

Little Gull at Lake Simcoe, Ontario and review of status in Ontario

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Introduction

In Lake Simcoe, during the fall and early winter of 2015, there was an unprecedented run of the Emerald Shiner (*Notropis atherinoides*) in Kempenfelt Bay, near Barrie, Ontario. Although there are runs of this species every year, this one was notable because of the enormous numbers of fish involved. Indeed, local fishermen could not remember such large numbers of this small bait fish, (J. Nightingale, pers. comm.). The huge numbers in relatively shallow waters attracted large numbers of fish-eating birds, including large numbers of gulls of several species. In fact, on 13 December 2015, nine species of gulls were recorded (J. Iron, pers. obs.). Among the gulls, there were at least 1,300 Bonaparte's Gulls (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*). Birdwatchers were aware that Little Gulls (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) tend to associate with Bonaparte's Gulls and, as a result, were careful to look for them. On 26 October 2015, I recorded 14 Little Gulls at one time at the Barrie Marina in Kempenfelt Bay. It is highly probable that

there were more Little Gulls on Lake Simcoe at this time; however, it is a large lake and access to the lakefront and shoreline for bird watching is optimal only around the west shore of Kempenfelt Bay, basically in downtown Barrie. The feeding frenzy and concentration of gulls lasted until mid-December and only ceased at freeze-up. The relatively large numbers of Little Gulls on Lake Simcoe during this period created some interest among birders. Questions were raised as to whether or not these numbers were a normal course of events and just not previously reported or whether it was a one-off event as Little Gulls, other gulls and waterfowl exploited the unusually abundant food source. It was suggested to me by C. Weseloh, R. Pittaway and J. Iron, that I do some research into the occurrence and abundance of Little Gulls on Lake Simcoe. What follows is a compilation of my findings. The primary purpose of this article is to track the history of Little Gull sightings on Lake Simcoe to determine their seasonal occurrence and abundance.

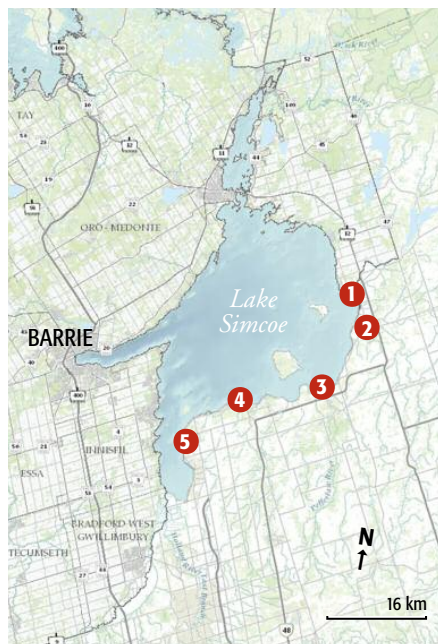


Little Gull in first winter plumage at Minet's Point in Barrie, Ontario, on 13 September 2019. *Photo: Jean Iron*

Methods

I solicited information on the locations, dates of occurrence, relative age (adult or immature) and numbers of individual Little Gulls observed on Lake Simcoe (Figure 1) or immediately adjacent areas (e.g., Beaverton Sewage Lagoons—400 m from the east shore of the lake) from Ontario birders using the Ontbirds Listserv for all years from 1992 to 2018. I approached individual birders known to have birded Lake Simcoe and I examined past copies of *The Blue Heron* (the journal of the Brereton Field Naturalists [now known as Nature Barrie]) in the Simcoe

Figure 1. Lake Simcoe and areas outside of Kempenfelt Bay which are mentioned in the text: 1. Thorah Centennial Park, 2. Beaverton Sewage Lagoons, 3. Mouth of Pfefferlaw Creek, 4. Sibbald Point and 5. Roches Point.



