

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL *LARUS MARINUS*: LATEST NEWCOMER AS BREEDING BIRD IN THE NETHERLANDS

DE GROTE MANTELMEEUW ALS JONGSTE AANWINST BROEDVOGEL IN NEDERLAND

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Great Black-backed Gulls *Larus marinus* were first reported nesting in The Netherlands in 1993 in the Delta area. In subsequent years, breeding was also established in the Wadden Sea area and along the border of the IJsselmeer. The total number of breeding and territorial pairs increased from 1 in 1993 up to 11-13 in 1998.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* breeds on the maritime coasts of the North Atlantic and in the Baltic, mainly on islands and rocky stacks (Kilpi 1997). Breeding numbers in Europe have increased over large areas, in Denmark and France accompanied by a range expansion. Its absence as a breeding bird on Danish, German, Dutch and Belgian North Sea coasts was a remarkable discontinuity, which looked to be due to a lack of suitable breeding habitat. However, the Great Black-backed Gull established a small breeding population in the German Wadden Sea in 1985, with at least 10 breeding pairs in that region in 1995 (Südbeck & Hälterlein 1997). It seemed therefore just a matter of time before the first breeding attempt would be recorded in The Netherlands. However, although the species increased as a breeding bird in Brittany and north-west France, a nesting attempt in the Delta area in 1993 still came as a surprise (Vercrujse & Spaans 1994). Since 1993, the Great Black-backed Gull has bred annually in The Netherlands, and this paper reviews the first six years in which the largest of the European gulls apparently obtained a foothold in our country.

METHODS

Great Black-backed Gulls are large birds and it is tempting to believe that it is easy to find and confirm breeding attempts. However, because so few birds nest

in The Netherlands and because the first breeding attempts were on several locations, often in areas which are not particularly attractive for the ordinary birder, it is quite possible that some nests have been overlooked. It is therefore no surprise that most nests were detected by dedicated teams of observers, most notably the ornithologists of the Rijksinstituut voor Kust en Zee (RIKZ; Meininger *et al.* 1999) and of Vereniging Natuurmonumenten (Jongenelen 1998) in the Delta area and of the SOVON team in the Wadden Sea area (Koks & Hustings 1998). Only a few other observers have found breeding Great Black-backed Gulls (coast IJsselmeer), and these were discovered during the national surveys of SOVON Vogelonderzoek Nederland.

BREEDING ATTEMPTS

Elsewhere in Europe, Great Black-backed Gulls prefer nesting on small islands, tops of stacks and on cliff-ledges, while flat beaches and saltmarshes are only occasionally used (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Rocky coasts and small islands are not naturally available in The Netherlands, but the first nests found in the Delta area in 1993-98 were found on artificial, stony, coastal protection works (Vercrujisse & Spaans 1994; Jongenelen 1998; Meininger *et al.* 1999). At Hellegat (Volkerakmeer), a pair of Great Black-backed Gulls was located in 1996 in a mixed colony of Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. graellsii* and Herring Gulls *L. argentatus*. In 1998, another pair was found in a similar colony in the eastern part of Zoommeer (R.M. Teixeira *pers. comm.*).

The first nesting attempts in the Wadden Sea area were also in unnatural habitats. In 1994, a nest was found at 'De Hond', a small artificial stony island in the Eems estuary, Groningen (Koks 1995). This site was used for nesting by these gulls in 1994, 1995 and 1998 and shared with Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Koks & Hustings 1998). In 1996, an alarming pair was located on Vlieland (Wadden Sea islands) in Oudehuizenlid (van Straaten 1996), and two pairs were found at the Groede, Boschplaat (Terschelling) in 1997 (Staatsbosbeheer unpubl. data). The latter were breeding in the very large colony of Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls in an area with low sandy dunes and saltmarshes. In the same area, at least 3-4 breeding pairs were found in 1998 (Bot 1998).

Two further pairs were found in the IJsselmeer area. At the so-called Vooroeverproject in Wervershoof (Noord-Holland), both in 1997 and in 1998 a pair was observed carrying around nesting materials (A. Roobeek and B. Winters *pers. comm.*). However, in 1998 a nesting attempt could not be confirmed with certainty (van der Lee 1998). At Mokkebank near Laaxum (Friesland), in 1998 territorial behaviour was seen of yet another pair (van Hijum 1998; M. Versluys *pers. comm.*). Both nesting attempts in the IJsselmeer

Table 1. Breeding attempts of Great Black-backed Gulls in The Netherlands, including number of pairs, clutch size, number of chicks hatched and number of chicks fledged.

