

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

WINTER GULLS

By Clive E. Goodwin

Winter has its compensations. Flocks of Snow Buntings drift across the snowy fields, soft lilting calls announce tree sparrows foraging along the hedgerows, and on the open waters of the lake flocks of waterfowl toss in the surf. Then there are the gulls.

Of course, gulls are not everyone's favorite birds. They stand around on the ice doing nothing, scruffy creatures that look as though they need dry cleaning, and all appearing vaguely alike. But gulls can also be fascinating. Among the motley array of young birds can be immaculate Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, and the seeming similarities can mask the presence of rarer species that can be drawn to the loitering flocks. The winter gull flocks are also a good opportunity to sort out those confusing plumages, and fortunately only two or three species will make up the bulk of the birds.

Over the years Cobourg harbour has been the most consistently productive locality in Northumberland for readily accessible gull flocks in winter, and we have 3,388 records from this location between December 1 and the end of February [this constitutes 82% of all gull records in this period, excluding the CBCs]. In all, 11 species have been recorded in this period, although three, Laughing Gull, Mew Gull and California Gull, have only four records between them, so they fall very much into the 'rarer species' category [the Laughing Gull from last year first appeared in March, 12 days later than the previous sighting in 1994!]. Bonaparte's Gull, although it can appear in fair numbers in early December, really does not qualify as a 'winter' gull, as there have been only scattered birds into the New Year, and it is really better considered as a very late migrant.

As for the rest, we have good numbers of the three common species – Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed – with much smaller [and rather unpredictable] numbers of Glaucous and Iceland, and occasional appearances of one or two Lesser Black-backed and Thayer's Gulls.

One of the intriguing things about these birds is that the numbers of each species varies from month to month: Ring-billeds hit a low in January and then almost double in February; Great Black-backed decrease steadily from a peak in November, while Herring Gulls increase steadily to a peak in February. This latter pattern is repeated, in smaller numbers, with Iceland Gull and Lesser Black-backed, but both Glaucous and Thayer's Gulls have a pattern shown by none of the others, with numbers peaking in January. These are composite totals over a period of years: there's quite a lot of variation from one year to the next, perhaps depending on ice conditions, so we will concentrate on the composites [For those of you who like looking at actual numbers, the gross totals are below; I have included March figures for comparison purposes].

Why do these patterns occur? As usual, we can only speculate. However, in the case of the Ring-billed Gull the answer is relatively straightforward. Many Ring-billeds leave

Ontario in winter, so although they are still common birds at that time, their numbers are much reduced. By February we are seeing return migration, which peaks in March.

COMPOSITE TOTALS OF GULL SPECIES BY MONTH, 1991-2007

	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Ring-billed Gull	43642	40270	25223	48704	69159
Herring Gull	7820	60446	139994	171129	72437
Thayer's Gull	1	4	17	11	5
Iceland Gull	4	53	161	212	106
L. Black-backed Gull	3	11	46	47	27
Glaucous Gull	7	182	430	306	146
Gr. Black-backed Gull	4836	4664	3125	1523	652

Herring Gull numbers are more difficult to explain. Herring Gulls, while common enough year-round, do not begin to approach Ring-billed numbers in the summer: in fact, the aggregate total for February is over 18 times higher than the highest monthly count between May and August. This seems to suggest that winter birds are migrants from somewhere; but it is not clear where. The *Birds of North America*, the authoritative source for information on our birdlife, is rather silent about the Great Lakes' Herring Gulls. It says that the local adults winter here, while the young birds move south; and does not suggest that we get migrants from elsewhere. Coastal Herring Gulls are said to move out to sea or south along the coasts, and the account says nothing about where the "several thousand" spread across the Arctic go.

My guess is that we may be seeing migrant birds that originate both from the Arctic and the Gulf of the St. Lawrence. Supporting this is the fact that we have considerably more Herring Gulls from September through November than in the summer months, again suggesting migration, and the January-February totals may be particularly high because return flights are usually in a much tighter time frame than those in fall, also coupled with the fact that the harbour is often frozen in these months, giving numbers of birds a prime location to loiter.

Certainly the Iceland Gulls originate from the eastern Arctic. The bird we see here is believed to be the 'Kumlien's' race of Iceland Gull – it differs mainly in having grayish smudges on the tips of the wing - and it apparently nests on cliffs in the area of south Baffin Island. It follows roughly the same wintering pattern as Herring Gull, but the numbers are so small that it's difficult to draw any real conclusions. As for the Lesser Black-backed, although they follow a similar pattern as well, no-one really knows where they originate: they're a European bird, but the numbers now being seen on this continent seem to suggest a closer origin, so perhaps they too are breeding in the eastern Arctic.

Which brings us to the real puzzle; why would Great Black-backed Gulls reach their highest numbers of the winter in December and then seem to steadily decline? In fact, the

species reaches its highest numbers of the year during the fall and then declines from there. The fall numbers suggest migration, but where do they go, and more intriguing, why do we not seem to see them returning? Great Black-backed are a pelagic species, nesting along the Labrador coast, Newfoundland and the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, with a very few on the Great Lakes, so we might expect a movement pattern similar to the three species above. At present, this is another of those odd, unexpected features the database reveals.

Which leaves us with Glaucous and Thayer's Gulls. Unlike the species above, Glaucous are spread across the north coastlines of the entire Arctic, while Thayer's nest on the northerly islands of the high Arctic, and winter mainly along the Pacific coast. There's an on-going debate as to whether Thayer's are really simply another race of the Iceland Gull [the birds look different, but they apparently don't seem to care!]. Race or not, their winter ranges are clearly very different, and the northern Great Lakes would seem to be the final winter destination of both Glaucous and occasional Thayer's Gulls.

So the gulls are with us all winter, but at the same time are among the true harbingers of spring. By February the returning flocks, all in bright, crisp spring plumages, will be calling noisily and displaying to one another, a sure sign that spring is on its way.