

A ROSS' GULL ROUND TABLE

(An interview with the discoverers)

Perhaps the most significant chapter in the history of Massachusetts birding -- since the extinction of the Heath Hen in the 1930's -- has just been written. The discovery of a Ross' Gull in Newburyport Harbor was the first record of this intrinsically rare species in the contiguous United States, a feat magnified by the fact that the bird was in winter plumage, a dress that is inadequately or marginally described in common field guides.

This interview with the original discoverers of the gull is presented not only to document their find, but to reveal the unusual and difficult situations it created for them and for persons who screen sightings of rare birds. The participants include Philip Parsons and Herman Weissberg (the discoverers), Paula Butler and Robert Stymeist (Bird Observer staff), and Leif Robinson (editor of this interview).

Bird Observer expresses its appreciation to Caroline Robinson for transcribing 24 pages of typescript, from which this account has been abstracted due to space limitations.

Leif: What is your reaction to the publicity received by the Ross' Gull? A couple of years ago a new species of Hawaiian Honeycreeper was discovered, and it got practically no press coverage.

Phil: I didn't believe that our bird was going to blow up as big as it did -- all those people! I knew it was rare, but I didn't know it was going to create all the interest it did.

Herm: I'm amazed, amazed that there was so much response. I understood that this was a rare Massachusetts bird, but I didn't know that it was so rare throughout North America and that so many people high up in ornithology had never seen one.

Leif: On what date did you see the bird, and who saw it first? What field marks did the two of you see together?

Herm: It was January 12th, late Sunday afternoon. We had already finished the day's birding and were ready to go home. Actually, we were looking for a Black-headed Gull when we saw a flock of Bonaparte's, and we thought that there might be a Black-headed among them. We stopped by the Clam Shack and got out with our binoculars -- not our scope -- because the birds were so close. As we looked at the flock, I immediately noticed one of the birds as being smaller and said, "There's no Black-headed, but there's a Little Gull." Then Phil replied, "It's too big to be a Little Gull." I said, "Well he's too small to be a Bonaparte's -- and look how pink he is, very pink, too pink for a Little Gull."

Leif: Was the pink noticeable as the bird was sitting on the water?

Herm: Very much so, very much. The first special thing we noticed was that it was very pink. The contrast was made with the Bonaparte's; if he had been by himself, we might not have noticed the pink.

Phil then said, "Look at the head; it has a very pigeonlike head, with a short stubby neck. And look at the short bill." Phil pointed out all of these things, and I kept agreeing with him as we looked at the bird. Someone suggested that we get a field guide. If we had realized the subsequent events, one of us would have kept an eye on the bird. Unfortunately we both went to the car, and when we came back, the flock had left! One piece of advice for people who bird together: someone should always watch the bird! We searched briefly and then went home.

Phil: It was late afternoon and the sunlight was coming right over our backs toward the bird.

Herm: I commented that since it was late afternoon, the sun might make the bird look pink. Then Phil said, "Why wouldn't it make all of the birds look pink?" The Bonaparte's still looked white -- this one looked pink." On March 10th, Gerry Soucy called me to say that he had just seen the Ross' Gull in low light and that it appeared very pink. Perhaps the hue is strengthened by a low sun, such as prevails in the Arctic; and also at the time we first saw the bird! Since the bird has gone nationwide, it has usually been seen under "high-light" conditions, which might account for its pallid appearance.

Leif: What happened subsequently, on Monday?

Herm: Monday evening Phil called. He said that he had a book to show me. Sunday, on the way home, we had talked about the possibility of a Ross' Gull, but all we had was the Robbins' guide. Phil came over with Pough's book, which shows Ross' Gull in winter plumage. The picture looked just like the bird we had seen.

Phil said, "I think we ought to call Gerry Soucy and Mrs. Emery." I said, "Well, I feel kind of foolish reporting a bird like this." Phil responded, "We can say that we want people to be on the lookout for it; we're pretty sure of what we had."

Leif: At this point did you write the bird into your life list?

