

GULLS IN OUR AREA - DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?

Have you ever been inundated with noisy, assertive gulls whilst dining outdoors on your fish and chips? As a child, feeding leftover chips to local flocks of gulls was as enjoyable as eating the obligatory ice cream that so often followed the fish and chip dinner. For adults, however, the invasion can be a negative onslaught to the senses when trying to relax and unwind after a busy day.

Either way, gulls play an integral role within the coastal ecosystem, and hopefully, after reading the following facts, people will gain a greater appreciation for these opportunistic and resilient birds.

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*

The Silver Gull is very recognisable (as the species most likely to steal your chips!) with a white head, tail and under parts, light grey back, and black-tipped wings. Juvenile Silver Gulls have brown beaks, legs and feet, and full brown eyes, whereas adults have characteristic, bright orange legs, beaks and eye ring. Common all around Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia, Silver Gulls can be found at any watered habitat, however, they are rarely seen far from land. Silver Gulls are non-migratory, with nesting taking place in large colonies on offshore islands. In good seasons, two broods can be raised each year, with both adults contributing to nest building, incubation and feeding. As with Pacific Gulls, nests are shallow scrapes lined with vegetation.



Silver Gull

Due to their opportunistic nature, Silver Gulls have widened their dietary intake to include man-made foods. This has resulted in significant increases in population size, with nesting ground availability being the only limiting factor to further population increases.



Pacific Gull

Pacific Gull *Larus pacificus*

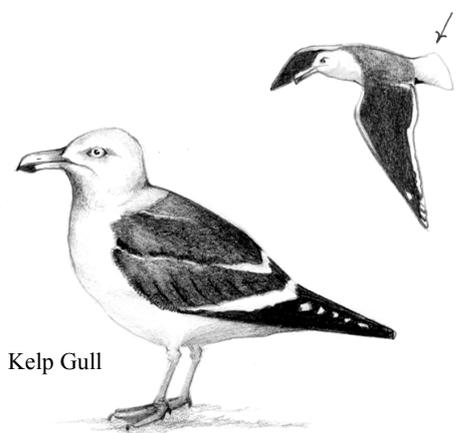
This is the largest of the gulls found in our area, and is distinguished by its black back and massive yellow bill, which is broadly tipped in scarlet. The body is white, with yellow to orange-yellow legs. Juvenile Pacific Gulls are mottled dark brown, with brown legs, pale faces and pink, black tipped beaks. The Pacific Gull stands at an impressive height of 63 cm. There are two forms of Pacific Gull: The eastern form (*race pacificus*), which has a white eye and a complete red tip to the bill, and the western form (*race gergii*), which has a red eye and an incomplete red tip to the bill.

The Pacific Gull is endemic to southern Australia, and inhabits sandy or rocky exposed coasts, mainly avoiding human habitation. These gulls are occasionally sighted on farmland or rubbish tips near the coast, but never inland. More recently, Pacific Gulls have been seen scavenging around abattoirs, picnic areas and wharfs. Nests are either shallow scrapes – a shallow indentation in the ground – lined with gravel, or shallow bowls made from sticks, grass, seaweed and feathers. Both sexes build the nest, with mainly the female incubating, and the male doing most of the foraging. Adult Pacific Gulls are mainly non-migratory, whilst the juveniles are dispersive.

Molluscs, fish, birds and other marine animals, found between the high and low water mark, constitute the bulk of their diet. Pacific Gulls drop molluscs, such as limpets and mussels, from height onto a rocky platform to help break them open, resulting in midden like formations of shell fragments. These are sometimes mistaken for ancient, natural, beach deposits!

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*

The Pacific Gull is often confused with the Kelp Gull, which is a much smaller, less bulky bird, with a distinctly smaller bill. The Kelp Gull lacks the black, sub-terminal band on the tail of the Pacific Gull. This is evident when the bird is in flight. It is not often seen in this area.



Kelp Gull



Source: 23.01.2007, Birds Australia, (online), <http://birdsbackyards.net/species/Larus-pacificus>.

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Sea All Dolphin Swims
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