FRIENDS *of Great Salt Lake*

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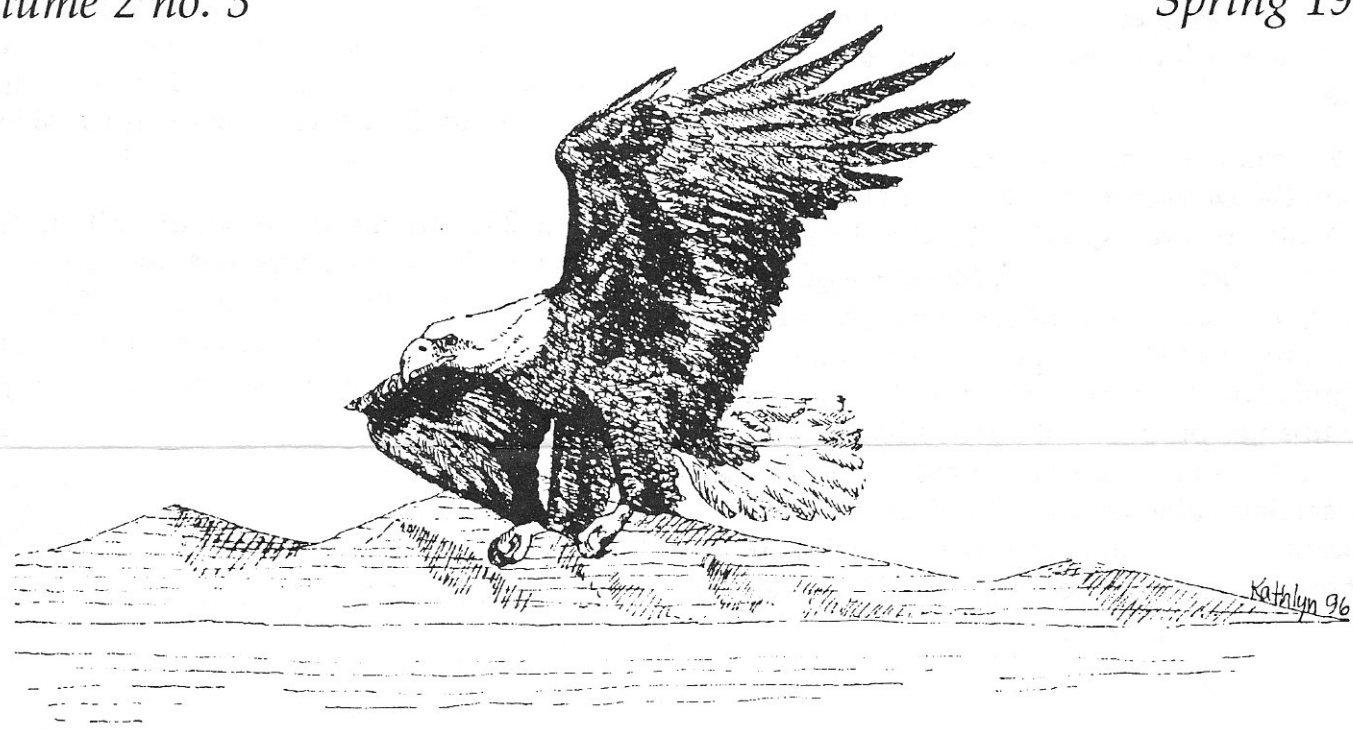

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The mission of Friends of Great Salt Lake is to preserve and protect the Great Salt Lake ecosystem and to increase public awareness and appreciation of the lake through education, research, and advocacy.

General Meeting: Tuesday, April 23

Mineral Leasing Plan for the Great Salt Lake

Edie Trimmer, Royalty Analysis for the Division of Sovereign Lands and Forestry will discuss the "Mineral Leasing Plan for the Great Salt Lake" at the April 23rd Friends of Great Salt Lake meeting. By April 23, this will likely be in the public comment phase. Therefore, understanding this mineral leasing plan and being able to make useful comments will help us look towards the future of the Great Salt Lake.

The following are just a few facts provided from the Division of Sovereign Lands and Forestry regarding salts. The Great Salt Lake has an estimated 4 to 5.5 billion tons of dissolved salts. Salts have been extracted from the Great Salt Lake at an increasing rate and in significant amounts since 1964. In that year, salt companies produced about 300,000 tons of sodium chloride. By 1994, production from the Great Salt Lake was over 2 million tons of sodium chloride and approximately 300,000 tons of other salts produced for sale in 1992. In January 1995, the Division of Sovereign Lands and Forestry announced the withdrawal of sovereign lands from mineral leasing as part of a comprehensive planning process for management of minerals on those lands.