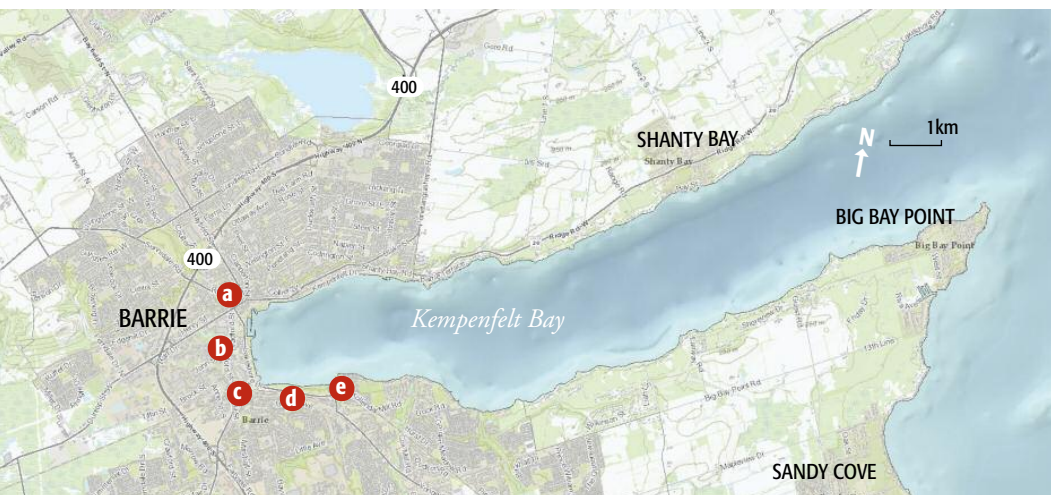


Figure 2. Kempenfelt Bay with five observation points indicated: a. Heritage Park, b. Centennial Beach, c. Tiffin Launch, d. South Shore and e. Minet's Point.

County Museum (1951 to 2009). I also searched back issues of *American Birds* and *North American Birds* (1971 and 1973). Finally, I used eBird (eBird 2019) and obtained the majority of records from this source (2005 -2019).

Background and Historical Overview

Lake Simcoe

Although not considered one of the Great Lakes, Lake Simcoe was part of Lake Algonquin, the original proglacial lake of which the Great Lakes are remnants. The lake is approximately 30 km (19 mi) long, 25 km (16 mi) wide and covers 722 km² (279 mi²). It has a mean depth of 16 m and its deepest point is 47 m (North *et al.* 2013). About 60 km from the Greater Toronto area, it is renowned as a recreational lake both summer and winter. It is connected to the Great Lakes system by way of the Severn River. A number of southern Ontario rivers flow, generally north, into the lake, draining 2,581 km²

(997 mi²) of land. From the east, the Talbot River, part of the Trent-Severn Waterway, is the most important river flowing into Lake Simcoe, connecting the lake with the Kawartha Lakes system and Lake Ontario.

Lake Simcoe is well known as a staging point for a number of avian species both in spring and fall. Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) are regularly estimated at upwards of 2,500 individuals (C. Evans, pers. obs.). I counted 570 in one hour leaving the lake and flying in a northwesterly direction on 6 April 2006 between 06:00-07:00. Red-necked Grebes (*Podiceps grisegena*) show up on the lake in hundreds of individuals (C. Evans, pers. comm.). Common Mergansers (*Mergus merganser*) stage here as well, with flocks numbering in the thousands (pers. obs.). Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), Bufflehead (*B. albeola*) and Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) are all present in numbers during migration in spring and fall (Hawke 2019).

Regularly occurring gull species in fall include Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), Bonaparte's Gull, Iceland Gull (*L. glaucoideus*), Glaucous Gull (*L. hyperboreus*) and Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*). Numbers of these gulls remain until freeze-up and, mixed in with the Bonaparte's Gulls, in some years, are Little Gulls. Most reported bird observations come from Kempenfelt Bay (Figure 2), a long arm of Lake Simcoe proper that forms the shoreline of Barrie.

