

# The Massachusetts Ross' Gull

*Paul Miliotis\* and P.A. Buckley\*\**

What has been termed by many "the bird of the century", the winter-plumaged adult Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia* [=*Larus*] *rosea*) that was seen in the flesh by thousands, broadcast on nationwide TV, graced page one of *Time* and which appeared in virtually all major newspapers in the U.S. and many others throughout the world, began its rise to notoriety about 2:30 p.m. on a gray Sunday, March 2, 1975, as it fed on the incoming "tideline" at the mouth of the Merrimack River in Salisbury (opposite Newburyport), Essex Co., Mass (ca. 70° 51' W, 42° 48' N). A small cluster of independently afield observers were scanning the flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls when Walter Ellison of White River Jct., Vermont and Miliotis spotted an odd gull in with the Bonaparte's. Ellison finally ventured that it looked like a Ross', and as it wheeled and dived for small floating prey, the diagnostic pink ventral flush, wedge-shaped tail, grey underwings and almost totally white head with delicate black bill and huge dark eyes convinced Miliotis that Ellison was absolutely correct.

Rushing to a phone, Miliotis called Buckley. After an incredulous dialogue lasting but a few moments, Buckley grabbed his binoculars and cameras (but left his telescope behind in the rush), and he and Francine Buckley raced out the door to pick up neighbor Ken Harte, pausing only long enough to call Guy Tudor in New York City and set telephones ringing all over the U.S. and Canada. Setting what will probably stand for some time as the track record between Carlisle and Salisbury, they arrived on the Merrimack to find a large party of additional observers had already gathered at the scene, having also coincidentally been birding that day in the area. It was clear the bird had been satisfactorily identified

well before the arrival of the "verifiers," who could only add their assent and assurances to Miliotis that he still held a tight grip on his sanity.

By late that evening, word had spread even to the Pacific Coast, and quite likely in no more than 24 hours at least one person in every state and province had heard the word: the first Ross' Gull ever recorded in North America away from Arctic waters was, naturally, in Massachusetts, and, of course, in Newburyport. Before dawn the next morning the first assault wave was on hand, and shortly thereafter Roger Peterson got his 668th North American species, one he had painted on several occasions but which he had never seen in life.

*Birding* is threatening to devote an entire issue to the ornithosociology of The Ross' Gull, perhaps the most enchanting aspect of this hyperborean waif; we will defer to them. More to the point, though, is some of the background on record. In mid-January, Philip Parsons and Hermon Weissberg of the Brookline (Mass.) Bird Club had reported seeing what they felt was a Ross' Gull on January 12th and 16th at the old sewer or yacht club location in Newburyport harbor. They and others subsequently were unable to relocate it, and, Newburyport being perhaps the most intensely birded spot in New England in winter, most observers forgot about the January report. That is, until the week of March 2nd and the Great Rediscovery, after which two more reports, even earlier, came to light.

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On December 7, Tom Wills of Londonderry, Vermont had clearly seen a gull in Newburyport harbor he felt was an adult Ross', but disbelieving his own eyes, decided to forget he ever saw it. Likewise, Rev. James A. Nash of Burlington, Mass. also saw what he was convinced was an adult Ross' in Newburyport harbor on December 28th; he too decided against reporting what was clearly absurd. Detailed descriptions seen by both writers of this note leave little doubt that all four original observers were quite correct in their identifications, and that this particular Ross' Gull was indeed present on the Merrimack River from at least December 7th until last seen with certainty early in the morning of May 6th by, ironically, Miliotis. Between March 2nd and May 6th probably some five to ten thousand persons saw the bird in Newburyport, and reliable estimates placed the crowd on the Saturday and Sunday following rediscovery — March 8th and 9th — at close to two thousand. Having been there, we would not disagree.



Fig. 1. Photo / P.A. Buckley and F.G. Buckley

Inasmuch as the literature has precious little to say about this High Arctic bird, some comments about its plumages, calls, feeding habits and field marks are in order.

It seemed a winter adult in all respects — even pink below and lacking all trace of neck ring. The small, dove-like head was all white except for dark feathering below and in front of the eye (on the orbit) and some indistinct smudges — possibly oil — on the left rear side and back of the head (Fig. 1). The small bill was all black, feathered for perhaps one-quarter to one-third its apparent length and giving its outline a peculiar basal bulge. The gape was brilliant scarlet or carmine, matching closely foot and leg color (at least early in March; the legs seemed duller in late April). The short legs appeared feathered almost to the heel, contrasting markedly with those of

the Bonaparte's. The entire upper wing surface was an even pearly gray, appreciably lighter than the Bonaparte's, Littles and Black-headed's with which it usually associated. No dusky coloration was detectable dorsally, but a white wedge corresponding well to the white wedge visible on the wings of a flying Sabine's Gull was visible in Ross' from above, and especially, from below with transmitted light (see Fig. 2). The trailing edge of the wing was white as in most gulls, with some persons feeling that its greater width in Ross' was yet another field mark.

