



*The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist*

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## Spring Bird Notes

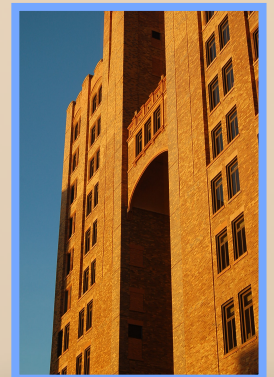
### *Larus argentatus* (Herring Gull)

**ORDER:** Charadriiformes (19 Family)

**FAMILY:** Laridae (103 Species)

Today is the **Full Worm Moon** because the worm casts are usually re-emerging and attracting American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*). It is also called the **Full Crow Moon** because of the crows cawing the end of a long winter. Furthermore, it is also called the **Full Crust Moon** because the snow is crusted from night freezing and thawing during the day. And finally, it is called the **Full Sap Moon** when tree tapping for sap is underway.

This is the time of year when Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) begin pair bonding and demonstrating courtship displays. I always know nesting is about to begin when pairs are seen closer together on downtown building rooftops. Gulls will usually return to the same nesting site each year and I have been watching a pair on the archway of the AT&T building for several years. I'm excited because they have returned. The courtship display is very sweet. I witnessed this display for the first time on top of a building in the Third Ward a few years ago. The pair began by calling soft "Mew" sounds with their heads lowered while walking closely around each other. Then they gently, playfully preened each others necks and touched beaks. It was a sight to see and savor! Herring Gulls also use leaves during their courtship display by picking some up and gesturing to the mate while walking around each other. They can also show their interest to a mate using long calls. There are three distinct parts of the long call. It starts with short, accelerating yelps in a neutral posture, then followed by loud, high-pitched calls with the head held very low, and finally the head is tossed back while repeating short notes. This long call is also used as a defense strategy during aggressive encounters. Gulls have adapted to using their calls instead of action for pair-bonding displays and defense. One characteristic I wish humans could master!



*AT&T Building*

Soon you will see Herring Gulls flying downtown with beaks full of nesting material. Both mates are very attentive in nest making, incubating, and feeding their young for several weeks. I always get nervous when I see the big, gray, fluffy fledglings walking in the streets because I'm afraid they will get injured. The adults are always nearby supervising and attempting to reign in their precocious young. I am glad the gulls have integrated well with humans, however, I wish they could make nests in more protected, natural areas free from *any* predator.

How does the new nestling know how to get food from their parent? Is it instinctual? Tinbergen Niko, a Dutch ethnologist who won a Nobel Prize in 1973 for his seagull physiology and behavior research, determined that when a chick pecked at the red spot on the adult's lower mandible it would stimulate the parent to regurgitate food into the chick's mouth. This leads to another question, since there is no red spot on the mandible of many sea birds, does pecking at the bill lead to regurgitation regardless of a bright colored spot? You can witness this behavior by watching a Royal Albatross webcam hosted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in collaboration with the New Zealand Department of Conservation. Granted this is not a gull, but, it is still a good example of a sea bird feeding their young.



As I'm sure we all know, gulls will eat just about anything. Several studies have found that breeding gulls and those raising chicks will forage for more marine life. Results have shown that gulls eating higher quality marine animals have larger clutch sizes and heavier chicks. However, once the chicks have fledged, gulls will resume garbage foraging which has been determined to act as supplemental nutrition. Perhaps this is why bird watchers tend to see more gulls at landfills in the winter when lakes and ponds are frozen.

Herring Gulls are smart birds. They have been observed taking bread crumbs to ponds in order to catch the fish going for the gull's offering. Additionally, gulls have learned to take mollusks and drop them from the sky in order to break them open and eat what is inside. I often see solitary crayfish claws on my walks along the lakefront. I have determined that these were unwanted left-overs from gulls ingesting all the other parts of the crayfish. In fact, I have often seen gulls rip off the claws to discard, and then eat the remaining carcass. But, they can also be naughty, though they may not think so, because often times they will take golf balls from ponds in golf courses and drop them on the ground and even cars! That wasn't golf ball-sized hail, that was a golf ball dropped from a gull! Or, should I say "*fore*"?



**References:**

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