

Gull Concentrations at Alpha Ridge Landfill, Howard County, Maryland, Winter 1982-1983

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At the time of the tally for the 1982 Liberty Reservoir Christmas Bird Count (CBC), we were theorizing on the source of the gulls appearing on Liberty Reservoir in the evening at the end of each day during this time of the year. Someone suggested that the source might be the Alpha Ridge Landfill near Marriottsville, Howard County, Maryland. The site of the landfill is approximately 8 mi [12.9 km] south of the area of the reservoir where the gulls congregate in the evening.

Two days later, on 20 December 1982, we investigated the landfill and obtained permission to count the gulls while refuse was being dumped. There were about 3000 gulls actively feeding close to the dumping operation or resting on the ground. We estimated 2500 Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and 500 Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*), one of which had an orange wing tag and metal bands on both legs. We immediately noticed about 10 Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. marinus*) in a variety of plumages. There were only four previous records of this species for Howard County.

Realizing that some of the rarer species were likely to be present in a flock of this size, and having seen some on the Liberty CBC, we started scanning carefully. Among the flock, we found 4 Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*L. fuscus*), 2 adults and 2 third-winter birds; 2 first-winter Iceland Gulls (*L. glaucoides*); and a first-winter Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*). These three species were all new Howard County records. Ringler immediately set up the camera to record the presence of these birds.

The Thayer's Gull (Figure 1) was the most cooperative of the rare birds and came to an icy pool beside the road, less than 50 ft (15 m) from our observation point. It was joined by one of the Iceland Gulls (Figure 2), allowing close comparison of these species with the more numerous Herring Gulls. The Iceland Gull was extremely white in plumage with an all-black bill. The other Iceland Gull was differentiated by having flecks of yellow on the otherwise black bill.



Figure 1. Howard County's first Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*). Bottom photo: showing spread wings. Alpha Ridge Landfill, 20 December 1982.



Figure 2. Howard County's first Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides*). Alpha Ridge Landfill, 20 December 1982.



Figure 3. Howard County's first Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*). Alpha Ridge Landfill, 24 December 1982.

On 24 December 1982, we returned to the landfill and found a flock composed of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls with 40 Great Black-backed Gulls and 1 each of Thayer's, Lesser Black-backed, and Iceland Gulls, plus 1 Glaucous Gull (*L. hyperboreus*) (Figure 3), the latter another Howard County first. The Thayer's, Iceland, and Glaucous Gulls were all in first-winter plumage. Something flushed a large number of the birds over the hill and we decided to try to relocate them in the surrounding fields. We spotted a flock of about 100 Ring-billed Gulls on Sand Hill Road opposite Crestlawn Cemetery. With them was the Iceland Gull. We found another larger flock near a farm on the south side of Old Frederick Road (MD Route 99) about 0.5 mi (0.8 km) west of the intersection with Sykesville Road (MD Route 32). In this flock, we found the Thayer's Gull. These birds flushed and many of them, including the Thayer's, flew across the road and landed in another field on the north side.

On 14 January 1983, Ringler returned to the landfill with David Holmes. In addition to the 1200 Herring Gulls and 300 Ring-billed Gulls, we saw 15 Great Black-backed, 2 Glaucous, and 2 Iceland Gulls. All the white-winged gulls were in first-winter plumage. One of the Iceland Gulls was a bird that we had not seen before, being more darkly marked than either of the previous birds.

Ringler again visited the landfill on 15 January 1983 with Jo Solem and Martha Chestem. Our count this day was 10 Great Black-backed, 1 Glaucous, and 3 Iceland Gulls along with the Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. The 3 Iceland Gulls appeared to be the same birds observed during the previous visits. In addition, a bird which may have been a hybrid Herring x Great Black-backed Gull was seen and photographed.

On 28 January 1983, Ringler returned with Floyd Murdoch, Monte Murdoch, Benton Basham, and Wally Sumner. Ringler estimated 100 Herring and 500 Ring-billed Gulls. We also saw about 10 Great Black-backed Gulls, 1 first-winter Glaucous Gull, and 2 first-winter Iceland Gulls.

On 11 February 1983, Paul Dumont lead a group to Alpha Ridge and estimated 4000-4500 gulls, with about 85% Ring-billed and 15% Herring Gulls, with 5-10 Great Black-backed Gulls and 1 Glaucous Gull.

Ringler's final trip of the winter was on 17 February 1983 with Hal Wierenga, Debbie Mignogno, Jon Dunn, Claudia Wilds, and Bill Clark. The tally was 500 Ring-billed, 300 Herring, 10 Great Black-backed, 1 first-winter Iceland, and 1 (probably third-winter) Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

With the advent of super-landfills, future trips to this and other inland landfills should yield interesting information on the winter distribution of the more common gulls in Maryland, as well as observations of the rarer species.