

STATUS OF THE LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL *LARUS [FUSCUS] GRAELLSII*¹ IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Hayes F.E., White G.L., Kenefick M. & Kilpatrick H.. 2002. Status of the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus [fuscus] graellsii* in Trinidad and Tobago. *Atlantic Seabirds* 4(3): 91-100. *The Lesser Black-backed Gull Larus [fuscus] graellsii is an Old World species whose numbers have increased dramatically in the New World, but its status in South America is poorly documented. We summarise data for 36 records of an estimated 51 individuals (70.6% immature, 29.4% adult) in western Trinidad (47 ind.) and southwestern Tobago (4) from August 1978 through April 2002. All associated with flocks of Laughing Gull L. atricilla along the coast. Most records were in winter (esp. Jan-Feb), but four stayed in Trinidad throughout the summer of 2000. A few individuals that first appeared in March-April may have been northbound migrants wintering farther south. Up to 13 individuals occurred during autumn-spring in Trinidad and up to two in Tobago. Maximum daily counts included eight for Trinidad and two for Tobago. The gulls may have arrived by migrating southward across the Caribbean or westward across the central Atlantic.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus [fuscus] graellsii*¹ is an Old World species whose numbers have increased dramatically in the Americas during the past decades (Post & Lewis 1995). Although most New World records are from North America, the species has been recorded from several localities in the Caribbean and northeastern South America (Post & Lewis 1995; Raffaele *et al.* 1998; Ebels 2002), including Trinidad and Tobago (French 1991), where its current status is not well known. In this paper we summarise the historical and current status of the Lesser Black-backed Gull in Trinidad and Tobago, and provide data on habitat use, seasonality, maximum counts, age classes, plumage, and moults. We further discuss their potential migratory routes.

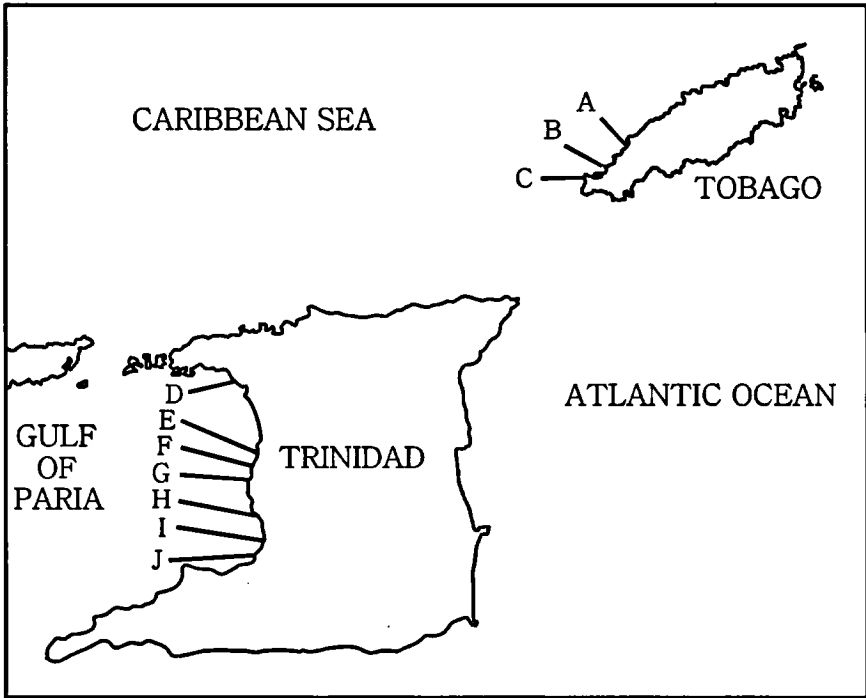


Figure 1. Sites in Trinidad and Tobago of Lesser Black-backed Gull records. A = Turtle Beach; B = Buccoo; C = Pigeon Point; D = Port of Spain; E = Waterloo; F = Orange Valley; G = Carli Bay; H = Claxton Bay; I = Pointe-a-Pierre; J = San Fernando.

Figuur 1. Locaties in Trinidad en Tobago waar Kleine Mantelmeeuwen zijn waargenomen (zie voor verklaring het Engelstalige onderschrift).

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

The islands of Trinidad and Tobago are located on the continental shelf of South America just north of the Orinoco River Delta. The relatively shallow Gulf of Paria separates Trinidad from the continental mainland and borders Trinidad's west coast, where several major ports, along with several extensive tidal mudflats, are located; elsewhere in Trinidad the ports and mudflats are relatively insignificant. Tobago, which is located between the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean, offers only two major ports. Extensive sandbars and rocks, but no mudflats, are exposed during low tide in southwest Tobago. Fishing boats operate along all coastlines of Trinidad, but attract large numbers of gulls only in the Gulf of Paria.

