

THE GREAT GULL INVASION

Inland Great Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls, Winter 2014–15

By John P. Herman

Great Black-backed Gulls (GBBG) were rare Ohio winter visitors to Lake Erie during the late nineteenth century (Wheaton 1882), with a specimen being obtained near the city of Lorain on 22 Dec 1888 (Jones 1903) which was preserved at the Oberlin College museum. The Reverend W.F. Henninger observed a GBBG along the Scioto River in **Pike** on 21 Mar 1900 (Henninger 1902). **Franklin** recorded its first GBBG on the OSU campus at the Olentangy River on 16 Dec 1907 (Jones 1908). There is a 03 Mar 1928 record of a GBBG in the Toledo area which is unclear about the specific location (Mayfield 1943). Dr. Milton B. Trautman observed a second-winter GBBG at Buckeye Lake, **Fairfield**, just north of Journal Island on 19 Nov 1933 (Troutman 1940). **Lucas** had its first GBBG on 18 Feb 1934 along the Maumee River southwest of Waterville (Campbell 1940), while the Cleveland area saw its first GBBG at Lakewood on 29 Feb 1936 (Kendeigh 1936). Arthur B. Williams stated in the *Cleveland Bird Calendar*, “there seems to have been quite an invasion of the region by these large gulls of the north this winter”, with a peak count of 21 seen on 26 Jan 1945 at Cleveland (Williams 1945). The first Akron area GBBG was observed on 08 Feb 1959 at Summit Lake (Newman 1959). Grand Lake St. Marys, **Auglaize/Mercer**, had three GBBGs on 05 Nov 1952 and one on 25 Feb 1972. Three were recorded at C.J. Brown Reservoir, **Clark**, from 03 to 05 May 1979 (eBird).

In the 1960s, Great Black-backed Gull populations increased significantly (Devos 1964), resulting in midwinter concentrations being common by the end of the decade, including 350 at Toledo in Dec 1967 (Campbell 1968). The Cleveland area recorded its first GBBG numbers of more than one hundred on 21 Jan 1972, when 156 were at Lorain (Hocevar 1972). A decade later, at least 640 GBBGs were observed at Lorain on 08 Feb 1983 (Hannikman 1983). Great black-backed gull populations showed slight increases among five-year periods from 1951–1990, with a 3.3-fold increase from 1986–1990 to 1991–1995 (Tyson, *et al.* 1999). During the 1990s, concentrations of 800 to 1000 GBBGs were observed along Lake Erie (Peterjohn 2001). On 14 Jan 2003, 1300 were seen at Lorain and during Jan 2004, at least 1500 GBBGs were observed at Cleveland (Whan 2003, Whan 2004). On 20 Jan 2005, 1960 adult GBBGs were observed in **Cuyahoga**

and **Lorain** combined (Fazio 2005). The 2000 or more at Cedar Point, **Erie**, on 03 Jan 1998 is probably the record high count (Whan 1998).

An early record of a GBBG in unglaciated Ohio came from Tappan Lake, **Harrison**, on 17 May 1998 (Schlabach 1998). A first-cycle GBBG was found at Gallipolis, **Gallia**, on 27 Feb 2004, for a rare southeastern Ohio record (Whan 2004). Another southeastern sighting was of 15 GBBGs at Pike Island Lock and Dam, **Belmont**, on 13 Feb 2015 (Scott Pendleton, pers. comm.). A GBBG at Deer Creek SP, **Pickaway**, on 04 Feb 2007, was the first for south-central Ohio (Fazio 2007) since Henninger’s **Pike** record in 1900. The first southwestern Ohio record was at Dayton on 16 Jan 1999 (Brock 1999). As of 2001, this Dayton GBBG “provided the only report from southern Ohio” (Peterjohn 2001). Now there are at least twenty GBBG records from that half of the state.

Great Black-backed gulls remained rare visitors to Ohio inland locations until the winter of 2012–13. (For the purpose of this paper, “inland” refers to locations at least five miles south of Lake Erie. Also, “winter” includes the months of Dec through Mar.) On 30 Dec 2001, 41 GBBGs were observed at Oberlin Reservoir, **Lorain**, twelve miles south of the lake, and 26 were there on 04 Jan 2002 (Whan 2002). During the winter of 2012–13, GBBGs were observed in the inland counties of **Allen**, **Defiance**, **Franklin**, **Hancock**, and **Wyandot** (Caldwell 2013). In the winter of 2013–14, inland GBBGs were observed in **Belmont**, **Clermont**, **Delaware**, **Franklin**, **Hamilton**, **Hancock**, **Jefferson**, **Montgomery**, **Stark**, **Tuscarawas**, and **Wood** (Caldwell 2014).

