

FIELD NOTES

Gull Feeding Frenzies

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Anting Gulls. On Sunday afternoon, September 14, Susan and I stopped off at the Joppa boat ramp in Newburyport so that she could try out her new binoculars. We quickly realized that a substantial hatch of flying ants was in progress. While we picked the odd ants out of our hair, the real action was overhead. For an hour or so we watched hundreds of gulls and terns anting over our heads. Presumably in keeping with the flux in ant distribution, the hordes of gulls drifted back and forth, up-river and down, and low and high. At times the greatest concentration of gulls was overhead, at times over downtown Newburyport, over the river, or over the homes behind us. Gulls were clearly attracted from afar, since they were visibly streaming in from Salisbury to join in the feast.

The gulls included many Ring-billed and a few Herring, but the majority were Bonaparte's Gulls. Close attention to the hundreds of Bonaparte's paid off and netted us a Little Gull not 50 feet overhead. The few terns involved were mostly Common with at least a couple of Roseates. We assumed that the terns were anting, based on behavior similar to that of the gulls; for the most part they were too high for us to see their prey.

The feeding behavior of the gulls mostly involved hanging in the slight breeze and then stalling with a quick bill-up motion when seizing an ant. On occasion, a more elusive ant would necessitate a quick lateral snap of the head or even a contorted course correction (with flailing wings, tail, and feet). We could clearly see them selecting and snagging their prey.

The ants were everywhere. Even the House Sparrows were darting out from the shrubbery to snag ants. This was probably the best flying ant show I've ever seen — better even than watching Northern Cardinals hawk flying ants in our backyard a few years ago.

Wigglers on the Surf. Just over a week later, Susan and I were driving along Ocean Avenue in Marblehead Neck when we noticed a gull commotion of a different sort. Hundreds of gulls were on the water, facing into the considerable onshore breeze, all within yards of the beach. We pulled over to investigate. Aside from the relative few gulls in the air or on the shore, all of the gulls (including Great Black-backed, Herring, Ring-billed, and Laughing gulls) were bobbing on the surface, facing into the wind, and pecking delicately at the surface. The mass of gulls extended for about 100 yards along the rocky shore and beach.

Since we could not see the prey, we speculated wildly about what the birds were consuming so avidly. Some sort of influx of zooplankton? Bits of a decomposing

whale around the upwind rocks?
Perhaps chum from a Marbleheader with
a wry sense of humor?

Finally, we noticed masses of tan
objects on the shore, deposited by the
waves. I checked with my spotting
scope and the objects turned out to be
live, half-inch, maggot-like creatures.
They clearly writhed on the sand. In
with the tan wigglers were darker cases
from which some of the wigglers
appeared to be trying to free themselves
— an emergence? Gulls on the shore
were snapping up both the cases and the
wigglers.

At this point, our speculation
centered on maggots, perhaps tabanid
(greenhead) fly larvae, but how could
they have arrived there in such numbers?
Marblehead Neck is a rocky headland,
without salt marsh, the habitat of
greenheads. Perhaps the beasts were a
different type of maggot. Marblehead
Neck is also a place of limited access to the shore. For all we knew, a beached whale
could have been rotting just beyond the outcroppings up wind (but surely we would
have smelled it).

We did check public shore accesses
nearby, but there was no concentration
of feeding gulls. Returning home,
frustrated and fascinated, we hit the
books, but our library gave us no
answers. I had taken some marginal
photos and video, and I sent them off to
a friend at the Museum of Comparative
Zoology at Harvard. Though he checked
around, no answers were forthcoming.
At this point, it is speculation 10,
knowledge 0, and maybe we will never know. One thing for sure though, it was a
heck of a banquet.

Just the other day, I looked out over the Merrimack River estuary from a window
at the Joppa Flats Education Center in Newburyport. There was a flock of gulls,
wildly flailing at the water, probably after bait fish stirred up by snapper blues — ho
hum, just another gull feeding frenzy.... 🐦



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