**Xema sabini (Sabine’s Gull)**

Family: Laridae (Gulls and Terns)  
Order: Charadriiformes (Shorebirds and Waders)  
Class: Aves (Birds)

**Fig. 1.** Sabine’s gull, *Xema sabini*.  

**TRAITS.** *Xema sabini* are described as a small gulls (Wikipedia, 2016); adults grow to approximately 33cm in length and weigh 150-210g (Strom, 2017). Male and female have similar appearance, with a dark head and a slightly forked tail. The back and wings are grey, however the outer wing flight feathers and wing coverts are black with white tips. The belly, breast and tail are white, sometimes appearing to be tinged with pink. The bill is black and has a yellow tip and the outer eye circles are red. In the breeding season the adult has a dark grey hood edged in black (Fig. 1) while the non-breeding adult plumage has a partially grey and white head.

**DISTRIBUTION.** *Xema sabini* are migratory birds having a circumpolar distribution (IUCN, 2016). This gull travels far north to sub-arctic and high arctic regions for breeding (Fig. 2). They can be found along the west coasts of South America and Africa during the winter (Fig. 3). They are a rare visitor to the Caribbean including Trinidad and Tobago.
HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Their habitats are located in high arctic regions, in marshy tundra areas close to ponds or near the coast. *Xema sabini* colonies are often near or within arctic tern colonies. Artic terns are more aggressive in nature and by nesting within or close to their colonies the gulls are provided with protection against predators. *Xema sabini* will usually only show aggression when defending their nest against predators.

FOOD AND FEEDING. *Xema sabini* are considered opportunistic feeders. In the summer during their breeding season and during migration their food includes small fish, marine invertebrates (insects and crustaceans) which account for the majority of their diet in the summer, faeces and carcases. They occasionally eat eggs and chicks of other birds. Not much is known about their winter diet.

REPRODUCTION. These gulls are known as arctic breeders with scattered distributions (Blomqvist and Elander, 1961). They breed during the short arctic summer, and favour dry tundra areas near to water for nesting. They build grass nests lined with seaweed in shallow depressions close to water, where the female can lay up to three eggs. The eggs are slightly pointed with a rich olive-green colour with irregular darker markings. Both parents help incubate the eggs until they hatch. Mere hours after hatching the young gulls follow their parents to the water and learn to feed themselves.

BEHAVIOUR. A long distance migrant, *Xema sabini* is found in the arctic tundra while it is still covered in snow (Fig. 4). Breeding takes place in colonies of 6-15, occasionally up to 60 pairs. Sabine’s gulls nest in solitude or in single pairs among arctic tern colonies. They have also been known to feed on the eggs and young of their neighbouring arctic terns. If needed they will go out to sea for small fish and crustaceans. Unlike other gulls that dive to catch their food, *Xema sabini* will only take food from the surface of the water. In late July and August when the breeding period is over the adult and juvenile birds migrate in flocks that can reach up to 100 individuals.

APPLIED ECOLOGY. Currently, there is no real threat to *Xema sabini* other than climate change, although hunting of this gull is reported to occur in Russia. The African Eurasian Water Bird Agreement is one of the proposals underway to protect and make safe zones for the gulls.

REFERENCES

Author: Akil M. Joseph
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Fig. 2. Sabine’s gull geographic distribution.
[http://www.iucnredlist.org downloaded 7 March 2017]

Fig. 4. Sabine’s gull on ice close to the breeding area.
[http://pubs.aina.ucalgary.ca/arctic/Arctic34-2-122.pdf, downloaded 7 March 2017]
Fig. 3. Sabine’s gull migration patterns.

[http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0166043, downloaded 7 March 2017]

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