

## The Illinois Ross' Gull

*The first inland visitation of a most elusive species, with notes on underwing linings and other matters*

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Photos by Richard Biss*

**I**N THEIR ARTICLE ON the first Ross' Gull to appear in the eastern United States, Miliotis and Buckley (1975) predicted that the next occurrence of this species "will doubtless generate only a scintilla of the interest, and a sliver of the crowds that came to Newburyport . . ." They might well seek employment as prophets. The next subarctic occurrence, in Illinois, produced these measures of 'scintilla' and 'sliver': the maximum crowd looking for the bird was of 75 persons, not 2000, and only 16 people saw it, rather than 5-10 thousand as in Newburyport. Nevertheless, there was great excitement and the occurrence became another media event, with nationwide coverage.

As in Massachusetts, the first report of this gull was not taken seriously. In part this was owing to the seemingly preposterous nature of such a record, but largely it was because of differences between the Massachusetts and Illinois birds that will be discussed below. The report came at midmorning on a sunny November 19, 1978, when Andy Sigler telephoned Balch. Struggling to catch his breath after running half a mile to a telephone, he gasped, "I just saw a Ross' Gull." Balch runs the Chicago Audubon Society's Rare Bird Alert and is accustomed to receiving reports of rarities such as Passenger Pigeon, so he took this with equanimity. But Sigler's report of a pink breast and wedge-shaped tail, plus his known competence as an observer, were enough to speed Balch, Rosenband, and several others to Wilmette Harbor (ca. 87°41'W, 42°5'N), where Sigler had observed the bird. It had been feeding with a dozen Bonaparte's Gulls in the small harbor and its entrance channel, wheeling and diving to the surface to pick from the water. But when they arrived it was no longer there.

Further questioning of Sigler produced details that left Balch, at least, unconvinced that the bird had in fact been a Ross' Gull, but equally perplexed about its identity. Although he had been close to the bird, Sigler had not noticed that its bill was different from that of a Bonaparte's; he reported a black mark behind the eye, not mentioned in the popular field guides, and strongly reminiscent of a Little Gull that had been frequenting the harbor area; finally, the underwings had appeared to Sigler "gray, the same color as the upper surface." This was at variance with the Newburyport Ross' Gull, which displayed very dark underwings, almost like a Little Gull's. Further search that morning along a two-mile stretch of the lakefront to the south, where Bonaparte's Gulls congregate was without success. Beyond that, Sigler's sighting produced only speculation as to what he had actually seen.

**T**EN DAYS LATER and ten miles to the south, Lucy Gemlo and Walter Hopkins were walking along Chicago's Fullerton Avenue beach shortly before dusk on a heavily overcast day. Beginning birders, but very careful observers, they reported a short time later that they had seen a bird floating near the beach with Bonaparte's Gulls that had a pink breast, very short bill, and dark feathering around both eyes. They said it looked as though someone had "punched it and given it two black eyes." Clearly, there was indeed a Ross' Gull in the Chicago area. Any lingering doubts were completely dispelled the next morning (November 30) when seven observers (including Bohlen and Rosenband) watched the bird for an hour in bright sunlight at North Avenue beach, another mile to the south. It floated off the beach

with Bonaparte's Gulls most of the time, but twice stood on the beach for short periods with Herring, Ring-billed, and Bonaparte's gulls.

When it left, the Ross' Gull flew off alone to the northwest. Two hours later Balch saw the Ross' Gull fly off the water with several Bonaparte's Gulls near Montrose Beach, four miles to the north. In the next few days, several extensive searches of the nearby North Shore Channel failed to find the Ross' Gull among the one to two thousand Bonaparte's Gulls there. On Friday morning, December 1, the Ross' Gull was seen briefly between North and Fullerton Avenues before it disappeared to the south. Except for a possible sighting the next day three miles to the south, the bird was not seen again.



Fig. 1. Note peaked head and short black bill.



Fig. 2. Note pale mantle and size comparison with nearby Bonaparte's Gull.



Fig. 3. Wedge-shaped tail is evident.