We compiled data on published records and recent sightings of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Trinidad and Tobago. From autumn 1997 to summer 2002, we routinely scanned flocks of wintering Laughing Gulls *Larus atricilla* for rare species of gulls at various localities along the west coast of Trinidad. During 1997-2000 our efforts were concentrated at Waterloo and Orange Valley. During 2000-2002 we expanded our searches southward to include San Fernando. With the aid of binoculars and telescopes, we attempted to age all Lesser Black-backed Gulls encountered by the criteria of Harrison (1983) and Grant (1986); although precise ageing, especially of older immatures, is complicated by the extreme variability in moult strategies. We scrutinised individual birds for unique features in bill colouration, plumage and moult, which helped distinguish them from other individuals.

RESULTS

We compiled 36 records of an estimated 51 individual Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Trinidad and Tobago (Table 1). Of these, 32 records of 47 individuals are from Trinidad and only four records of four individuals are from Tobago. Some records presumably refer to the same individuals returning for consecutive winters. The first record was on 25 August 1978 (French 1979). Ring recoveries are lacking but several records from Trinidad have been documented by photographs.

In Trinidad, all records are from the west coast, which is a major wintering area for Laughing Gulls (up to 5000) and other gull species (Hayes *et al.* unpubl. data). The wintering gulls often congregated on mudflats during low tide, with the highest concentrations in the vicinity of Waterloo, Orange Valley and Pointe-a-Pierre, during January-March; large numbers (up to 2000) also congregated at the wharf and fish market at San Fernando during high tide (Hayes *et al.* unpubl. data). All Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen along the coast, with the exception of one individual in a sewage pond 600 m from the coast in 1985. In Tobago, all records were from the western end of the island, where several hundred Laughing Gulls often congregated at Turtle Beach, Buccoo Reef and Pigeon Point.

Wintering Lesser Black-backed Gulls began to arrive in August and September; numbers peaked in January and February, and declined afterward (Table 2). Several individuals were first detected in March (one in 1999) and April (two in 2000). In 2000, at least one adult and three immatures remained all summer (Table 1), providing the first summer records; in 2002, an immature lingered until at least 15 June. A distinctive third-fourth winter immature, thought to be the same individual with a black smudge on the tip of the upper

*Table 1. Lesser Black-backed Gull records in Trinidad and Tobago.**Tabel 1. Waarnemingen van Kleine Mantelmeeuwen in Trinidad en Tobago.*

