

**SIGHTING OF A ROSS' GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*)  
AT NILES POND, GLOUCESTER**

by Richard A. Forster

**Date:** February 1, 1990. **Location:** Niles Pond, Gloucester

**Time:** approximately 11:15 A.M. to 1:24 P.M.

**Observers:** R. A. Forster, D. R. Arvidson; subsequently, m.obs.

*Editor's Note: What follows is Richard Forster's report of the sighting with supplementary comments in brackets by the editor, who was privileged to be a part of the event and finds it difficult to be reticent about the experience.*

While on a birding venture to Cape Ann, we arrived at Niles Pond in the late morning under overcast skies. The eastern portion of the pond was open, but the rest of it was frozen and supported a sizable number of large gulls, most resting in a large, rather compact flock on the ice adjacent to the open water, with a small number of gulls bathing in the open water near the ice. A cursory inspection of these gulls revealed two Glaucous Gulls but only one Iceland Gull—a seemingly small number considering the number of gulls present. Looking back toward the eastern portion of the pond, I noticed a smaller group (a dozen or so) of Bonaparte's Gulls standing on the ice. We decided to move closer to that area to give them a look-see.

The Bonaparte's were standing on the ice next to the open water about a hundred yards distant. Although cloudy, the light was good since it was at our backs. A quick look at the gulls was rewarded with a first-winter Common Black-headed Gull, quite obvious amidst the smaller Bonaparte's Gulls. After Dorothy Arvidson had studied the black-headed through the scope, I resumed scoping the other gulls. *[We were sharing my scope, because Richard had left his in a friend's car. This may be why I was invited along on the expedition. Never mind; I am not ungrateful.]*

My attention was drawn to a gull standing at the front of the Bonaparte's that had a pink blush to the underparts. Focusing my attention on this gull, I immediately noticed its small rounded head, prominent dark eye, short black bill, and short legs and immediately recognized it as an adult Ross' Gull. The initial observation lasted about two seconds before the gull flew. *[At this point, Richard turned around: "I have a Ross' Gull." Earlier, at Eastern Point, he had pointed out a Glaucous Gull flying over the road that had completely escaped my aging eyes. This was the first I had seen in two years and I announced that I would go home very happy. But Richard answered, "No, no; now we're going to find a good bird—a Ross' Gull." Therefore, when he announced he had a Ross' Gull in the scope, my first thought was, "He's kidding. This is some kind of a test to trip me up."]*

Rising from the scope and scanning with binoculars, I was unable to relocate the bird. However, I did notice a number of Bonaparte's Gulls actively bathing in the open water arranged in a loose linear grouping off to the left. After a few minutes, the Ross' Gull was noticed as it flew a few feet and then landed. At this time the pale gray wings and mantle, devoid of any dark markings, and the white trailing edge to the wing were clearly observed. Also, the all-white, wedge-shaped tail was clearly noted. For the next few minutes the bird was seen intermittently bathing and in brief flight sorties. Eventually the Ross' Gull flew and landed with a growing number of Bonaparte's Gulls standing on the ice at the edge of the open water. The Ross' was standing in the front row of the Bonaparte's Gulls, and field marks were clearly observed. The dove-like head, short black bill, mantle paler than Bonaparte's Gull, long wings and tail, and short legs were clearly noted. The short legs, red but not bright red, were very different from the pink legs of the Bonaparte's Gulls. The eye appeared dark and large, perhaps emphasized by the whiteness of the head. A very small black spot, smaller than the eye, was located posterior to and slightly below the eye.

*[Because we had only one scope and groups of gulls were repeatedly taking off, then landing and regrouping, there were some hectic minutes of desperate maneuvering before Richard was able to show me the gull in the scope. Later, we concurred that our chief worry at this tense time was that the bird would vanish before I could see it. But gradually the birds became more quiescent. I then succeeded in getting a brief but memorable view of the Ross' Gull in the scope, easy to pick out because of its shorter stature compared to the Bonaparte's beside it, the pinkish breast clearly visible, its short legs darker than an adjacent gull's, the small bill, the tiny remnant of the black neck band—everything except the tail shape and the underwings. Thereupon the tension broke, and Richard Forster lost his cool, dancing about with gleeful abandon. Thereafter our viewing was more relaxed, and happily for us, the gulls remained fairly quiet. Richard's professional self took over and he made notes while I enjoyed a prolonged and very pleasing look at a bird I had seen only twice before in my life.]*

We left the area about 11:50 A.M. to make a telephone call to alert others to the presence of a Ross' Gull and then returned to the location. During this period Bonaparte's Gulls were arriving in increasing numbers. However, we were able to locate the bird immediately upon our return. During this period of observation, the gulls would periodically fly up as a group and return shortly to resume their position on the ice. The Ross' Gull was often difficult to locate during such panic flights, but when seen, the gray underwing could be discerned as a medium gray, neither dark nor light. The wedge-shaped tail was noted on several occasions during these flights.

