



Unusual Spring Aggregation of Migrating Sabine's Gulls in Interior British Columbia

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On 23 May 2013, I was standing near the mouth of Kuskanax Creek in Nakusp, a small village in the West Kootenay region of southeastern British Columbia on the east shore of Upper Arrow Lake (11U 440236E 5565648N). The site is at 446 m elevation. I observed a large flock of gulls well out into the lake, about a kilometre away. They appeared to be Bonaparte's Gulls (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) but there had been recent reports of Franklin's Gulls (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*) in the Okanagan valley so I decided to watch them through a telescope for a while. Shortly thereafter, they lifted off the water and flew northward up the middle of the lake. The diagnostic large black wedges on the leading edge of the wings and all-black heads on some birds immediately identified them as Sabine's Gulls (*Xema sabini*) (Figure 1). They flew in a fairly tight flock and landed again but not appreciably closer to me. I estimated the flock to contain about 100 birds.

This observation represents the first spring record for the upper portion of the Arrow Lakes valley or the southern interior of the province. Previously, only single birds (adults or juveniles) have been reported in September in the area (Davidson 2011). On the following day, 24 May, Jason Rogers (pers. comm.) reported seeing a flock estimated to contain 90 birds in Banff, Alberta, about 200 km and two major mountain ranges northeast of Nakusp.

In North America, Sabine's Gull breeds at high latitudes in the Arctic and winters mainly in up-welling zones of pelagic waters off western South America (American Ornithologists' Union 1998, Blomqvist and Elander 1981). The species migrates principally



Figure 1. The striking wing pattern of this small gull is diagnostic in all plumages, even at a distance. Photo by Michael J. Foley.

over offshore waters, especially continental shelves, in spring and autumn and in Canada migrates primarily along the Pacific coast. It is rare anywhere in the interior of the continent (Day et al. 2001, Godfrey 1986).

In British Columbia, Sabine's Gull is a regular and abundant spring migrant, and is more numerous during the autumn passage offshore. In the interior, it is casual in spring and very rare during the southward movement, mainly through eastern portions of the province (Campbell et al. 1990). The spring flock seen on Upper Arrow Lake on 23 May 2013 is unusual, as large numbers of Sabine's Gulls reported in migration anywhere else in the interior of North America are exceptional (Day et al. 2001). The only other large flocks reported in the Pacific Northwest were 300 birds observed 9 June 1963, as late spring migrants, at Blue Lake, Grant County, in eastern Washington (Wahl et al. 2005) and 40 gulls in breeding plumage on 29 May 2000 at Judas Creek, Marsh Lake, 50 km southeast of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory (Sinclair et al. 2003). †

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