Location	Date	Number and age	Source ^b
TRINIDAD			
Claxton Bay	25 Aug-09 Sep 1978	1 ad.	ffrench 1979
Pointe-a-Pierre	Sep-Oct 1979	2 ad.	ffrench 1981
Pointe-a-Pierre	11 Oct 1983	1 ad.	ffrench 1983
San Fernando	23 Apr 1984	1 ad.; 1 imm.	Norton 1984
Port of Spain	06 Oct 1985	1 3rd-yr. imm. ^a	Hayes & White 2000 ^c
Waterloo	26 Dec 1993	1 ad.; 1 1st- or 2nd-yr.	ffrench & Hayes 1998 ^c
Waterloo	11 Jan 1996	1 subadult (3rd-yr. imm.?)	ffrench & Hayes 1998 ^c
Cangrejos Bay	21 Dec 1997	1 ad.	White & Hayes 2002 ^c
Waterloo	08 Dec 97-11 Jan 98	3 1st-yr. imm.	White & Hayes 2002 ^c
Waterloo/Or. Valley	11 Jan-01 Mar 1998	1 3rd-yr. imm.	White & Hayes 2002 ^c
Waterloo	22 Feb-01 Mar 1998	1 2nd-yr. imm.	White & Hayes 2002 ^c
Waterloo	06 Dec 98-03 Jan 99	1 3rd-yr. imm.	GW, FH
Port of Spain	05 Jan 1999	1 1st-yr. imm.	DM, FH
Waterloo	14 Mar 1999	1 ad.	White & Hayes 2002 ^c
Waterloo/Or. Valley	26 Dec 99-10 Feb 01	1 1st-yr. to 2nd-yr. imm. ^a	FH
Waterloo/Or. Valley	09 Jan-12 Apr 2000	1 3rd/4th-yr. imm. ^a	GW, FH, MK
	04 Oct 00- 19 Feb 01	(absent during summer)	
Orange Valley	12 Feb-20 Apr 2000	1 3rd-yr. imm.	FH, GW
Orange Valley/ San Fernando	12 Feb-12 Apr 2000	2 2nd to 3rd-yr. imm. ^a	FH, GW, MK
Waterloo/Or. Valley	27 Feb-01 Mar 2000	1 1st-yr. imm.	FH, GW
Waterloo	11 Apr 00-12 Apr 01	1 ad. ^a	GW, FH, MK
Waterloo	20 Apr 2000	1 3rd/4th-yr. imm.	GW
San Fernando	10 Nov 00-11 Mar 01	2 ad. ^a	FH, MK, HK
San Fernando	10 Nov 00-11 Mar 01	2 2nd-yr. imm.	FH, MK, HK
Waterloo/San Fernando	03 Dec 00-11 Mar 01	3 1st-yr. imm.	GW, FH, HK
Waterloo/Or. Valley	03 Dec 00-03 Mar 01	1 3rd/4th yr. imm.	GW, FH, MK
San Fernando	21 Jan 2001	1 3rd/4th yr. imm.	FH
Waterloo/Carli Bay/ San Fernando	23 Sep 01-27 Jan 02	2 ad.	MK, FH, HK
Waterloo/San Fernando	26 Sep 01 - 26 Feb 02	2 2nd-yr. imm. ^a	MK, FH, HK
San Fernando	02 Dec 01 - 26 Feb 02	1 2nd-yr. imm. ^a	FH, HK
San Fernando	12 Jan-15 June 2002	4 1st-yr. imm. ^a	FH, HK, MK
San Fernando	09-26 Feb 2002	1 3rd-yr. imm.	FH, HK, MK
San Fernando	24 Mar 2002	1 3rd/4th-yr. imm.	FH
TOBAGO			
Buccoo	14 Jan 1988	1 ad.	ffrench 1991
Turtle Beach	19 Jan 1992	1 1st-yr. imm.	ffrench 1993
Turtle Beach	15 Jan-20 Mar 1997	1 1st-yr. imm.	ffrench & White 1999 ^c
Pigeon Point	20 Mar 1997	1 ad.	ffrench & White 1999 ^c

^aphotographed; many are posted at Southeastern Caribbean Birds Photo Gallery website (<http://www.geocities.com/secaribbirds>); ^bobservers: Floyd E. Hayes (FH), Martyn Kenefick (MK), Howard Kilpatrick (HK), Douglas B. McNair (DM), Graham White (GW); ^caccepted by the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee (Hayes and White 2000, White and Hayes 2002)

Table 2. Seasonal distribution of Lesser Black-backed Gull in Trinidad and Tobago by year, based on actual observations of the minimum number of individuals of adults (a) or immatures (i) per month. Birds thought to represent the same individuals from one extreme date to another are not included for intervening months not observed.

Tabel 2. Verdeling van waargenomen Kleine Mantelmeeuwen in Trinidad en Tobago (minimum aantal verschillende exemplaren). a= adult, i = onvolwassen.

YEAR	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
TRINIDAD												
1978	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1a	1a	-	-	-
1979	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2a	2a	-	-
1983	-	-	-	1i 1a	-	-	-	-	-	1a	-	-
1985	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1i	-	-
1993	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1i, 1a
1996	1i	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1997	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1i, 1a
1998	4i	2i	2i	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1i
1999	2i	-	1a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1i
2000	1a	4i, 1a	-	5i, 1a	2i, 1a	3i, 1a	3i, 1a	1i, 1a	3i, 1a	2i, 1a	3i, 1a	6i, 1a
2001	7i, 1a	7i, 3a	4i, 3a	1a	-	-	-	-	1i, 1a	-	1i, 1a	2i, 2a
2002	4i, 2a	6i, 1a	3i	3i	2i	1i	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOBAGO												
1988	1a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1992	1i	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1997	1i	1i	1i, 1a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trinidad	22	24	13	12	5	5	4	3	9	7	6	17
Tobago	3	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTALS	25	25	15	12	5	5	4	3	9	7	6	17

bill, was present during winter 1999-2000, disappeared during summer 2000 and reappeared in winter 2000-2001 (Table 1).

In Trinidad, at least six different Lesser Black-backed Gulls were identified along the west coast of Trinidad during winter 1997-98, three during 1998-99, eight during 1999-2000, 13 during 2000-01 and 11 during 2001-02 (Table 1). Daily high counts increased consistently, with four on 11 January 1998 (White *et al.*), five on 20 April 2000 (White), six on 3 December 2000

(White *et. al.*), seven on 27 February 2001 (Hayes) and eight on 10 February 2001 (Hayes). The high count in Tobago was two on 20 March 1997 (Hayes).

