



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PHOTOGRAPHS available from Fish and Wildlife Service

### FRANKLIN'S GULL, NOMADIC BIRD, SETTLES DOWN ON WILDLIFE REFUGE

The more Franklin's gulls the merrier. That seems to be the consensus among farmers and conservationists, because the Franklin's gull is almost entirely beneficial to mankind, being a bird that devours grasshoppers, locusts, grub worms, and other agricultural pests. Now officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service believe they have found a way of increasing the population of Franklin's gulls, according to a report made today to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

It apparently all revolves around the problem of controlling the water level of ponds and marshes.

A big factor in increasing bird populations is to get the species to nest in sites where favorable conditions prevail and predators and other unfavorable factors are at a minimum. The Franklin's gull, unlike most birds, has frequently nested in one locality one year and moved to another the next, so that conservationists have been unable to provide ideal habitats that would aid in increasing the population of this species of gull.

Biologists of the Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with some earlier observations by Dr. Thomas S. Roberts and Arthur Cleveland Bent that varying

food and water conditions were responsible for the fluctuation of nesting localities. Since food supplies on various mid-western refuges are adequate and constant, Service biologists concluded that water levels alone were probably the determining factor in the management of Franklin's gull nesting colonies.

Prior to the establishment of the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota in 1935, this species of gull was not known to nest in Brown County, where the refuge is located. In 1937, Mud Lake, a part of the refuge which frequently dried up in fall, was impounded and transformed into a lake and marsh of more than 3,000 acres. About 6,000 Franklin's gulls nests were built there that year. The water level was controlled. The next year there were 6,100 nests; in 1939, 20,000 nests; and this summer there were at least 40,000 nests.

Similar results were obtained on the Lower Souris National Wildlife Refuge in Bottineau and McHenry Counties, North Dakota, where biologists stabilized water levels on extensive areas of marsh and shallow pools as a management factor in benefiting waterfowl and inducing the colonization of the Franklin's gull.

There were no nesting records for this bird on the Lower Souris Refuge in 1936 and 1937. In 1938, however, 300 nests were recorded on the area. In 1939 the birds returned to make 1,500 nests; and this summer Fish and Wildlife personnel estimated between 50,000 and 60,000 nests on the area.

At nearby Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge, the same methods of controlling water levels were employed. There were no nests in 1936, when the refuge was dry; but 200 nests in 1937; 10,000 in 1938; 20,000 in 1939; and between 40,000 and 45,000 in 1940.

Officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service are optimistic about their results and believe they have found the solution to the problem of encouraging this highly valuable species to return to the same nesting sites each year. There is every indication, officials believe, that within a few years Franklin's gulls will be utilizing every nesting site available for these gulls on and surrounding each of the refuges in the Great Plains States where the birds migrate.

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NOTE TO EDITOR: The following information on the Franklin's gull will serve those interested in a longer feature story. Photographs to illustrate the story may be obtained from the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C.

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A breeding colony of Franklin's gulls is one of the most spectacular, most interesting, and most beautiful sights in the realm of North American ornithology, declared Arthur Cleveland Bent in a publication issued by the Smithsonian Institution. "The man who has never seen one has something to live for—a sight which once seen is never to be forgotten," Bent wrote.

Franklin's gull is considered among the more beautiful of the North American birds. This black-headed gull has a pearl gray mantle, a delicate rosy tint to the white breast feathers, and claret-colored bill and feet. Many observers have described the sight of thousands of these birds rising from a marsh as being "like a billowy, white cloud."

Once called Franklin's rosy gull, because of the rosy tinge on its breast feathers, the bird is both useful and ornamental. Usually it arrives from below

the equator in spring, as the farmer begins to plow his fields. The birds literally surround the plowman, picking up worms, grubs, and other food exposed in the upturned soil.

Fond of insects, particularly grasshoppers, locusts, beetle grubs, and flies, the Franklin's gull has been especially helpful to farmers whose crops are sometimes damaged by large hordes of insects. It is said that this gull is almost wholly, if not entirely, beneficial to man.

Highly gregarious, the Franklin's gull not only nests in large, compact colonies, but it is also sociable towards other species of birds. It is said that this bird frequently seeks the company of other species.

In flight the bird is light and graceful. At times, small parties apparently gather for the pleasure of indulging in aerial exercises and sport, soaring upward in spiral curves, sailing on outstretched, motionless wings, and mounting higher and higher until almost lost to sight.

The bird is equally attractive in the water, swimming about gracefully and almost without effort.

Wintering mainly on the west coast of South America, from northern Peru to southern Chile, the Franklin's gull moves northward in spring and breeds in the United States and Canada during the summer.

The breeding range includes the prairie regions of the northern interior of the continent: East to central Manitoba and western Minnesota, south to southwestern Minnesota, northeastern South Dakota, and northern Utah, west to southeastern Alberta, and north to central Saskatchewan and central Manitoba.

Generally the Franklin's gull nests in rather open marshes and in water that may be waist deep. The nest, which is usually a mass of dead reeds, floats in the open water or is held in place by the marsh vegetation. Nests vary greatly in size, being from 12 to 30 inches in diameter, 4 to 8 inches above the water, and with an inner cavity about 5 inches across.

Usually a nest has three eggs, though complete sets of two are common. Sets of four eggs are rare. A nest often has four eggs that have been produced by two birds.

The eggs are usually ovate, with a thin shell. The color varies from buffy to greenish buffy shades. Some of the eggs are sparingly spotted while others are heavily marked with large and small spots, irregular patches, and splotches.

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