

Notes

Ontario's Second Ross' Gull

by
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On 11 December 1990 an adult Ross' Gull in winter plumage was discovered on the beach at Turkey Point, Norfolk County, establishing the second record for Ontario.

The bird was first seen by the writer at 0900h as it fed along the shoreline with a flock of 15 Bonaparte's Gulls near the base of Ferris Street and Ordnance Avenue, in the village of Turkey Point. Within minutes, Jim Dowell, Barry Jones, John Olmsted and Bill Smith, who were birding nearby, also saw the gull and Smith managed to take a number of photographs. I then left to phone various birders while the others remained to watch the gull.

When I returned at 0925h the others said that the bird had moved to a nearby sandbar and rested briefly, then flew south directly out over Lake Erie and out of view. Local birders began to arrive and all of us began scanning the distant gulls that were feeding about 1 km offshore. At 0940h I saw the bird at long range but was unable to show it satisfactorily to anyone else before I lost it in the distance. To obtain a better view of the distant gulls, we moved about 1 km south to the Basin Street Marina. At 1000h Jon McCracken spotted it much closer as it flew past the marina, about 75 m away, from the direction of the Turkey Point marsh then out over Lake Erie again. At this point Bev

Collier, McCracken, Don Sutherland, Anne Marie Taylor, Deidra Skuce, and Susy Skuce also saw the bird. To my knowledge, this was the final sighting of the Ross' Gull despite many people searching for it on subsequent days.

While the photographs depict the general appearance of the bird, a few points are worth noting. The upper surface of the swimming bird stood out as being very pale when compared with the adjacent Bonaparte's Gulls. While much confusing discussion has occurred in the literature about the degree of pink colouration on this species, of the 15 or so different individuals I have observed in breeding season, this bird was far and away the pinkest I have ever seen. In addition to pink on the breast and belly, this bird displayed pink on the face, upper surface of the tail and rump. There was dark smudging around the eye, and what appeared to be traces of dark feathering where the neck collar would be on one side of the neck. The underwing colour was medium grey, clearly much darker than the upper surface but not nearly as dark as a Little Gull.

While I am confident that the last sighting of the bird was on 11 December at 1000h, I am not as certain that the bird had not been present earlier. A resident of Turkey Point with an interest in birds spoke

with several of us just after the last sighting and asked if we were looking for the "arctic gull". At this point, he had not talked to any of the birders present. He described seeing a strange gull on 10 December and that some hunters had also seen it on 8 December. While the details provided at the scene and later in writing are not convincing or consistent with each other, I fail to understand how he came up with "arctic gull" out of the blue either. In the week prior to the sighting, Turkey Point received regular coverage since there was a late flock of shorebirds present, including a Western Sandpiper. While Little Gulls were regularly seen with the Bonaparte's during the previous week, no one reported a Ross' Gull. The OBRC has considered the only acceptable date for this sighting as 11 December 1990, but it is possible that the Ross' Gull may have been present earlier.

The Turkey Point Ross' Gull is the first record for southern Ontario. The only previous record for the province is of an adult, nearing full breeding plumage, seen at Moosonee from 14 to 23 May 1983 (Abraham 1984). The only other Great Lakes record is from southern Lake Michigan where an adult was seen in

the Chicago area intermittently from 19 November to 1 December 1978 (Balch *et al* 1979).

Ross' Gulls are being seen with increased frequency south of the arctic and subarctic zones of North America in recent decades. While locations of these records are scattered, most have come from the mid-Atlantic coast in early winter, and most have been associated with Bonaparte's Gulls. It seems likely that some birds from the north, perhaps the Churchill population and/or other undiscovered populations in the Hudson Bay Lowland, may be migrating south with greater frequency than we realize. Observers should be watchful for this species when migrant Bonaparte's are encountered in Ontario, particularly in eastern Ontario in late April and early May, when large numbers of northbound Bonaparte's Gulls are seen that have presumably wintered along the New England coast.

Literature Cited

- Abraham, K.F.* 1984. Ross' Gull: New to Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 2:116-119.
- Balch, L.G., H.D. Bohlen & G.B. Rosenband.* 1979. The Illinois Ross' Gull. *American Birds* 33:140-142.

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