

## Species Status Assessment

**Class:** Birds  
**Family:** Laridae  
**Scientific Name:** *Hydrocoloeus minutus*  
**Common Name:** Little gull

### Species synopsis:

Formerly placed in the genus *Larus*, little gull was reclassified to the genus *Hydrocoloeus* in 2008.

Little gull began colonizing the United States in the early 1960s and was first recorded breeding on Lake Ontario outside Toronto, Canada in 1962. No breeding has been documented in New York, but birds have wintered annually in the Buffalo/Lake Erie and Rochester areas since the 1970s. In recent years there have been more reports of little and Bonaparte's gulls lingering on the lower Great Lakes into early winter, along with more reports of wintering birds.

The debate is ongoing as to whether this species occurred historically in small numbers in North America or colonized during this century by influxes across the North Atlantic or across the Bering Strait (Baillie 1963, Bruun 1968, Johnson and Adams 1977, Hutchinson and Neath 1978, McRae 1989).

### I. Status

#### a. Current and Legal Protected Status

- i. **Federal** \_\_\_\_\_ Not Listed Candidate? No  
ii. **New York** \_\_\_\_\_ SGCN

#### b. Natural Heritage Program Rank

- i. **Global** G5  
ii. **New York** SNRN Tracked by NYNHP? No

### Other Rank:

**Status Discussion:**

Little gull is a rare to uncommon visitant on the coast of New York; it is rare to fairly common visitant in western New York.

**II. Abundance and Distribution Trends**

**a. North America**

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**Time frame considered:** Since 1960s

**b. Regional**

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**Regional Unit Considered:** Northeast

**Time Frame Considered:** Since 1960s

**c. Adjacent States and Provinces**

**CONNECTICUT**              **Not Present** \_\_\_\_\_              **No data** \_\_\_\_\_

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

Time frame considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Listing Status: Not Listed SGCN? No

MASSACHUSETTS Not Present  No data

i. Abundance

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

ii. Distribution:

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

Time frame considered: 1979-2008

Listing Status: Not Listed SGCN? No

NEW JERSEY Not Present  No data

i. Abundance

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

ii. Distribution:

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

Time frame considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Listing Status: Not Listed SGCN? No

ONTARIO Not Present  No data

i. Abundance

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

ii. Distribution:

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

Time frame considered: 1981-85 to 2001-05 (breeding pop. only)

Listing Status: Not Listed

**PENNSYLVANIA**      **Not Present** \_\_\_\_\_      **No data** \_\_\_\_\_

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

Time frame considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Listing Status: Not Listed      SGCN? No

**QUEBEC**      **Not Present** \_\_\_\_\_      **No data** \_\_\_\_\_

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

Time frame considered: 1984-89 to 2012

Listing Status: \_\_\_\_\_

**VERMONT**      **Not Present** \_\_\_\_\_      **No data** \_\_\_\_\_

**i. Abundance**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining     increasing     stable     unknown

Time frame considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Listing Status: Not Listed      SGCN? No

**d. NEW YORK** \_\_\_\_\_ **No data** \_\_\_\_\_

**i. Abundance**

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

**ii. Distribution:**

declining  increasing  stable  unknown

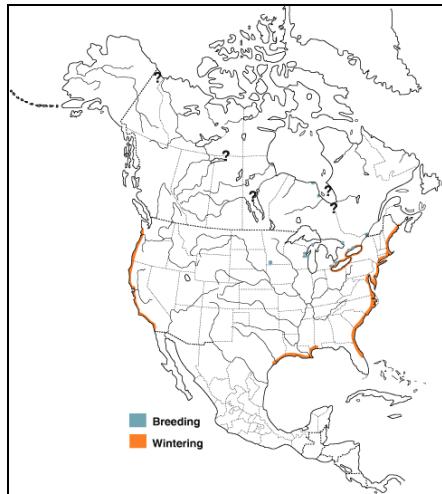
Time frame considered: \_\_\_\_\_

**Monitoring in New York.**

None

**Trends Discussion:**

The number of wintering individuals reported in Ontario has been increasing steadily, particularly since the late 1960s (Ewins and Weseloh 1999); a fourfold increase was reported 1965–1969 to 1970–1974 (Weseloh 1994). At Niagara Falls, Ontario, there was a significant increase in the number of little gulls reported/party-hour on Christmas Bird Counts from 1966–1996. Since recorded reproductive output is very low in North America, it is presumed that these increases reflect either differing breeding output from as-yet unknown breeding concentrations in North America, or continued immigration from Palearctic or Siberia. The latter is supported by the 1996 return of Swedish-banded chick in Pennsylvania in its first summer [M. Gustafson pers. comm. in Ewins and Weseloh (1999)]. The second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas reported a decline in breeding little gulls from 1981-85 to 2001-05 (Cadman et al. 2007).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of little gull in North America (Birds of North America Online).

