

THE CHASE: OUR QUEST TO FIND THE ASHTABULA BLACK-TAILED GULL

By Kyle Carlsen

I am the kind of guy who lives and breathes birds. In fact, I would venture to say that birds take priority over almost everything else in my life. I sneak over to the local wildlife refuge in between my college classes and frequently skip meals during migration season. I have travelled hundreds of miles to chase an unusual vagrant and have, in fact, rearranged a few dates to coincide with a good birding opportunity. (Weekend retreat to Mio, Michigan, honey?)

I am also a stickler when it comes to academics. Class attendance, writing assignments, and grades almost always come first.

So when my friend Jon Benedetti sent me an email asking if I would like to join him on a chase for a Black-tailed Gull in Ashtabula, Ohio, I was faced with a stressful dilemma: skip classes, or skip the chance for an ABA area code four.

It took me nearly five seconds to decide.

I took off from Vincent, Ohio in Washington County around 6am on November 27, 2011, joining Jon Benedetti and Pat Collins of Wood County, West Virginia. The three of us loaded Jon's Subaru with scopes, maps, field guides, and luggage for at least one overnight stay and headed north. We encountered some rain along the interstate, which was a foreshadowing of the overall wet and cold conditions we would endure over the course of the trip, but this did not shake our resolve: We were chasing birds.

Obviously, Black-tailed Gull was our number-one target species. With only a mere handful of documented North American sightings, this was the first Ohio record of Black-tailed Gull, a species that is normally at home in Asia. The bird would be a life bird for all three of us, and for the more experienced birders among us, like Jon, life birds are hard to come by.

However, Black-tailed Gull was not the only rarity awaiting us in northeast Ohio. A Black-headed Gull was hanging out just a few miles east of Ashtabula, at the Conneaut Harbor—another life bird for all three of us.

And as if these two gulls were not enough incentive to forge ahead, shortly after leaving home, we received some phone calls reporting a Snowy Owl that had plopped down in the very same spot that we were headed. Snowy Owl is a great bird for anyone to see, and was another

possible lifer for me.

This was getting good.

Around 10 am we arrived at the now-famous cement bridge over the Ashtabula River, grabbed our binoculars and joined a few folks who were focused north. There, at least three football fields out, in a railroad yard situated along an inlet of Lake Erie, sat a nearly pure-white Snowy Owl. I was thrilled to catch this amazing life bird right off the bat—even if we missed out on the gulls, I had already had a successful trip.

But there were still two rare gulls out there, and the day was still young. After talking over some strategies with some folks at the bridge and amongst ourselves, we decided our best bet was to head over to Conneaut to first try for the Black-headed Gull.

The Conneaut beach proved to be a surprisingly popular spot for a Sunday morning in late November. We ran across a few sightseers and, of course, five or six hundred Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls. Our task: to pick out the one dude amongst them with the bright red legs and bill. Piece of cake.

After an hour of scanning in wind and rain, a randomly unkind gentleman who purposefully flushed the entire flock of gulls by roaring through in his red pickup, and a false alarm (Common Tern), our chances of success were beginning to look rather dim. However, our luck changed when Jen Brumfield showed up, took a quick look, and candidly pointed out the prized bird, more or less right in front of our eyes. Score! A beautiful nonbreeding Black-headed Gull was sporting his noticeably reddish bill and legs, which contrasted with the black-billed Bonaparte's Gulls all around.

Once our life-bird excitement momentarily wore off, we grabbed lunch and then headed back to Ashtabula. The single Black-tailed Gull sighting that day had been at 8 am, and at 2 pm we were hoping the bird would show before nightfall hit in just a few hours. Rather than bore my readers with every painful detail, I will just say that we did not locate the bird that day. We scoured every spot along the Lake Erie shoreline where the gull had been previously reported, and picked out several great birds along the way (Peregrine Falcon, Snow Bunting, Surf Scoter), but we failed to turn any of those dark-tailed juvenile Ring-billeds or even the occasional dark-looking Herring into a Black-tailed Gull.

But we did not give up. We were not about to head home without the bird. We booked a room in a local hotel and laid out all of our maps and notes, most of which were the product of the generous knowledge and assistance of helpful Ohio birders, both from the field that day and via the Ohio Birds listserv. We looked over our options, mapped out a game plan, and then hit the sack.

The next morning, we were sitting at that cement bridge thirty minutes before daylight. Most morning sightings of the gull had been within the first hour of sunrise, and we were not taking any chances.

The sun came up and our scopes were trained on every gull that appeared within our range of view. We relocated the Snowy Owl and noticed a lone Red-necked Grebe floating in the channel north of the bridge. But, alas, no Black-tailed Gull.

We had decided the night before that if we did not succeed at the bridge within the first hour, we would head on over to Lake Shore Park, just a mile northeast of where we now stood near the cement bridge.

After arriving at the park, we carried our scopes and tripods up to the picnic pavilion which proved to be a great vantage point overlooking the blue industrial buildings where numerous gulls seemed to enjoy standing on the rooftops. From this position, we resumed the task in which we had been engaged ever since we first arrived in Ashtabula: checking every individual gull—in this case, looking for a dark-backed gull with a black tail.

After a few minutes, I sensed a change in Jon's tone of voice. "Take a look at this gull." He proceeded to describe the precise location of the gull in question—which was standing on one of the rooftops between a Ring-billed Gull and a Herring Gull—and soon all three of us were studying the bird. Jon, being the veteran birder of our group, made the identification first. "That's it! That's it—very dark back, black tail, dark tip on the bill!"

Black-tailed Gull. Holy cow.

I am fairly certain at least one or two of us did the happy dance. There were shouts, and, possibly, a few tears. Hundreds of travelled miles, a dozen cups of coffee, and many hours spent scouring thousands and thousands of distant gulls had paid off with very satisfying looks at this bird from about one hundred yards, who then decided to take flight for a few moments, showing off that diagnostic white band and black tail, before dropping back down and staying put for over ten minutes. I could even make out the red spot in front of the black band on the tip of the bill. A nearby Lesser Black-backed Gull offered an excellent comparison; the Black-tailed Gull appeared slightly smaller than the Lesser Black-backed, slightly larger than the nearby Ring-billeds, and noticeably smaller than the Herrings.

All three of us enjoyed a birder's high for the rest of that day, a feeling that has yet to fully diminish as I write this article three weeks later. As of this writing in mid-December 2011, the Ashtabula Black-tailed Gull continues to delight birders from all over the country. All of us who found the bird are greatly indebted to the many, many Ohio birders who shared information, updated websites, and posted sightings. I am proud to be part of such a dynamic community made up of people who love birds and love helping other birders.

I said I am the kind of guy who lives and breathes birds. Come to think about it, that is nothing unusual. All of us live and breathe birds.

We are birders, and that is how we roll.

A recent graduate of Ohio Valley University, Kyle is a freelance musician and the assistant editor of Bird Watcher's Digest. He also leads tours and workshops for Back Road Birding Tours based in southeast Ohio.