Photo: Brandon Holden

Black-tailed Gull
New to Ontario

Brandon Holden

ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2009, the forecast was to be remarkable in terms of weather, with winds predicted to be southwest at 80 to 100 km/h. The Lake Erie marine forecast was calling for waves reaching four to five metres, surely a great day to be outside. I drove through the night and arrived at Point Pelee National Park for dawn. Fallen trees blocked the road, but I was able to arrive in good time to view the visible migration and displacement that morning. Of note were numerous Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) in active migration and two Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) that appeared to be in great discomfort trying to ride out the storm at the Point. They eventually walked into the nearby woods looking for shelter.

After spending the morning birding around Point Pelee, my mind began to focus on real life. I was scheduled to work in Prince Edward County at 0900h the following day, a six hour drive from my current location. I debated how I could continue to experience the spectacular weather and unusual birding conditions, while also cutting into my future travel time. In short order, I decided to make the drive to Port Burwell Provincial Park where I had expectations of large numbers of gulls and potentially other waterbirds taking shelter on the beaches there.

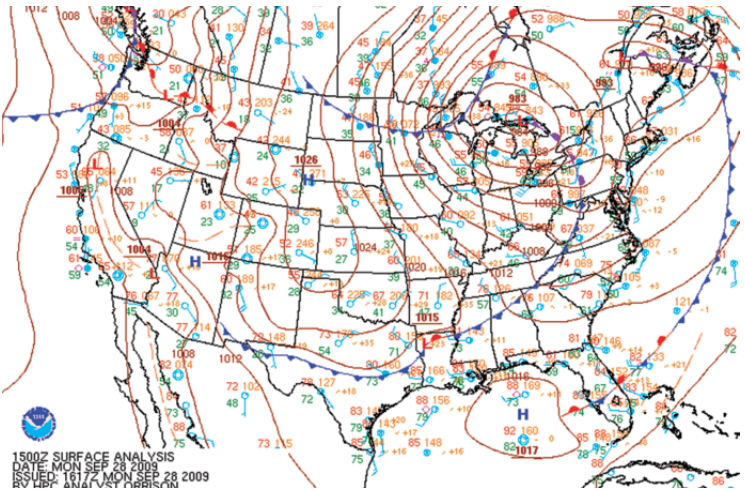
When I arrived at Port Burwell, I was thoroughly shocked. Off the community beach, I estimated at least 10,000 gulls in the immediate area using all

available space on shore and in the water to ride out the gale force conditions. Instead of scanning these birds, I decided to travel immediately into Port Burwell Provincial Park in hopes of seeing even greater numbers of gulls there. Upon arrival, I was amazed to see that most of the beach was underwater due to the large waves. Thankfully, there were still roughly 5,000 birds standing in shallow water or on a sand-bar that was once the beach. Observations were difficult due to my inability to stay still in the wind gusts and painful raindrops that occurred as occasional bands of precipitation raced ashore.

While walking along the beach, I frequently stopped and hunched down behind bushes and weeds in order to get some sort of wind-break to make scanning possible. I had only brought my binoculars, as I figured a scope might be useless, and my camera gear would get rained on. After several stops of scanning through the gulls, I had covered a few kilometres of the beach. Looking far behind me, I thought for a brief moment, I had seen a dark-mantled gull at a great distance from where I had just came, however I could not confirm this.

The viewing was horrible and I was debating whether I should back-track to check. I knew a second-basic plumaged Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) had been reported in the area a few days previously (Apse 2009), and Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) is an expected species by late September in Ontario (eBird 2012). I then briefly saw and confirmed there was indeed a darker mantled gull, and I decided to go back and figure out what it was. I moved

Figure 1. A powerful 983mb low pressure system over central Ontario at the time of observation.
National Weather Service – Hydrometeorological Prediction Centre 2012



closer several times, but I still could not see anything more than the bird having a dark mantle. Eventually I got the impression it was an adult-like dark-mantled gull, and I was assuming Laughing Gull in the back of my mind as it appeared too small for a Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Viewing conditions remained very poor, so my goal was to continue to move and check every few hundred metres to keep an eye on the bird's location. During one of these quick stops, I saw the bird in question take flight with a mass of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) as a wave swept over the sand-bar they were on. It quickly landed again, but I did notice that it had a black tail band. A quick realization flashed through my mind that this could very easily be the same Laughing Gull reported earlier, which would show some black on the tail at this age. Yet that thought quickly vanished as I realized that I had just viewed a tail that was almost entirely black, a feature at odds with a second-basic Laughing Gull (Howell and Dunn 2007).

