

## Winter Occurrences of Ivory Gulls, *Pagophila eburnea*, in Inland Labrador

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Ivory Gulls were observed during winter on three occasions up to 325 km inland from open coastal water, feeding on Caribou carcasses in inland Labrador. Other recent observations in central Labrador are also noted.

Key Words: Ivory Gulls, *Pagophila eburnea*, range, distribution, Labrador.

The Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) is a plump, medium-sized gull (40-43 cm long; 108-120 cm wing span), about 10% larger and longer-winged than the Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), with sexes alike and plumage entirely white in adults (Haney and MacDonald 1995). Ivory Gulls are High Arctic birds that have a circumpolar distribution ranging across northern Canada, Greenland, and arctic western Europe (Haney and MacDonald 1995; Gilchrist et al. 2005). The known Canadian population breeds in remote locations on Ellesmere, Devon, Seymour, northwestern Baffin and Perley islands, Nunavut (Todd 1963; Haney and MacDonald 1995; Thomas and MacDonald 1987; Stenhouse et al. 2004; Gilchrist and Mallory 2005).

Ivory Gulls, locally referred to as "Ice Partridges" (Peters and Burleigh 1951) or "Ice-Gulls" (Tuck 1971), are uncommon winter visitors in coastal Labrador and northern Newfoundland (Todd 1963). They are rarely found far from drifting pack ice offshore in winter near the southern pack ice between Canada and Greenland (Haney and MacDonald 1995; Stenhouse et al. 2004). Ivory Gulls appear along the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador in December, usually well offshore, but they are most abundant in March when they concentrate on Harp Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*) whelping areas in the pack ice (Tuck 1967, 1971). Historic inshore observations of Ivory Gulls in Newfoundland and Labrador have occurred along the northeast coast of insular Newfoundland between December and March (Tuck 1971) with fewer records along the Labrador coast (Todd 1963). The largest numbers of Ivory Gulls recently recorded in our region have been in southeastern Labrador and northern Newfoundland following strong northeast gales (P. Linegar, personal communication). Peters and Burleigh (1951) indicated that there were a number of reports of the "Ice Partridge" from interior localities in Newfoundland and one specifically from Badger, but those sightings were not confirmed. Several adult Ivory Gulls have been banded at sea off Cape Chidley, Labrador (Thomas and MacDonald 1987), and a band was recovered in 1940

at Port Hope Simpson, Labrador (52°30'N, 56°10'W) that was banded in Franz-Joseph Archipelago (North of Russia) six years previously (Tuck 1967, 1971). Occasionally, there have been anecdotal observations of Ivory Gulls at North West River, Labrador, during winter, where the water remains open (P. Linegar personal communication). A recent observation at North West River was of a single immature Ivory Gull on 16 March 2006 (J. Thomas, Department of Natural Resources, personal communication). An adult and an immature Ivory Gull were also observed on 10 and 17 February 2007 at Dry Island (53°42.00'N, 59°59.50'W) near North West River (S. Russell, personal communication).

The Ivory Gull is designated as Endangered in Newfoundland and Labrador under the province's Endangered Species Act (NL ESA Regulation 57/2, 2002\*) and in Canada under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA Schedule 1) (COSEWIC, April 2006\*). Recent aerial breeding colony surveys in the eastern Canadian Arctic revealed an 85% decline in numbers of breeding Ivory Gulls since the early 1980s (Gilchrist and Mallory 2005; Gilchrist et al. 2005).

Our observations were made while travelling along the Trans-Labrador Highway between Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Churchill Falls in central Labrador. This area lies within the Lake Melville-High Boreal Forest ecoregion and is dominated by Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) with lesser amounts of Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*), Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) and White Spruce (*P. glauca*) in river valleys (Meades 1990\*). This region has the most moderate climate in Labrador with mean average daily temperatures ranging from -14 to -18°C in February and +13°C in July. Average annual precipitation is 1100 mm with an average snowfall accumulation of 4 m (Meades 1990\*).

On 8 March 2003, F. R. Phillips and F. Taylor observed an adult Ivory Gull along the Trans-Labrador Highway approximately 5 km west of Metchin River (53°26'N, 63°18'W). The Ivory Gull was feeding on Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) remains left by hunters of

the migratory George River Caribou herd. The observation was located approximately 325 km west of the nearest permanently open coastal water at Rigolet (54°11'N, 58°27'W), and nearly 400 km inland from the edge of the coastal ice pack.

On 23 March 2006 we observed an adult Ivory Gull near the same location as the sighting recorded in 2003. This Ivory Gull was at a campsite adjacent to the Trans-Labrador Highway, 10 km west of Metchin River (53°26'N, 63°21'W) where approximately 15 Innu hunters had recently harvested 58 caribou. The Caribou carcasses, laid on the snow, were intact with the hide, head and legs attached with only the entrails removed. The Ivory Gull was feeding on the exposed flesh and offal of the Caribou adjacent to the road. The hunters indicated that the Ivory Gull had been present and feeding on scraps of Caribou meat for several days, alternating feeding sites between the road and the Churchill River, where the animals were harvested. On 26 March 2006, F. R. P. returned to the Innu camp but did not observe the gull. The hunters indicated that they had last observed the Ivory Gull on 24 March 2006.

On the morning of 26 March 2006, T. E. C. observed an adult Ivory Gull adjacent to his home in the community of Happy Valley-Goose Bay (53°18.92'N, 60°22.95'W) feeding on scraps of Caribou meat from a hunt the previous week. This location is approximately 195 km east of our sighting at Metchin River, three days earlier, and was possibly the same bird. We placed several large pieces of Caribou meat on the snow to feed the Ivory Gull and to encourage it to stay for further observation and photographs. At approximately 1500 hrs on 27 March 2006, an adult Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) joined the Ivory Gull and both fed on the Caribou meat. Both Gulls appeared to have departed on the evening of 27 March 2006 and were not observed again.

To our knowledge, our sightings are the first confirmed inland observations of Ivory Gulls recorded for insular Newfoundland or Labrador. These observations of Ivory Gulls in central Labrador may have been influenced by the recent southern extension of the winter range of the George River Caribou herd, which has occurred during the last two decades (Chubbs and Phillips 2005). Caribou from the George River herd have been recorded as far south as 52°10'N in central regions and may have facilitated the inland range expansion of other scavengers such as Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) into Labrador (Chubbs and Phillips 2005). With the Canadian Arctic breeding population of Ivory Gulls possibly in peril, and little information on their life history outside their breeding grounds, our inland observations add to the knowledge of this species' feeding habits and migration stopovers in Labrador that may provide some insight into the recent decline of this species in Canada or aid in the recovery of the population.

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