

# FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE \_\_\_\_\_

*Editor's note: the Ross's Gull report described in the following account has not yet been evaluated by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee; details and a field sketch, however, have been submitted to the MARC. We felt that the significance of the report, combined with the nature of the details provided by the observer, warranted the publication of this account in advance of MARC review.*

## ROSS'S GULL ON CAPE COD

Since May 9, conditions for migrant land bird finding on Cape Cod had been disheartening. The days had been cloudy and rainy, with temperatures never much above 50 degrees and stiff northeasterly breezes of 20 to 30 knots. On May 12, the sun finally came out as high pressure over Maine asserted itself. However, by afternoon the low pressure that was never far to our east resumed control, and the clouds, cool temperatures, and northeast winds returned.

I awoke May 13 thinking I was going to look for warblers no matter what. But on going outside to fill the bird feeders and feeling the cheerlessness of the morning, I ditched that plan and decided to go to Sandy Neck. Maybe, I thought I might get lucky and see a phalarope fly by.

I pulled into Sandy Neck parking lot at 7:15 A.M. and parked at the west end lookout. I was at first discouraged to see that the tide was low, but then noticed some winter Bonaparte's Gulls in the close-in surf and decided maybe I should walk the beach a little. Even this required some fortitude, as there was a cold wind and I had failed to bring gloves.

I walked down the new handicapped ramp, walked west a short way and had a very close look at the Bonaparte's. Seeing some birds in the other direction, I turned and walked east. To my delight, I immediately saw three alternate-plumaged Red-Necked Phalaropes standing in a shallow pool at the ocean edge. These were my first on terra firma on Cape Cod.

I then noticed a group of five or so small gulls standing on a sand bar, and a quick binocular scan revealed one with a rosy breast and thin black necklace. It couldn't be! A Ross's Gull on Cape Cod?! I moved closer and saw the bird very well. It was with winter Bonaparte's Gulls and was indeed a Ross's Gull, in full breeding plumage.

At this point I didn't know what to do. All I could think was "how do I document it? how do I contact all the people that want to see it? why don't I have the camera in the car?" — that sort of thing. I returned to my car, moved it to the center of the parking lot, got out a scope and walked down the center stairway, which the gull was right in front of. I watched the gull through the scope for several minutes from no further than thirty-five feet, made a sketch,

wrote down some notes, and tried to enjoy the moment. I was simultaneously warmed by my good fortune and chilled by the weather.

Thrilled as I was with the gull, I also wanted to enjoy the phalaropes. I was like a king not knowing which of his riches to fondle. Accordingly, I turned the scope head to watch the phalaropes for a minute or so, and on turning it again saw that the gull, like a wraith, had vanished.

The field notes I made on the gull were that the legs were red, the breast was suffused with a rosy pink color, the mantle was all gray, the eye and bill black; a thin black necklace curled around the nape and sides of the neck. The bird was always slightly facing away, so that I could not see the underside of the neck and therefore the continuation and completion of the necklace. The bird was standing next to winter Bonaparte's Gulls, and I could see that it was distinctly shorter-legged and possibly slightly smaller.

I had forgotten that the necklace is not a collar but rather sits well up on the nape, then drops almost straight downward to assume a more lateral course as it crosses the sides of the neck. I never saw the gull in flight. The interval from my first setting foot on the beach till the departure of the gull was no more than fifteen minutes.

As a historical note, this was not my first Ross's Gull. My wife Ellie and I were on a Massachusetts Audubon trip to Churchill, Manitoba, in 1978 led by Jim Lane and an exuberant teenager named Simon Perkins. We had just gotten to Churchill when a nearly hysterical birder, the late Tom Davis of New York, intercepted our caravan to exclaim that there was a Ross's Gull at the harbor. We tore off after him, got to see it, and in fact enjoyed it for all of our week's stay. We have a copy of a photograph of it taken by Dick Lowell. Neither Ellie nor I saw the 1977 Newburyport Ross's.

--Stauffer Miller

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