

Fact Sheet

Ivory Gulls (*Pagophila eburnea*)



Figure 1. Ivory gulls at an island breeding colony. Ivory gulls are identified by their pure white plumage and black legs (other gulls have gray wings and yellow or orange legs). Note birds sitting on nests constructed of moss.

Natural History:

The ivory gull is a small, white seabird which spends most of its life near ice (Fig. 1). It breeds on snow and windswept plateaus, ice-choked islands or nunataks surrounded by glaciers, and winters in pack ice. It feeds along floe edges and polynyas, and is often observed standing on elevated icebergs.

Ivory gulls feed on zooplankton and fish, and are well-known for their habit of scavenging from polar bear or Inuit kills of marine mammals.

Gulls arrive in the Arctic in late April, and begin to move to open water and south in September, although some may be seen in the Arctic much later. Birds arrive at breeding colonies in June, and remain there into August. Nests are constructed of available vegetation, and 1-3 eggs are laid.

Estimated Population Size:

1980s 1800 birds counted; 2400 birds suspected
 2002-2005 maximum 400 birds counted (approx. 80% decline)

The species is currently listed as *Endangered* by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Surveys at breeding colonies, at sea, and on the wintering grounds, as well as Inuit traditional knowledge, all suggest that populations are declining.

Breeding Locations:

Ivory Gulls breed on Ellesmere, Devon, Seymour, Cornwallis and north Baffin islands (black dots on Fig. 2). Colonies are generally small, about 20 pairs of birds, but may get up to 200 pairs in some locations.

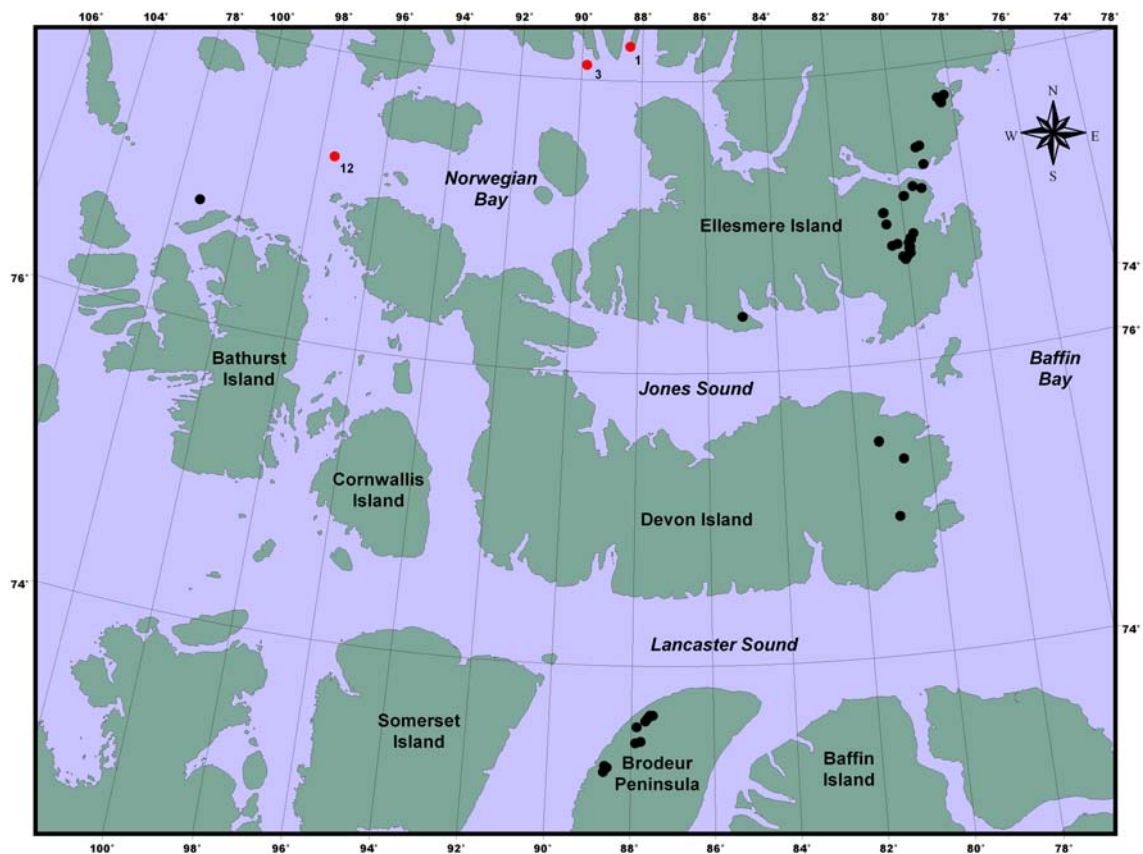


Figure 2. Breeding locations of ivory gulls in Nunavut, denoted by black dots (red dots are recent observations at sea).