Edie Trimmer has been with the Division of State Lands and now the Division of Sovereign Lands and Forestry for over four years. As the Royalty Analyst, Ms. Trimmer has had major responsibility for developing the mineral leasing plan.

April 23 is an important opportunity to find out more about the future and the proposed management of the Great Salt Lake. The adoption of the mineral leasing plan will guide mineral leasing on the Great Salt Lake for years to come.

1996 Spring Schedule
Friends of Great Salt Lake

Event	Date/Time	Location
Activities Planning Meeting	April 4, Thursday/ 7-9 p.m.	Salt Lake County Building, Room N3005
Adopt-A-Highway & Potluck	April 20, Saturday/ 9-Noon	Meet at the I-80 Saltair exit ramp
Lecture Series	April 23, Tuesday/ 7-9 p.m.	Sugarhouse Garden Center
Activities Planning Meeting	May 2, Thursday/ 7-9 p.m.	Salt Lake County Building, Room N3005
Antelope Island W & C	May 10-12	Fielding Garr Ranch House, Antelope Is
Lecture Series	May 28, Tuesday/ 7-9 p.m.	Black Rock

Field Notes: The Gulls of Spring

Joel Peterson

Join me in welcoming our returning friends. There's quite a crowd gathering. The months of March and April are busy and exciting around the lake as birds file back into the Great Salt Lake area for the warmer half of the year. Although a few have stayed here for the winter, the majority of avocets, stilts, ibis (or is it 'ibises'), plovers, and others will be making their way back to the Great Salt Lake from distant Winter locations.

Right now, as this article is written (mid-March), gulls are congregating, courting, and beginning to locate nesting territories. Over the next two months, you will see some fascinating phases in the manner of the California gulls. Most of us can easily pick out gulls with just a little instruction. If you look at the flocks of birds on the shoreline, you may see what appears to be just one species everywhere. However, if you look *very* closely, you may see two birds that are not quite the same!

When I make a concerted effort to identify mixed flocks of gulls by exact species, my eyes eventually lose their acuity and I slip back into my boyish wonder of Nature. I like better to soak in the entire scene and muse at their flights, vocalizations, and postures. My finger marking the gull section of the bird book slips from the page and my appreciation deepens for those who have invested the effort to become gull identification experts. I can't keep my mind from wandering, imagining I am seeing the earth from their perspective, or that I'm in a maritime setting. As Longfellow says, "A boy's will is the wind's will / And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts." My daily concerns slip away and I imagine leaving behind responsibility to follow those gulls, whatever species they may happen to be.

Although I don't strongly make the distinction between gull species for this article, I am generally describing the California gull. I've borrowed heavily from a paper written by D. Elden Beck, *Life History Notes on the California Gull, No. 1*, published December 1942 in the Great Basin Naturalist, Vol.3, nos. 3 and 4. In this paper, he describes three years of seasonal fieldwork watching nesting gulls on Rock Island in Utah Lake. Many of the behaviors he mentions are similar between gull species.

A few California gulls spend the entire year in the area, but they primarily winter on the Pacific Coast. Consider this: more California gulls now seem to be wintering in this area than in the past (Behle et. al., 1985). The breeding populations in the state are some of the largest in the world. It's no wonder that the 'California' gull is our Utah state bird. Another species of gull that nests in Utah is the Franklin's gull. The ring-billed gull will winter in this area but are not expected to nest here. Uncommon and rare winter gull visitors include Bonaparte's gull, herring gull, glaucous gull and Thayer's gull. Accidental or casual visitors include the mew gull, glaucous-winged gull, and Sabine's gull (ibid.).

Through the first part of March the gulls flying into Utah are very flighty. You will notice that they are easily disturbed and will fly a greater distance away from the disturbance at this time of year. Later on in the season, after a nesting area has been selected, the gulls are less easily disturbed. In March, gull flocks congregate on the spit east of Black Rock, on the south shore of the lake. As the bonds strengthen between these monogamous birds they begin to fly in pairs. The older birds which have bred before will generally arrive first, selecting nesting areas they have used in the past. Younger gulls arrive later and claim more marginal nesting sites around the periphery of the gull colony. In the morning I see all the gulls sitting with their bodies pointing in the same direction like windvanes. They begin to fly about as the sun warms them. It is common for gulls to leave the nesting area in the morning and disperse for the greater part of the day.

Sugarhouse Park pond in Salt Lake City hosts some of the daily transients which are accustomed to handouts. At nearly the same time each summer evening I see them depart the park in rising spirals as they fly to the northwest. I would love to drop what I'm doing some day and follow them; if only I could keep up with them as I drive through the city. I assume they are flying out to their protected colonies near the Great Salt Lake shore.