Both: No, no.

Phil: I have a diary; in it I noted that we had sighted a pinkish gull. The date was there to go back to, and I was glad of that.

Herm: As a matter of fact, I think that as we were going home I asked you, "Are you going to put this bird on your list?" Phil said, "No, but I'll put it in my diary, just in case something comes of it."

So I agreed that we ought to let Gerry and Mrs. Emery know; I also called Paula Butler. Everyone asked a lot of questions! I felt foolish, and they acted kind of skeptical. I can't say that I blame them -- but we did report.

Leif: This was the 13th?

Herm: Yes. On the 14th nothing happened. John Nove is a birder who lives in Manchester, and I told him about the gull then. He and I went up on the morning of the 15th. At the boat ramp Sally Ingalls drove up, and we told her about the bird. Everyone came back empty handed. But on the 16th Phil went up by himself.

Phil: I scoped a bunch of Bonaparte's from the Coal Yard and picked out one bird. I followed him as best I could, but the 30-power eyepiece made this difficult and I eventually lost him. However, I did notice the pinkish color again. It was about the same time of day as on the 12th.

Leif: How far away was the bird at this time?

Phil: I would say 60 or 70 yards. After a few minutes I picked him up again, by his color, sitting with the Bonaparte's. Of course, the minute I saw the color I looked for the other things such as the little white head with a big black eye. After a few minutes he flew off, but I was convinced then and there of what the bird was, though I still hadn't seen the wedge-shaped tail.

Herm: When you got home that night you called me. The next morning both of us and John Nove went to look together. When we arrived there wasn't a gull in sight, not even a Herring Gull. So we went to the north end of Plum Island. After a few minutes the gulls started passing the breakwater, and we checked every one. It was a constant stream. I I've never seen so many Bonaparte's in all my life. As they came by, they seemed to divide into two lanes -- one going to the Salisbury side of the harbor, the other to the Newburyport side. Around lunchtime we drove to the Coal Yard, where we sat until dusk. But we didn't spot the bird.

Leif: Phil, why don't you give an account of how you reported the gull.

Phil: Gerry knew about it from Herman's telephone call; and, of course, Larry [Judge Jodrey] would also know. As I met different birders, I'd tell them -- all the good birders -- to be on the lookout for a pink gull among the Bonaparte's. I think some of them did, but probably more of them didn't, because they didn't believe me. That was probably the reason more didn't look.

Leif: This was in mid-January?

Phil: Around mid-January. I told Mr. and Mrs. Argue and Henry Wiggin, and I gave a full description to Mrs. Argue. On another day I met Dick Forster at the Northern Three-toed Woodpecker, and I gave him a rundown. I also told Mrs. Emery -- I just don't remember the date -- and she wrote down everything.

Paula: When Herman called me, I called Nancy Claflin; from the description, she had no doubt what bird you had seen, and she went three times to check. Did you call Ruth [Emery] directly?

Herm: I'm pretty sure I did. I'm not sure of the dates, but I can get them. Mr. Stepanoff and the whole New York Club were at Hammond Castle, and I met them there -- they would know the weekend.

Bob: Ruth had your information around mid-January, probably after the second time Phil saw the bird. In doing the December records, Dick Veit and I looked at your description. Dick said that it looked good and he was going after the bird the next day. Wayne Petersen, was also informed. I went with Dick on the following Saturday. We looked for the gull but couldn't find anything. Dick subsequently spent several other days looking to no avail.

Leif: I gather that you relied basically on the field marks given in Robbins' and Paugh's guides. In retrospect, do you think that the published field marks were sufficient? What field marks would you stress that the books don't?

Phil: I would stress the short stubby neck -- no neck at all as I see it -- down on his shoulders. Then that all-white head with big black eyes. And the short bill.

Herm: Of course, we weren't looking specifically for a wedge-shaped tail, which you couldn't see when he was sitting on the water. We were more aware of the pigeonlike head and that he was bigger than the Little Gull and smaller than the Bonaparte's.

Paula: Did you see the long tail?