The undersurface of the wings generated the most discussion. When we first viewed the bird March 2nd, we were startled at the underwings' duskiness, virtually unillustrated in field guides. Indeed, word soon went out to look for an adult "Little Gull" to facilitate locating the Ross' at some distance. Subsequent examination of museum specimens and of the present individual under varying light conditions convinced us of the perceptual nature of the "dark" underwings: while truly not dusky as in adult Little Gulls, they are not white as in Bonaparte's, being instead a gray barely distinguishable from that of the upperwings. Consequently when not directly illuminated from the side or below, they were in shadow and definitely *appeared* black. The "lighter" axillars as in Fig. 3 represent, in fact, the true underwing color. Opinion is split on how this condition should best be depicted in field guides; between the authors of this note, Buckley feels it should be shown as perceived (very dark), while Miliotis prefers a lighter, gray tone.

The rosy tinge giving the species its alternate vernacular was quite apparent in early March, and was also noted by the December and January observers. By April it was becoming difficult to detect, engendering some spirited discussions



Fig. 2 Photo / Peter Alden

about its reality or its relation to incident long-ray sunlight and water reflections. Two sets of color photos taken by Buckley at a 25-foot distance with the same lens in the third week of April showed a snow-white venter on blue-sensitive Ektachrome but a genuine pink blush on red-sensitive Kodachrome. At any rate it had become virtually white by early May, possibly owing to the bird's inability to obtain essential dietary items from the Merrimack.

The all white tail was clearly wedge-shaped (see Figs. 2-3), most evident when the bird banked prior to picking some tidbit from the water's surface. The tail was also exceedingly long, accentuated by the tapered appearance of body-plus-tail narrowed at point of tail insertion (Fig. 3). The wings were long and slender, extending well beyond the tail at rest and accounting for the discrepancy between the bird's published overall length (ca. 12-13 in or 30-32 cm) and its actual body length — the same as, or slightly smaller than, a Little Gull. In flight, especially at a distance, it appeared most like a very long-winged, exceedingly pale, small-headed, stubby-necked tern-but-not-quite-tern. When it fed in the mudflats, systematically probing as it walked along like some sandpiper, many observers commented how much its long-gearred shape reminded them of a Baird's or White-rumped Sandpiper (see front cover).

Buckley heard it call twice when he was photographing it. The single vocalization given then, in an "annoyed" context, was a moderately sharp *ack, ack*, roughly halfway between the *chack* of a Roseae Tern and the "bark" of a Black Skimmer.

This particular bird was most probably in its second winter or adult winter plumage. There being little material available of known age and virtually no field data beyond Buturlin's, one cannot say for certain, but first winter plumage probably corresponds to the immatures depicted in recent North American and European bird guides. By its first summer, when it occasionally if not regularly breeds, it sports a combination of immature wings and tail and adult contour feathers, including a neck ring. Such an individual summered in England in 1974 (see *British Birds*, 67: opposite p. 470, 1974 for excellent photos). The postnuptial (or prealternate) molt following its second summer results in "adult" winter plumage — that worn by the Massachusetts bird, although the gray cap/hindneck described by several guides was not apparent and the blackish feathering in front of the eyes, which accentuated their largeness, is, among field guides, mentioned only by Peterson's European guide.



Fig 3. Photo / Kenneth P. Able

The feathered tarsi and heavily feathered base to the bill — classic Arctic temperature adaptations — are marvelously juxtaposed with the relatively huge eyes necessary for successful foraging in the long polar night; the black preorbital spotting probably also aids light gathering by reducing water reflections. Finally the long, powerful wings and dextrous tail allowed striking ease of flight and maneuverability in the strongest of winds.

During the month of March, when most observers made its acquaintance, it fed largely from the wing, dipping onto the water's surface for floating food, especially along incoming or outgoing tidelines; less frequently did it feed on the mud. By April it was spending more and more time probing in the mud exposed by ebb tides, regularly foot-paddling in shallow tidal pools. Inasmuch as the same behavioral change occurred in the feeding habits of its flock associates, one assumes the change was a function of increased invertebrate activity in the river mud.

The failure of many latecomers to locate the gull for about a ten-day period in late March, despite literally hourly scrutiny of the river and environs, convinces us it had temporarily left the estuary. Numbers of the other three small hooded/masked gulls also dropped at the same time, rising again when the Ross' was rediscovered. This periodic departure probably explains why it was not seen by other people in December, January and February, despite saturation coverage, as on the Newburyport Christmas Bird Count.

