

ADULT ROSS' GULL AT NEWBURYPORT ON DECEMBER 3, 1984

by Stuart Tingley, Sackville, N. B., Canada

While scanning through roosting gulls in Newburyport Harbor from the Coast Guard station at the north end of Plum Island at about 1:30 P.M. on December 3, 1984, Juliet Bloss of Brooklyn, New York, (who was a participant on the WINGS Massachusetts Weekend I was leading in the area) called my attention to an adult Little Gull passing through the harbor at a moderate distance with a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls that she was observing through her 25X telescope. I quickly got on the flock with a 40X Questar telescope and immediately picked out the Little Gull by its uniformly dark underwings. But as I studied the bird, everything started looking wrong for that species. First of all, the wings seemed strongly angled and appeared much too long and pointed for Little Gull. Upon noticing this, I announced to the group that the Little Gull might indeed be a Ross' Gull. Everyone laughed - they thought I was joking(?) - and turned away to look at other things. Indeed, I couldn't believe what I had just said, yet my instinct was telling me that this was a Ross' Gull. I seriously considered just dropping it at this point as the bird was getting farther and farther away, flying almost directly away from us, and I knew the group was anxious to get to their cars to warm up and to buy some lunch material. As I continued to study the bird, other things became apparent. The bird wheeled and dropped to the surface a couple of times showing a long-tailed appearance, and when near the surface, the dark underwings seemed much paler. And, my God, wasn't that a pink blush I could see on the underparts? My pulse quickened, though I still literally couldn't believe my eyes. Finally the gull landed on the water with a number of Bonaparte's Gulls a great distance away and seemingly close to the seawall in Newburyport. Again I nearly convinced myself to stop entertaining any thoughts of this being a Ross' Gull - but I decided to go for it! I turned to the group and announced that, indeed, I was serious, that there was a chance that I had just been following a Ross' Gull and that we should drive to the seawall in Newburyport to search for the bird. Everyone gasped and agreed.

Upon arriving, we quickly located a group of 30 or 40 Bonaparte's Gulls sitting on the water just beyond an exposed flat, perhaps 300 metres away. Scanning through the flock with the Questar, I suddenly came upon the bird in flight just above the surface and flying away, but there was that wing shape again, and the underwings appeared a much lighter gray below than on adult Little Gulls, though still substantially darker than the upper surface. Suddenly the bird turned and gave me an excellent side on and top view as it wheeled around. The tail was distinctly wedge-shaped, and the pinkish blush to the underparts was very conspicuous. There was no longer any doubt! I screamed in excitement and collapsed on the seawall.

Pulling myself together, I relocated the bird sitting this time. On the water it appeared slightly smaller and paler-mantled than the Bonaparte's Gulls around it but looked longer-winged. But the most conspicuous difference was the head, which was overall much whiter and cleaner than the Bonaparte's Gulls, with a very large-eyed appearance caused by areas of black adjacent to the eye. Otherwise, no dark areas or markings