During the winter of 2014–15, at least 354 Great Black-backed Gulls were observed at Ohio inland locations. Many of these gulls were seen at or near county landfills, though surely not all landfills were checked during the season. Thirty-eight percent of the total number of inland GBBGs were observed near the Schroyer ball fields on the outskirts of Canton, **Stark**. The following is a list of the 18 Ohio inland counties with records during Feb 2015 and the number of GBBGs seen in each: **Belmont** (15), **Butler** (2), **Clermont** (3), **Crawford** (12), **Defiance** (2), **Franklin** (2), **Jefferson** (2), **Licking** (3), **Montgomery** (11), **Muskingum** (1), **Pickaway** (1), **Richland** (6), **Seneca** (18), **Stark** (136), **Summit** (20), **Tuscarawas** (47), **Washington** (1),

and **Wood** (4). **Crawford, Knox**, and **Paulding** had their first ever GBBG in early 2015, and **Muskingum** had its second record.

Great black-backed gulls were also recorded at inland locations in counties that border Lake Erie. Farnsworth MP, near Waterville, **Lucas**, had four GBBGs in Jan and Mar. The **Lorain** regional airport, 19 miles south of the lake, had two GBBGs on 08 Feb. Walsh Park, an inland **Sandusky** location, had a GBBG on 24 Feb. The **Erie** landfill had 11 GBBGs on 11 Jan 2015, and Rocky River Reservation, **Cuyahoga**, had a GBBG on 19 Feb.

The 2014–15 inland movement of GBBGs started in Dec, with a GBBG seen at Alum Creek reservoir, **Delaware**, on 10 Dec, followed by one at Findlay Reservoirs on 19 Dec, and an immature seen 30 Dec at Eastwood MP, **Montgomery**. It appears the GBBG invasion continued through early Mar with several peak counts recorded then. Seven GBBGs were seen near Dover, **Tuscarawas**, on 26 Feb, at least 40 there on 28 Feb (C. Caldwell, pers. comm.), and 23 on 06 Mar. Thirty-four GBBGs were observed at the **Seneca** landfill on 06 Mar, and 18 were recorded there on 27 Feb (eBird; H. Thomas Bartlett, pers. comm.). GBBGs were seen at Silver Lake, **Summit**, during the winter of 2014–15, with a probable total there of 20, including immatures (Larry Rosche, pers. comm.). Up to 15 GBBGs were at the Chapel Hill Mall, **Summit**, parking lot during the coldest portion of the winter of 2014–15. The peak count of GBBGs along the Great Miami River at Dayton was 11 on 23 Feb (eBird). At least 14 GBBGs were recorded at the **Richland** landfill in Butler Township during the period; the only previous **Richland** records were of single gulls in Dec 1983, from Dec 1994 to Jan 1995, and in Jan 2012.

Almost 40 inland counties had records of GBBGs before this winter. The maps on the right show the counties which hosted GBBGs before the winter of 2014–15 and during it.

Curiously, Great Black-backed Gulls were seen at eight inland counties during Jan and Mar 2015, but not in Feb. Five inland counties had GBBG records only in Mar: in **Delaware** at Alum Creek reservoir, two on 01 Mar; in **Warren** at Caesar Creek, a single gull on 09 Mar; at Buck Creek in **Clark**, a single on 24 Mar; at the **Paulding** reservoir, one on 25 Mar; and at Kokosing lake in **Knox**, an adult on 29–31 Mar (eBird).

This inland invasion of GBBGs was not limited to Ohio. Forty-two GBBGs were seen on 22 Feb 2015 at the Pike Island dam, West Virginia,

across the Ohio River from Yorkville, **Belmont**; some of them crossed to the Ohio side (eBird). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania had 67 GBBGs on 28 Feb. Arkansas had its first ever GBBG in Jan 2015. Kentucky had at least seven GBBGs during the winter of 2014–15; that state has at least 46 records all-time (Palmer-Ball, Jr. 2002; Brainard Palmer-Ball, Jr., pers. comm.). Colorado, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Tennessee each had at least one GBBG the winter of 2014–15, and Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska each had at least two (eBird).

Glaucous Gulls (GLGU) were not recorded in Ohio during the nineteenth century. What seems to be Ohio's first GLGU was observed near Sandusky, **Erie**, from 20 to 23 Mar 1902 (Moseley 1912). Northeast Ohio's first GLGU was

Great Black-backed Gull, pre 2014–15



Great Black-backed Gull, winter 2014–15



recorded at Ashtabula on 22 Mar 1933 (Hicks 1936). The Toledo area's first GLGU was on the Maumee River on 25 Feb 1934 (Stuckey 2006). Glaucous gull sightings increased with those of all gulls during the 1960s and 1970s. During sub-average temperature winters, 10 to 20 GLGUs may often be seen at hot-water locations along the Lake Erie shore.