Frequently the attention brought to bear on an area by the discovery of one rarity turns up others; the present case was no exception. In the immediate vicinity of the harbor in March and April were a male Tufted Duck, an adult Mew Gull and a juvenile Thayer's Gull, all seen by

many people. These were in addition to the regular Newburyport specialties: many Glaucous and Iceland, several Little and Black-headed Gulls; Barrow's Goldeneyes; and Snowy Owls. The power of suggestion even transmogrified an abnormally pigmented Snow Bunting into a McKay's! Fortunately it was well photographed so its true identity could be ascertained. Not far away another party discovered an adult Swainson's Hawk while they were waiting for the proper Ross' Gull tide (about three hours after high). Finally, in late April at least one female and two male Ruffs shared the flats with the gulls. All in all, not a bad season for the muddy Merrimack.

Inevitably, three questions are asked about this Arctic errant: Where does it normally occur? Exactly how rare is it in North America? Where did it come from? To the best of our knowledge, this is the first known occurrence in the contiguous 48 states, and the first on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean (if one excludes the Davis Straits between Baffin Island and Greenland). It seems unknown in the eastern Pacific south of the Pribilofs and far western Aleutians (Wrangel Island), and in the western Pacific has occurred but once, in Manchuria. Even in the Canadian Arctic it is not often seen, Godfrey's *Birds of Canada* listing it only from Boothia and Melville Peninsulas, Cornwallis Island, and the Davis Straits. It breeds with certainty only along certain central-eastern Siberian rivers draining into the Arctic Ocean (notably the Kolyma), so there is good reason for suspicion about the unique "breeding" record of a female supposedly shot off a nest at Disko Bay, Greenland in 1885. Numbers appear in autumn at Point Barrow, Alaska, where the birds are usually moving eastward. Its normal wintering grounds are still apparently unknown, but one can logically suppose it feeds along leads and breaks in the pack ice of the Arctic Ocean. As there seems no return passage in spring past Point

Barrow, some members of the species might circle the Arctic Basin counterclockwise each winter, in the manner of some ice islands, returning in early June to breed in Siberia.

While this is the first non-Arctic North American record, Ross' Gull is not as scarce in Europe, probably being regular each year in northern Norway (Varangerfjord area), and having occurred in France, Holland, Germany, Denmark, and even as far south as Caligari Bay, Sardinia. In the British Isles there were eight accepted records at the time of the 1971 edition of *The Status of Birds in Britain and Ireland*, with four of them in the 1960s and two more in 1970. Since then there have been an additional seven (as yet unvetted), thus we have four British records in the 1960s and as of 1974 *nine* in the 1970s. Only two were prior to 1960. This pattern, plus: (1) at least one prior occurrence in Iceland; (2) the species' documented rarity in the eastern Canadian Arctic, (3) the relative distances involved; and (4), perhaps most important of all, the present occurrence in Newburyport Harbor — the most regular spot in the eastern U.S. for European Mew, Black-headed and Little Gulls — lead us to the conclusion that this particular Ross' Gull came not from the Canadian Arctic but from northern Europe perhaps the British Isles, although more likely from Norway, possibly by way of Iceland. If the recent increase of British Isles records continues, we should look for additional Ross' Gulls in eastern North America in favored haunts of the above European gulls; the Maritime Provinces are especially likely candidates for the next records.

Regardless of the location of the next occurrence — even if the individual is in full nuptial plumage, neck ring and all — it will doubtless generate only a scintilla of the interest, and a sliver of the crowds that came to Newburyport in March and April of 1975 to eat *Danish* Danish pastries and to ogle *The* Ross' Gull.



In a letter to the Editor dated March 17, 1975, Daniel D. Gibson, our Regional Editor for Ross' Gull country, strongly opposes the widely-circulated theory that the Newburyport Ross' Gull had accompanied Bonaparte's Gulls across the continent from Arctic Canada. He points out that "except on its breeding grounds, there are no inland records (even a few hundred yards) of the species." That the Arctic coast where the Ross' Gull nests is far from the taiga breeding grounds of the Bonaparte's. That there are no known instances of a marine gull following an inland-

breeding species across a continent. He writes that the Ross' Gulls "are highly pelagic most of the year, but that they commonly occur in the littoral zone at certain times, and when they come ashore it is often with other gulls." In sum, he agrees with the opinion expressed by Miliotis and Buckley, and others, that "Ross' Gull has occurred often enough in the British Isles to have made it a species to be looked for on the New England coast," and that the Newburyport bird was almost certainly a trans-Atlantic visitor