

## NOTES

### A ROSS'S GULL REACHES SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

GUY McCASKIE, 954 Grove Ave., Imperial Beach, California 91932; guymcc@pacbell.net

I spent the morning of Friday 17 November 2006 birding in the Imperial Valley of Imperial County, California, my only notable sightings being a wintering Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) 5.5 km west of Seeley and a White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) frequenting a feeder near the southeast corner of El Centro. In the afternoon I birded eastward along the south shore of the Salton Sea from the vicinity of the New River mouth, seeing the expected number and variety of waterbirds. The weather was clear and calm, with the temperature approaching 80° F in the afternoon. At about 1500 hr I arrived at the boat-launch ramp at the southwest corner of Red Hill and drove to the hill's westernmost point for optimal viewing of the gulls loafing along the west shore. As I cautiously drove west on the north dike to the boat-launch channel, my attention was drawn to a small white gull on the water about 50 feet to my right. My initial reaction was that the gull was a Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*), but at the same time knew that I was at the south end of the Salton Sea so must be mistaken. However, upon more careful study with binoculars, I was unable to make this bird into an aberrant Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) or an odd looking Little Gull (*L. minutus*)—it was indeed an adult Ross's Gull in basic plumage. At this time the gull flew a short distance to the shore about 100 feet to the northeast of me and began actively picking insects from the surface of the wet mud.

Being alone without a camera, and knowing that Ross's Gull was unrecorded in California, I was eager to obtain confirmation and documentation. I fumbled with a list of cell-phone numbers and finally calmed down enough to alert some southern California birders, including Bob Miller in Brawley and Kenneth Z. Kurland near El Centro, both photographers. I then spent one of the longest half-hours of my life nervously watching the gull while awaiting the arrival of Bob Miller with his camera. Fortunately, the gull appeared interested only in consuming insects picked from the surface of the mud, so when alarmed by approaching Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) it flew only very short distances and never got more than 200 feet from me. Miller arrived at about 1530 hr and quickly obtained recognizable digiscoped images. I was now able to relax and enjoy my find. Kenneth Z. Kurland arrived about an hour later, and the three of us witnessed a great sunset while enjoying this fabled gull from the far north.

News of the Ross's Gull spread quickly, and birders from as far away as central California and Arizona were at Red Hill before dawn on 18 November. To everyone's relief, the gull was still present, remaining through the day and delighting photographers. On Sunday 19 November 2006 the gull was still present at dawn, but, to the disappointment of the many arriving after sunrise, it was last seen flying east toward the rising sun.

This Ross's Gull appeared to be about the size of a Bonaparte's Gull or smaller but with exceptionally long wings and whiter plumage (Figure 1). The small rounded head was mostly white but had some pale blue-gray on the crown. In addition there was a short dark blackish line at the rear of the auriculars that appeared to be a remnant of the collar present in summer. The eyes were dark and appeared large in part because of dark feathering immediately above, below, and in front of each eye. The short bill was entirely black, with white feathering extending from the forehead over the base.

## NOTES



Figure 1. Adult Ross's Gull at Red Hill, south end of the Salton Sea, Imperial County, California, 18 November 2006.

*Photo by Kenneth Z. Kurland*

The mantle was pale blue-gray, with this color extending up the rear of the neck to the nape and out onto the sides of the breast; the longest tertials showed white tips. The long primaries were a slightly darker blue-gray than the mantle, with the narrow outer web on the outermost primary black. The long wedge-shaped tail, with the central rectrices noticeably long, was entirely white. The underparts were white with a noticeable pink wash, the pink being brightest on the belly (see cover photo). The legs and feet were dark red.

The bird was extremely graceful in flight, with long unmarked wings and a strongly wedge-shaped tail. The upper sides of the wings were pale blue-gray with white tips on the secondaries and inner primaries forming a white trailing edge and the narrow black outer web on the outer primary visible (Figure 2). The undersides of the wings were noticeably dark though not as dark as those on an adult Little Gull.

The Ross's Gull breeds in marshy tundra in northeastern Siberia, with occasional isolated nesting in northern Greenland (Cramp 1983) and in Canada on the Cheyenne Islands, Nunavut, and around Churchill, Manitoba (Godfrey 1986). The birds disperse north after nesting, moving west and east along the coast and pack ice in the Arctic Ocean; large numbers pass Point Barrow at the northern tip of Alaska in October. The winter range is unconfirmed but believed to be around ice in the Beaufort, Bering, and Okhotsk seas (Olsen and Larsson 2004).