**III. New York Rarity, if known:**

| <b>Historic</b>      | <b><u># of Animals</u></b> | <b><u># of Locations</u></b> | <b><u>% of State</u></b> |
|----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>prior to 1970</b> | _____                      | <u>3</u>                     | _____                    |
| <b>prior to 1980</b> | _____                      | _____                        | _____                    |
| <b>prior to 1990</b> | _____                      | _____                        | _____                    |

**Details of historic occurrence:**

Though little gull may appear on any large body of water, it is reliably encountered at three locations: Buffalo/Niagara Falls area, Rochester area, and along the coast, especially New York Harbor.

Large numbers of little gull were reported in western New York during the late 1970s and early 1980s occurred during a time when the species was expanding its Canadian range eastward: 78 individuals were reported at Durant-Eastman Park in Rochester (Monroe County) in November 1981; 61 birds were reported at Irondequoit Bay (Monroe County) in December 1979 (see DiCostanzo 1998).

| <b>Current</b> | <b><u># of Animals</u></b> | <b><u># of Locations</u></b> | <b><u>% of State</u></b> |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| _____          | _____                      | <u>3</u>                     | _____                    |

**Details of current occurrence:**

A new high count was reported in March 1999 when 85 little gulls were observed at the mouth of the Niagara River (Bellerby 1999). The subsequent years produced more typical numbers, a few to a dozen birds per sighting.

**New York's Contribution to Species North American Range:**

| <b>Distribution</b> (percent of NY where species occurs) | <b>Abundance</b> (within NY distribution) |
|--|---|
| <u>X</u> 0-5%  | __ abundant                               |
| __ 6-10%   | __ common                                 |
| __ 11-25%  | __ fairly common                          |
| __ 26-50%  | __ uncommon                               |
| __ >50%  | <u>X</u> rare                             |

**NY's Contribution to North American range**

X 0-5%

- 6-10%
- 11-25%
- 26-50%
- >50%

#### **Classification of New York Range**

**Core**

**Peripheral**

**Disjunct**

#### **Distance to core population:**

>50%

#### **IV. Primary Habitat or Community Type:**

1. Marine, Intertidal, Benthic Geomorphology, Tidal Flat
2. Marine Intertidal Gravel/Sand Beach
3. Large/Great River
4. Estuarine, Freshwater Intertidal, Tidal Wetland
5. Estuarine, Brackish Intertidal, Tidal Wetland

**Habitat or Community Type Trend in New York:**

Declining       Stable       Increasing       Unknown

**Time frame of decline/increase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Habitat Specialist?**       Yes       No

**Indicator Species?**       Yes       No

**Habitat Discussion:**

During migration, little gull is noted most often on larger lakes and rivers, and along marine coasts. Regularly associates with Bonaparte's Gulls on roosting areas, and at productive feeding sites in areas of water turbulence, and at sewage outfalls, upwellings and at mouths of rivers. Daytime roosts (loafing areas) noted on beaches, mudflats, lawns, and airports, often with other gulls (Green 1974, Steeves et al. 1989, Davis 1995a, 1995b).

Most breeding records are from shallow, freshwater wetland complexes, but brackish marshes used along Hudson Bay and James Bay lowlands (McRae 1984, Carpentier 1986, Wilson and McRae 1993).

## V. New York Species Demographics and Life History

Breeder in New York

Summer Resident

Winter Resident

Anadromous

Non-breeder in New York

Summer Resident

Winter Resident

Catadromous

Migratory only

Unknown

### Species Demographics and Life History Discussion:

In the Palearctic, where most breeding occurs, first breeding is usually at 2–3 years (Berg 1937), but occasionally first-year birds form loose pair bonds, and very rarely breed (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Veit and Petersen 1993). Hatching success is low in Ontario nestings, and most recorded North American breeding attempts have failed. Mobility of young and difficult access to many breeding areas has prevented collection of good breeding data. Most studies record low productivity, 0–0.2 young fledged/pair or occupied nest (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). No information is available on life span for North America, but the oldest banded bird in the Palearctic was 5 years, 10 months (Cramp and Simmons 1983).

