



Kelp Gull

Swartrugmeeu

Larus dominicanus

The Kelp Gull has a wide breeding distribution in the southern hemisphere (Croxall *et al.* 1984; Croxall 1991). In South America, it is common along the coasts of Chile and Peru, while on the east coast it breeds as far north as southern Brazil. About 5000 pairs breed on the Falkland Islands, and similar numbers on the Antarctic Peninsula and associated islands. There are a few hundred pairs at many of the subantarctic islands and in Australia, where it is increasing. The largest concentrations, estimated to total more than one million pairs, are found in New Zealand. These populations all belong to the nominate race (Harrison 1993b).

The subspecies *L. d. vetula* is endemic to southern Africa (Brooke & Cooper 1979b) where breeding has been recorded at 79 localities between Cape Fria (1812AC) and Rietrivier (3327CA) (Bridgeford 1982; Crawford *et al.* 1982a, 1994). The southern African population was c. 11 000 breeding pairs in 1976–81, of which c. 9000 pairs bred in South Africa and c. 2000 in Namibia (Crawford *et al.* 1982a). The nominate subspecies occurs as a vagrant (Brooke *et al.* 1982a); there are two specimens from Yzerfontein (3318AC) (Clancey *et al.* 1987).

In southern Africa, most are on the west and south coasts, as shown by reporting rates. It is sparse along the northern KwaZulu-Natal coast (Cyrus & Robson 1980). Nonbreeders range on the west coast to Luanda, Angola, and on the east coast to Maputo, Mozambique (Urban *et al.* 1986). Records of large gulls with dark backs in the interior are more likely to be the Lesser Blackbacked Gull *L. fuscus*, such as at Barberspan (2625DA) (Milstein 1975; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

Habitat: It nests colonially, occasionally singly, in a wide variety of marine and coastal habitats, including cliffs, rock stacks, small islets and sandbanks in estuaries, salt and sewage works, and larger islands in lagoons and offshore (Crawford *et al.* 1982a). Nests have been found up to 10 km inland along the Skeleton Coast, Namibia (Bridgeford 1982). It forages at sea, catching its own prey and taking food discarded by boats, primarily fishing vessels operating nearshore; it also

feeds along the coast on rocky beaches and sandy shores, and preys on animals at islands (Shelton *et al.* 1978; Sinclair 1978a; Brooke & Cooper 1979a; Shaughnessy 1980; Ryan & Moloney 1988; Steele 1992). Along the coast, numbers, especially of first-year birds, are highest where there is a source of supplementary food, such as at fishing harbours and refuse dumps (Steele & Hockey 1990). In the southwestern Cape Province it has regularly been recorded inland, particularly at abattoirs, livestock carcasses and rubbish dumps (Hockey *et al.* 1989).

Movements: Off the southwestern Cape Province there are large seasonal changes in numbers at breeding localities. At Dassen Island (3318AC), numbers in the austral autumn are only 7% of those recorded during the main spring breeding season (pers. obs). By contrast, the model of seasonal occurrence shows an increase in the reporting rate off the southwestern Cape Province in autumn and winter, probably reflecting dispersal from island breeding localities. Off KwaZulu-Natal and Transkei, reporting rates are also highest in autumn and winter. This suggests an eastward migration in these seasons, at the same time that many

marine predators move eastwards following the 'sardine run' (Armstrong & Thomas 1989). Off northern Namibia, where it breeds at a number of mainland localities, there was a decreased reporting rate immediately after the breeding season. This may be caused by birds moving to sea to feed, or southwards as at this time birds are most visible between Lüderitz (2615CA) and St Helena Bay (3218C). Fledglings ringed at colonies in the southwestern Cape Province have been resighted as far east as East London (3327BB) and as far north as Swakopmund (2214DA) (Steele & Hockey 1990).

Breeding: Breeding is initiated in spring and peaks in mid-summer; it occurs earlier in South Africa than in Namibia (Crawford *et al.* 1982a). This is confirmed by the models and data.

Interspecific relationships: It nests in association with, and preys on exposed eggs and chicks of, other seabirds, including the Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*, Cape Gannet *Morus capensis*, cormorants and terns (Crawford *et al.* 1982a). It scavenges on the carcasses of dead birds, which may sometimes lead to its contracting and spreading diseases such as Avian Cholera *Pasteurella multocida* (Crawford *et al.* 1992).

Historical distribution and conservation: Artificial nesting sites have increased the number of available breeding localities; otherwise there is no reason to suspect an altered historical distribution. Numbers of Kelp Gulls increased substantially at localities off the southwestern Cape Province in the 1980s (Steele & Hockey 1990; Crawford *et al.* 1994). This may be a return to previous levels of abundance. Numbers were reduced earlier in the 20th century to decrease predation on guano-producing seabirds. However, an increased food supply may also have influenced the recent increase.

R.J.M. Crawford

Recorded in 219 grid cells, 4.8%
Total number of records: 16 312
Mean reporting rate for range: 51.7%

