

These two statistics were compiled from eight years of data collected at Evanston (north Cook County). It refers to the average arrival date or peak count of juveniles at that location. Evanston is 27 miles (and 23) from the Calumet (and Waukegan) colonies. The earliest juvenile arrival was on 22 June 1990 while the maximum peaks were about 700 juveniles on 13 July 1990 and 400 on 14 July 1993, respectively.



The young started hatching in early June at the Waukegan Colony. Photo taken 6 June 1997 in Waukegan, Lake Co. by Eric Walters.

Fledglings' Successes and Dangers

After hatching, the need for food increases. Ring-billed Gulls mainly eat fish and insects. One parent does 95% of the foraging at the peak of hatching. The other parent defends the nest site. This foraging activity occurs during the first two and last two hours of the day (Ryder 1993).

With so many gulls hatching and fledging, competition for food likely drives gulls to new areas. Pressure to find new food sources is what may have driven adults into flooded fields during the early June of 1993 (fide Joe Milosevich) or into suburban alleyways in nearby towns during the last two spring and summers (fide Walter Marcisz). Juveniles can't compete with adults for food sites near the colony, so they leave the area sooner than adults to find food.

The need for food and the search in outlying areas from the colony site can lead to disaster for the young birds. Large-scale death from starvation was documented in 1997. Over 600 juveniles were found dead in outlying southern Cook County suburban locations (11 July TV news report, fide Walter Marcisz). I found numerous dead juveniles in the summer of 1997 near the Waukegan colony site as well as in the Evanston area.

Fledging is a time in which numerous territorial skirmishes occur.

Adults attack other chicks who cross into their territory, and will peck them to death (Ryder 1993). I saw one chick who apparently lost track of its parents and who went up to numerous other adults, only to be attacked on its neck. The gull was bitten so badly that its neck was bloodied with an exposed wound.

Young gulls can also become "road kill." Their lack of experience with fast-moving cars and slow reaction times to dangerous situations leave many dead. One recent summer day, 75 were found dead along Stony Island Avenue very near the Lake Calumet colony (fide Walter Marcisz). I found numerous casualties the summer of 1997 along McCormick Boulevard in Skokie and Evanston.

Weakness from lack of food and foraging in garbage dumps or other unhealthful areas could introduce bacteria or viruses into a young gull's system, which could ultimately cause death. Accounts of botulism have been reported, and probably took the lives of 600 gulls between 1959 and 1964 (Blokpoel and Tessier 1986).

Other factors contribute to the deaths of young gulls. Mammals such as coyotes, raccoons, skunks, or even rats invade colonies. The failure of the 1993 Grundy and Will County colony was probably due to repeated coyote predation (fide Joe Milosevich). One study from 1965

found that adults deserted eggs when a raccoon came by at night. That resulted in the deaths of 32 to 87 embryos, which had cooled below the temperature required for incubation (Emlen et al. 1966).

Human intrusion has impacted the colony's reproduction success. This intrusion causes an interruption of nesting activity, which leads to the eggs being exposed to low or ambient temperatures. This disturbance can result in a 16 to 31 percent desertion of nests (Vermeer 1970 & Southern and Southern 1981). In the spring of 1994, dredging activity and the resulting truck traffic at Lake Calumet disturbed nesting gulls. The use of a cannon to create loud noises frightened away the gulls (fide Walter Marcisz). These disturbances may have caused a 25 percent drop in nest numbers from the annual estimate of about 10,000 nests. That means some 5000 less young fledged that summer.

Typically, 90 percent of adults and 40 percent of chicks return to same colony to nest (Ryder 1993).



This Ring-billed Gull fledged several days before Eric Walters took the photo on 11 July 1997 at the Waukegan Colony, Lake Co.