

Early Fall Migration of Bonaparte's Gull at Point Pelee

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The purpose of this paper is to describe a number of aspects pertaining to the fall migration of Bonaparte's gull *Larus philadelphia* within the Point Pelee birding area—specifically the arrival of the first adults, the arrival of the first juveniles, and details on numbers and behaviour of these initial migrants.

At Point Pelee and throughout the western basin of Lake Erie, Bonaparte's gull is an abundant spring and fall transient; at many locations the species is often present in the thousands. In summer, variable numbers of non-breeding (one-year-old) immatures remain throughout the season; at Point Pelee such immatures are regularly present in numbers exceeding 500 birds, but some years considerably fewer birds may be present (Wormington 2001).

Within this summering population of immatures are occasionally individual birds present that are adult-like in appearance—but it has been noted that some of these are possibly second-summer immatures; some are injured or otherwise bedraggled, and still others appear to be in typical winter plumage, completely lacking a black hood! Based on these observations, it can be concluded that it is probably very unusual for a healthy, mature Bonaparte's gull to over-summer either at or near Point Pelee.

It is sometime during July when the first adults (fall migrants) appear at Point Pelee, usually in groups of less than ten individuals. Shortly thereafter, however, numbers increase dramatically to the point where the summering (one-year-old) immatures become increasingly inconspicuous. During the last few days of July there is usually a surge of new arrivals, often exceeding 1000 birds.

Fall migration extends over a remarkable period within the western basin of Lake Erie, often from the middle of July to the middle of January—half a year or more! During this period adult birds arrive in breeding plumage, complete with a black hood; they then undergo a complete wing and body moult before eventually leaving the area in fresh winter plumage. This two-tier migration strategy is apparently not employed by very many species of North American birds, although several shorebird species do exhibit this behaviour during either spring migration (e.g., American golden-plover, Baird's sandpiper and pectoral sandpiper) or fall migration (e.g., dunlin).

Every year since 1980 I have made an attempt at Point Pelee to find and record the first adult and juvenal fall migrants. Over the years the arrival dates of both age classes has been relatively consistent, as detailed in Table 1. Adult birds have been detected on dates ranging from 6 July (2001) to 30 July (2000), a span of 25 days. The first juveniles have been detected on dates ranging from 20 July (1998) to 9 August (1983), a span of only 21 days. It is perhaps more than coincidence that the earliest recorded date for adult birds (6 July in 2001) was immediately after one or



Juvenal Bonaparte's gull at Sturgeon Creek, Ontario, on 2 August 1987. Photo by Alan Wormington.

more strong cold fronts that resulted in record or near-record low temperatures across much of Ontario.

In various publications covering the bird life of a particular area, "average" or "mean" arrival (and departure) dates are often calculated for each species based on observations that have been compiled over a period of many years. In the author's opinion this system does not provide accurate information, as the system relies heavily on the assumption that observers are regularly in the field each and every year during the time when a particular species is likely to appear. In reality this often does not happen, especially during the hot summer months when most birders do not systematically search for migrants.

Instead, I prefer to use a system based on examining the known arrival dates and then making a deduction as to when a species can be considered "normal" or "typical" for a particular area. More specifically, Table 1 shows that Bonaparte's gull has on numerous occasions arrived on or about 16 July at Point Pelee with some consistency, and this date has been chosen for "The Birds of Point Pelee" to represent when the first migrants can be expected to occur here (Wormington 2001). Explained differently, if an observer were to find adult birds on or about 16 July it should be considered normal and typical for fall migrants at Point Pelee.

Arrival dates considerably earlier than 16 July (three or more days earlier) would be progressively more unusual, and in fact are limited to only four such occurrences since 1982 (Table 1). However, on or shortly after 16 July, a significant number of migrant Bonaparte's gulls regularly appear at Point Pelee (see Table 2); this indicates that 16 July is indeed a good choice to describe the typical arrival date of the species.

Table 1. Arrival date and number for the first adult and juvenile Bonaparte's gulls recorded in the Point Pelee Birding Area during the years 1980 to 2003 inclusive.

