

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

SMALL GULLS, LITTLE GULLS AND THE TIRE MAT

By Clive E. Goodwin

Not everyone is a fan of Herring Gulls and their close kin, but the smaller gulls are a different story. In our part of the world Bonaparte's Gulls are the familiar small gull, and twice a year we can look forward to the flocks of these elegant birds moving along the waterfront, to and from their breeding grounds in the boreal forest. On the ground they form restless little groups, and from time to time they'll swirl out over the water, or perform intricate aerial ballets over some invisible source of food. I've wasted – well, spent - hours watching them when I really should be doing something more constructive, but they're a never-ending source of delight.

While we can expect them in migration, a few young birds typically spend the summer on the Great Lakes, and occasional birds will winter here as well, so we can hope for them year-round. Their numbers seem to wax and wane, and a careful look at the history of their movements reveals some suggestion of four or five year peaks. If so, the next peak may occur this year, and it will come as no surprise to regular readers to find that in the last 10 years their peak spring movements seem to have become earlier, from May to April.

However, another now familiar trend is more worrying: an apparent decline in numbers over the same period. The 1997 spring peak was over 11,000 birds [as always with the database, this is really 'bird days', as some birds will be counted more than once]. Numbers remained high for the next two years before dropping off in 2000, but then in 2001 the total was some 4200, with 3500 in 2003 and over 2900 in 2005, thus revealing a two-year sequence of much lower 'peaks'. Since then spring numbers have continued very low, with fall counts little higher, so we await the 2009 results with some apprehension.

The other small gulls are a diverse bunch indeed: about all most of them have in common is rarity. In fact, recently the American Ornithologists' Union reclassified Bonaparte's and Black-headed Gulls into a separate genus, with the Little Gull separated into another; all three had previously been in the *Larus* genus with the bigger gulls. As the kittiwakes, Sabine's Gull, and Ivory Gull all had their own genera already [as do Franklin's and Laughing Gulls, which we'll not discuss here], now all these birds are formally segregated from their larger relatives: still gulls, but distinctively different.

They're all rare here. We have 8 Ivory Gulls on record, 9 Sabine's Gulls, 12 Black-headed Gulls and about 21 Black-legged Kittiwakes. With the exception of the winter-visiting Ivory Gull they have usually appeared in migration periods, and – sometimes - popped up in the company of Bonaparte's Gulls. The same is even more so in the case of Little Gull, both the smallest and much the most common of lot. We have 238 Little Gull records, and it has been seen in every year since 1991, almost always at the same time as

Bonaparte's. The chance of finding a Little Gull is another strong incentive to watch Bonaparte's Gull flocks!

But there's more to the Little Gull story than this, which leads me – finally – to the tire mat. Anyone who started their Northumberland birding after about 1995 will wonder what a tire mat could possibly have to do with gulls, but in fact in its day the tire mat was, for its size, the most important piece of bird habitat in Cobourg harbour. The mat floated at the end of the centre pier, which it was supposed to protect. It was about the width of the pier and maybe twice as long, and simply consisted of a bunch of old tires all attached together and floating vertically with their tops protruding just slightly above the surface of the water. It was in bad shape when I first saw it, and was removed around 1995 as loose tires were breaking away and the entire mat was becoming a hazard.

The mat attracted an astonishing variety of birds. I have never encountered such a small area that was so consistently productive: you never knew what it would turn up! I saw everything from Brant to Snow Buntings on it, and it was great for small flocks of shorebirds, loitering waterfowl and open country birds like Horned Larks and pipits. But above all it was a mecca for small gulls and terns, and particularly Little Gulls.

The story of Little Gulls in North America is an intriguing one. They're an Old World species, but their first known nesting on this continent was in Oshawa Second Marsh in 1962. Subsequent nestings occurred in a variety of locations across the Province, but the last known nesting was in 1989 [an excellent account of the species' history appears in the latest Breeding Bird Atlas], and the birds often seem to be present in an area, sometimes nesting, for a few years and then move on.

So what of the tire mat? Our first harbour Little Gull records were in 1983, when a bird was seen on June 26 and stayed until July 2. The next year [1984] four birds spent July 18-29 here. Interestingly, that year coincided with the highest-ever May counts of Bonaparte's Gulls on record to that date – some 11, 500+. There were a handful of records in the next few years, and we were travelling a lot on business at that time so our contributions were few.

Then came 1994: as it happened, the next big spring peak in Bonaparte's numbers [7500+], and a year when I was convalescing from surgery, and hence, not travelling! The first Little Gull appeared on April 27. On May 2 there were 4, but the last departed on May 21, close to the end of the Bonaparte's flight. Then on July 15, long past the migration period but in a pattern reminiscent of the 1983-4 sightings, 5 birds appeared, and until August 21 there were never fewer than 2 birds in the harbour. On July 30 there were 8, all concentrated on the tire mat! We had courtship flights, and the mat itself was the site of animated courtship displays. But of course, it couldn't last. Little Gulls breed in large cat-tail marshes, and although they do like open areas for the nest sites themselves, the tire mat didn't quite make the grade. The last bird was seen on September 2. And soon the raft itself was no more.

Since then Little Gull sightings have fallen off in the County as a whole. There was a small peak in numbers in 1998-9, also years of good Bonaparte's movement, and a few isolated summer records – some in Port hope harbour, where interestingly there are a few floating tires for use by the yachts. Cobourg is lucky to see one bird a year. But for one amazing season Cobourg harbour and the tire mat was the Little Gull capital of southern Ontario!