Since the 1980s, many former colonies have been abandoned (Fig. 3), and recent colonies generally support fewer birds than colonies from 20+ years ago.

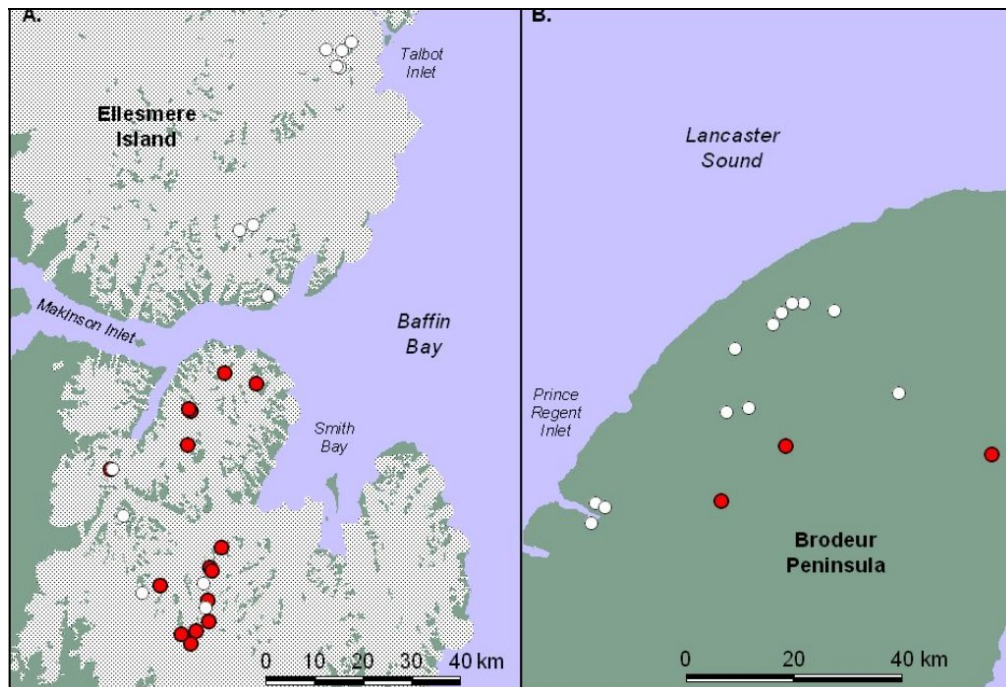


Figure 3. Former (white dots) and recent (red dots) colonies of ivory gulls on eastern Ellesmere Island (left panel) and the Brodeur Peninsula, Baffin Island (right panel).

On the Brodeur Peninsula, ivory gulls nest on flat ground (Fig. 4) but will generally jump into the air and circle their colony at the approach of an aircraft or predator. There are few if any other birds in this area, so white birds observed are undoubtedly ivory gulls.



Figure 4. Ivory gulls nesting on flat ground.

Wintering Locations:

Canadian ivory gulls are thought to spend the winter in the pack ice in Davis Strait, off of Labrador and Newfoundland. Some birds are observed near shore occasionally.

Threats:

Like many breeding seabirds, ivory gulls are susceptible to disturbance when at the breeding colony. As migratory birds, they are protected during the breeding season by the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* and *Migratory Birds Regulations*, which prohibit disturbance or destruction of nests and eggs. Some researchers have suggested that they are particularly vulnerable to disturbance from aircraft, although other scientists have suggested that they can tolerate minor or very infrequent disturbance.

At sea, these gulls are susceptible to pollution and disturbance at feeding areas, and they are also harvested in Greenland.

Future Considerations:

Ivory gull population size and trends are perilously low, and it is very likely that this species will be uplisted to *Threatened* or *Endangered* pursuant to the *Species At Risk Act* in the near future. That action will be associated with some restrictions on activities that can have a negative effect on the birds near ivory gull colonies. For that reason, it is essential that colonies be identified and avoided for the protection of the birds. Industrial activities near nesting areas should not proceed.

If a colony is spotted, we strongly recommend that the aircraft maintain a vertical distance of 610 m and a horizontal distance of 2 km from the location.

If ivory gulls are observed, please record the location and contact us:

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