Year	First Adults (#)	First Juveniles (#)
1980	no data	August 5 (3)
1981	no data	August 3 (2)
1982	July 22 (12)	August 2 (1)
1983	July 19 (6)	August 9 (3)
1984	July 19 (3)	July 27 (3)
1985	July 21 (2)	July 31 (3)
1986	July 25 (5)	August 3 (3)
1987	July 11 (3)	July 27 (1)
1988	July 20 (16)	July 28 (1)
1989	July 20 (25)	July 28 (3)
1990	July 16 (1)	August 4 (7)
1991	July 21 (12)	July 27 (2)
1992	July 15 (2)	July 30 (2)
1993	July 17 (4)	July 27 (4)
1994	July 23 (2)	July 26 (3)
1995	July 8 (1)	July 23 (1)
1996	July 15 (2)	July 28 (1)
1997	July 29 (35)	July 31 (1)
1998	July 10 (4)	July 20 (1)
1999	July 18 (35)	July 24 (15)
2000	July 30 (500)	August 3 (2)
2001	July 6 (18)	July 23 (2)*
2002	July 10 (14)	August 5 (7)
2003	July 27 (3)	August 14 (5)

As described above, so-called "average" arrival dates may not be suitable for describing when a species is typical for a study area, but I have calculated such dates for both adult and juvenile Bonaparte's gulls at Point Pelee so they can be compared to each other. Based on these calculations—18 July for adults and 29 July for juveniles ($n = 20$)—adult birds predate those of the first juveniles by a mere 11 days on average (actually 10-1/2 days in the detailed calculations); however, the period between the observation of the first adults and the first juveniles has been as short as two days (1997) to as long as 21 days (1983).

Large numbers of adult birds arrive at Point Pelee shortly after the first vanguards; these often form huge roosting flocks that gather at such sites as the Onion Fields or the Tip, etc. Perhaps this roosting behaviour is in response to a long-distance flight that has just been completed. In any event, birds appear to do relatively little feeding during the period when they first arrive.

Table 2. Selected early counts of adult Bonaparte's gulls at Point Pelee, Ontario.

Date	Number	Location (Observers)
July 6, 2001	18	NE Hillman Marsh (Dean J. Ware, Alan Wormington)
July 10, 1998	4	Tip (AW)
July 15, 2001	440	NE Hillman Marsh (AW)
July 16, 1996	30	Tip (AW)
July 18, 1995	170	Tip (AW, David J. Milsom)
July 22, 1998	600	flying east to west past Tip (AW)
July 26, 2001	2100	Leamington Beach to Hillman Marsh (AW)
July 30, 1995	2000	Onion Fields (AW)
July 31, 1985	2000	Onion Fields and Coterie Park (AW)
August 4, 1986	3000	Tip (AW)
August 11, 1987	5000	Tip (Christopher M. Lemieux et al.)
August 17, 1998	4000	Tip (AW)
August 19, 1990	9000	NE Hillman to Coterie Park (Donald G. Cecile)

During the initial arrival period (and perhaps later), many adult birds remain paired. It is most obvious, for example, when a single bird takes flight to leave a roosting flock; more often than not, a second adult will quickly take flight to join the first. Also, pairs of adults can be observed throughout the Point Pelee area. In Table 1, note the preponderance of even-numbered adult arrivals; in those years (total of 16) when the first adults numbered fewer than 25 individuals—exact counts rather than the possibility of estimates for larger numbers—11 observations pertain to an even number of adults, whereas only five observations pertain to an odd number of adults.

It is amongst the initial concentrations of adult Bonaparte's gulls that the first few juvenal birds are usually detected (see Table 3). Within these concentrations it is also possible to occasionally find migrant adults of other "hooded" gull species at Point Pelee—for example, little gull (earliest arrivals on 14 July in both 1983 and 2001) and black-headed gull (earliest arrival on 18 July in 1995).

A few major papers have been published that describe the fall migration of Bonaparte's gull in eastern North America. One is a very detailed account on the status of the species throughout the year in the Niagara Frontier region of Ontario and western New York (Beardslee 1944). This study is based on fieldwork conducted by the author during the years 1921 to 1943 inclusive; the findings are very consistent with what is presented here for Point Pelee. Most birders may believe that the identification and study of gull plumages is an activity of modern times, but Clark S. Beardslee was certainly ahead of his time with the publication of his meticulous observations—all gull enthusiasts should obtain and read this fabulous paper!

Another major paper is that by Braune (1989), who collected information from dozens of observers in eastern North America in an attempt to determine so-called "migration routes" taken by fall migrants. A number of statements in this paper are

Table 3. Selected early counts of juvenile Bonaparte's gulls at Point Pelee, Ontario.