**M**OST OF THE FEATURES reported by observers can be seen in the accompanying photographs, made from color slides. (Close approach was not always possible, and Richard Biss is to be commended, particularly for the flight shot, which were taken through a 1400 mm telescope not designed for such photography.) Figure 1 shows the peculiar peaked head of this individual, its very short black bill with extensive feathering at the base, the prominent blackish feathering in front of and below the black eye, and the dusky spot below and behind the auricular. This spot appears in exactly half of the twenty Chicago Field Museum specimens in complete winter plumage. Figure 2 shows the size of the bird and its very pale mantle as compared with a nearby Bonaparte's Gull. Note also the relatively longer wings, and attenuated body "look" to the bird. The wedge-shaped tail is evident in the third photo, with the uniform light gray mantle. The original color slide shows more clearly the white trailing edge of the wing on the secondaries and inner primaries. The pale pink wash to the underparts was quite apparent to observers in the field, especially when white-breasted Bonaparte's Gulls were nearby. The legs were bright red, and the tarsi did not appear to be feathered. In flight, the bird had a stocky or chunky look that was quite evident when it flew with the trimmer, less heavy-bodied Bonaparte's Gulls. The shape of the tail was not easily seen.

The underwing color of Ross' Gull deserves discussion here, in view of the controversy about the Massachusetts bird's underwings. Miliotis and Buckley, and others, have attempted to explain why that bird appeared in the field to have blackish underwings, nearly resembling those of an adult Little Gull, while all specimens have underwings that are gray, like the upper surface of the wing. The gist of their explanation is that the Massachusetts Ross' Gull really *did* have gray underwings, but they were *perceived* as black in the field primarily because of the effect of shadow. We saw that bird under all lighting conditions and have never been satisfied with this explanation; a simpler and more logical one, and the one we believe is correct, is that the underwings looked blackish because they *were* blackish. In short, this was an anomaly exhibited by the Massachusetts bird. The matter is of importance for field identification, so we wish to discuss it in detail.

**T**HE OUTER PRIMARIES of all adult Ross' Gull specimens in the Chicago Field Museum appear, at certain angles, to be exactly the same shade of gray below and above. By changing the angle of incident light, the under-surface can be made to appear a few shades darker, probably because of structural characteristics of the feathers. But it is not possible, in either direct light or shadow, to approximate the blackish appearance of the Newburyport bird. That bird showed its blackish underwings at all times — in sunlight, on cloudy days, from below, from the side, with its wings held high, in photographs, and even on nationwide television. If shadow were a factor in our perception of the underwing color, one would expect our perceptions to vary more than they did. By contrast, no observer of the Illinois Ross' Gull reported blackish underwings, even though a few of them, recalling their sightings of the Massachusetts bird, were looking specifically for that effect. Three observers who had not seen the Massachusetts bird independently and without prompting described the underwings as the same color as the upperwings. Bohlen and Rosenband agree that the undersurface of the primaries did at times appear slightly darker than the upper surface, but not blackish (Balch did not see the underwings of the Illinois bird). A color slide of the bird in flight (not reproduced here) shows this, as does Figure 1. (The undersurface of the far wing in this figure should be compared to the color of the wing coverts, rather than to the tips of the near wing, whose color has been washed out by the strong light. The original slide is slightly overexposed.)

Balch has questioned observers of adult and subadult Ross' Gulls at Gambell, Alaska, in June 1977, and of an adult bird at Churchill, Manitoba, in June 1978. Those who noted the underwing color called it gray, and no one recalled seeing distinctive dark underwings like a Little Gull's. Two accounts of European sightings describe "light pearly gray upper and under wings" (Kist, 1959) and "[under] wings gray, several shades darker than upper surface" (Bunce and Richards, 1962). All this indicates strongly to us that the Massachusetts Ross' Gull was atypical in its underwing color, for unexplained reasons, and that the field guides correctly show that the underwing color normally seen in the field is a shade of

gray not greatly different from the upperwing

**A** RECENTLY DISCOVERED COLONY of Ross' Gull (totally predated) in the Canadian arctic, near Bathurst Island has been reported, and we previously mentioned the June 1978 occurrence of an adult in Churchill, 1200 miles north of Chicago. Was the Illinois bird a vagrant from the Canadian arctic, perhaps even the Churchill individual, or was it of trans-Atlantic origin, as the Newburyport Ross' Gull was considered by some to be? We think the evidence favors a Canadian arctic origin. First, both the Churchill bird and the Illinois bird associated with Bonaparte's Gulls, and this species flies overland to Lake Michigan from Hudson Bay and elsewhere in northern Canada. (The Churchill Ross' Gull also "kept company" with a Sabine's Gull.) Second, the Ross' Gull appeared in Illinois at the time when other arctic and pelagic species presumed to make overland flights from the north normally appear on Lake Michigan: scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Red Phalaropes, jaegers, Sabine's Gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwakes. In fact, during the period the Ross' Gull was in Illinois, a Brant, three Harlequin Ducks, a Purple Sandpiper, two Red Phalaropes, and a Black-legged Kittiwake were seen in the Chicago area. It does not seem reasonable that many individuals of such species find their way to Chicago from the north Atlantic, through the St Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes, the distances are greater, the opportunities for delay along the way are more numerous, and the general direction is not in keeping with migratory tendencies at that time of year. As an example, a Common Eider seen last winter in northern Illinois was identified as *Somateria mollissima borealis*, from arctic Canada, rather than *S. m. dresseri* from the North Atlantic coast. The only vagrant species in Illinois that must certainly approach from the Atlantic is the Great Black-backed Gull, and its occurrences tend to be in middle and late winter rather than in fall.

