California Gull
Larus californicus

Aves — Charadriiformes — Laridae

CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide:	Secure (G5)
Statewide:	Imperiled breeding/Vulnerable nonbreeding (S2B, S3N)
ESA:	No status
USFS:	Region 1: No status; Region 4: No status
BLM:	No status
IDFG:	Protected nongame

BASIS FOR INCLUSION
Highly variable breeding success in Idaho; patchy distribution, population declines, and threats.

TAXONOMY
No taxonomic note of relevance.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE
California gulls breed in scattered locations throughout the Great Basin, northwest Great Plains, and south-central taiga of North America. There are an estimated 414,000 adult California gulls breeding in North America (Kushlan et al. 2002). In the Great Basin and Northern Rocky Mountains there are approximately 71,936 breeding pairs (Ivey and Herziger 2005). Just over half of these (36,320 pairs) bred in southern Idaho, as of 1993 (Trost and Gerstell 1994), at American Falls, Blackfoot, Magic, and Mormon Reservoirs, Bear Lake, Deer Flat, and Minidoka National Wildlife Refuges (NWR), and Ted Trueblood Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

POPULATION TREND
Patchy distribution of colony sites in the U.S. likely obscures any potential geographically large-scale trends (Winkler 1996). Nevertheless, Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data suggest declines during the period 1960–2004 and 1960–1979 in the U.S. (-1.5% and -1.8% per year, respectively), western BBS region (-1.3% and -1.5% per year, respectively), and Idaho (-3.2% and -8.0% per year, respectively), and increases during the period 1980–2004 (U.S.: +0.3% per year; western BBS region: +0.7% per year; Idaho: +1.3% per year; Sauer et al. 2005). In Idaho, the population of breeding adults may be declining, as nesting islands become unsuitable for nesting because of low water and exposure to predators. Of the 4 large (2500–10,000 nests) California gull colonies in Idaho (American Falls Reservoir, Blackfoot Reservoir, Magic Reservoir, Mormon Reservoir), only 2 were successful in producing young in 2004 and 1 was apparently abandoned altogether in 2005 (Idaho Bird Inventory and Survey [IBIS], unpubl. data; M. Wackenhut, IDFG and C. Trost, pers. comms.)

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

California gulls breed almost exclusively on barren or sparsely vegetated islands in natural lakes, reservoirs, and rivers (Winkler 1996). In Idaho, they are generally found nesting with ring-billed gulls and/or double-crested cormorants. Nest scrapes are formed on the ground and lined with vegetation, bones, and feathers (Behle 1958), and nests are occasionally reused from year to year (Winkler 1996). For foraging, this species may travel up to 60 km (37 mi) from the colony (Baird 1976). California gulls will use a wide variety of fairly open habitats for foraging, including reservoirs, lakes, irrigation canals, weirs, garbage dumps, feed lots, irrigated agricultural fields, and pastures (Winkler 1996). This species is highly opportunistic, and will feed on just about any food items that are possible to consume, although it prefers live animal prey (Winker 1996). California gulls will occasionally steal food items from other species, and commonly eats eggs from other nests in the colony (Winkler 1996).

ISSUES

Low water levels, particularly in the Game Magic Valley, are a serious problem for California gulls in Idaho. Colony islands at Magic and Mormon Reservoirs have recently been connected to dry land, and thus exposed to predators and human disturbance. Both colonies failed in 2004 during late incubation/early hatching, which was likely a result of predation (C. Moulton, IDFG, pers. comm.). The colony at Mormon Reservoir, which historically had 7500–8500 nests (Trost and Gerstell 1994), contained only 800 nests in 2004, and no sign of nesting was observed in 2005. Covering of landfills in Idaho, which provide a food source for gulls, may impact the population (Trost and Gerstell 1994). Easy access to colonies by the recreating public may cause too much disruption for successful nesting (Ivey and Herziger 2005, Winkler 1996). Entering colonies for research purposes may impact reproductive success of the colony by exposing eggs and chicks to predation by other gulls (Winkler 1996). Since Trost and Gerstell's (1994) study, no statewide assessment of breeding locations and colony sizes has been made.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Maintaining water levels that separate nesting islands from dry land is most likely to have a positive impact on the California gull population in Idaho (Ivey and Herziger 2005; C. Moulton, pers. comm.). Evidence of this impact was seen in June 2005, when 1 of the 3 Magic Reservoir colony islands was completely surrounded by water (it was not surrounded by water in 2004). Unlike in 2004, the colony appears to have been successful in producing chicks (Idaho Bird Inventory and Survey [IBIS], unpubl. data). Monitoring of effects of landfill covering on California gull populations should be investigated. Protecting colonies from disturbance should be explored, although caution should be exercised in drawing too much attention to these sites (Ivey and Herziger 2005). The effects of entering colonies in Idaho for research purposes should be studied, and findings should be applied to future work on these colonies. Finally, consistent monitoring of the breeding colonies should be implemented, through IBIS, such that all colonies are surveyed every 3 years following the monitoring plan outlined in the Intermountain West Waterbird Conservation Plan (Ivey and Herziger 2005).