Ice Cover

The number of birds on the lake is directly affected by the amount of ice cover. An average of approximately 80 days of ice cover is to be expected on a yearly basis (Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change 2014); however, duration of ice cover varies greatly from year to year. For example, at Sibbald Point (Figure 1), the longest period of ice cover recorded was 137 days in 1996 and the shortest was in 2002, when the ice cover lasted a mere 37 days (Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change

2014). Freeze-up and thaw dates also vary annually, but there might be an effect of climate change as reflected in change of the mean date for an ice-free lake from 19 April during the 1960s to 15 April during the 2000s (A. Mills, pers. comm.).

Little Gull

The Little Gull is the smallest member of the gull family and is a common breeder across northern Europe and Asia. In North America, it is commonly associated with Bonaparte's Gull, which it resembles. The breeding adult has a black hood, red bill and legs and its most obvious identification feature is its dark underwings. Non-breeding adults lose the dark hood but have a dark ear patch and a smudgy forehead (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Above:
A winter adult Little Gull
(left) and a winter adult
Bonaparte's Gull (right).
Kempenfelt Bay, Barrie,
18 December 2015.

Photo: James Coey



Figure 4. Left: Little Gulls:
a first winter (left) and winter
adult (right). Kempenfelt Bay,
15 December 2015.

Photo: Jean Iron

Immatures differ from non-breeding adults. They have a distinct blackish pattern on the leading edge of the upper wing and a black band across the tail (Figure 4). They do not have the characteristic and diagnostic dark underwings of an adult which may well lead to under-reporting of Little Gulls.

Little Gull in North America, Canada, Ontario and Lake Simcoe

The first documented record in Canada and North America is a Little Gull collected during the Franklin expedition to the Arctic Ocean by naturalist John Richardson between 1819 and 1820 (Houston 1998, Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Other early records for the Americas include specimens collected in Bermuda on 22 January 1849, near Mazatlan, Mexico, on 27 March 1868, on Long Island, New York, on 15 September 1887 and 10 May 1902 and in Maine on 20 July 1910 (Norton 1910). After the Franklin expedition bird, there is no reported Canadian sighting until 1930 at Port Stanley, Ontario (Saunders 1930, Weseloh 1994), which was the first sighting in Ontario. Little Gulls have now been reported from most Canadian provinces and US states (Mlodinow and O'Brien 1996, Ewins and Weseloh 1999).

The ever-increasing sightings in the 1970s and the first recorded breeding in North America (Scott 1963, Peterjohn 1989, 2001, Ewins and Weseloh 1999) correlate with an increase in the Little Gull's European and Asian range in the 1970s and their wintering in large numbers on the west coast of Europe and the Mediterranean (Hutchinson and Neath 1978). Some Little Gulls in North America are

known to be of European origin. The link to Europe was proven when an adult pair of Little Gulls was observed at Sturgeon Creek near Leamington in 2001 by Alan Wormington (Wormington 2015). One of the pair was banded and enough of the numbers on the band were identified to determine that the bird had been banded in Finland in 1998. Another link is a Swedish-banded chick in first summer plumage which was found dead on a highway in Pennsylvania (Ewins and Weseloh 1999).

The first known record for Lake Simcoe is from 1957 (Devitt 1957, 1967). Devitt (1957) wrote:

A casual visitant; one sight record. This Old World gull was added to the county list on October 26, 1957, when one was identified by Miss A.M. Hughes who later pointed it out to other members of the Brereton Field Naturalist Club. The bird was feeding with a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls in Kempensfelt Bay, at the foot of Toronto Street, Barrie.

It is significant that the bird was with a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls. It is also significant that there are no further records extant for Lake Simcoe until 1990 (33 years later), at least none that I could find. It is interesting that the first Little Gulls for Point Pelee were recorded in the same year as Lake Simcoe's first Little Gull. Little Gulls were seen at Point Pelee on the 25th of April and the 24th of May 1957 (Wormington 2015).

