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## Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*

Large numbers of gulls of several species winter in Florida, and a few non-breeding birds may remain throughout the summer, but only the Laughing Gull breeds in the state. Laughing Gulls also breed along coasts from Sonora, Sinaloa, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia south to Texas, Yucatan, and French Guiana.

**Habitat.** Most gulls have benefited from human activities in this century, and the Laughing Gull is no exception. Dredged-material islands are a favorite nesting location, especially in the Tampa Bay area (Patton and Hanners 1984). On the other hand, the colonies in Florida Bay are on natural islands (Frohring and Kushlan 1986). Islands with vegetation in early successional stages are preferred. Many colonies shrink in numbers as the vegetation becomes more dense. Laughing Gulls do not demonstrate a high degree of site fidelity. Therefore, when one island becomes unsuitable, the birds readily move to another. Open landfills have been an important source of food for gulls, so colonies will probably diminish in size as other methods of garbage disposal become more widespread.



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The large nest, primarily of marsh grasses, is built directly on the ground or atop windrows of beach vegetation or other debris (H. Kale, pers. commun.). A clutch consist of 3 or 4 eggs of a beautiful olive color, marked with shades of brown. Incubation takes about 20 days. The young fledged at 35 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

**Seasonal Occurrence.** Eggs are laid in May and June. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), highest frequencies of Laughing Gulls occur in the Big Bend during June through August, about 15 times as high as the in January and February.

**Status.** Breeding is strictly confined to coastal areas where the colonies are located on inshore islands. The colonies in Tampa Bay are huge (up to 50,000 pairs!). However, only a few pairs nest in northeast Florida, where it first bred in 1976 (Loftin and Sallas 1977). The colonies in Florida Bay range in size from a few nests up to about 150. Few colonies are found in the Panhandle. The species was not known to breed in Brevard County until 1973, when 1057 pairs were discovered nesting on dredged-material spoil banks in the Banana River (Cruikshank 1980).

Large colonies of Laughing Gulls are easy to detect; therefore, it is very likely that the Atlas data reflect all the significant colonies in Florida. The Atlas map reveals that the species continues to expand its range in the state with colonies at the mouth of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal in Levy and Citrus counties and in Charlotte Harbor. The first breeding record for Franklin County was established in 1988 off Lanark (Paul 1988). Nonbreeding Laughing Gulls were formerly rare and irregular in the interior but are becoming more abundant there. Nevertheless, breeding colonies are still confined to the coast.

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# Laughing Gull