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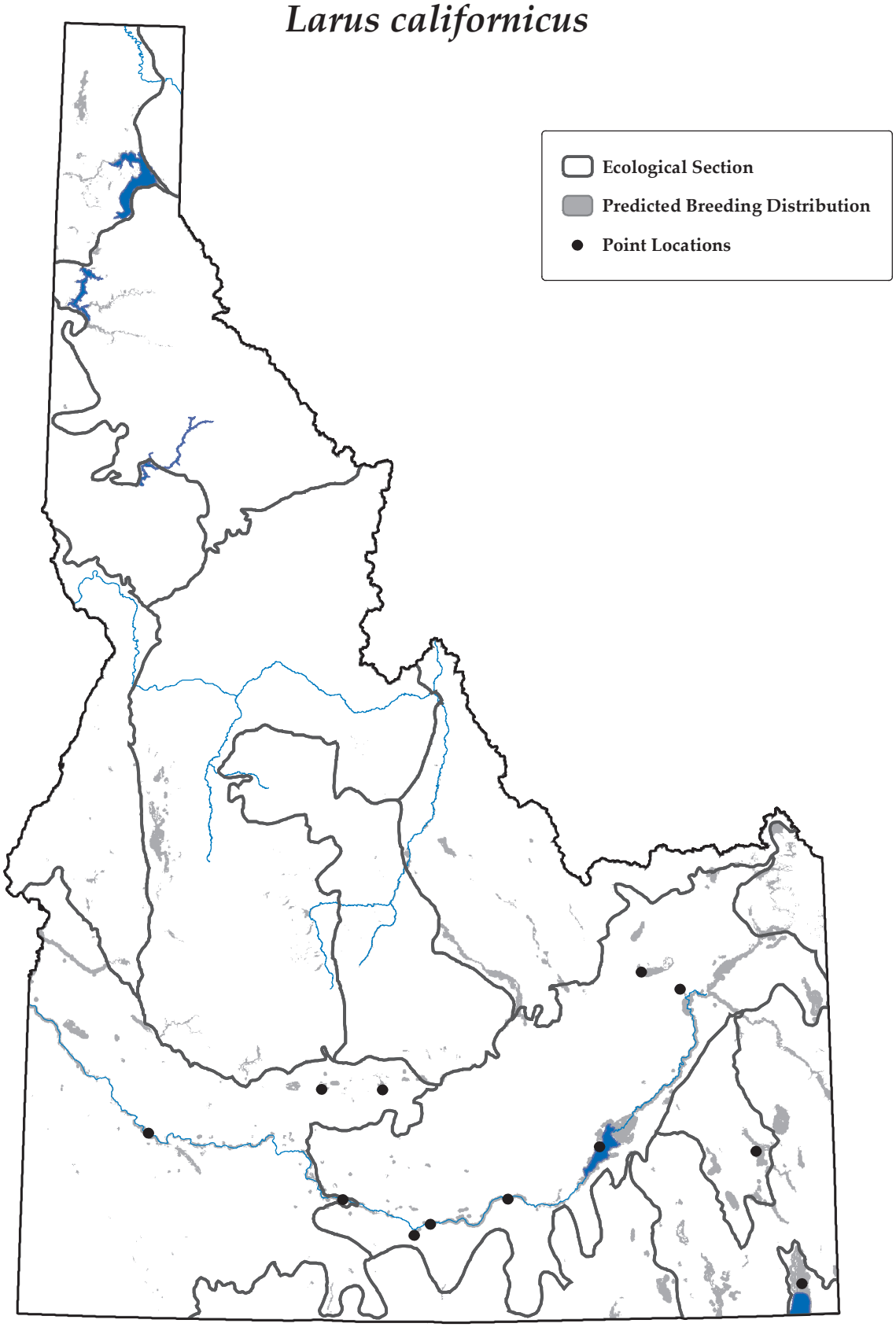

Map created on September 20, 2005
and prepared by Idaho Conservation Data Center.
Sources: Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center, Idaho Department of Fish and Game (2005). Predicted distribution is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationships Models (WHR), A Gap Analysis of Idaho: Final Report. Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Moscow, ID (Scott et al. 2002). Predicted distribution is approximate (for more information, go to http://www.wildlife.uidaho.edu/idgap/idgap_report.asp).

0 20 40 80 Kilometers

0 20 40 80 Miles