Until 1938, the Little Gull was unknown in the Niagara region (Beardslee and Mitchell 1965). The Niagara River (Bellerby *et al.* 2000), as well as Lakes Erie and Ontario, are now important staging

areas for Little Gull (Tozer and Richards 1974, Peterjohn 1989, 2001, Weseloh *et al.* 2004). The magnitude of the change in abundance is evident when you compare the single 1938 record with the 352 individuals reported in 1989 in seasonal reports for Ontario in *American Birds* (Weseloh 1994).

Breeding

A cursory examination of regional reports in both *American Birds* and *North American Birds* shows that Little Gulls have been present during spring migration along the shores of Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and the Niagara River since the 1970s and this has led to speculation that Little Gulls may nest at isolated locations across the boreal and tundra regions of Canada. This is a vast under-explored region with many small bodies of water and marshes that Little Gulls seem to find ideal for nesting (Weseloh 2007).

The first breeding record in North America was confirmed in 1962 at Osawa's Second Marsh in Ontario (Scott 1963, Tozer and Richards 1974). Since then, Little Gulls have been reported nesting in several additional widely scattered southern Ontario localities: Rondeau Provincial Park, Chatham-Kent (Tozer and Richards 1974, Kelley 1978); Bassett Island, Lambton County (Godfrey 1986); Cranberry Marsh, Durham R.M. (Tozer and Richards 1974) and North Limestone Island, Parry Sound District (Mills 1981, Weseloh 2007).

Elsewhere in Canada, the species has nested at Churchill, Manitoba (McRae 1984, Jehl 2004, Joos 2013), northern Ontario (Carpentier 1986), and in LaSalle, near Montreal, Quebec (Godfrey

1986, Bannon and Robert 1996). In Michigan, nesting has been reported by Chu (1994). A number of documented nestings have been reported from Wisconsin (Robbins 1991, Ewins and Weseloh 1999). A recent nest was found by Francie Cuthbert in St. Martins Bay in northern Lake Huron, Michigan, on 29 June 2013 (C. Weseloh, pers. comm.). Remarkably, Little Gulls in fresh juvenal plumage (indicating recent fledging) have twice been recorded in California – 15 August 1981 at Crescent City in Del Norte County and 3-5 September 1984 at Lake Elsinore in Riverside County. This suggests that the species may have nested well to the west of its known North American breeding range at Churchill, Manitoba, northern Ontario and the Great Lakes. Little Gulls also occur annually on the Salton Sea (California Bird Records Committee 2007).

Results

My requests for records of Little Gull sightings on Lake Simcoe did not generate very many responses and what follows is a synopsis primarily based on eBird and other sources. I found a total of 45 reports from 25 individual reporters from 10 locations in or adjacent to Lake Simcoe. A total of 227 Little Gulls was reported: 212 (93.4%) from Kempenfelt Bay and 15 from other locations around the lake (Table 1). Little Gulls were reported in 12 of the 62 years, 1957-2018 (Table 1). Four of the 12 years in which Little Gulls were reported occurred during 1990-94 and involved birds occurring outside of Kempenfelt Bay. Seven of the remaining eight years when Little Gulls were reported were

Table 1. Total number of individual Little Gulls reported annually on Lake Simcoe, 1957 to 2018, sorted by Kempenfelt Bay and the rest of Lake Simcoe, Ontario.

YEAR	KEMPENFELT BAY	REST OF LAKE SIMCOE	TOTALS
1957	1	0	1
1958-1989	0	0	0
1990	0	4	4
1991	0	3	3
1992	0	0	0
1993	0	3	3
1994	0	5	5
2005	42	0	42
2006-2011	0	0	0
2012	8	0	8
2013	0	0	0
2014	27	0	27
2015	61	0	61
2016	15	0	15
2017	22	0	22
2018	36	0	36
Total	212	15	227

between 2005 and 2018, and all reports were from Kempenfelt Bay.