Table 1. Broedpogingen van de Grote Mantelmeeuw in Nederland, met het aantal broedparen (pairs), de legselgrootte (eggs; voor zover bekend), het aantal uitgekomen (hatched) en uitgevlogen (fledged) jongen.

year	site	area	pairs	eggs	hatched	fledged	source
1993	Middelplaten	Delta	1	1	0	0	(1)
1994	De Hond	Wadden	1	1	?	?	(2)
	Middelplaten	Delta	3	1, 3	≥ 2	?	(3)
1995	De Hond	Wadden	1	?	?	?	(2)
	Middelplaten	Delta	1	?	?	≥ 2	(3)
	Volkerakmeer	Delta	4	?	≥ 3	3	(3)
1996	Vlieland	Wadden	1	?	?	?	(4)
	Middelplaten	Delta	1	?	≥ 2	?	(3)
	Volkerakmeer	Delta	4	?	?	?	(3)
	Markiezaat	Delta	1	?	?	?	(3)
1997	Groede, Terschelling	Wadden	2	?	?	≥ 3	(5)
	Wervershoof	IJsselmeer	1	?	≥ 1	?	(6)
	Haringvliet	Delta	1	?	?	?	(3)
	Middelplaten	Delta	1	3	3	3	(7)
	Volkerakmeer	Delta	2	?	?	?	(3)
	Zoommeer	Delta	1	?	?	?	(3)
1998	Groede, Terschelling	Wadden	3-4	?	?	+	(5)
	De Hond	Wadden	1	3	3	3	(8)
	Wervershoof	IJsselmeer	1	?	?	?	(10)
	Mokkebank	IJsselmeer	1	?	?	?	(11)
	Middelplaten	Delta	3	2, 3	0	0	(7)
	Volkerakmeer	Delta	1-2	?	?	?	(3)
	Markiezaat	Delta	1	?	?	?	(3)

(1) Vercrujssse & Spaans 1994, (2) Koks 1995, (3) Meininger *et al.* 1999, (4) van Straaten 1996, (5) Bot 1998, (6) van der Lee 1998, Roobeek *pers. comm.*, (7) Jongenelen 1998, (8) Koks & de Boer 1998, (10) Roobeek *pers. comm.*, (11) van Hijum 1998

area were in newly established 'natural habitat' developed offshore the IJsselmeer dikes. All breeding attempts are shown in Table 1 and Fig. 1.

BREEDING SUCCESS

Despite its rarity as a breeding bird in The Netherlands, there were hardly any attempts to measure the breeding success of the Great Black-backed Gulls found here. It is possible that most observers simply did not expect to find these birds in their study area, and therefore did not adequately studied the breeding output. On the other hand, Great Black-backed Gulls are remarkably shy, so that adults readily take wing and start alarming (Cramp & Simmons 1983; *pers. observ.*). As a result, and particularly in mixed colonies, it is often not easy to find the