After noontime the sky became progressively brighter, and the pink blush became less obvious and harder to discern. Also the number of Bonaparte's Gulls increased to about a hundred and twenty individuals. The Ross' Gull became increasingly more difficult to distinguish as it became concealed in the midst of the numerous Bonaparte's Gulls. *[In the brighter light, the pinkish breast seemed to lose color but still appeared, to my eyes, as a gray shadow, distinct enough to enable me to locate the bird several times.]*

In most respects the Ross' Gull mirrored the behavior of the Bonaparte's Gulls, with one notable exception. When the gulls took flight and returned to the ice, the vast majority of Bonaparte's Gulls would remain standing on the ice, but the Ross' Gull would remain standing for only a short period of time and then would sit on the ice. This behavior is most likely an adaptation to its normal winter range along the pack ice where minimizing heat loss from bare parts is a primary concern. *[This also made it easier to pick out the Ross' Gull; whenever the flock rearranged itself, one looked first at the sitting gulls. Friend Janet Lee Heywood who saw the Ross' Gull later in the afternoon asserts that the gull did not "sedately sit" whenever it landed but immediately "flopped belly-down" on the ice.]*

At 1:24 P.M. the flock again flushed, as had happened on numerous occasions during the viewing period. A small group consisting of four Bonaparte's Gulls and the Ross' departed the pond in a southeasterly direction.

During the viewing period about twenty-five to thirty-five observers were fortunate enough to see this Arctic gem. *[Just before we left to telephone, we had been joined by one couple to whom Richard showed the bird. But when we returned from calling Wayne Petersen at Mass. Audubon, the speed with which other birders joined us was astonishing—Robert Vernon and wife, Herman*



Ross' Gull  
Photo by Richard A. Forster

Newburyport, MA  
March 4, 1975

Weissberg, Kathy Leahy (who went back to pick up a Questar), Robert Buchsbaum, Jim Baird, Jerry Bertrand, Arnold Brown, and Nick Nash, among others. One additional note: I should have known that Richard's remark to me at Eastern Point about finding a Ross' Gull was not just birder's chitchat. Later on I learned that he had commented to another friend sometime in mid-January that it was time to look for a Ross' Gull at Newburyport. Such prescience is not guesswork or mystical inspiration but comes from years of field experience and study, from a thorough training in bird biology, a professional life focused on analyzing bird sightings and bird migration, plus an encyclopedic rolodex of ornithological data that Richard Forster carries around in his head.]

Ross' Gull can be found at a few Arctic locations, including breeding at Churchill, Manitoba, but away from Arctic waters, the species is a bona fide vagrant. This sighting represents the fourth occurrence in Massachusetts. Other notable North American sightings are listed in the accompanying table. [Note carefully in the table Richard has compiled the last bird on the list. Surely, that is "our" bird still going south.] Perhaps Ross' Gull occurs more frequently than supposed in wintering flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls, among which its size and plumage, so similar to Bonaparte's, make it rather inconspicuous.

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**Occurrence of Ross' Gull in North America  
Exclusive of Alaska and Churchill**

British Columbia, Victoria	1 1W	November 9, 1966
Massachusetts, Newburyport	1 adult	January 12-May 9, 1975
Newfoundland, Fogo Island	1 adult	December 18, 1976
Illinois, Chicago	1 adult	Nov. 19-Dec. 2, 1978
Massachusetts, Newburyport	1 adult	April 26, 1981
Colorado, Julesburg	1 1S (or 1W)	April 25-May 7, 1983
Ontario, Moosonee	1 adult	May 14-23, 1983
Connecticut, West Haven	1 adult	April 11-22, 1984
Massachusetts, Newburyport	1 adult	December 3, 1984
Newfoundland, L'Anse-aux-Meadows	1 1S (or 1W)	May 11, 1985
Tennessee, Reelfoot Lake	1 adult W	December 19-28, 1985
Newfoundland, Stephenville	1 (2W?)	January 2-3, 1986
Oregon, Yaquina Bay	1 adult	Jan. 18-March 2, 1986
Newfoundland, L'Anse-aux-Meadows	1 adult	September 22, 1986
Nova Scotia, Canso	1 1W	December 1-4, 1986
New York, Lake Montauk	1 2W	December 11, 1986
Massachusetts, Gloucester	1 adult	February 1-2, 1990
Maryland, Baltimore (Back River)	1 adult	Mar. 3-17, Apr. 13-, 1990

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