Prior to 2011, GLGUs were accidental inland Ohio visitors. Ohio's first inland GLGU was recorded at Grand Lake St. Marys, *Auglaize/Mercer*, on 18 Jan 1958 (Clark and Sipe 1970). Single GLGUs were observed at Summit Lake, *Summit*, on 8-9 Feb 1959 and 21 Feb 1981 (Newman 1959, Rosche 2004), and two were there on 18 Feb 1979 (Hannikman 1979). Four GLGUs were observed at Summit Lake between 20 and 26 Feb 1978 (Hannikman 1978). An adult male GLGU was collected by John Ruthven at the Lorain city dump on 22 Feb 1964 (Newman 1964). A Glaucous Gull was reported at Indian Lake, *Logan*, during a CBC on 29 Dec 1965. Other inland records of single GLGUs are the only *Seneca* sighting prior to the winter of 2014-15, from 06 to 10 Apr 1981 at Beaver Creek reservoir (Bartlett 1989); at Lake Rockwell, *Portage*, on 01 Jan 1995 (Harlan 1995), and at Kokosing Lake, *Knox*, on 10 Jan 1998 (Schlabach, R. 1998). Three Glaucous Gulls at Dayton on 16 Jan 1999 provided the first *Montgomery* record (Brock 1999).

During Jan and Feb 2015, at least 40 GLGUs were observed at fourteen Ohio inland locations. The initial 2015 Ohio inland GLGUs occurred on 11 Jan at both Farnsworth MP, *Lucas*, and at the *Erie* landfill, and were followed by one in *Montgomery* on 14 Jan (eBird). The following is a list of the inland counties and the number of GLGUs seen in each during Jan and Feb 2015, according to eBird data: *Belmont* (2), *Clermont* (1), *Crawford* (1), *Defiance* (3), *Delaware* (1), *Franklin* (2), *Hancock* (2), *Henry* (1), *Montgomery* (2), *Seneca* (1), *Stark* (6), and *Tuscarawas* (4). Glaucous gulls observed at inland locations in counties bordering Lake Erie were a single at the *Erie* landfill on 11 Jan; up to four on several dates along the Maumee River between Grand Rapids and Farnsworth MP (on the *Lucas/Wood* border), and one observed at several locations a mile or more up the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland throughout the season. The *Crawford* bird was the first ever for the county, and *Clermont*, *Seneca* and *Tuscarawas* had their second all-time records.

Almost 30 inland counties had records of GLGUs before this winter, as did inland sites in some

of the Lake Erie counties as well. The maps below show the counties which hosted GLGUs before the winter of 2014-15 and during it.

Glaucous Gull, pre 2014-15



Glaucous Gull, winter 2014-15



The winter of 2014-15, GLGUs were seen at multiple locations away from the Great Lakes. Pittsburgh had six GLGUs on 06 Mar (eBird). Glaucous Gulls were also recorded in Jan and Feb 2015 at states south and west of Ohio. Arkansas and New Mexico each recorded one GLGU, South Dakota and Utah each had two, three were in each of Kentucky and West Virginia, at least seven were in Colorado, Kansas had at least 11, and 16 or more were seen in Nebraska (eBird).

The winter of 2014-15 witnessed a historic number of Great Black-backed and Glaucous gulls at Ohio inland locations. The 136 GBBGs at the **Stark** location were an amazing sight. Both GBBGs and GLGUs were seen throughout Ohio, all the way south to the Ohio River and in the unglaciated areas of the state as well. The 10-year average numbers of GBBGs and GLGUs for inland Ohio before this past winter are 3.1 and 4.4, respectively. If the numbers for the winters of 2012-13 and 2013-14, when at least 21 GBBGs and 16 GLGUs were reported, are deleted, the average drops to 1.25 for GBBG and 2.8 for GLGU.

Chip Weseloh, a colonial waterbird specialist now retired from the Canadian Wildlife Service, proposed one hypothesis about the inland movement of GBBGs and GLGUs during the winter of 2014-15. He attributes it to the reduction in the amount of open water at hot-water locations along Lake Erie. The power plant at East 72nd Street, Cleveland, went to reduced output a couple of years ago, and only operated intermittently this past winter (Craig Caldwell, pers. comm.). The Eastlake, **Lake**, plant has also been on reduced output for a year or two and is slated for closing. So, previous to three years ago, there were Ohio hot-water locations along Lake Erie at Bayshore, near Toledo; in Avon Lake, **Lorain**; and those in Cleveland and Eastlake. With Lake Erie almost entirely ice-covered, and half of the power plants barely operating, the gulls apparently roamed far and wide to find open water.

Whatever the reasons, the winter of 2014-15 produced some unique gull watching at Ohio inland locations. By 01 Apr, most of the GBBGs and GLGUs had moved back to Lake Erie, though a GBBG was at the Findlay Reservoirs on 22 Apr and a GLGU remaining at Indian Lake SP, **Logan**, on 23 Apr.

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