



## **Brunswick Wildlife Laughing Gulls**

Can you imagine writing a personal ad for a Laughing Gull? “Loves romantic walks on the beach in search of fish heads; enjoys ferry rides and sitting on docks waiting for fishing boats; will eat almost anything; good sense of humor, loves to laugh...”

The Laughing Gull is a relatively small gull, found in large numbers in Southeastern North Carolina. It nests in large colonies on our sandy shores. Unlike many personal ads, the above is fact not fiction

My favorite Laughing Gull encounter was with a large colony on the Texas Gulf Coast. As I approached the colony they all started making a soft clucking sound...not their usual loud “laugh”...communicating the presence of a possible predator (me). It reminded me of a certain Alfred Hitchcock movie.

I quickly retreated, gaining new respect for these gulls. If you have ever been surrounded by them while feeding gulls, you understand. They are beautiful and vociferous and suddenly appear in large numbers...a feeding frenzy competing for handouts or fish heads.

It takes three years for Laughing Gulls to progress from a juvenile to a breeding adult so their identification is not always easy. It requires an understanding of their molting cycles, aging process, and changes of appearance during the three years.

The young Laughing Gull is pictured in its dark, juvenal plumage. In approximately three years the juvenile will progress from this stage to its definitive alternate (breeding) plumage like the adults shown above. There are intermediate plumages during the three years that are not included in these pictures.

Adult Laughing Gulls molt all of their feathers from late summer to October. This is called the pre-basic molt. The basic plumage, generally known as “winter” plumage, that results is evident on the two gulls riding the ferry.

Most of our Laughing Gulls migrate south down the coast or to South America; however, many remain in the southern United States during the winter...including a small number in Brunswick County like the ferry hitchhikers.

In spring, adult Laughing Gulls go through a pre-alternate molt that yields the more colorful, alternate plumage...the breeding plumage. For Brunswick County, the arrival of these gulls and their laughing call ushers in spring. The adult's black hood, white eye arcs, and red legs, eye-ring, and bills return during their molt into alternate plumage.

By the way, what wine goes good with a romantic dinner of fish heads?

John Ennis