Date	Number	Location (Observers)
July 22, 1998	3	Tip (Alan Wormington)
July 23, 1998	7	Tip (AW)
July 24, 1999	15	Onion Fields (AW)
July 25, 2001	8	Onion Fields (AW)
July 29, 1988	60	Lake Erie off Wheatley Harbour (AW)
August 2, 1987	22	Tip to Sturgeon Creek (AW, Mark W. Jennings)
August 16, 1986	45	Marentette Beach to Tip (AW)
August 25, 1987	715	Holiday Harbour to Hillman Marsh (AW)

not consistent with the known behaviour of Bonaparte's gull, perhaps since the author had little if any pertinent data pertaining to the western basin of Lake Erie, including Point Pelee. Some of these statements are worth discussing here, since they directly relate to observations that have been made at Point Pelee over the decades:

- The author quotes the observation of single juvenal birds on 23 July 1984, in the Quoddy region off southeastern New Brunswick, and 25 July 1975, at Bonaventure on the north shore of Baie des Chaleurs in the Gaspé Peninsula, Québec, as evidence of probable breeding farther east than previously known. However, the observation of such juveniles is obviously irrelevant in light of the many records at Point Pelee and throughout southern Ontario—where the species does not breed—on dates even earlier than those cited.
- "... birds leave the nesting grounds during the period of August-September and begin arriving at their over-wintering grounds about November ..." This statement implies that birds slowly drift south from the breeding areas to the wintering range, failing to recognize the "two-tier" migration strategy that is employed by adult birds of the species—that is, the vast majority of birds vacate their nesting grounds very quickly during the period of July to perhaps as late as the middle of August, migrating to areas where they congregate, moult, and then spend an extended period of time—wherever that may be—before continuing south much later to their eventual wintering areas.
- "The birds usually depart the Great Lakes region sometime in January, but of the thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls that migrate through the Niagara-Erie area, less than 3% are juveniles, suggesting that the latter migrate southward over a different route." Indeed many birds do leave the Great Lakes during January, but the vast majority of these are adults that have been present for several months where they have undergone a complete moult into winter plumage. Juvenal birds, in contrast, do not appear to undertake this two-tier migration strategy, but simply continue to drift

south without an extended stay at any known locations (including Lake Erie). At Point Pelee, maximum numbers of juvenal birds are present during August—maximum count of 715 on 25 August 1987—with numbers decreasing shortly thereafter.

- "... most of the birds from the Prairie Provinces and Northwest Territories probably migrate via the Niagara region"—By implication, presumably this also includes the area of western Lake Erie. This statement can easily be challenged since it is well known that Bonaparte's gull is remarkably scarce throughout the entire Lake Superior area during fall migration, including inland areas. For example, in the Thunder Bay area of Lake Superior, only a few birds are usually seen each fall, and at the nearby Thunder Cape Bird Observatory, there are but two observations exceeding one or two individuals—250 and 50 birds in 1992 observed on 17 and 18 August respectively (Nicholas G. Escott, pers. comm.). At the other end of Lake Superior at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, Michigan, the species is also very uncommon during fall migration—monthly *totals* for the species there average only 183 birds for August; 70 for September; 124 for October; and five for November, up to the 15th of the month (James Granlund, pers. comm.).

Subsequent to the previous paper is a study published by Taylor (1993) that describes the status of Bonaparte's gull in southeastern Manitoba, including fall migration. This paper presents observations and conclusions consistent with the known behaviour of the species on western Lake Erie. The author correctly describes two distinct waves of birds in fall, the so-called "two-tier" migration that I have described above. The author also correctly notes that adult birds arrive there in breeding plumage, then moult into winter plumage before departing the area much later. And finally, that juveniles and some adults make a seemingly leisurely withdrawal while moulting, but the majority of adult birds lingered (on Lake Winnipeg) until after flight-feather moult was complete before making a late, direct departure from the province (southeast Manitoba).

Closer to Point Pelee, Pittaway (1991) published a summary on the year-round status of Bonaparte's gull in the Durham region of Ontario. In that area, the author reports that a few adults in full breeding plumage begin arriving by mid-July, with numbers increasing in late July and through August. Juvenal birds usually arrive by late July, with an "average" arrival date there of 28 July for the most recent three-year period. Thus, in the Durham region, the behaviour of Bonaparte's gull is very similar to that of the western basin of Lake Erie, including Point Pelee.

