

### The Dance of the Ring-billed Gull

On December 26, 1991, from 12:20 to 12:45 P.M., I observed six Ring-billed Gulls engaged in a curious form of feeding behavior. The gulls were part of a large wintering population at Lake Merritt in Oakland, California. Each of the six individuals observed was an adult in winter plumage. All were in close proximity to one another on a grassy slope, part of the park bordering the lake, and all acted quite habituated to humans. They seemed utterly unperturbed by joggers, walkers, and other pedestrians, including me.

Each of the six gulls seemed to be defending a tiny territory on the grassy slope. The average distance from one gull to another was about ten to fifteen feet. A gull would react aggressively if another gull began approaching it. Each of the gulls periodically engaged in what I can only describe as a dance, rapidly tapping the ground with both feet, legs churning, the bird remaining in a stationary position. As the dance proceeded, each of the gulls appeared to stare intently at the ground around its feet. After the leg churning-foot tapping, which required about ten to fifteen seconds, the gull would continue to stare at the ground. Never moving from its location, it would then resume its dance, or it would strike quickly with its bill at the ground.

The objects of the gulls' attention were large earthworms. I observed each of the six gulls capture at least one worm, and some of the gulls caught several in the approximately twenty-five minutes during which I observed them. The worms appeared to be about six to nine inches in length. My guess is that the vibrations created by the rapid tapping of a gull's feet were detected by worms, causing them to come briefly to the surface, though why foot-tapping should inspire such annelid behavior is quite unknown to me. Perhaps it sounds like rain. The gulls presumably located the worms by vision, and I watched as worms were captured, extracted, and swallowed in about one to two seconds. Ring-billed Gulls are known to devour earthworms (Bent, A.C. 1963. *Life Histories of North American Gulls and Terns*. New York: Dover, Inc.), but the foot-tapping behavior that I witnessed is not widely reported (Richard Stallcup, pers. com.).

It is interesting to note that humans are just as smart as Ring-billed Gulls. Charles Kuralt, noted CBS correspondent who has made a career of reporting on the minutia of American society, writes in his recent book (Kuralt, C. 1990. *A Life on the Road*. New York: Ivy Books) about something called "worm grunting," an art practiced in a place called Sopchoppy on the Florida panhandle. Kuralt describes the process as follows: "You go out into the woods and pound a hardwood stake into the ground, preferably using a heavy truck

spring to do the pounding. Then, you rub the truck spring sensually, but with a certain pressure, across the top of the stake. This sets up a vibration in the ground which you can feel in the soles of your feet. Earthworms must find the vibration disagreeable, for to escape it, they wriggle to the surface; whereupon, you pick up the worms and go fishing." To me that still seems like a lot of work. Perhaps the good people of Sopchoppy could just try dancing.

John C. Kricher, Norton

---

### VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR FALL HAWK WATCH

While some hawks, such as Osprey, Bald Eagle, and Peregrine Falcon, are increasing in numbers, recent hawkwatch data suggest that many species, such as the Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, and American Kestrel, may be significantly decreasing in the Northeast. Hawk migration counts are our best means of learning what is happening. The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW) can use *your* help counting hawks this fall. Coordinated hawk watches will be held at Wachusett Mountain in Princeton from September 1 through October 12, and throughout the region on the weekends of September 12-13, 19-20, 26-27, and October 24-25. We also seek reports from hawkwatchers anywhere in eastern Massachusetts on any fall date. If you would like more information on participating in a hawk watch, or on submitting reports of what you see, contact: Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, Massachusetts 02155 (or telephone 617-483-4263 after 8:00 P.M.).

If you would like a copy of the *Fall 1991 EMHW Report*, complete information on the Fall 1992 watch, and a copy of the newly revised flier, "Where and When to Watch Hawks in Eastern Massachusetts," please write Paul Roberts at the address given above and include a check for \$2 (made out to EMHW) to defray costs.

Jim Brett, curator of the world-famous Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and author of a field guide on hawk identification, will be the guest speaker at the annual meeting of the EMHW on Friday, September 11. The meeting, which begins at 7:30 P.M., will be held at the Nature Center of Massachusetts Audubon's Drumlin Farm Sanctuary in Lincoln. The public is invited, free of charge. Refreshments will be provided. For more information, call 617-483-4263 after 8:00 P.M.