

GULLS HAWKING ANTS

On October 15, 1986, a very large, synchronous nuptial flight of ants occurred along a hundred meters of Manomet Bluffs, which overlook Cape Cod Bay in Plymouth County. The weather was balmy: air temperature was 72 degrees F., winds were southeast two to three mph, and the sky was partially cloudy. I estimated that over a hundred thousand ants were ascending from nests in the ground, flying about fifty meters above the ground, with great numbers floating dead on the ocean surface. I suspected that more than ten ant colonies were involved, given the magnitude of the flight.

I noted unusual foraging behavior of both Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*). While swimming, a first-year and two second-year Herring Gulls were picking dead ants off the water, along with other less abundant food items. Adult Herring Gulls and adult Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. marinus*) were also present but were not feeding on the ants. I also watched a first-winter Ring-billed Gull hawking ants in midflight. The gull would circle over the hundred-meter stretch of bluff where the ants were most concentrated, abruptly altering its flight course to catch the insects in midair. It continued in this manner for half an hour, catching about four ants per minute. Several adult Ring-billed Gulls flew through the foraging zone during this time, but only one was observed to hawk ants, for about five minutes.

These observations suggest that the gulls feeding on ants are opportunistic. Subadults were the main participants in this kind of foraging. Perhaps adult gulls may evaluate the situation better than immature birds and realize that the net energy gain per unit of time, particularly flying to catch ants in the air, is small or negative. Subadults may still be learning how to forage efficiently.

I thank Kathy Murphy and Mark Kasprzyck for their helpful comments on this note.

Andrew A. Whitman, Orono, Maine

AN UNUSUAL HERON POSE

My husband Don and I enjoy trips to Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge at the end of summer to watch the herons feeding there. In fact, I first decided to get more involved in birding, when someone showed me my first Great Blue Heron through a scope at Great Meadows. Boy, was I surprised to learn what I'd been missing. I thought herons were only Florida birds!

On a crisp September afternoon, we were on the main path at Great Meadows looking at some herons in the distance and trying to decide whether it

was worth photographing them. My hobby is bird photography, but I had never gotten very close pictures of a Great Blue at this refuge. They always seemed afraid to come close to the main path where people congregate. Suddenly one of the herons came flying toward us and landed a bit unsteadily on some thick lily pads no more than thirty feet from the path. As soon as he steadied himself, he spread out his wings and held them away from his body, cormorant style, for over fifteen minutes. It seemed not to bother him at all that many people were coming over to admire him, laugh at his strange stance, and take pictures.

Perhaps this heron had gotten quite wet in his last fishing attempt and needed to dry out his wings, or perhaps this is the method by which herons sunbathe. He was not using his wings as a sunshade for the purpose of shadowing fish, as some herons and storks do, because he was not looking toward the water at all. Whatever his reason, I have never seen any other heron spread and keep its wings out in this manner. It certainly made our day, and we finally got some close-up and unique photographs of a Great Blue.

Sandy B. Selesky, Westford



Photo by Sandy Selesky, whose camera work has appeared in *Birder's World* and has been exhibited at Harvard University, at MAS's Marshfield sanctuary, and at the BBC's 75th Anniversary Celebration.



Northern Wheatear
Red River Beach, Harwich, MA
October 3, 1988

Photos by Roger Everett