

## TACTILE FORAGING BEHAVIOR IN A VAGRANT BLACK-TAILED GULL

by Willam E. Davis, Jr.

On July 5, 1995, in late morning, I was watching a vagrant Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*) on Second Beach, Sachuest Point, Middletown, Rhode Island, with David L. Emerson, who had kindly brought the presence of this rare gull to my attention, and Richard L. Ferren, an avian biologist. The bird had flown to Second Beach from Third Beach, where we and a number of other birders had been watching it, and we relocated it standing with a Lesser Black-backed Gull and a flock of a dozen or so Ring-billed Gulls on a freshly raked patch of sand amid scattered sunbathers, immediately in front of the public parking lot. We observed an unusual foraging behavior, which the gull intermittently practiced for perhaps fifteen minutes. The sand had been raked into a series of long rows in some places five or six inches high. The bird probed the ridges of sand with its bill slightly open, several times a second, and closed its beak on any object it encountered. It pulled objects from the sand and appeared to inspect them before continuing its probing activity. It pulled out several shell fragments up to several inches in length, and at one point a completely buried piece of wood perhaps four inches long. It became apparent that this bird was practicing tactile foraging, using its bill to locate buried objects. The behavior reminded me of a dowitcher rapidly probing a mudflat.

Gulls normally forage by sight, walking or flying along and picking up possible food items after they have been visually located. None of us had ever seen a gull foraging tactilely, and Richard Ferren mentioned that he had never seen a Herring Gull forage that way in hundreds of hours of close observation (he studied Herring Gulls for his Master's degree). I have been unable to find any reference to this kind of foraging behavior by any North American gull species in the literature, nor in any reference on Black-tailed Gulls. The bird did not recover a single food item for its efforts, and the tactile foraging behavior was clearly maladaptive for the sand ridges of a freshly raked Rhode Island beach. The species is native to Korea and Japan, but there was no reference to tactile foraging by the species in Austin (1972) or Austin and Kuroda (1972). In the latter reference, however, the authors mention that "In May and June the . . . [Black-tailed] gulls spend much time in nearby paddy fields catching the larvae and imagi of various land and freshwater insects. They are accused by the rice farmers of tramping down young plants, but their damages are well offset by their consumption of noxious insects." Perhaps they practice tactile foraging in rice paddies where conditions may be wet, vegetation thick, and visibility reduced.

### References

- Austin, O.L., Jr. 1972. The Birds of Korea. *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* 101(1):1-301.
- Austin, O.L., Jr., and N. Kuroda. 1972. The Birds of Japan: Their Status and Distribution. *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* 109(4):280-637).

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