Loafing Behavior of Ring-billed Gulls

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Ring-billed Gull Photo by Eric Walters.

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Studying the behavior of gulls on and off the colony can make important contributions to our knowledge of the time budgets of these animals. The behavior of gulls at the colony could be a critical determinant of reproductive success or failure. Colonial behaviors have been studied by several researchers (Burger 1976, Conover and Miller 1980). As a result, we have a good understanding of how breeding gulls spend their time during the incubation and chick-rearing stages of the annual breeding cycle. Thus, for example, nest defense through parental vigilance and even aggressive actions are typical behaviors of breeding gulls, behaviors that would obviously be unnecessary away from the colony. But the activities engaged in away from the breeding colony may also have important fitness implications for gulls.

We studied the loafing behavior of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) on the shores of Lake Michigan in Waukegan, Illinois from early May to mid-July in 1996 and 1997. These gulls were associated with a breeding colony of approximately 1,000 pairs. While many of the gulls at the beach were probably nesting gulls, many were also non-nesters, birds that had failed to find a mate, experienced a failed nesting effort, or suffered a breakdown of their territory (Conover 1984). Non-nesting gulls often loaf at the edge of a colony, and their numbers may even increase relative to nesting gulls during the breeding season because of nesting failures and territorial destruction.

We observed birds at the beach and in the lake through binoculars or a spotting scope, usually at distances of 30-60 meters, closer when we could observe them behind low-lying sand banks, at greater distances when we might be visible to the gulls. Individual gulls were observed for 10 minutes with their behavior recorded every 30 seconds for a total of 20 observations per subject. Observations that ended before the conclusion of the 10-minute period were discarded. Observations were typically made between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. We treated each 10-minute sequence as a single observation, calculating the percentage of time devoted to each behavior within a sequence. We recorded observations on the following activities: standing, sitting, walking, swimming, bathing, preening, foraging, and vocalizing. In addition, at randomly selected times we also counted the number of birds in the water and on the land simultaneously.