

SIGHTING OF AN IVORY GULL

C. Leon Strickland, Rochester, N.H.

Strong winds had been blowing in from the sea for a considerable time, with intermittent rain, snow and sleet. When the weather is like this, we like to check the coastline to see what might have been blown in by the storm. (For 47 years I have been an increasingly avid, intemperate, inveterate, incurable, dedicated naturalist and outdoorsman, with a particular interest in birds, perhaps because they are the most appealing and readily observable of the wild fauna.) My son, Carl III, and his wife, Kathy, were visiting us from New York state for the holidays. Since they share our interest, they decided to take my wife, Beverly, and me to Plum Island.

We drove to the island, and, hoping to find an area where birds might have taken refuge from the storm at open sea, we hiked to the far northeastern corner. However, far up the Merrimack the great waves were being lashed to foam, and no sensible bird would linger at the mouth of the river. We saw none, except for an occasional gull moving with the wind and a couple of Savannah Sparrows in the grass and weeds. The tide was coming full and was encroaching on the land more than usual.

We decided to try the Salisbury side of the mouth of the Merrimack. I could see gulls flying over the distant Salisbury marsh. Maybe there would be an unusual one among them, or a Snowy Owl, or an uncommon duck, or at least Horned Larks, Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs on the large, flat camping and recreation area.

After checking the south end of Salisbury beach, we headed down toward the boat launching ramp and parking area, where a number of duck hunters had parked their vehicles. With an ardor and enthusiasm worthy of a better cause, and in spite of the weather, they had actually taken small boats out into those dangerous seas to blinds and other hiding places from which they might destroy the wildlife we had come to admire. We felt there was little hope of seeing much with the hunters around ready to shoot anything that came in sight, if not in range, but we drove on down to the boat ramp. We had started to turn around, as the cars do to back up and put the boats into the water, when my wife and my daughter-in-law both said, "That gull is different!" I heard it twice before I "came to" and asked, "Where?" "On that cement platform by the boat ramp," they said.

When I turned around to look at what they were talking about, I saw a small, mostly white gull. At first glance, I wondered if the Ross' Gull might have miraculously returned. I even imagined that I might be seeing the pointed tail, but those with me showed me that the tail was straight across, and that I was looking at the long, pointed wings extending over the shorter tail. We had only the Golden Press Field Guide with us, but, even with those rather poor pictures and scanty information, we quickly identified the bird as an Ivory Gull that had not reached adult plumage. We particularly noted the short, black legs and white pantaloons, the neat, black, horizontal Vs on the primaries, and the touch of dark on and between the shoulders. The sooty area extending to the throat from the beak and down from the eyes threw us off a bit, as did the yellow-tipped, blue-grey (rather than black) bill. But we almost immediately felt that, because of size, shape, and other identifying marks, it could be nothing but an Ivory Gull. It was our first sighting of the species, and we knew it was rare, but we had little concept of how rare.

So began an hour and a half or more of observation at close range. The gull appeared to be pecking at some stringy, wet animal remains on the wet, three- or four-foot wide, cement platform. Too little remained of the food for us to see it, except when the bird would raise a stringy bit with its beak. The bird seemed to be unafraid and only a bit cautious if we approached it too closely. It appeared hungry, weary and reluctant to fly.

The wind was changing toward the north, and there was increasingly more sleet mixed in with the rain. A foggy mist obscured the view at any distance, but we stayed on. We saw the bird lift its long, wide, white wings, as a gust of wind threatened to blow it off the cement platform. My son took pictures at different angles, with and without his scope--about twenty in all. I told him that the bird might not stay, and we should have proof that we had seen it. Hunters approached, and we heard one say, "There's that odd gull again." We (perhaps foolishly) feared for the bird's life. We appealed to them not to harm or frighten it and explained that it was a rare bird, and they were really very respectful.

It was about two o'clock on the afternoon of December 22, 1975, when we first saw the bird. As the hours wore on, the blowing sleet came faster. The darkness of evening was

coming on prematurely because of the storm, and we knew that we should be leaving soon. Assuming that neither we nor anybody else might ever have a chance to see this bird again, we decided to try for a real close-up picture, even if we should frighten the bird away. My son approached to within a few feet before the bird flew a short distance into the wind, and then returned as Carl retreated. For the next half hour, we watched it fly and return, fly and return, sometimes alighting on an ice floe and floating by on the swiftly receding tide, sometimes flying without fear so close to the car that we could almost have touched it. Then the time came when we knew that we must go. As we left, the gull flew back to the ramp where we had first seen it. It was still there when we lost sight of the ramp. We stopped to see a Short-eared Owl in a nearby bush, then headed for home in Rochester, New Hampshire.

I thought of stopping in Portsmouth to ask Leon and Betty Phinney if an Ivory Gull had been reported, but it was dark, cold and stormy, and, as we had missed out noon meal, we were anxious to get home.

The next day, I went up to the Skowhegan, Maine area, and then back to Kittery that evening. Sometime after nine o'clock that Tuesday night, more than a day after we had seen the bird, I called Leon Phinney from a friend's home in Kittery to ask if an Ivory Gull had been reported. He assured me that it had, and I thought it was just "old stuff" to the bird-watching world. Imagine my surprise when I got home to find out that my son had reported it, and that we really were the first to see and identify it!

We went back to see the bird the day before Christmas without any luck, and we assumed it had become refreshed and homesick and had left; but we were very pleased to see it again the next Sunday along with dozens of fine bird-watching people. Meeting them is a joy comparable to seeing the Ivory Gull, and very likely more enduring.

A RARE BIRD INDEED!

A couple of years ago, I remember being fooled on a Christmas Count by a decoy that had gotten loose. Perhaps that is forgivable, but if I'm ever again in the vicinity of Vancouver International Airport, I'll think twice before adding a Peregrine Falcon to my list.

Large congregations of Dunlin gather there during migration, causing a potential threat to aircraft. Though common "scare" tactics failed to disperse the birds, trained Peregrines were effective but expensive.

Yet, most birds are affected by the shape of a predator. Would a falcon-shaped model aircraft work? Robert Randall (right in picture) built such a radio-controlled device. According to Science Dimension Vol. 7, No. 6, "Dunlins, ducks, gulls and geese treated the falcon-shaped model as a potential threat and were effectively dispersed from the area. It still has to be determined if, through repeated exposure to the model, the birds will learn that it is different from a live falcon and not a threat to them."

L. J. Robinson