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John Pogacnik of Perry, Ohio, has provided some interesting information (via an e-mail to the author dated 14 February 2001) pertaining to the winter status of Bonaparte's gull in Ohio along the Lake Erie shoreline. Some of his comments are as follows:

"What was interesting this past winter was the large [fall] movement of Bonaparte's gulls on December 31, with none the following day. The birds were seen moving west at Headlands Beach, but none were seen west of there and only a couple were seen anywhere the next day. I personally have not heard of any Bonaparte's gulls in Ohio since around January 15, and that was only a single bird. As far as wintering of Bonaparte's gulls in Ohio is concerned, it is very dependent on the weather. During a typical year, most usually leave toward the end of December or in early January. The winters of 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 saw a few over-winter, although the numbers were generally very low. In 1999 there was an early [spring] migration of Bonaparte's gulls in late February with numbers exceeding 500 birds; the interesting thing about this was the record number of little gulls (27+) that were with them. The winter of 1997-1998 saw good numbers of Bonaparte's gulls with counts exceeding 500 throughout the entire winter. In 1996-1997 there were about 20+ that lingered into late January, but none were present thereafter"

The winter status of Bonaparte's gull at Point Pelee is remarkably similar to what is described above for Ohio. For example, most years Bonaparte's gull typically remains at Point Pelee only to early January. But during the winter of 1997-1998 (when more than 500 remained throughout the winter in Ohio) there were also considerable numbers recorded all winter at Point Pelee, with a maximum count of 550 birds on 27 February. And with these birds were two or three adult little gulls on 26-27 February. At the time they were assumed to have probably over-wintered somewhere on Lake Erie; however, considering the significant arrival of little gulls that occurred in Ohio during late February in 1999, it is more likely that these birds were in fact early spring migrants—the earliest to be recorded at Point Pelee prior to 2001.

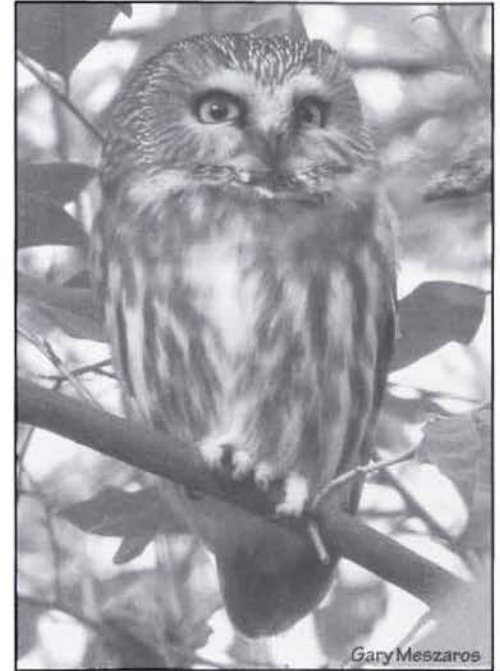
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Short Note: Northern Saw-whet Owl Banding Project in Ross County

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The migration of northern saw-whet owls in Ohio is virtually unknown. In a pilot project to determine the feasibility of a banding study, nets and audio lures were set up on six nights in November of 2003 at Buzzard's Roost Nature Preserve near Chillicothe in Ross County. Six northern saw-whet owls were captured and banded, and one foreign re-trap was caught and released. This re-trap of 21 November 2003 was originally banded at Holiday Beach, Ontario on 5 November 2003, when it was recorded as an after-second year female with a weight of 97g. Upon recapture, the bird was again aged as an after-second year based on molt; however, the sex was indeterminable due to a weight of 83.2g which placed this bird in the unknown sex category.



Gary Meszaros

Two of the six owls banded were recaptured. The first recapture, originally banded on 8 November 2003, was a hatch year female that was recaptured on 21 November 2003 and had maintained its weight of 99.5g. The other recapture was an after-hatch year female originally banded on 20 November 2003 weighing 88g and recaptured on 30 November 2003 weighing 85.5g. The sex of the remaining four owls could not be determined since the mass and wing chord measurements were in the unknown range; however, three were aged as after-hatch years and one as a hatch year based on molt limits.

The banding station was open on 2 December 2003 and 7 December 2003 with no additional owls captured. Monitoring throughout 2003 and during the winter and spring of 2004 will continue to attempt to better determine fall migration dates, over wintering population, and approximate spring migration dates. The information from this pilot project will guide a northern saw-whet owl banding project for 2004-2005. 