

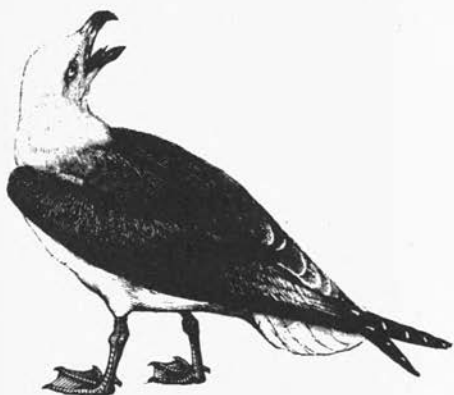
FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

A Note on Gull Pellets or How Our Household Trash Ends Up in a Wilderness Area. It is widely known among those of us curious about bird life that certain species, most notably raptors, regurgitate pellets of undigestible materials after consuming food or prey items.

The digestive system in birds consists principally of a tube extending from bill to cloaca with several specialized organs in between - adaptive features to help break down a great array of food types. The first "stomach," called the proventriculus, breaks the food down chemically. Within this organ, peptic and other enzymes along with powerful gastric juices containing hydrochloric acid are capable of breaking down all but the toughest and hardest food items. These then enter the gizzard where the job is completed. Pellets, or the ingredients thereof, do not travel any farther than the gizzard, the second of two "stomachs" in the avian digestive tract. The gizzard is a muscular organ with the primary function of grinding up tough food items like acorns and seed husks taken by some birds or mussels and other bivalves that many sea ducks survive on. Many gallinaceous birds swallow sand and grit to aid in the constant, rhythmic, grinding action of the gizzard. Food leaving the gizzard in the business direction is mostly liquid and enters the intestine where nutrients are absorbed. However, this is not a discussion of nutrients! We need to back up to the gizzard and the part of the system anterior to it and direct our discussion toward pellets and the family Laridae.

It is no secret that landfill areas, i.e., dumps, across the state support a great many gulls, primarily the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) and the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*). On Cape Cod, gulls occupy the dumps throughout the year while in some areas of the state landfills are devoid of gulls during the breeding season. The gulls, often numbering in the thousands, feed at the dumps during the day and retire to coastal roosting areas at night. Monomoy Island in Chatham, Gray's Beach in Yarmouthport, and Nauset Beach in Orleans are some principal roosting areas on Cape Cod. These are the areas where the large larids regurgitate pellets of "food" consumed at the dump hours earlier.

Now, it is true that some pellets contain crab shells, fish bones, or the fur, bones, and feathers of various vertebrates, coughed up by what I call "working gulls." The majority of gull pellets, however, contain so many more interesting items. The main body of most gull pellets is comprised of aluminum foil, plastic wrap, or paper towel. Glass fragments, even chunks measuring two centimeters or more, are often found.



The following list of items was found in pellets during the years 1980, '81, '83, and '84 on North Monomoy Island: a broken pencil 7.5 centimeters long, rubber bands, a nylon comb, the spring from inside an automobile oil filter, a plastic fork, and a rubber army man. Steak bones, spareribs, and pork chop bones were common. Also found in a pellet was the plastic tip from a tube of caulking with a chunk of the rubber caulk next to it. In many cases, I have been able to unravel the regurgitated mass and actually read the contents: e.g., margarine or butter wrappers, Swiss Miss cocoa envelopes, Lipton cup-a-soup envelopes, restaurant place mats, and even a road map.

So, consider the amazing capabilities of the family Laridae and how interesting the dissection of their pellets can be - raptors have held the limelight long enough! Oh, yes, there's one item I almost forgot. Robert Humphrey, Refuge Manager of Monomoy, dissected a gull pellet from the island in 1984. Inside he found a dog license! The canine, however, was unaccounted for

Peter Trull, West Chatham

How Thirsty Can a Cardinal Be? On the morning of December 22, 1984, I observed a male cardinal feeding on seeds from a bush in my backyard. After satisfying himself, he flew into the bare branches of a tall oak tree. I watched him carefully through binoculars and was quite surprised when he crept slowly up to a drop of water hanging from the branch. He lowered his beak down to it, and presto! it was gone. He then crept along the branch until he came close to another drop of water. Again, the same routine. He did this twice more. There was no shortage of water, because a snowfall of the night before was quickly melting. The Cardinal drank a total of four water drops. Hardly a deluge, but perhaps thirstquenching.

Oliver Komar, Newton



EASTERN SCREECH-OWL SURVEY

April 19 - 29, 1985

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Help make this unique and valuable project a success. As little as one hour's observation near your home can produce useful data.

Please contact Oliver Komar for more information.

OLIVER KOMAR, 61 Wade Street,
Newton, MA 02161
Telephone: 617-332-5509

Spring Migration Watch in Sixth Year

April 15 to June 6

Again this year, the Bird Observer Field Studies Committee will conduct a Spring Migration Watch. The committee has prepared data forms to enable all who volunteer for this project to keep uniform records for their favorite birding sites. Observers will visit their selected sites about once every four days from April 15 to June 6. This year each observer will receive a computerized analysis of the data. Just let us know the site you wish to cover. For instructions and data forms, new participants should contact:

JOHN ANDREWS, 22 Kendall Road, Lexington, MA 02173
Telephone: 617-862-6498.

Spring Hawk Watch

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will conduct coordinated weekend watches on two weekends this spring, April 20-21 and April 27-28, 1985. Volunteer observers are needed for both weekends. No experience is required, and your help on any date would be appreciated.

We are also seeking individuals who can hawkwatch (if weather is favorable) on Plum Island any weekday between April 15 and May 3 or on Wachusett Mountain between April 15 and April 26.

If you would like to participate in the watch, or if you need additional information, please contact:

PAUL ROBERTS, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155
Telephone: 617-483-4263 (after 8 P.M.).

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