Whatever its origin, this highly pelagic species has never before been observed so far from salt water. This is apparently the first inland record except for Siberia, and adds to a recent history of more frequent subarctic occurrences. Miliotis and Buckley pointed out the increasing frequency of British Isles records in the 1960s and early 1970s. This pattern has

continued, with two more accepted records in 1975, *five* in 1976, and two in 1977. (This gives a total of 22 accepted British records through 1977.) Such an increase prompted the British Rarities Committee to write “. . . this beautiful small gull now seems bent on becoming an annual and increasingly widespread vagrant. It is no longer confined mainly to winter . . . and may appear in any month.” (O’Sullivan, 1977). Our 1978

occurrences give us hope that the same words can some day be said of Ross’ Gull in North America.

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### RARE OCCURRENCE

## Townsend’s Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*) occurrence in Rhode Island

*The first verified New England record  
and first for Rhode Island*

*Richard Bowen*

ON NOVEMBER 29, 1978, I conducted a bird census of a five-hundred acre area along the east shore of the Kicke-muit River in Warren, R.I., continuing a forty-year traditional late-November count of this tract. During the morning, the numbers of species and individuals were both running well below the average of past years, but at 12:30 p.m., a bird appeared in a mixed flock of chickadees, Carolina Wrens, Cardinals, and White-throated Sparrows that made this 1978 census a memorable one.

My initial reaction to the bird was that it might be a small, dark Mockingbird, but the one striking field mark that immediately alerted me to its being something different, was a pronounced white eye-ring. The bird was perched facing partially away from me, and the next field mark that was very obvious and very different from the Mockingbird, was a series of three white chevron markings on the back edge of the folded wing. The third point I noticed was a narrow, fairly long tail, that was distinctly notched.

After a minute or two of observation, the bird shifted position, presenting a side-on view and exposing a distinct light orange patch at mid-wing. At this point, I knew I was looking at a Townsend’s Solitaire. I then wrote down other field marks, most notably the catbird size, the medium gray underparts with little con-

trast between back and belly, the small dark bill, and least obvious of all, thin white outer tail feathers. When it flew, the orange wing patches became particularly prominent. The flight was quite distinctive, being rather slow and erratic. Each flight was of short duration as it moved alternately from the tops of deciduous trees to the lower branches of junipers.



*Townsend’s Solitaire. Warren, R.I. November, 1978. Photo/Richard Bowen.*

MY ORIGINAL OBSERVATION lasted about thirty minutes, and as I felt sure the species was a new record for the State of Rhode Island, I wasted no time getting camera equipment from my car. Relocating the bird quickly, I was able to get 30 pictures with a 600 mm Novoflex lens.

In the following days a large number of Northeastern region birders were successful in finding the solitaire. I have made 22 trips to the area since November 19, locating it on 20 of these. My last observation was February 4, 1979. The last date that anyone has seen it to my knowledge was February 11, in the middle of an extreme cold spell that the bird may not have survived.

The immediate area of this observation is an uninhabited hillside of mixed junipers and deciduous trees, with open spaces, leading down to a salt water river. It contains an abundance of berries, providing an ample food supply that has kept the bird reasonably confined to a small area of approximately five acres.

IN CHECKING PAST RECORDS, it appears that the Townsend’s Solitaire is a new bird for the State of Rhode Island, and appears to be the first record for New England that is verified by photographs or a specimen. A review of Northeastern records show the following (although this listing may not be complete):

- November 25, 1905, King’s Park, Long Island, N.Y. (collected)
- March 16, 1953, Amenia (Dutchess County), N.Y. (collected)
- December 3, 1957, West Gloucester, Mass. (sight record)
- October 25, 1975, Mary Pt., N.B. (sight record)
- December 29, 1975, Wolfville, N.S. (collected)
- October 20, 1976, Charlestown, N.H. (sight record)
- January 23, 1977, Sherbrook, Qué. (sight record)

The increasing number of records in recent years certainly would seem to indicate that the Townsend’s Solitaire is one of the Western stragglers that we should expect to see more of in years to come along the Northeastern coast.

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