

Franklin's Gull

Larus pipixcan

Who would expect the nickname “prairie dove” to belong to a gull? Yet the name definitely applies to the Franklin's gull, a bird that breeds in the wet parts of the prairie and flies with the buoyancy of a dove.

And the Franklin's part? Sir John Franklin, an explorer looking for the Northwest Passage, headed the Arctic expedition on which the gull was first collected for science.

APPEARANCE

Take your basic gull and shrink it a bit to 14 or 15 inches. Give it a black hood, a heavy white crescent above and below each eye, and a red bill. Make the wings short and maneuverable, add splashes of white to the black wingtips, and—*Voila!*—you have a good approximation of a Franklin's gull dressed for the breeding season. To change to the winter costume, give the bird a smaller hood placed on the back of the head and make the bill black.

RANGE

The Franklin's gull breeds mainly in Canada's Prairie Provinces, Montana, the Dakotas, and western Minnesota. The birds generally stick to the eastern part of Montana but sometimes wander west after the breeding season.

Franklin's gulls migrate much farther south than most gull species, wintering chiefly on the Pacific Coast of Peru.

HABITAT

The Franklin's gull is as close to a landlubber as a gull gets, living on the prairies rather than the seacoast or lakes during the breeding season. However, these birds don't have webbed feet for nothing. Once they reach the grasslands in spring, the gulls

look for large marshes where their chicks will be safe until able to fly.

Five areas in Montana host breeding colonies of Franklin's gulls: Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area; Benton Lake, Bowdoin, and Red Rock Lakes national wildlife refuges; and the Manning Lake Complex northwest of Culbertson.

FOOD

Franklin's gulls also break the mold when it comes to food. Unlike most gull species, Franklin's aren't pirates that swipe food, nor are they predators that gobble chicks of any sort.

Instead, they mainly eat insects such as midges, grasshoppers, and grubs. They also consume earthworms, sometimes following a farmer's plow to pluck the morsels from the overturned dirt. Rarely do you find Franklin's gulls scavenging at dumps.

REPRODUCTION

Franklin's gulls nest by the thousands in noisy colonies that can often be heard more than a mile away. Each breeding pair builds a nest on cattails and bulrushes surrounded by shallow water that keeps the eggs and chicks safe from most predators. The floating nest decays below the water line, so the birds must constantly add material. In fact, stealing from other nests is so common among Franklin's gulls that an unguarded nest can disappear in just a few hours.

All the female gulls in a colony lay their three eggs at about the same time. The eggs hatch in about 25 days, and 35 days after that the chicks begin to fly. Once the young have been airborne for two weeks, the gulls abandon the colony and spread to large-water areas such as Fort Peck and Canyon Ferry lakes.



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One of the largest Franklin's populations in Montana is at Benton Lake, which had 50,000 gulls when they were last counted in August 1998.

STATUS IN MONTANA

The Franklin's gull is considered a species of concern in Montana. “That status does not necessarily mean the population is dropping,” says Kristi DuBois, FWP Native Species Program coordinator. “It's more about the species having just a few breeding sites. All its eggs are in one basket, so to speak.”

DuBois says the combination of wetland loss over the past century and the drought of recent years is reason to keep watch on the gull's status. Biologists are also concerned that the three lakes containing Montana's largest Franklin's gull populations—Benton, Bowdoin, and Freezout—all have soils high in selenium, a natural trace mineral that can be fatal to birds at high levels. When lake levels are low, DuBois says, water evaporates more quickly than usual, concentrating the selenium. 🐼

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