

## *Letters to the Editors*

### **California Gull**

I enjoyed reading the very well written Photo Quiz by Willie D'Anna in the April issue of *Ontario Birds* (18: 48–51). I feel one statement made by the writer needs some additional comment. D'Anna, referring to aberrant Herring Gull-type birds, states "one character I have never seen on these birds, and I suspect I never will, is the unique bill pattern of the adult winter California Gull." In early April 2000, I observed an aberrant gull on the Niagara River with an identical bill pattern to that of an adult winter California Gull. The bird's bill pattern, mantle, irid and leg color were typical of an adult California Gull. However, structural difference and large size (exceeding *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) combined with slate gray primary tips eliminated California Gull. The bird observed was so unique that it would be impossible to mistake it for either a Herring Gull or California after careful observation.

Except for the one occasion, I have never seen the unique bill pattern on any bird that could not be identified as a California Gull. However, one final note of caution on bill patterns is due. Many third-year Herring show dusky subterminal markings on the anterior side of the red spot near the tip. The dusky

markings are most extensive on the lower mandible but often extend to the upper mandible, creating the illusion of a band. This pattern is also observed on a small minority of adult winter Herring Gulls. At close range, this pattern is never as thin, nor as clearly and sharply defined as on California Gull. Also, the subterminal markings on Herring Gull are usually grayer and only rarely extend to the top of the upper mandible as shown by California Gull. When viewed at a distance, it becomes difficult to separate the bill pattern of California Gull from some Herring Gulls. I suspect that similar bill patterns could exist on some adult Thayer's Gulls, although never observed by myself. Bill pattern is an excellent field mark for identifying adult winter California Gulls. However, a combination of characteristics such as leg, mantle, and irid color, primary pattern, shape and size, must be used to identify all out-of-range California Gulls.

Brendan Klick  
48 Roycroft Blvd.  
Amherst, NY 14226

#### **Willie D'Anna comments:**

I want to thank Brendan Klick for his comments about bill pattern and identifying adult California Gulls in

winter. I heartily endorse his view that out-of-range California Gulls (such as those found in Ontario) should only be identified with a combination of characters. Like Brendan, I have observed aberrant gulls on the Niagara River that appeared in many respects to be like a California Gull but upon closer inspection failed to pass the whole test. Not surprisingly, these gulls have sometimes been misidentified as California Gulls by unwitting birders. In my article, I described many of the field marks that have been observed on these aberrant gulls which are known characters for California Gull. In hindsight, my statement that the bill pattern of adult winter California Gulls was unique was an unfortunate choice of words. Although I have not yet observed this mark on an aberrant gull, the combination of black and red on the bill is frequent enough in Herring Gulls that it stands to reason that an aberrant gull might show something similar. As for Brendan's odd gull, it is yet another example of the perplexing variability shown by the large gulls. The bird would seem to me to be unidentifiable. With so many characters that are a match for California Gull, it is a fine example of the need for great caution when identifying this rarity in Ontario.

Willie D'Anna  
2257 Cayuga Drive Extension  
Niagara Falls, NY 14304

## **Robin Behaviour**

On 11 May 2000, I watched an American Robin fly across our yard from a nest next door, carrying a large item which it dropped in the dense vegetation of my fern garden. Presuming that it was an eggshell (albeit, a big one), indicating that its young had hatched, I went over to have a look. To my surprise, it was the cold but still flexible corpse of a nestling. There was physical injury (and bleeding) at the head and back, but I think that resulted from the female carrying the body in its beak. The adult bird flew strongly and normally, which is one reason that I presumed it was carrying an eggshell. Flying over 20 metres with the  $\pm 20$  gram body of a young in its beak was not something I would have expected, however.

I always assumed a dead young was either pushed or pulled out of a nest, and then was dragged away from beneath by whatever scavenger came along. I have certainly found dead robin nestlings beneath nests before. That the adult (the female) would carry the body off was quite a surprise, let alone that it would carry the body so far with so little apparent difficulty.

Perhaps this is a common occurrence, but it's a new one to me. Ever heard of or seen such a thing?

Dan Brunton  
216 Lincoln Heights Road  
Ottawa, Ontario K2B 8A8

**Ron Tozer comments:**

An adult bird removing a dead young from its nest and then transporting the corpse a significant distance away may occur regularly, but it certainly appears to be rarely observed or reported, especially among passerines. I am aware of two other occurrences. Dan Strickland (pers. comm.) observed a Gray Jay remove a dead young from the nest and carry it in flight for at least 15 metres before disappearing from view among the trees. It was Dan's only observation of this behaviour during nearly 35 years of studying Gray Jay breeding biology in Algonquin Provincial Park. Patricia Rossi (BIRDCHAT, 9 August 2000) reported that a male Northern Mockingbird dropped a dead nestling from its nest, and then dragged the corpse across a street in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

**Oshawa Guide Update**

Since the publishing of OFO Bird Finding Guide # 7 (*Ontario Birds* 17: 133–151), dealing with Second Marsh Wildlife Area and McLaughlin Bay Wildlife Reserve, a number of new records have become known. While some are newly established sightings, most are previously published and unpublished records that were overlooked by the author. I am indebted to those who have made

their records known to me, and especially to Tyler Hoar who has shared his vast database for Darlington Provincial Park.

While the new records do not change the overall list for the Regional Municipality of Durham, I had incorrectly published the Regional list as totalling 349 species, when in fact it stands at 353. The new records do change the Bird Finding Guide breeding bird list from 98 to 101 species, with the addition of Ring-billed Gull, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Orchard Oriole.

The Guide area species total goes from 276 to 288, with the following additions: Western Grebe, Barrow's Goldeneye, Northern Bobwhite, Parasitic Jaeger, Thayer's Gull, Ivory Gull, Great Gray Owl, Common Raven, Carolina Wren, Bohemian Waxwing, Worm-eating Warbler, and Summer Tanager. Please continue to forward your records from this area to the author.

Finally, websites about Second Marsh <[www.secondmarsh.com](http://www.secondmarsh.com)> and McLaughlin Bay Wildlife Reserve <[www.gmcanada.com](http://www.gmcanada.com)> are now on-line.

Jim Richards  
14 Centre Street  
Orono, Ontario L0B 1M0