

## Articles

### Heermann's Gull in Toronto: First For Ontario

Bob Yukich

On the afternoon of 14 November 1999 at 1300h, while making his rounds as an employee of the Toronto Public Works Department, Bruce Massey noticed a very dark gull in with several Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) at one of the city's service yards on Eastern Avenue in Toronto. He did not recognize the bird. Upon returning home, he consulted his field guide and tentatively identified it as a first year Heermann's Gull (*L. heermanni*). He reported his find to Marcel Gahbauer, and together they looked for it again later that day, but without success. It was subsequently reported to the Toronto rare bird hotline. Exercising caution, the hotline coordinator described the bird as "an unusual dark brown gull" that had been seen near the Leslie Street Spit. Apparently, not many birders took notice. It was not reported again until 28 November, when Margaret Allen and Ted Reid observed it while they were out for a walk at Ashbridge's Bay, which is just east of the first site. After consulting several field guides, they also identified it as a Heermann's Gull. Neither of them was aware of the previous sighting. Again, it was reported to the Toronto rare bird

hotline, and this time it went out as a "possible Heermann's Gull in first basic plumage", seen at Ashbridge's Bay.

That same evening, after listening to the hotline, Craig McLauchlan decided that he would look for the bird the next day. On 29 November at about 1000h, he arrived at Ashbridge's Bay along with Beverly Rellin and Rob Miller. After searching for the gull for 25 minutes without any luck, they decided to leave. They returned at 1300h to try again. As Craig was getting out of his car, he immediately noticed a dark brown gull sitting on the railing at the boat launch. He was able to get quite close to the bird, as it showed little fear. Everything he noted on the gull matched a first basic Heermann's Gull perfectly. He then got his camera and began taking photographs, staying back so as not to frighten the bird off. Next, he made a phone call to alert the birding community. That afternoon, many birders arrived, but unfortunately, the gull had flown off after Craig had watched it for about 15 minutes. It was not seen again that day. Craig had his photographs developed immediately, and that evening, three of them were posted on Rob Miller's website.



Figure 1: First basic Heermann's Gull in parking lot on Cherry Street, Toronto, 1 December 1999. Photo by *Craig McLaughlan*.

The following morning, on 30 November, after seeing Craig's photos on the internet, I decided to go directly to Ashbridge's Bay to try to see this bird. The gull in the photographs, although somewhat distant, clearly looked as if it could be a Heermann's Gull.

Upon my arrival at Ashbridge's Bay at 1000h, I was greeted by a multitude of birders. It was sunny and cold, about  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The gull had not been seen all morning. Birders arrived throughout the day, but the gull did not reappear. At about 1400h, after a 4 hour vigil, my patience ran out and I decided to leave. I was travelling by bicycle, so I rode home in a westerly direction along the waterfront, checking out

all gull flocks en route. About an hour later, after several diversions, I arrived at the Cherry Street ship canal. This has always been a good spot for gulls in winter.

It was now 1500h. The weather was clear and cold, about  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and there was a light southeast wind. The sun was behind me, and as I scanned below and to the east with my binoculars, I noticed a very dark small gull. It was amongst a small group of Ring-billed Gulls, Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. marinus*) that were resting on the gravel near the base of the salt piles on the south side of the canal. I immediately knew that this was the bird. I made the following observations from a distance of 200 m to 50 m,

using a hand-held Kowa scope with a 27x and a 40x eyepiece. Lighting conditions were very good, with the bird in bright sunlight. I watched it for about 45 minutes.

The gull's plumage was a smooth, solid chocolate brown in colour. I saw it briefly with its wings raised, but not in flight. On a later visit I saw it once in flight. It had fairly quick, jerky wingbeats typical of a small gull. It showed no pale colouring anywhere other than on its bill. When it stood up, I could see the dark blackish-brown legs. They appeared relatively longer than those of a nearby Ring-billed Gull, and were the same thickness as the latter's. The wing coverts were slightly paler brown in contrast to the rest of the plumage. They were also quite worn, lacking the pale fringes seen in fresh juvenal plumage. I did not see any other feather wear on this bird. Later, in early January, I did notice that the scapulars as well as some of the contour plumage had become worn, and that the tips of the primaries and tail feathers were beginning to show some wear.