Of an estimated 51 different birds, 36 (70.6%) were immatures and 15 (29.4%) were adults. Of the immatures, 15 were identified as first-winter, eight as second-winter, one as first/second-winter and 11 as third/fourth-winter (summering first- and second-winter birds moved up an age class during the subsequent autumn). All adults and older immatures appeared to be relatively light-mantled, representing *L. graellsii* of the southern end of their distribution range rather than dark-mantled individuals of the central North Sea (previously named *L. f. intermedius*), which are by far the most numerous occurring in North America (Post & Lewis 1995).

The scapulars, wing coverts and tertials were often moulted during winter; the remiges and rectrices were replaced in late summer and autumn individuals and invariably appeared worn in spring and summer individuals. An unusually fresh first-winter immature photographed on 24 Mar 2002 (Hayes) had just moulted its scapulars, coverts and tertials in one wave. All first-winter birds were dark-billed, except one with a distinctly yellowish tip and late spring and summer individuals which were acquiring a pale base. All second-winter immatures had notably pale-based bills except one whose bill was about 95% dark. A few advanced third-winter or fourth-winter immatures had yellow bills with a black smudge or dot near the tip.

DISCUSSION

Our observations indicate that the Lesser Black-backed Gull is currently an uncommon winter and rare summer visitor to Trinidad, and a rare winter visitor to Tobago. Records are no longer reviewed by the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee (White & Hayes 2002). The west coast of Trinidad hosts the greatest numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gull in the Caribbean and South America. Furthermore, its occurrence in Trinidad is undoubtedly linked to the abundance of wintering Laughing Gulls, with which it invariably associates, and the local fishing industry. Although Herklots (1961) stated that Laughing Gulls were never seen in large numbers in Trinidad and Tobago, French (1973, 1991) reported them to be most common from March–November, when flocks of up to 2000 birds were recorded along the west coast of Trinidad at Pointe-a-Pierre, but less common or absent during December–March, with flocks of up to 500 at Pointe-a-Pierre and 200 at Port of Spain. In recent years we have observed larger numbers of Laughing Gull along the west coast of Trinidad during winter than during other months of the year (Hayes *et al.* unpubl. data), suggesting that Laughing Gull numbers are increasing and their seasonal occurrence is changing.



Lesser Black-backed Gull associated with Laughing Gulls, San Fernando Trinidad
Kleine Mantelmeeuw tussen de Lachmeeuwen, San Fernando Trinidad (F.E. Hayes)

The seemingly dramatic increase in Lesser Black-backed Gull populations in Trinidad and Tobago within the past 5 years is undoubtedly attributable to increased scrutiny of Laughing Gull flocks, especially in San Fernando. Nevertheless, their numbers have increased within the past several decades, paralleling the increase in North American populations (Post & Lewis 1995). In recent years the Lesser Black-backed Gull greatly outnumbered other vagrant gull species in Trinidad and Tobago. From December 1997 to April 2002, we recorded an estimated 41 different Lesser Black-backed Gulls (some may have returned for consecutive winters) along the west coast of Trinidad (Table 1). During this period the only other vagrant gull species that we observed in these areas included an estimated six Franklin's Gulls *L. pipixcan* (McNair *et al.* 2002), three Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus*, five Ring-billed Gulls *L. delawarensis*, two Kelp Gulls *L. dominicanus* (Hayes *et al.* 2002) and a Sabine's Gull *L. sabini*.

Given the complex variation of moult schedules in Lesser Black-backed Gull, our data on age classes should be viewed with caution. First-winter birds were generally distinctive, but advanced individuals of a given age class often resembled older birds and retarded individuals resembled younger (Grant 1986).

Nevertheless, our data provide evidence that immatures, especially first-year birds, are more likely to stray to Trinidad and Tobago than adults. Unfortunately we obtained few useful details on moult cycles. Because of the paucity of information on moult in Lesser Black-backed Gulls in tropical latitudes, further details on moult patterns should be acquired by experienced observers.

We postulate three hypothetical migratory routes for the autumn-winter arrival of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Trinidad and Tobago: (1) flying westward across the tropical Atlantic directly from southwestern Europe; (2) flying southward through the Lesser Antilles from southeastern North America; or (3) flying southward along Central America and then eastward along the coast of northern South America.

