

# Laughing Gull Sighted in American Samoa

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A Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) in breeding plumage was first sighted on 19 March 1998, in the village of Avau, on the south coast of Tutuila island, American Samoa. Two of us (M.E.H. and M.G.) observed it at ca. 1300 hr. It was first observed at a distance of ca. 100 meters, flying towards us. We observed it for a period of two minutes, during which time it flew back and forth along the coastline. At its closest it passed us at a distance of 10 meters. Lighting was excellent, with the sun above and slightly behind us. One of us (R.P.C.) subsequently observed it for 30 seconds at the same locale at ca. 1700 hr. The bird was a medium-sized, black-headed gull, with a reddish-black bill, dark-grey mantle, secondaries, and primaries, with prominent, all black wing tips. The authors have all worked previously with colonial waterbirds, in locales where breeding Laughing Gulls are superabundant, and are familiar with the species.

The bird was sighted again on 22 and 23 March in the same general area. On all occasions it was observed in flight and was never observed standing. It did not appear to be injured or distressed. Reasons for its affinity to this particular portion of the island's coastline are unclear. There is a flat, emergent rock about 50 meters offshore that could provide a disturbance-free place to roost, and this section of coast is frequently used for artisanal fishing, which generates fish-cleaning debris. However, these explanations are speculative, with no direct observations to support them.

While Laughing Gulls breed and winter coastally in southern and eastern North America, southward to northern South America, it is also an occasional visitor to the tropical Pacific, with many records from Hawaii (Harrison 1985, 1987, Pratt et al. 1987). Its occurrence elsewhere in the tropical Pacific is less frequent, or at least, less well documented. There are records for Johnson Atoll, (Pratt et al. 1987), a single record for the Marshalls (Garret 1987), one for the Phoenix Islands and six for the Line Islands (King 1967, cited in Garrett 1987). There is only one previous record for the Samoan archipelago (Muse et al. 1980) and it has not been recorded in nearby Fiji or Tonga (Watling 1982). The Samoan record was on the island of Upolo, in the independent nation of Samoa (formerly known as Western Samoa). That record involved an immature individual that was observed for a period of one month, ending 27 February 1980. The present record is the first ever for the U.S. Territory of American Samoa, and only the second for the Samoan archipelago. As Muse and Muse (1982) point out, Laughing Gulls are an unfamiliar species to Samoans. While it is undoubtedly an infrequent vagrant here, the lack of records may also be partially due to a scarcity of observers here as well.

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# Summer Bird Census on Mauna Kea

by Lena Schnell

Kathleen Sherry and Lena Schnell of the Pohakuloa Training Area ("PTA") Environmental Office staff, recently assisted USGS-BRD biologists with a three-day bird census on Mauna Kea. Although all bird species are counted, the census focuses on Palila, *Loxoides bailleui*, an endangered bird that only lives on the western slopes of Mauna Kea. Preparing for a bird census takes time. One or two days prior to each census, the field crew gathers to practice identifying birds and correctly determining distances. During the calibration period on Mauna Kea this summer, the field crew was treated to a rare event, the appearance of an Akiapola'au, (*Hemignathus munroi*, another endangered bird) which was heard and observed. The "Aki" is extremely rare on the western slope of Mauna Kea and is always exciting to see. Bird census counts on Mauna Kea are usually conducted during the winter months after breeding season. Because the population estimates for Palila were thought to be low, more counting stations were added and an additional summer count was conducted. Kathleen and Lena were primary counters on transects in the Palila Critical Habitat on PTA. Although no Palila or other endangered birds were detected on PTA, Palila were heard along the Pohakuloa Gulch about 2 kilometers above PTA.

Source: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM BULLETIN, V. 14, July 1998. Department of the Army

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