My pulse quickened, yet I convinced myself the bird was not going to be a Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*). I was getting frustrated with the constant blasts of wind and stinging raindrops as they were preventing me from making an identification. I made the decision to cut inland behind a dune and walk considerably closer, with hopes that when I surfaced it would be easily identified as long as I could still find it. I have looked at hundreds of birds from afar, or in bad conditions, and thought they were something unusual, only to find out they were nothing unusual once I obtained better views. Yet when I resurfaced from behind the dune, I was shocked to see a stunning adult Black-tailed Gull standing only 50-75 feet away! The bird even made another short flight to avoid a crashing wave, revealing its spectacular black tail

Figure 2. Adult Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*) at Port Burwell Provincial Park on 28 September 2009 with six Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) in the foreground and two Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) in the background. Note the distinctive bill pattern of a yellow base, black ring and red tip. *Photo: Brandon Holden*

bordered in white. Now that I was shaking from both the wind and excitement, I enjoyed the bird for a few minutes before reality started to return. I needed to get the word out about this bird via cell phone and I had a long run back to my car to get my camera. Upon my return I was able to relocate the bird and obtain several images (Figures 2–5). Before dark, Tyler Hoar, Stu Mackenzie and Ron Ridout were able to arrive and view the bird before it was lost in the fading light.

Figure 3. Clean appearance with black primaries and white primary tips ages the bird as an adult. Dusky head markings indicate definitive basic plumage. The dark mantle, yellow legs and thin white tertial crescent were useful both for locating and identifying this individual before finer points were noticed at closer range.
Photo: Brandon Holden

Discussion

Although there were remarkable weather events occurring at the time of observation, they are unlikely to be the direct cause of this bird occurring in Ontario. This is due to the species' core range being largely in the Sea of Japan (Olsen and Larssson 2004) over 9,400 km away from Port Burwell (Google Maps 2012). We can only speculate if the bird was brought to Lake Erie from some distance due to the large wind field of the storm or whether it was already

Figure 4. Body size was similar to nearby Ring-billed Gulls, although the large bill and long wings gave the impression of a larger gull. All gulls observed at this location were showing an unusual hunched posture in order to deal with the adverse weather conditions.
Photo: Brandon Holden

Figure 5. The beach at Port Burwell Provincial Park on 28 September 2009, with the Black-tailed Gull visible near the centre. Powerful swells on Lake Erie forced thousands of gulls to take shelter throughout the Port Burwell area.
Photo: Brandon Holden

present on Lake Erie and simply arrived on the beaches of Port Burwell Provincial Park to take shelter from the elements during the storm.

Despite the incredible distance from the core range, there is a developing history of vagrancy for this species in North America (Howell and Dunn 2007). The Black-tailed Gull is a casual visitor to the coasts of Alaska, along the Pacific

coast (British Columbia, Washington, California and Mexico) and along the Atlantic coast from many states and provinces from Newfoundland south to Virginia (Howell and Dunn 2007). It is considered exceptional in the interior of North America with records in Texas, Vermont, Iowa and a single bird that occurred on Lake Michigan for several months providing first records for Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana (Howell and Dunn 2007). Since this observation in 2009, a third record for the Great Lakes occurred in nearby Ohio when Craig Holt found a basic plumaged adult in Ashtabula County on 16 November 2011 (Ayyash 2011). That bird spent several weeks in the area through late February 2012 (eBird 2013).

The sighting on 28 September 2009 in Port Burwell, *Elgin County,* was subsequently accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee in 2010 and constitutes the first and only record for the province to date. The same bird was presumed to be involved in subsequent sightings along the north shore of Lake Erie at Port Burwell, *Elgin County,* on 29 September 2009 by Pete Read *et al.*, 15 November 2009 by Garth Riley and 14 December 2009 by Aaron Allensen; at Port Stanley, Elgin County from 25-26 November 2009 by Peter Gilchrist, Josh Vandermeulen and Andrew Keaveney; and at Port Rowan, *Norfolk County* on 9 December 2009 by Stuart Mackenzie and Ron Ridout (Cranford 2010).

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