

FIELD NOTES


Ring-billed Gull Piracy of Bufflehead

Mark Lynch

While leading a field trip to some of the coastal ponds of South Falmouth on November 21, 1999, one of the participants directed our attention to a singular sight. An adult winter Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) was harassing a drake Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*). There was a small flock of Bufflehead actively feeding in a brackish coastal pond. When one drake surfaced, the gull began pecking at it, and eventually the Bufflehead took wing. As the duck flew rapidly over the pond, it was closely pursued by the Ring-billed Gull. No matter which way the duck flew, the gull followed relentlessly. The pair zipped back and forth, and eventually the duck dropped something, and the gull wheeled quickly to the surface to get the morsel. As the duck was flying, we could not see anything in its mouth, so we are not sure whether the gull simply caused the duck to drop something or regurgitate.

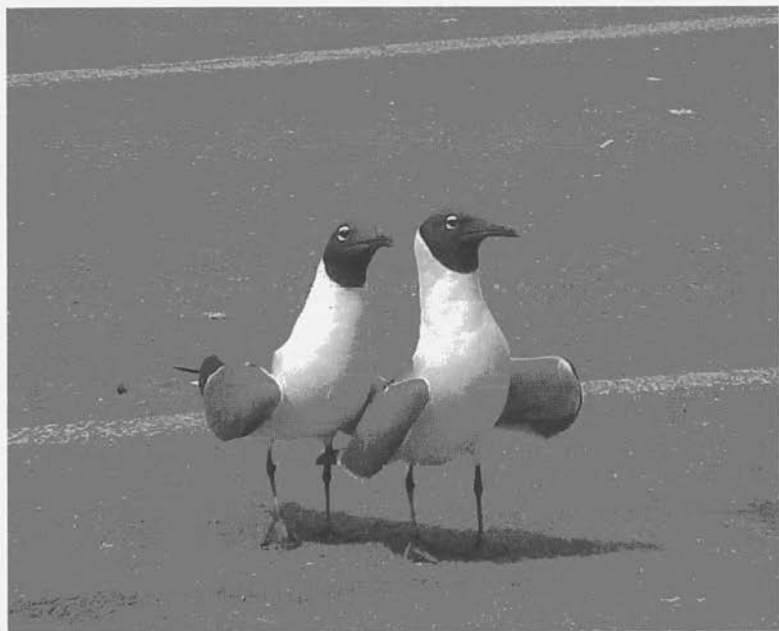
After this incident, we began to notice that in four different ponds, we saw Ring-billed Gulls harassing Buffleheads for food. Most often the gulls would swim among feeding flocks of Bufflehead, and when a duck surfaced, a gull would either attempt to grab something from the duck or peck at the duck's head, it was difficult to determine which. This behavior was common and just between these two species. We witnessed it only on the coastal tidal ponds of Southern Falmouth, although we did observe flocks of Bufflehead on other ponds farther inland. The behavior was so common that the trip participants commented on its frequency. Other species of ducks were present in these same ponds including scaup, Common Goldeneyes (in small numbers), Hooded Mergansers, and large numbers of feeding Red-Breasted Mergansers. Other gull species present nearby included Herring and Great Black-backed gulls. Small flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls were also seen feeding on the ponds. We witnessed this piracy only between Buffleheads and Ring-billed Gulls.

Kleptoparasitism, also called "piracy, robbing or food parasitism, is the deliberate stealing by one animal of food which has already been captured by another" (Furness 1987, p. 160). Although many of us in the northeast know that the larger gulls (Glaucous, Great Black-backed, and Herring) are accomplished pirates, I cannot remember seeing kleptoparasitism being performed so consistently between two species in several areas on the same day. My guess is that whatever specific food the Buffleheads were diving for was also of great interest to the Ring-billed Gulls. Buffleheads and goldeneyes consume a good deal of animal prey: "As much as eighty percent of their diet consists of animal prey which includes aquatic insects and their larvae, spiders, earthworms, leeches, crustaceans, echinoderms, mollusks, tadpoles, amphibians, small fish and even water shrews" (Todd 1996, p. 410). The fact that we witnessed this behavior in coastal tidal brackish ponds narrows the above-mentioned list of possible food items that the Buffleheads were taking. Ring-billed Gulls have been reported to take a number of food items including fish, fiddler crabs, and

specifically ragworms from Maine tidal flats. Kleptoparasitism has been reported in Ring-billed Gulls (del Hoyo et al., p. 604), but so far I have come across no references to such consistent piracy of Buffleheads. 

References

- del Hoyo, J, A. Elliott, and J. Sargatal, eds. 1996. *Handbook of Birds of the World*, Vol. 3. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.
- Furness, R.W. 1987. *The Skuas*. Staffordshire, England: T. & A.D. Poyser.
- Todd, F.S. 1996. *Natural History of Waterfowl*. Vista, CA: Ibis Publishing.



101st Christmas Bird Count

Birders of all skill levels are encouraged to participate in the 101st CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT, sponsored by the National Audubon Society and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Thirty-three count circles are located entirely or partly within Massachusetts. Dates for some counts were not available for inclusion in this list. If you want to participate in a count, please make contact with the compilers at least one week before it takes place.

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