

Dry land nesting of Ring-billed Gull in Simcoe County

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On the afternoon of 22 June 2013, I noticed a large flock of very vocal adult Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) circling over a dry weeded field near the corner of County Road 88 and S.R. 10 of Bradford-West Gwillimbury in Simcoe County. I parked nearby and was surprised to find a sizable colony of nesting gulls (Figs. 1 and 2). The purpose of this short note is to document the details of this unusual sighting.

The colony was located on the eastern edge of a weeded field just north of a CIBC Bank parking lot and west of an extended Walmart parking lot. It was bounded by S.R. 10 on the west

Figure 1. An adult Ring-billed Gull at a late season abandoned egg/nest, 23 June.

Photo: Tim Antonio

side of the bank parking lot. A small storm-water pond and the eastern edge of a Petro-Canada Station were at the southern limit of the colony. The entrance road to the Walmart was on the eastern boundary and an earthen berm was to the north.

The only body of water nearby was the small storm-water pond to the south of the colony where several adults and three chicks were feeding/swimming. There was a broken wire fence line which partially separated the colony from the bank parking lot on the south side, but was not intact enough to provide any protection from predators. The colony itself extended west from the Walmart access road approximately 100 m to an area of denser vegetation and north approximately 60 m to where the earthen berm was located. The site was sparsely vegetated with Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), and patches of Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*) and some grasses. The nests seemed to be concealed mostly among the Coltsfoot patches. The land appeared to have been owned by a commercial developer and seemed likely to be built upon at a future date.

Figure 2. A telephoto view of the dry land Ring-billed Gull colony.
Photo: Tim Antonio





Initially I estimated over 200 birds but was only able to observe 8–10 occupied nests, although there were at least that many flightless chicks wandering among the adult birds (Figs. 3 and 4). When I returned to the colony the next morning, to make a more accurate census, I counted at least 300 adult birds and 30 nests with incubating birds, as well as 40 chicks in various stages of development. One recently hatched chick was found dead in the bank parking lot as well. There were also four adult Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) perched on the earthen berm at the northern edge of the colony.

This nesting site was unusual due to the lack of any local large water bodies and the close proximity of a very busy commercial development. Cook's Bay on Lake Simcoe is at least 12 km northeast as the gull flies, and the West Holland River is half that distance to the east. There were two larger storm water ponds within 1–1.5 km of the site and there were large tilled fields frequented by large flocks of gulls. In addition, there were quite a few nearby fast-food establishments, so there was a ready food supply.

Figure 3. A newly hatched Ring-billed Gull chick.

Photo: Tim Antonio



Figure 4. Three Ring-billed Gull chicks about three weeks old.

Photo: Tim Antonio

Eds. Note:

David Hussell advised us that a dry land colony of Ring-billed Gulls existed for several years at the Townsend sewage lagoons. It was located on the intersection of berms separating the four lagoons. In that case, however, there was limited water adjacent to the site.

The choice of this "dry land" nesting is a good example of the adaptability and opportunism of Ring-billed Gulls in choosing a breeding site, especially in such a vulnerable location. It seems that this site might also be subject to easy predation because it was so visible and open. In fact, on one return visit to the colony, I observed adult gulls strafing a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicianis*) which was dining on an immature gull in the midst of the colony. It also represents an interesting addition to the breeding avifauna of the Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury since the literature does not indicate any previous colonies in the area.

Thanks to Tim Antonio for his documenting photographs.

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