

# BIRD CALLS

"This is Joanna; if you're calling to report a wing-tagged gull, please leave the location, state, color of tag, and number if readable. All reports are welcome, even if you can't read the number. Please leave your phone number in case your bird is of particular interest. All other messages are welcome."

This may not be your typical home telephone voice-mail request, but Rutgers biology professor Joanna Burger makes good use of the two to three messages she receives each day from farmers in the Midwest who call to report sighting a Franklin's gull.

Burger was asked to conduct research on the Franklin's gull and write a chapter for *Birds of North America*, which will be published this December by the American Ornithologists' Union. To do so, she spent a good part of seven weeks last spring and summer tagging hundreds of gulls at the Agassiz National Refuge in Minnesota. Her goal was to determine if the gulls' migration pattern had changed since she last studied them in the 1960s,

when she was a University of Minnesota doctoral student writing her dissertation.

Burger found that of the estimated half-million pairs of Franklin's gulls in North America, there were 40,000 pairs in the refuge, compared with 15,000 pairs when she did her initial study. The only species of gull to always nest in marshes, the Franklin's gull migrates farther than any other gull, traveling each October to Peru or Chile. Their dispersal pattern hasn't changed either, she reports.

"These types of studies are generally conducted in three- or four-year time frames," she says. "In this case, 25 years have passed since we looked at this species' dispersal pattern."

Because the gulls are popular with farmers—who appreciate the birds' flying behind their tractors to gobble up insect pests—Burger contacted individual farmers and asked them to report sightings through a toll-free number. She found them extremely cooperative. "It was amazing to find that everyone was just as friendly and receptive as they were 25 years ago," says Burger.