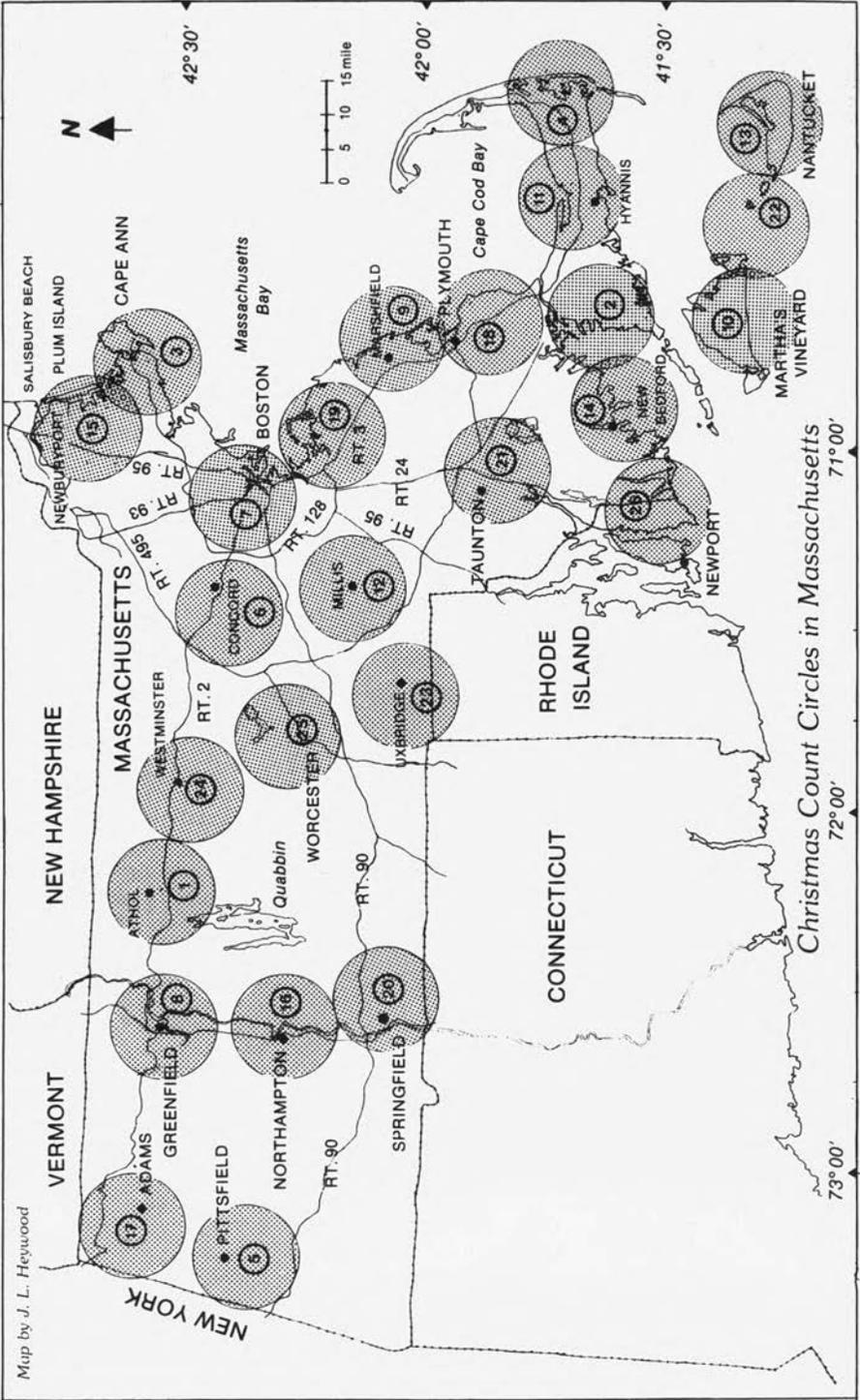
were apparent on the head. I checked this point repeatedly. The pink suffusion was noticeable on the breast and may have extended onto the face. The bird then lifted off and started flying around. I turned the Questar over to Juliet Bloss who had an excellent study of the bird in flight and immediately agreed with the identification. The bird was far enough away that the others in the group, using only binoculars, were not able to distinguish it from among the many other gulls in the immediate vicinity. For the next ten minutes, I repeatedly relocated the gull which was making short flights and re-landing, getting it in the Questar and stepping aside to let others view. Alas, the only other tour participant who managed to see the gull at all well was William Van der Mehden of Redding, California. A young couple who were scoping the flats when we arrived at the seawall and who had come running over upon hearing my scream of joy also said they were getting good looks at the gull through their standard telescope but disappeared up the road to get a closer view of the gull and "make a phone call" - before I had a chance to talk to them. After several frustrating minutes of trying to get other tour participants onto the gull through the Questar, I decided to scope an adult Common Black-headed Gull that I had earlier noticed standing on a bar somewhat nearer, for I knew several participants wanted to see it as we had missed it earlier in the weekend. This was a mistake, for when we resumed the search for the Ross' Gull, it had disappeared. Despite searching the harbor from Salisbury Beach and, later, again from the seawall, we were not able to relocate the bird.

I have been leading birding tours for WINGS, Inc. since 1980 and have seen Ross' Gulls many times at Churchill, Manitoba, and also once in the Northwest Territories at Prince Leopold Island. Juliet Bloss is, in my opinion, a very sharp and experienced birder, and she has seen Ross' Gulls at Churchill also.

STUART TINGLEY, well-known young tour leader and Canadian birder, is Northeast Maritime regional editor for the nesting season for American Birds. In that capacity, his writing is of necessity restrained by well-defined editorial and substantive rules. The above presentation, obviously written in the full flush of excitement over a "rare bird" sighting, demonstrates how the form of a field account is less important than the inclusion of all the essential facts, written while memory and images are still fresh in the observer's mind. So that our readers might share the excitement and still learn the components of a creditable field report, BIRD OBSERVER obtained permission from Stu to reprint his letter, originally sent to Richard Forster of the state Records Committee at Mass. Audubon.

In 1975, a Ross' Gull at Newburyport brought birdwatchers nationwide flocking to the area. A difficult bird to find, the only reliable spot to see it at that time was cold, inhospitable Point Barrow, Alaska. The species has since been reported from British Columbia, Newfoundland, Chicago, Colorado, Connecticut, and Newburyport (1981). Ross' Gull was found nesting in northern Canada in 1977 and in Churchill, Manitoba since 1980. It is a small (12 inches) gull with gray wings and back and a narrow white border on the hind edge of the wing, a small, rounded, dove-like head with a short, black bill and is usually seen in the company of Bonaparte's Gulls. The characteristic feature (unique among gulls) is a wedge-shaped tail, seen only in flight.

Map by J. L. Heywood



Christmas Count Circles in Massachusetts