In terms of seasonal distribution, 216 of the 227 (95.2%) Little Gulls were reported in September – December (Table 2). After an August hiatus, Little Gulls begin to appear in Lake Simcoe in September, rapidly reach a peak in late October and then decline but remain elevated during November and December. The four sites which reported the largest numbers of Little Gulls were all in Kempenfelt Bay (Centennial Beach, Heritage

Park, Minet’s Point and Tiffin Launch) (Table 2, Figure 1); the next largest number of Little Gulls was reported from the Beaverton Sewage Lagoons (Table 2, Figure 2).

Slightly more than half of the reports of Little Gulls (127 of 227, 55.9%) identified the exact date of sighting (Table 3); the others only reported the month. From these exact reports, it was possible to identify the peak weeks of Little Gull observations on Lake Simcoe. The last three weeks of October and the first week of November accounted for 95 of the 127 Little Gulls (74.8%) where exact dates of reporting were available. Among these four weeks, the last week of October accounted for the most Little Gulls. J. Randall (pers. comm.) anecdotally reported that both adult and immature Little Gulls were seen annually in October at Minet’s Point in Kempenfelt Bay from 2003 to 2015, usually in small groups of up to 10 birds. Unfortunately, detailed notes were not kept.

In terms of flock size, most sightings of Little Gulls on Lake Simcoe involved fewer than five individuals; however, on 3 November 2005, more than 20 individuals were sighted along the shores of Kempenfelt Bay (J. Iron, pers. comm.). Also, on 26 October 2015, I recorded 14 Little Gulls among the more than 1,000 Bonaparte’s Gulls foraging in the same area. These sightings appear to be most unusual for Lake Simcoe.

Discussion

The first year for which I could find a documented record of Little Gull for Lake Simcoe was 1957. Then, from 1958 to 1989, there are apparently no records.

Table 2. Monthly sightings of Little Gulls by location for Lake Simcoe, Ontario since 1957.

PLACE	JAN	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTAL
1. Thorah Cent. Park	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
2. Beaverton Lagoons	0	1	4	2	0	0	3	0	3	13
3. Pefferlaw	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	4
4. Sibbald Point	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
5. Roches Point	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
a. Heritage Park *	2	0	0	0	0	4	22	15	15	58
b. Centennial Beach *	0	0	0	0	0	5	44	3	7	59
c. Tiffin Launch *	0	2	0	0	0	0	8	20	8	38
d. South Shore *	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	8
e. Minet's Point *	0	0	0	0	0	3	34	4	0	41
Total	2	3	4	2	0	13	117	50	36	227

* Sub-locations of Kempenfelt Bay

Table 3. Weekly distribution of Little Gull sightings on Lake Simcoe, Ontario, 2005-2018.**

WEEKS	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTALS
Week 1 1st - 7th	0	7	22	7	36
Week 2 8th -15th	0	21	1	2	24
Week 3 6th - 23rd	1	17	2	2	22
Week 4 24th - 31st	4	35	4	2	45
Totals	5	80	29	13	127

** The total numbers shown here are less than in Table 1 because only those reported sightings that included exact dates are included.

During four of the five years from 1990 to 1994, there are annual records but all of these are from the east side of the lake (Beaverton Sewage Lagoons) where there was a small but active cadre of expert birders who were aware of the possibility of Little Gull appearances. The large number (42) reported for 2005 is the result of an individual sighting of over 20 birds at Centennial Beach, Barrie waterfront.

Except for Randall's anecdotal report (pers comm.), I could find no reports of Little Gull for Lake Simcoe for the recent years 2006-2011 and 2013. Many larids, including Little Gulls, took advantage of the phenomenal bait fish run that occurred in 2015. Most sightings were from the west end of the lake and, in particular, Kempenfelt Bay. From the beginning of September to the end of December 2015,

there were more sightings of Little Gull reported for Lake Simcoe than in any previous fall period or since: a total of 61 individual birds was reported. From the fall of 2016 to the fall of 2018, 34 individual birds were reported. The years 2014 to 2018 have shown an overall trend toward more sightings of Little Gull. I put this down to the birdwatching community being more aware of the possibility of Little Gulls.