Herm: We saw the long tail, but not the wedge.

Leif: The only time the wedge tail was evident to me was when the bird was flying directly away; then it looked like a diamond, but otherwise the wedge was not noticeable.

Phil: On March 2nd, Gerry noticed the bird by Bullock's Needle, and he was close enough to see that when the bird opened its mouth the inside was all red.

On the second day I saw the bird, I noticed the wing linings particularly -- they were a nice pearly gray.

Leif: Darker than the mantle?

Phil: Darker!

Herm: Battleship gray I would say. On the 12th we had noticed a little black mark like the remnant of the neck ring. Has anybody else seen it?

Leif: When I saw the bird fly away from me, its neck had a dusky area which was roughly rectangular, let's say an inch long and a half inch wide. This was on the nape.

If you had this experience to relive, how would you change your reporting procedure, and how would you hope reactions to your report would change?

Herm: I would not have reported it any differently. But it has disturbed me for a long time that a lot of people will tell someone about a bird, and the immediate reaction is skepticism. Unless an individual sees the bird, he is always a doubting Thomas. So there is always that attitude in your mind, and this is one reason why I hesitated when Phil said, "Let's make it a possible instead of a definite," did I agree. He was sure and he convinced me with the illustration in Pough's book. I was still reluctant -- I guess it's your ego -- but you hate to have the word get around, "This fellow says he saw a Ross' Gull ... Ha, Ha, Ha!" And I'm sure this was the reaction of a lot of people.

Leif: What happened from the time that you reported it informally to Ruth to the time the bird was rediscovered? Do you think a stronger effort should have been made to confirm the bird by the pipeline?

Herm: I didn't know what was being done to confirm it at that time; and I'm still not sure. From what we did, you just assume that the word spreads.

Phil: I don't think I would have handled it any differently. At that time of the year,

you've got the problem of weather -- there was a lot of bad weather, and people weren't getting down to the area. I know that on two or three weekends the weather was very bad for the BBC walks. It probably would have been hard to spot the bird.

Herm: Many times I have the feeling that there's not enough of an established network, among the people who are birding all the time, as to who will call whom. Another point is that when you do report, you get the feeling that you are being judged, that the person you are talking to isn't taking it cold-turkey the way a doctor would. He is making a judgement as you are talking. Because of this, I have always wanted to be darn sure about birds -- keep it in my little circle of friends until we are absolutely positive that nobody can break down our case. Then we report it officially. Then, if they go out and happen to see it, the reaction is positive.

Bob: A report comes in -- and if it's a rare bird, you know we don't want to make fools of ourselves and report it to the world that you've got a "Labrador Duck" in Massachusetts. We have a committee of six or seven people to which I submit material.

Herm: Who writes the report?

Bob: The observer. If somebody reports a "Labrador Duck" and does not send any description, we write the person back. Sometimes they reply, sometimes they don't. We get as much information as we can, in writing or over the phone, and submit it to the panel. We want to make sure that we have everything, if it's going to be for the record. It's not just a single judgement by a compiler -- it goes through a number of experienced birders.

Phil and Herman didn't see the tail, which could have clinched the bird for them. But they did see the small head, small pigeonlike bill and so forth. No one was completely familiar with the bird, simply because of the lack of facts in the field guides. Davis Finch, who is probably one of the foremost experts on gulls, brought up the point that Little Gulls have pink in breeding plumage. With that mark alone, you could have seen a Little Gull -- with the dark under the wings and a pink wash -- but the small head and the other field marks wouldn't fit a Little Gull. The fact that this bird is so far out of range makes one want to think of something else. Few people know about Little Gulls having the pink wash.

Herm is probably right about the negative reactions some people get. Of course, compilers don't have the right to do that. Yet, most of the reports are followed up: somebody knows; somebody checks it out; or at least the word is spread around.

Leif: How is it spread around?

Bob: Ruth puts it on the "Voice." I don't think the Ross' Gull got on the "Voice." Did it?

Phil: I don't think so. No.