Few cases in which mortality causes identified for fully grown birds in North America, other than collection for museum specimens. Breeding failures in North America attributed to predation by muskrat, long-tail weasel, northern water snake, Franklin's and ring-billed gulls. Protracted human disturbance of nesting areas likely increases risk of nest predation from other *Laridae* (Scharf et al. 1979, Schadweiler 1986). There have been very few marked individuals in North America, so the degree of site fidelity is unknown. Most breeding sites are occupied for <2–3 successive years, so there is little evidence for traditional use of same sites.

Initial dispersal from North American nesting areas is poorly understood, but adults from failed nests often move away from breeding marshes within 3–4 weeks of failure (Scott 1963, Tozer and Richards 1974). Sharp increases in sightings of adults and first-year birds well away from breeding sites by July and August (often accompanying concentrations of Bonaparte's Gulls) indicates relatively rapid movement after breeding (Weseloh 1994). There is no information on home range.

Fidelity to wintering sites is poorly known, but concentrations are regular at certain Great Lakes (Niagara River) and Atlantic Coast sites, and single birds have returned over successive years to winter at the same inland sites in California (Roberson 1980, Langham 1991).

## **VI. Threats:**

Regulation of water in wetlands (for waterfowl management, recreational boating, or irrigation) has likely been a major cause of nest flooding and failure. Contaminants may have been a factor for this species as it appears to have experienced DDT-induced eggshell thinning. There is likely risk of predation of nests and small young by other colonial nesting gulls. Other known threats to wintering birds are loss of habitat to coastal and offshore developments, diseases, entanglement in fishing gear, exposure to oil spills and other environmental contaminants, and habitat loss due to rising sea levels.

**Are there regulatory mechanisms that protect the species or its habitat in New York?**

No       Unknown

Yes

Little gull is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

**Describe knowledge of management/conservation actions that are needed for recovery/conservation, or to eliminate, minimize, or compensate for the identified threats:**

Little work has yet been conducted in North America. In breeding areas, control of water levels, power boating and human disturbance during the breeding season, as well as provision of artificial nesting rafts (as per marsh-nesting terns), would likely improve breeding success in some areas.

Conservation actions following IUCN taxonomy are categorized in the table below.

| Conservation Actions       |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Action Category            | Action   |
| Land/Water Protection      | Site/Area Protection   |
| Land/Water Protection      | Resource/Habitat Protection  |
| Land/Water Management      | Site/Area Management   |
| Land/Water Management      | Habitat and Natural Process Restoration (pollution control)              |
| Law/Policy Actions         | Policy/Regulation Changes (hunting regulations, ocean dumping practices) |
| External Capacity Building | Alliance & Partnership Development                                       |

The Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (NYSDEC 2005) includes recommendations for the following actions for wintering water birds, which includes little gull.

#### **Habitat Management:**

- Protect important waterfowl/water bird foraging areas from long-term destruction or development, excessive human disturbance, oil spills, environmental contaminants, and other potential impacts, through environmental permit reviews, etc.

#### **Habitat Research:**

- Characterize and map important foraging areas (submerged aquatic vegetation, mussel beds) for waterfowl/water birds wintering on Long Island.
- Document habitats used by northern pintails during spring migration and staging in the St. Lawrence Valley and Lake Plains regions of New York.

#### **Life History Research:**

- Determine contaminant levels (mercury, other metals, PCBs, other organochlorines) in samples above waterfowl/water birds wintering in New York to assess potential impacts on reproduction and survival. Obtain samples as opportunities arise.
- Document and estimate annual mortality of waterfowl/water birds in New York associated with Type E botulism and other major mortality factors, as opportunities arise.

#### **Modify Regulation:**

- Establish hunting regulations that will ensure long-term conservation of waterfowl populations migrating through or wintering in New York.
- Reduce or modify ocean dumping and disposal practices that may damage important water bird habitats or result in debris (ex- lead, plastics) that can cause waterbird mortality.

**Other Action:**

- Because most of the species in this group are non-breeding visitors to the eastern U.S., NY should provide technical, financial, or political support as needed, to further international waterfowl/water bird conservation efforts.

**Regional Management Plan:**

- Work with regional marine resource managers to identify common interests and potential conflicts (ex- commercial fishing/shell fishing techniques, aquaculture development, entanglement, oil spill response plans) with needs of wintering water birds. More intensive studies are needed of interactions between commercial fisheries and seabirds.

**Statewide Baseline Survey:**

- Cooperate in development and conduct of baseline surveys or monitoring programs to determine population status of wintering waterfowl/water bird species in New York and/or eastern North America, at 10-year (or more frequent) intervals.

**VII. References**

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