

Northern Gulls Invade Dayton by Dave Dister

On Friday evening, 15 January 1999, I received a phone call from Charlotte Mathena regarding a drake harlequin duck reported from Sidney along the Great Miami River (GMR). Wow, I thought, this is super! I had been planning to bird the Lakefront from Toledo to Cleveland over the weekend, and I could just include a short detour on my way north. Saturday morning, despite the long drive ahead, I decided to take the time to first check the GMR at several spots in downtown Dayton.

Much of the river was still frozen, though much thawing was expected later in the day. My first stop was beneath a low dam, where rapids kept the water open. I scanned the gulls on a nearby icy bar, and a very large pale bird came into view. It was uniformly whitish over most of its plumage—was it a glaucous gull? Then I noticed light-brown flecking overall—yes, a first-winter glaucous gull! A nearby herring gull was approximately the same size, so it clearly wasn't an immature Iceland gull. Wow! As far as I knew, a glaucous gull had never been seen in the Dayton area.

Excited, I drove next to a point half a mile downstream, where the Mad River empties into the GMR. More gulls were there, among them a dark-winged individual. It was very large, with a very black back and wings at rest, and pink legs...it had to be a great black-backed gull, and an adult at that! This is too much, I thought, and looked around for other birders, but there was no one nearby. As I continued to scan to my left, two more large pale gulls were evident at the edge of the ice—two more first-winter glaucous gulls! I couldn't believe it...I was in downtown Dayton, not the Maumee River rapids in Toledo!

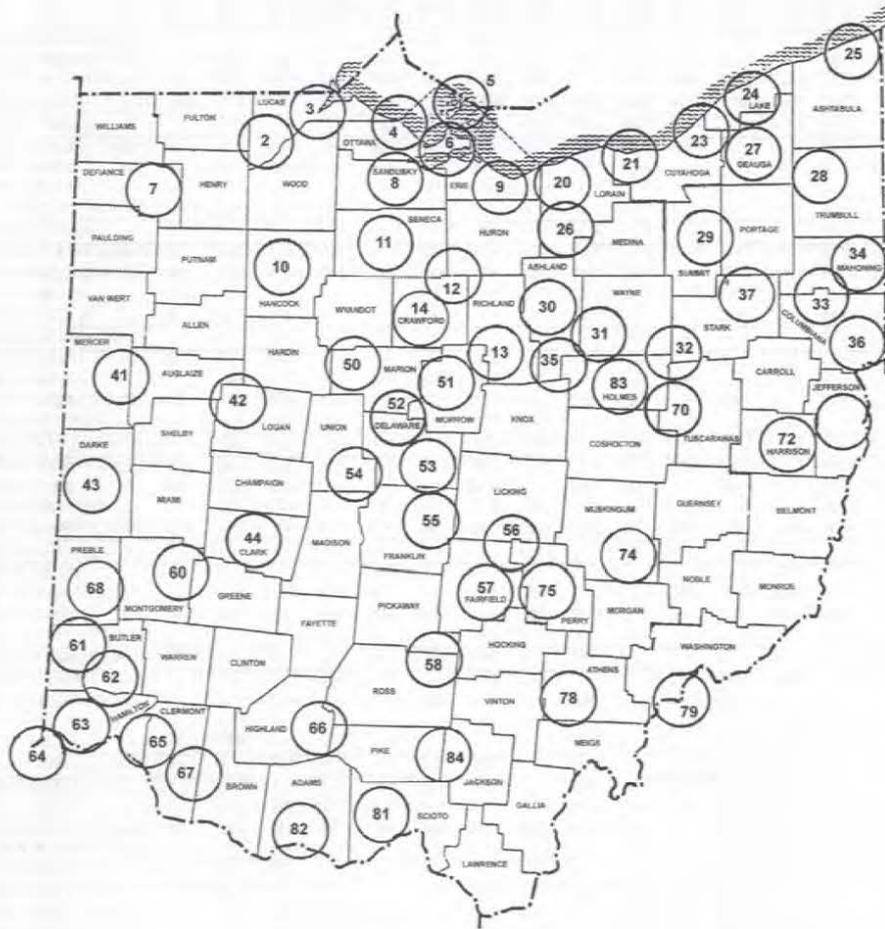
After checking a few spots further downstream, I drove home and made a flurry of mostly ineffective phone calls. Frustrated, I decided everyone was in Sidney checking out the harlequin duck. They would have wanted to know about an unprecedented accidental showing of four northern gulls in southwest Ohio, I was sure. I left the area, somewhat reluctantly heading north to bird the Lakefront via Sidney, where I located the stunning harlequin duck. After an underwhelming birding trip to Lake Erie, I called Charlotte when I got back to Dayton. Fortunately, she and several others got the word in time to see the great black-backed and two of the three glaucous gulls.

The great black-backed gull *Larus marinus* and the glaucous gull *Larus hyperboreus* are considered accidental visitors away from the Ohio shores of Lake Erie (Peterjohn 1989). There are approximately four records of single glaucous gulls in central and southern Ohio prior to this sighting (here I regard US 30 and south as representing central and southern Ohio). Within this same area, there are approximately 22 sightings of great black-backed gulls, most of which were of single birds. In relative frequency, therefore, the great black-backed is five times more likely to be seen than the glaucous gull in the central and southern counties.

The northern gull invasion of the century in southwest Ohio may not easily be eclipsed, especially in light of proposed development along the GMR in downtown Dayton and elsewhere along urban riverfronts. The paddleboat and casino mentality has no patience with esthetics and critical winter staging areas for wayward larids. Gravel and sand bars are considered wastelands by all too many urbanites inhabiting such riparian areas. If they only knew what they were missing...

REFERENCE

Peterjohn, B. 1989. *The Birds of Ohio*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
See Don Burton's article in Vol 22, No 2, last winter's *The Ohio Cardinal*, for a description of unusual weather conditions that may have influenced these sightings. —Ed.



The 1999-2000 Christmas Bird Count areas. Numbers within circles correspond to count numbers in the preceding article. The circle without a number indicates the Steubenville count from which we received no report.