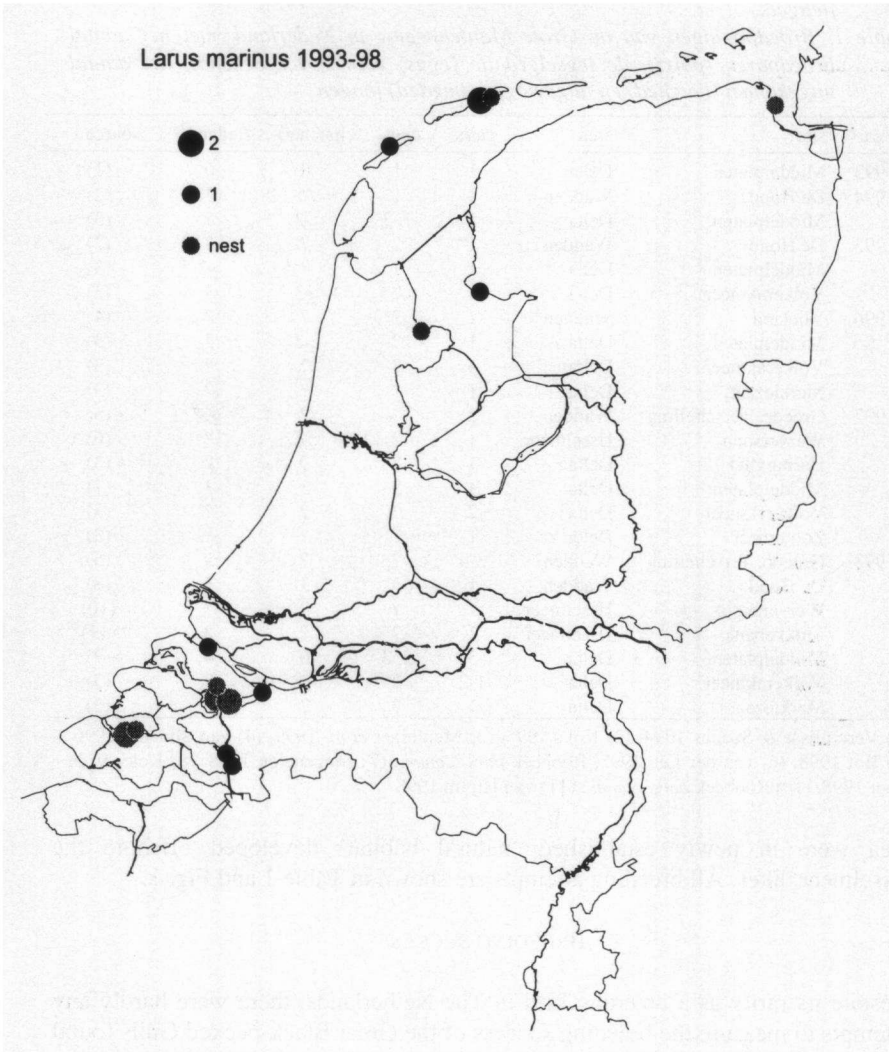


Figure 1. Distribution of breeding Great Black-backed Gulls in The Netherlands, 1993-98.

Figuur 1. Verspreiding van de Grote Mantelmeeuw als broedvogel in Nederland, 1993-98.

clutch or the chicks without considerable disturbance. All clutches of Great Black-backed Gulls found so far and the birds' breeding success as far as known are listed in Table 1. The mean clutch size observed amounted to 2.1 eggs per nest ($n = 8$), but it is likely that several clutches were not yet completed. The mean egg size was 75.74 x 52.13 mm ($n = 12$), which is rather small compared with measurements published for Britain (77 x 54 mm), Norway (77 x 53 mm) and Sweden (78 x 52 mm; Cramp & Simmons 1983). The number of fledged young per pair in The Netherlands (1.8, $n = 8$) was lower than that in a much larger sample elsewhere in Europe (2.6; Cramp & Simmons 1983). Some pairs apparently claimed territories, but certainly did not fledge any chick. The clutches of some other pairs were depredated (Vercruijssse & Spaans 1994; Jongenelen 1998).

DISCUSSION

Great Black-backed Gulls have established a small breeding population in The Netherlands. Breeding was first noticed in the Delta area, and until 1997 this area was the 'stronghold' of the species in The Netherlands. In 1998, 4-5 pairs were located in the Wadden Sea area and two territories were defended in the IJsselmeer area. The fact that the Delta area, the Wadden Sea area and the IJsselmeer coast were explored first by these gulls is perhaps not much of a surprise, because the species prefers sparsely populated, barren breeding habitat also elsewhere in Europe. Its occurrence as a breeding species in saltmarshes and dunes is perhaps not typical, but it has also been observed elsewhere in Europe (Cramp & Simmons 1983; Südbeck & Hälterlein 1997). In the Delta area, young have fledged with certainty in most years, but this has been demonstrated so far only twice in the Wadden Sea area (Koks & de Boer 1998). Despite the rather poor breeding success, and in the light of an expanding population in most parts of its European range, we might expect a bright future for this species in the country. For ornithologists all over our country it will be a challenge to find and document any further breeding attempts.

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SAMENVATTING

Tot voor kort ontbrak de Grote Mantelmeeuw Larus marinus als broedvogel langs de kusten van het zuidelijk deel van de Noordzee. De laatste decennia is daarin verandering gekomen. In Nederland werd het broeden voor het eerst in 1993 in het Deltagebied vastgesteld. In de jaren daarop werd de

soort ook in het Waddengebied en langs de kust van het IJsselmeer vastgesteld. Het totaal aantal broedparen en vestigingspogingen bedroeg in 1998 reeds 11-13.

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