Small numbers are found annually in northern Europe, with vagrants recorded south to Fuenterrabia and Zumaia on the north coast of Spain (adults photographed on 10 April 1994 and 17–18 April 1994, *Ardeola* 43:113, 1996), Lake Ohrid in Macedonia (adult photographed 23–24 April 2001, *Birding World* 14:240, 2001 and 15:25, 2002), and as far south as Cagliari Bay at the south end of Sardinia, Italy (January 1906, *Ibis* 9:394, 1906). On the Pacific coast of Asia, Ross's Gulls have

## NOTES



Figure 2. Adult Ross's Gull in flight at Red Hill, 18 November 2006.

*Photo by Larry Sansone*

been found south to Hokkaido, with two at Towada-ko in Aomori prefecture at the north end of Honshu, Japan (Brazil 1991), and one even farther south at Sotobai in the Gulf of Po Hai, Manchuria, China (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951, Meyer de Schauensee 1984).

The first Ross's Gull to be found in temperate North America was a first-winter bird at Clover Point in Victoria, British Columbia, 27 October–9 November 1966 (Campbell et al. 1990), followed by a highly publicized adult at Newburyport, Massachusetts, 12 January–9 May 1975 (Veit and Petersen 1993). Since that time an average of about one a year has been found in the United States south of Canada, with the southernmost, from east to west, being at the Indian River inlet in southeastern Delaware (adult photographed 16–30 November 1996, *Field Notes [FN]* 51:31, 1997), Indianapolis, Indiana (adult photographed 4–10 November 1995, *FN* 50:63, 1996), Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area near St. Louis, Missouri (adult photographed 31 December 1991–11 January 1992, *American Birds [AB]* 46:272 and 331, 1992), Sutherland Reservoir in central southern Nebraska (adult photographed 17–27 December 1992, *AB* 47:273 and 318, 1993), Julesburg Reservoir in northeastern Colorado (first-year bird photographed 28 April–7 May 1983, *AB* 37:896, 1983), and American Falls Reservoir in central southern Idaho (adult photographed 21–27 January 1998, *FN* 52:228, 1998).

In the Pacific states and provinces, the occurrence at Victoria in 1966 remains the sole record for British Columbia. An adult was photographed at McNary Dam on the Columbia River in southeastern Washington/northeastern Oregon 27 November–1 December 1994 (Wahl et al. 2005, Marshall et al. 2003), and an adult was on Yaquina Bay on the central coast of Oregon 18 February–2 March 1987

## NOTES

(Marshall et al. 2003).

The southernmost Ross's Gulls in Asia, Europe, and North America appear to have been the single birds in China (approx. 40° N), Italy (approx. 39° N), Missouri (38° 52' N) and Delaware (38° 30' N). The adult at the south end of the Salton Sea was at 33° 11.8' N, thus substantially farther south than any previous record.

### LITERATURE CITED

- Brazil, M. A. 1991. *The Birds of Japan*. Smithsonian Inst. Press, Washington, D.C.
- Campbell, R. W., Dawe, N. K., McTaggart-Cowan, I., Cooper, J. M., Kaiser, G. W., and McNall, M. C. E. 1990. *The Birds of British Columbia*, vol. 2. Royal Br. Columbia Mus., Victoria.
- Cramp, S., ed. 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*, vol. 3. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, England.
- Dement'ev, G. P., and Gladkov, N. A. eds. 1951. *Birds of the Soviet Union*, vol 3. (English translation 1969) Israel Prog. for Sci. Translations. U.S. Dept. Commerce, Springfield, VA.
- Godfrey, W. E. 1986. *The Birds of Canada*, rev. ed. Natl. Mus. Nat. Sci., Ottawa.
- Marshall, D. B., Hunter, M. G., and Contreras, A. L., eds. 2003. *Birds of Oregon: A General Reference*. Ore. State Univ. Press, Corvallis.
- Meyer de Schauensee, R. 1984. *The Birds of China*. Smithsonian Inst. Press, Washington, D.C.
- Olsen, K. M., and Larsson, H. 2004. *Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Veit, R. R., and Petersen, W. R. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Mass. Audubon Soc., Lincoln, MA.
- Wahl, T. R., Tweit, B., and Mlodinow, S. G. 2005. *Birds of Washington: Status and Distribution*. Ore. State Univ. Press, Corvallis.

*Accepted 26 February 2006*