The flight feathers were a dark blackish brown, darker than the rest of the plumage. The wingtips extended well beyond the tail, giving it an attenuated appearance. The crown was smoothly rounded and the forehead was somewhat sloping. During later visits, the crown variably appeared rounded or flattish. The eye was dark, and it had a dark orbital ring (eye crescents). On subsequent visits, these

eye crescents would at times appear whitish. The eyelid, visible as it slept, was also whitish. The bill was longish, relatively slender, and somewhat pointed. By comparison, the other gulls' bills appeared blunter. The gentle curve towards the tip of the upper mandible gave the bill tip a slightly droopy appearance. There was only a slight swelling at the gonys. The basal two-thirds of the bill variably appeared pinkish flesh or yellowish flesh, depending on the angle of light. The extreme base of the bill was slightly duskier. There was an evenly demarcated dark tip to the bill, extending farther back on the mandible than on the maxilla, but not as sharply demarcated on the mandible. During a later visit, I noted that its mouth lining was pink.

Many of the above features gave this gull a delicate, more elegant look. In a brief comparison, it appeared slightly larger than a nearby Ring-billed Gull. However, its darker colouring combined with a more delicate jizz gave it an overall smaller appearance. I was now certain that it was a Heermann's Gull. The only other similar species is the Gray Gull (*L. modestus*) from South America. The latter species could be ruled out by its all dark bill in first basic plumage, as well as other, structural differences.

When I had completed my observations, I reported my find from a pay phone, then returned home. Several birders arrived at the



Figure 2: Heermann's Gull at Polson Street, Toronto, 19 February 2000. Note light colour on throat indicating molt. Photo by *Sam Barone*.

ship canal before dusk, but the bird had once again disappeared, probably having gone to roost. However, the next morning it returned, and no one was disappointed. Throngs of birders got as close as one metre from this spectacular gull as it fed voraciously on garbage that was being dumped at the incinerating site at the corner of Cherry Street and Unwin Avenue. It was even accepting handouts from those eager to get close-up photographs.

Once its preferred haunts were known, the Heermann's Gull became very easy to find. Throughout the weeks that followed, it was easily seen at various locations along Cherry Street, almost always in the company of other gulls. During a short period in

December when it had temporarily disappeared, one person reported seeing it briefly in a field at Jane Street and Cunningham Drive, near a major landfill site in the city of Vaughan, just north of Toronto. On 23 February, the Heermann's Gull was observed by several birders at LaSalle Park Marina in Burlington, and was not found in Toronto during that time. However, as of this writing in March 2000, it is still being seen regularly in Toronto in a parking lot at the end of Polson Street, which runs west off Cherry Street.

### **Discussion**

Heermann's Gull breeds along the northwest coast of Mexico south to Nayarit, with isolated breeding reports from coastal southern

California. After breeding, it disperses as far south as the Pacific coast of Guatemala and as far north as the coast of southern British Columbia (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). In the United States, Heermann's Gull is accidental inland, and is an exceptional rarity even in the west. There are inland records from Oregon and Wyoming south to California and east to Texas and Oklahoma, as well as one for southeastern Alaska (American Ornithologists' Union 1998).

There is at least one previous record for eastern North America, that of a third year bird present at Lake St. Clair in Macomb County, Michigan from 26 August to early December 1979 (Tessen 1980). Probably the same individual (considered at the time to be a different bird) was observed in Lorain, Ohio on Lake Erie from 12 February to 12 March 1980 (Kleen 1980a, 1980b). Unaware of the Michigan sighting, the then Ohio regional editor for *American Birds* suggested it might be the first record for eastern North America (Kleen 1980a). It was described as a second year bird (Kleen 1980a), but photographs of the gull on page 783 in the next issue of *American Birds* (Kleen 1980b) clearly indicate it was a third year bird or older.

The Heermann's Gull returned again to Macomb County, Michigan from 24 October into November

1980 (Tessen 1981). It was back again in Lorain, Ohio on 20 December 1980 and was seen intermittently there throughout the winter period (Peterjohn 1981). It was last observed at Metrobeach on Lake St. Clair in Macomb County, Michigan from 12 October to 1 November 1981 (Tessen 1982). There was no overlap in dates of occurrence for any of the Michigan and Ohio sightings from 1979 to 1981. It seems likely that only one bird was involved in all of these observations, making Toronto's the second, as well as the most easterly, record of Heermann's Gull in eastern North America.

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Bob Yukich, 39 Lincoln Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6P 1M7