The first hypothesis is supported by the near absence of this species in the western Caribbean (thus discrediting the third hypothesis), its rarity throughout the northern and eastern Caribbean (Post & Lewis 1995; Raffaele *et al.* 1998; Ebels 2002), and its apparent regularity along the northeastern coast of South America in French Guiana (Tostain & Dujardin 1989) and Trinidad. However, there are only a few records for Barbados (E. Massiah & T. Frost *pers. comm.*), where other species of Eurasian vagrants occur more frequently than in other parts of the Caribbean (e.g. Raffaele *et al.* 1998) and are thought to have crossed the tropical Atlantic directly from south-western Europe. The rarity of Lesser Black-backed Gulls elsewhere in the Caribbean may be attributed to the paucity of observers and to the scarcity of Laughing Gulls wintering in the region (Raffaele *et al.* 1998; Ebels 2002). Lesser Black-backed Gulls migrating from southeastern North America could feasibly pass through the eastern Caribbean without detection before encountering and lingering with the large flocks of Laughing Gulls wintering in Trinidad and Tobago. The first appearance of several adults in March and April suggest that they were northbound migrants that had wintered farther south (e.g., French Guiana) or had wandered across the Atlantic from northern Africa. In conclusion, the migratory route of Lesser Black-backed Gulls wintering in Trinidad and Tobago remains uncertain.

Finally, given the potential pitfalls of identifying gulls, especially immatures (Harrison 1983; Grant 1986), all large gulls within the region should be carefully scrutinised. In Trinidad, observers have mistakenly identified an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull as a Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*), an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull as a Yellow-legged Gull (*L. michahellis*), and an adult Kelp Gull as an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull. The recent appearance of several tentatively identified Yellow-legged Gulls in Barbados during the winter of 1999-2000 (E. Massiah, T. Frost & M. Gawn *pers. comm.*) suggests that some of our Lesser Black-backed Gulls could have been misidentified Yellow-legged Gulls. Although the upperparts of all adults and older immatures appeared too dark (darker than Laughing Gulls), first-year birds

are extremely difficult to distinguish in the field. Several colleagues have pointed out that some of our photographs of immature Lesser Black-backed Gulls appear to be atypical. For example, a first-summer immature photographed at Waterloo, Trinidad, on 10 July 2000 (White), appears to be too bulky and short-winged for a Lesser Black-backed Gull and may represent a Kelp Gull (L. Atherton, A. Jaramillo & M. Reid *pers. comm.*). The recent hybridization of Kelp Gulls with Herring Gulls in Louisiana poses another identification problem in that F1 hybrids resemble Lesser Black-backed Gulls, but are larger and have a more restricted dark wedge on the under surface of the primaries (Dittmann & Cardiff 1998). All large gulls, especially immatures, should be documented by detailed descriptions and photographs (if possible) in order to facilitate accurate identification.

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STATUS VAN KLEINE MANTELMEEUW *LARUS GRAELLSII* OP TRINIDAD EN TOBAGO

De Kleine Mantelmeeuw *Larus graellsii* is een soort van de Oude Wereld, waarvan de aantallen in de Nieuwe Wereld sterk zijn toegenomen. De status in Zuid-Amerika is echter nauwelijks gedocumenteerd. In dit artikel worden 36 waarnemingen van 51 individuen (70.6% onvolwassen, 29.4% adult) van augustus 1978 t/m april 2002 in westelijk Trinidad (47 ind) en zuidwestelijk Tobago (4 ind) gepresenteerd (tabel 1). Alle vogels waren geassocieerd met Lachmeeuwen *L. atricilla* langs de kust. De meeste waarnemingen werden in de winter gedaan, met name in januari en februari (tabel 2). Vier vogels bleven de zomer van 2000 in Trinidad. Een paar individuen die in maart en april opdoken, waren mogelijk noordwaarts trekkende overwintelaars uit meer zuidelijk gelegen gebieden. Tijdens de herfst-lente kwamen tot 13 individuen voor in Trinidad en tot twee in Tobago. Dagmaxima bedroegen acht vogels in Trinidad en twee in Tobago. Kleine Mantelmeeuwen kunnen in Trinidad en Tobago terecht komen door zuidwaartse trek door het Caribisch gebied of westwaartse trek over de centrale Atlantische Oceaan.

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¹ Nomenclature followed in this article is according to the Dutch Commission for Avian Systematics (*Ardea 87*: 139-165): *Larus graellsii* formerly/elsewhere known as *Larus fuscus graellsii* and *Larus fuscus intermedius*, both are now considered conspecific and specifically distinct from the Baltic Gull *Larus fuscus*, formerly known as the third race, *Larus fuscus fuscus*.