Herm: Phil and I, who bird for pleasure, get the feeling that the people who are professional birders give the impression that they want to be considered infallible. You get very defensive, because you feel that their reaction is going to be, "What the hell do you know about birding?" You're intimidated, but there are more people who bird for pleasure than who bird for the records. That doesn't mean that the pleasure birders aren't competent. They might not know all the subtle points of every textbook or spend much time in a library -- they have other things to do -- but birding is a pleasure, a sport, a hobby, an outdoor activity that you find stimulating. But when you meet one of these other folks, you immediately know that this person is working on a different plateau. You've got to be careful how you say things or they will pull you up fast. Maybe from their point of view they are attempting to give you an education; I'll be lenient and say maybe they are.

Leif: Isn't it wonderful when a bird shows up that none of the "experts" has ever seen before, and everyone is on the same level!

Herm: That is what has been very gratifying about the Ross' Gull. I knew nothing about it before January 12th, then Phil did the research, and I began to understand that it had never been seen in Massachusetts.

Leif: What feeling did you get about the importance of the discovery? This was the first sighting of Ross' Gull in the contiguous United States. When you saw the bird, you knew it was rare, but did you know how rare?

Herm: I did not.

Phil: I didn't at the time, but as each day went by, I began to realize it fast!

Herm: In the past week, I've met only one man who said it wasn't a life bird.

Leif: What kind of local impact did the Ross' Gull have?

Herm: In a copy of the Newburyport newspaper there was an editorial entitled "Rare Bird Exposes Need." The subject was that Newburyport has no motel facilities, and people were looking for places to spend the night. The editor was trying to build up some interest.

Phil: A young girl came through the crowd with a big armful of pamphlets advertising all the restaurants in the town. After that a coffee truck showed up; then a truck with free hot chocolate (and a small advertisement on top).

Leif: A diagnostic photograph is now acceptable evidence for a record. Do you feel that you should have had a camera?

Phil: I have two cameras, but I don't have a long enough lens. I know that I couldn't have picked up that bird with the lenses I have.

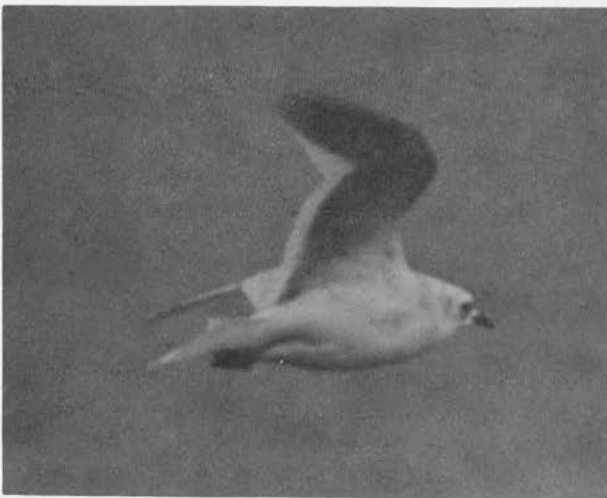
Herm: And the light was poor. You have to be prepared with a camera at all times and very few people are.

Leif: When did you first hear that the Ross' Gull had been independently recovered?

Herm: This happened last Sunday, March 2nd. Phil, John Nove, and I went to the Salisbury parking lot, and Paul Miliotis was standing there. We asked him about the Tufted Duck, and the first thing Paul said was, "There's been a sighting of a Ross' Gull -- some people from Vermont had it. And I confirmed it." The Vermonters, of course, were Walter Ellison and his father.

Then people started saying, "Wasn't that terrible -- wasn't that terrible!" What was terrible? "Well, you weren't even mentioned in the press." Then I went back and read the story, and I was annoyed.

Phil: My feelings are probably about the same. All this week I've been up one day and down the next. You know, this sort of thing goes wild with your emotions.



Above: Ross' Gull, photo by Richard Forster,
Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Upper right: Herman Weissberg, Manchester

Lower right: Philip Parsons, Manchester