Little Gulls stage in the spring at both the Niagara River (Bellerby *et al.* 2000) and at Oshawa Second Marsh on the north shore of Lake Ontario from mid-April to early-mid May (Tozer and Richards 1974, Speirs 1985, Ewins and Weseloh 1999, Weseloh *et al.* 2004). However, there are few spring records for Little Gull from Lake Simcoe. The most likely explanation is that spring migration is relatively rapid and Little Gulls simply fly over Lake Simcoe on their way north to their breeding grounds. In spring, adult Little Gulls do not leave Point Pelee and other parts of southern Ontario until mid-May or later and these sudden departures coincide with an increase in temperature and southerly winds (Wormington 2015). If the spring migration of Little Gulls takes them directly from Lake Erie and Lake Ontario to the breeding grounds then, if they stopped on Lake Simcoe even briefly, it is likely that they would be missed. As the ice cover goes out in mid- to late April, not many birders are covering the lake and most would be thinking passerine migration in early May. I visited Kempenfelt Bay on a regular basis from 9 May to 14 July 2019 and did not find any Little Gulls; significantly, I only saw one small flock of 14

Bonaparte's Gulls in breeding plumage during this period. In 1990, there was one adult Little Gull and one first summer bird at the Beaverton Sewage Lagoons from 12 June – 3 July (G. Bennett, R. Pittaway, M. Bain, pers. comm.). Little Gulls may fly directly to James Bay to avail themselves of the hatching of Dipterans (D. Szmyr, pers. comm.). This could account for the paucity of spring records for Lake Simcoe.

In fall migration, Little Gulls spend up to five months in the Lower Great Lakes region; in southern Ontario, the locations include Point Pelee and Long Point on Lake Erie, Hamilton on Lake Ontario and the Niagara River (Peterjohn 1989, 2001, Ewins and Weseloh 1999, Curry 2006, Black and Roy 2010, Wormington 2015). Fall migration of Little Gulls is first evident in southern Ontario at Point Pelee where it starts in mid-July and continues to late December (Wormington 2015). Interestingly, the autumn arrivals at Point Pelee are the result of two waves of migrants along the Great Lakes (Peterjohn 1989, 2001). The first wave shows up at Pelee in association with Bonaparte's Gulls and peaks in the third week of July (Wormington 2015). The second wave becomes apparent in the same region in late September but does not peak until late November (Wormington 2015). East of Point Pelee, records from Long Point Bird Observatory show a peak of just under 250 birds in August (Weseloh 1994) and a second peak of 266 birds in early November (McRae 1989, Weir 1989). Farther east at the Niagara River, the number of reports of Little Gulls builds from August through November and doubles from October to



First winter Little Gull (front) with adult winter Bonaparte's Gull (back). 9 December 2015, Barrie.

Photo: Jean Iron

November (Black and Roy 2010), i.e., the second wave of migrants. Nearby, at Hamilton on Lake Ontario, numbers of Little Gulls peak in late October (Curry 2006).

One must ask, are Lake Simcoe birds part of this second wave? Certainly the dates would seem to match. The very low number of Little Gulls recorded from Lake Simcoe in July (1) and August (1) suggests that the first wave of migrants misses this location. Little Gulls rarely show up on Lake Simcoe until late September. They peak in late October and then decline steadily. The latest December date I found outside of 2015 is

1 December 2016. These autumn departure dates mirror the dates for Point Pelee (Wormington 2015). In 2015, several Little Gulls lingered until January of the following year. If some birds linger until January and returning migrants are evident at Point Pelee in February (Wormington 2015), it would be interesting to speculate how long Little Gulls might linger on Lake Simcoe, if it were not for the freeze up. At Niagara, where the waters remain open all winter, the average last date of autumn migration is 6 February and the average date of first return on spring migration is 27 March (calculated from Bellerby *et al.* 2000).

