

Ross' Gull: New to Ontario

by
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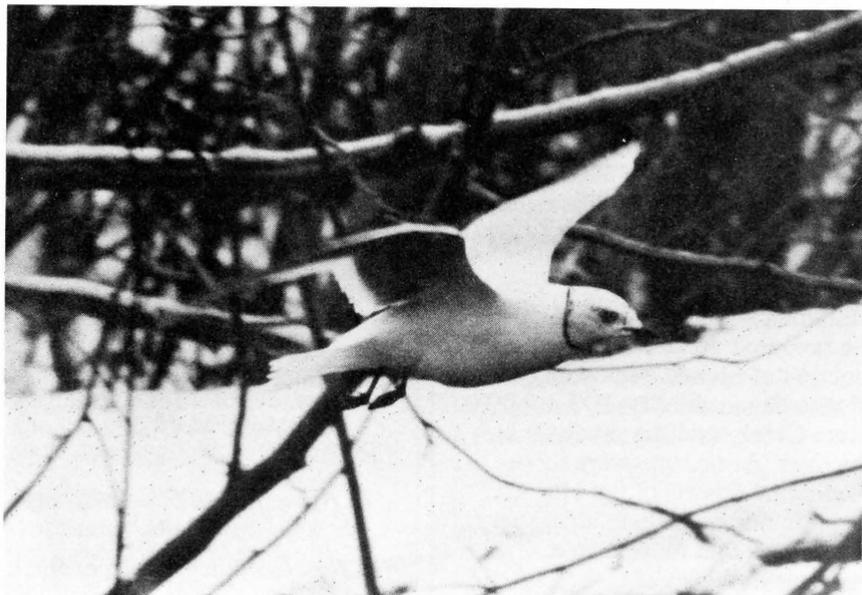
On 14 May 1983, approximately 14:30 E.S.T., Steve Anderson and I were driving alongside the Moose River in Moosonee, Cochrane District, when I noticed a small white-headed larid flying along the edge of ice blocks piled against the river's bank. The bird was about 50 m from our vehicle and 10 m from the river bank and was hovering and dipping for food items which it pecked from the water's surface. I observed the bird from that distance for a few minutes using 9 x 36 binoculars and noted pink colouration on the undersides, a white head with a black ring encircling the neck, a black bill, red legs and a completely white tail. From this initial view, I identified the bird as a Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*).

At the point, SA remained to monitor the bird's movements while I went to notify others of its presence and to get my camera and spotting scope. Diana Abraham went immediately to the river and was able to observe the bird, which was still feeding alone, for about 10 minutes at a distance of less than 25 m. She noted the same characters I had and

confirmed that the bird was a Ross' Gull. The gull joined a small group of feeding Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) and flew upstream towards the mouth of a small tributary, Store Creek, then settled on a sandbar in the Moose River where Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) and Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) were resting. From 15:00 to 16:30, at least 10 people kept the gull under constant observation from the river bank. Three of us (myself, John Kirk and John Thompson) went out to the sandbar in a freighter canoe and I took several photographs of the Ross' Gull resting near Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. It was disturbed by this activity and returned to the river bank location where it had originally been observed. We followed and I was able to obtain several more photographs of it in flight and feeding (photographs are on file with the Ontario Bird Records Committee). During most of this observation period, the gull was actively feeding along the edge of the ice, and was usually alone, hovering and dipping to peck food items from the water's surface.

I returned to the original sighting

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location at 17:45, relocated the bird feeding with 15 Bonaparte's Gulls (of which there were then nearly 150 in the vicinity) and observed it until 18:45. Bonaparte's Gulls had first been observed at Moosonee on the preceding day (13 May), and in subsequent discussions a neighbour, Shirley Bent, described a bird she had seen on 13 May which may have been a Ross' Gull.

On 15 May, the bird was observed from 12:45 to 14:00 and from 15:30 to 16:30. It spent the majority of that time at the junction of Store Creek and the Moose River, and in the first 100 m of the creek. It associated with Bonaparte's Gulls and all foraged throughout the period, mainly by the hover-dip method. They also fed by surface seizing, whereby the

Ross' Gull and several Bonaparte's Gulls landed on the river near the junction with the creek and then floated downstream on the current, all the time pecking at items at or just below the water's surface and sometimes spinning around in the manner of phalaropes. After floating up to 200 m, they flew back upstream to the starting point and repeated the procedure.

On 16 May, the Ross' Gull was observed from 08:00 to 08:45, at which time it was resting on cakes of ice piled up on a sandbar 150 m from the river bank location where it was first seen. It was with several Bonaparte's and Ring-billed Gulls. I left Moosonee on that morning and did not return in time to see the gull again. However, between 16 May and 23 May, a number of people found

and watched the gull. According to them it continued to associate with Bonaparte's Gulls and also with Little Gulls (*L. minutus*) of which about 12 were present. (A. Wormington, pers. comm.)

Observations of the gull throughout the 10 days (14-23 May) occurred along a 2 km stretch of the Moose River, from Maidman's Island to Butler Creek, the favoured areas being the junction of Stone Creek with the Moose River, the first 100 m of Store Creek, and the sandbars in the river. At no time were there conflicting reports of the bird's location nor were there any other indications that more than a single bird was in the area.

Examination of the photographs show that the black neck ring was entire but narrow (Figure 1) and that there is a black smudge behind the eye. These characters suggest that the gull was an adult not quite in full breeding plumage.

This is the first record of Ross' Gull in Ontario. The species has a circumpolar distribution, with the main nesting area being in northeastern Siberia. Known Canadian nesting areas include only the Cheyne Islands, Penny Strait in the arctic archipelago (Macey 1981) and Churchill, Manitoba (Chartier and Cooke 1980). The species apparently winters in open water and broken pack ice areas of the Arctic Ocean but is rarely observed at this season. During fall migration thousands of Ross' Gulls are observed regularly passing east at Point Barrow, Alaska, to winter (presumably) in the Canadian Arctic (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

Besides the Moosonee Ross' Gull, extralimital records in North America have occurred continent-wide. The nine records comprise three fall transients, four spring transients and two wintering birds as follows:

- 9 Nov. 1966, Victoria, B.C. (Roberson 1980)
- 7 Dec. 1974 - 6 May 1975, Newburyport, Mass. (Miliotis and Buckley 1975)
- 18 Dec. 1976, Fogo Is., Newfoundland (Vickery 1977)
- 19 Nov. - 1 Dec. 1978, Chicago, Ill. (Balch *et al.* 1979)
- 20 Apr. 1981, Newburyport, Mass. (Vickery 1981)
- 28 Apr. - 7 May 1983, Julesburg, Colo. (Kingery 1983)
- 4 - 13 Apr. 1984, Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge, Minn. (Mattson 1984)
- Spring 1984, Connecticut (A. Wormington, pers. comm.)
- 3 Dec. 1984, Newburyport, Mass. (A. Wormington, pers. comm.)

Thus the disjunct nature of these records does not present an easily-defined pattern to clearly indicate the sources and movements of Ross' Gulls south of the normal range. The date of the Moosonee sighting (mid-May at the peak of spring break up) and the Ross' Gull's coincident arrival and regular association with Bonaparte's Gulls strongly suggest that it may have wintered and migrated with Bonaparte's Gulls, perhaps those using the Great Lakes or St. Lawrence River systems.

This sighting excited speculation that the Ross' Gull was returning to an as yet unknown nesting location in the Hudson Bay Lowland of Ontario, where much suitable habitat exists, or that it was connected with the nesting birds at Churchill, Manitoba.

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