Pay close attention to the gestures the gulls are making this month and you may see aspects of their courting behavior. This can be seen in March and will continue to mid-April when they mate. The male and female will stand opposite each other and thrust their heads forward. They will peck and parry with their bills while making peeping vocalizations. At various times the female will point her bill to the ground to

demonstrate to the male to present food for her. Beck writes, "In a great number of cases, the male regurgitated some food and the female sparingly partook of a few morsels and then consented to copulate..." It probably demonstrates that the male will be able to do this for future chicks, making him a satisfactory mate. Bachelors reading this should not consider it advice. Volume One of Stokes' Nature Guides, A GUIDE TO BIRD BEHAVIOR, gives detailed descriptions of courting behaviors for the herring gull which parallel Beck's observations of the California gull. There is a whole series of ground-scratching, head-tossing, and vocalizations during courtship. It's sure to catch on in the dance club scene.

In late March the gulls begin constructing their nests. When nesting, they stay closer to the colony and are not flushed as easily. They begin their nest construction by scraping a shallow bowl in the ground's surface with bill and feet. The construction of their nests vary with the material available to them and can consist of nothing more than the scrape or may be well sheltered by rocks and lined with plant material and feathers.

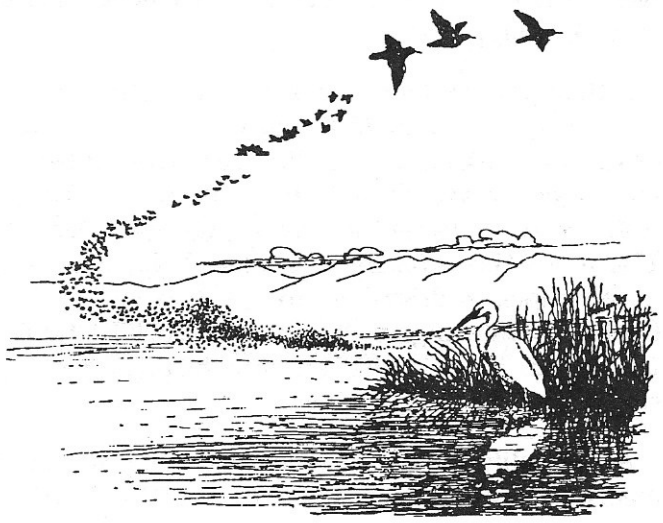
Near the end of April, gulls will be incubating an average of three eggs per nest. This incubation period lasts about 23-27 days. Hatching begins after the first week of May. The actual hatch dates depend on the timing of the individual pairs but hatching rates increase throughout the remainder of the month.

Concern exists about the disturbance of nesting colonies of any species of bird at the lake. The gulls will stay on the nest most tenaciously during incubation, but will temporarily abandon the site if disturbed. The eggs can quickly become too hot without a bird shading them and the embryo will die.

Also, after the chicks have hatched, they will be pecked by other adult gulls if they stray into another pair's nest area, sometimes causing the death of the chick. Imagine the upset to the entire colony if they are disturbed by something such as a dog chasing through them, for example. The adults will fly, leaving the chicks unshaded from the heat, and chicks will be running everywhere. The ensuing territorial disputes between the adult birds settling back in their nest areas, and disputes between adults and lost chicks finding their way back to their nest is complete mayhem, causing further chick mortality.

Red fox and coyotes are also predators of adults, eggs and chicks where they can be reached without crossing deep water. Consider Egg Island just off the north end of Antelope Island. It is separated from the larger Antelope Island (which hosts these predators) and makes a safe nesting area.

By nine or ten weeks of age the young-of-the-year gulls are beginning to fly and are foraging for themselves. They are easy to spot as the dusky brown colored "nerds" that aren't quite sure of themselves. They look very different from their white and gray plumaged parents. Also, they appear a bit larger.

On a more serious note, when I-80 was being resurfaced a couple of years ago, there was a slaughter of young gulls that were fledgling out of the old Morton Salt evaporation ponds just south of the Interstate. They were getting caught against the cement median barriers that were placed along a five-mile stretch of shared lane. I counted many road-killed fledgling gulls each day and often saw the frightened, unsure brown fledglings walking along the barrier looking for an opening in order to cross the road. After the peak fledgling period, gull carcasses littered the highway. Other animals like deer, red fox, and skunk met the same peril. There is a significant amount of animal movement along the south shore. They are often crossing the highway between the Saltair exit to the Tooele/Grantsville exit, evidenced by the road kills.

When you're at the lake, play a game with yourself or with your kids: look closely at the birds and see how many different species you can discern. When your eye is sharp, try counting how many different species of gulls you can make out. Plumage color alone may fool you because varying ages of the same species can look very different. Observe their behaviors and you can learn a lot about their breeding status. There will be many changes in these next months. Don't forget your binoculars and sack lunch. See you at the lake.