Thus, even with open water, there is a seven week period when Little Gulls are absent, or not recorded.

Do the Lake Simcoe Little Gulls join the lower Great Lakes birds before heading to the wintering grounds in the eastern Atlantic states from Maine to the Carolinas? A speculative answer to this question might come from observations of Bonaparte's Gulls, a well-known flocking associate of Little Gulls (Sibley 2014). Pittaway (1990) has suggested that Lake Simcoe is part of an important staging and migration corridor for Bonaparte's Gulls stretching from Georgian Bay in Lake Huron, south through Lake Simcoe and Sturgeon Lake, down through Lake Scogog and into Lake Ontario. Pittaway (1990) extrapolated from his estimate of 2,500 Bonaparte's Gulls at Beaverton on 9 September 1990 that there could have been over 10,000 Bonaparte's Gulls on Lake Simcoe at this time as they occur in numbers across the lake. Since Little Gulls are known to associate with Bonaparte's Gulls, it may be that this migration corridor might also apply to them.

Nothing is known about the origins of the Little Gulls that appear in Lake Simcoe in fall. The most consistent and recent North American nestings have been at Churchill, Manitoba, where the species has nested regularly, but not annually, in small numbers at least into the 2000s (McRae 1984, Jehl 2004, Joos 2013). Juvenal plumaged young of the year have also been reported annually, 2013-2018, along the Ontario shore of James Bay from mid-July to early September (C. Friis, pers. comm.). It would be interesting to discover whether these

Little Gulls migrate through southern Ontario and possibly come through Lake Simcoe.

Conclusions

It can be assumed that most Little Gulls will spend the winter on the east coast of North America (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Southern Ontario and the Great Lakes in general, appear to be the centre of the known migration of the Little Gull in North America but much of their life history is still a mystery. Little Gulls are present in spring and fall in Ontario and migrate north in the spring to nesting habitat presumably in the tundra areas of northern Ontario and other provinces. Very small numbers are observed in spring on Lake Simcoe. After breeding in the north, they migrate south to the US mid-Atlantic coast (the Carolinas) but spend considerable time enroute on Lakes Erie and Ontario and the Niagara River. Some spend time on Lake Simcoe during the fall migration and numbers fluctuate from year to year. In autumn 2015, Lake Simcoe had its largest numbers of Little Gulls ever recorded.

To answer the question posed earlier in this paper on the numbers and regularity of Little Gulls on Lake Simcoe, it might at first appear that the large influx (61 birds) in 2015 was a one-off occurrence. It was the largest annual number of Little Gulls ever reported on Lake Simcoe by nearly 50%. On the other hand, since the huge run of Emerald Shiners in the fall of 2015, notable numbers of Little Gulls (at least 25% of the 2015 total) have been noted every year on Lake Simcoe in Kempenfelt Bay. This

strongly suggests that Barrie birders are now paying closer attention to the waterbirds and gulls that visit Kempenfelt Bay in the autumn and especially to the flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls to make sure that Little Gulls do not get missed. Their efforts are showing that Little Gulls do appear to be annual visitors to Lake Simcoe and that 2015 was, indeed, an unusual year for the large numbers reported. Hopefully, this paper will encourage birders to carefully inspect flocks of Bonaparte's for Little Gulls and I would urge birders to report their findings to eBird.

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Jim Nightingale contributed his expert comments on Emerald Shiners and Lake Simcoe fish populations in general. I want to thank the many bird watchers who visited Lake Simcoe during the 2015 gull fest and enjoyed the spectacle. Your presence along the waterfront opened many residents' eyes to the importance of their lakefront, not just for recreation but for Lake Simcoe wildlife.

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