

R. F. Oldaker

THE MAN WHO READS GULL BANDS WITH A TELESCOPE

by C. Stuart Houston, Saskatoon

Bird watching is a very interesting and rewarding hobby because one so often encounters the unusual or the unexpected. The equivalent of the golfer's "hole-in-one" or the curler's "eight-ender" may occur not once in a lifetime, but once a month or even once a week. Also, natural history is probably the last field of science where the observations of amateurs make a substantial contribution to the fund of new knowledge. Finally, one meets such interesting people with similar interests!

These points are exemplified in the most interesting story I have encountered in twenty-odd years of birding. It concerns R. F. Oldaker, of Vancouver, British Columbia, who, without banding a single bird, has made a greater contribution to bird banding than any ten banders together.

I should begin by explaining that a bird bander may expend a lot of time, money and effort to little avail. He may devote a lot of energy to a certain species and then wait in vain for recoveries to come in over the succeeding years. This was essentially the situation as regards my California Gull banding in 1959, when my recovery rate was barely 1% and the only out-of-province recoveries were one each from California and Mexico. Although there were no recoveries from intermediate points, I presumed that the gulls migrated predominantly southwards from Saskatchewan to reach these wintering grounds (perhaps pausing briefly in Salt Lake City to admire the monument erected in their honor).

Imagine my surprise, then, in September, 1959, when I received from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service three reports of California Gulls **observed by telescope** by R. F. Oldaker of Vancouver, B.C. Incredulous, I wrote to Mr. Oldaker. Here is his explanation:

"It does, as you suggest, require lots of patience to record these bands.

Fortunately, I have plenty of it. Not only that, I am very fond of birds, especially the gulls, and am never happier than when surrounded by thousands of them on the Vancouver City Dump, where most of my observing is done. I read my first band number—a Glaucous-winged Gull—on November 2, 1958, in Stanley Park, Vancouver, and it was this experience that gave me the idea of using up my time in an all-out search for bands.

"Needless to say, I have made many unsuccessful attempts to read the bands, and at first I felt every failure keenly. (I have a long list of incomplete band numbers.) Now, however, I do not worry very much if a bird gets away from me. The chances are good that I will find him again some day, as the gulls seem to like to stay a long time in any area where conditions suit them.

"In order for this band-reading to be successful, there are many conditions that must be fulfilled. Since several sightings at different angles must be made to obtain the complete number (the band number extends most of the way around the circular band), the bird must be, preferably,



Photo by J. G. Sarles.
R. F. Oldaker reading a band.

at rest in an area where I can move round him and read a few digits at a time. Failing this, I must wait for him to scratch his head with the banded foot, or move to make way for another bird. I have now had enough experience with these birds that I can often make them change position without taking fright and flying away. If they sit down in the middle of operations I can, by using great care, make them stand up again. I have read many band numbers without moving the scope.

"My scope is of 81 mm. clear objective aperture and I designed and built it myself with optics purchased from a firm in the U.S. For band reading I normally use it at 35x, which provides adequate light, but I can, if necessary, take it up to 45x or 55x simply by changing eyepieces. I only use the latter when unable to approach within 150 feet of the bird, as with every increase in power there is a corresponding reduction in the light that enters the eye.

"For this work it is absolutely essential that the scope be equipped with a finder. Mine is a homebuilt 7x monocular which functions in the same manner as the scope-sight on a rifle. I use this monocular to scan the birds' legs for bands, and having located one, I center it in the monocular and the band is automatically in the field of view of the main scope. I can proceed to read it instantly, thus saving valuable time.

"You will find that you can read a gull band with the naked eye at 3 or 4 feet and at 20 feet with an 8x binocular. You will readily understand that I can read a band with my 35x scope at 100 feet without any trouble, provided there is no sun glare and the wind is not high enough to vibrate the scope. At 55x I can read a gull band at 200 feet, but only when conditions are ideal.

"The Vancouver City Dump is less than half a mile from the North Arm of the Fraser River and this seems to be "headquarters" for most of the gulls. All day long there is a never-ending stream of birds going back and forth between River and Dump—it is truly a gull's paradise. Others come in daily from the Steveston Jetty, the Point Grey area, and local roosting places, and return at night.

"I have several records of adult Glaucous-winged Gulls who were trapped, banded and color-coded at their nests on Mandarte Islands, by the University of B.C., and kept under daily observations there—and who visited the Vancouver City Dump for food, returning to the island to their waiting mate the same day to feed their young. This island is approximately 45 miles from Vancouver. Others seem to commute daily from the Howe Sound breeding colonies. At the same time, thousands more are resting on the log booms in the river and on the roofs of adjacent sawmills.

"Although the Glaucous-winged and California Gulls receive most of my attention, other species should be mentioned. Ring-billed Gulls, mostly juveniles, are quite common in late summer and fall. Adult Herring Gulls of both North American races appear in September and many stay until early spring, and I have seen a third race with orange legs which appears only in the spring on northward migration. The Mew Gull, having different feeding habits, is only an occasional visitor, and juvenile Franklin's Gulls have been seen only once or twice each summer. In winter, Glaucous Gulls frequent the area and Western Gulls are occasionally seen. I have not yet recorded band numbers of any of the last four species."

A final note from Mr. Oldaker accompanied the photographs requested to illustrate this article:

"The gulls do not mind me at all though they are wary of strangers. Mr. J. G. Sarles tried to get a photograph of me surrounded by gulls but they would not let him get near enough. However, they are accustomed to having me with them and let me move freely among them. We seem to have an affinity for each other."

Mr. Oldaker has continued his painstaking observations, thus adding immensely to the value of the gull banding on the breeding grounds of the prairie provinces, the northern states and the Pacific coast. He has now reported over 1700 individual gulls of four species from 44 banding localities!

For example, of the 3028 California Gulls banded by Mr. Louis M. Moos



R. F. Oldaker, Vancouver, B.C.

Photo by J. G. Sarles

in Teton County, Montana, between 1954 and 1961, Oldaker has made 100 reports on 74 individuals sighted in Vancouver, B.C. Glaucous-winged Gulls figure extensively in Oldaker's work, over 1400 individuals having been reported!

He maintains a card index in which the "sight histories" of hundreds of gulls are recorded. One California Gull was reported in four successive years, several others in three years, and many in two years or twice in one year. He also has histories of Glaucous-winged Gulls who have spent five successive winters in their favorite feeding places. One Glaucous-winged Gull, 48-727701, was first seen on the Vancouver City Dump on April 16, 1959. On June 21, 1959, he read its band by its nest on Christie Island, Howe Sound, where it had been banded nine years earlier by Mr. William Hughes. On April 4 and May 5, 1960, it returned to the City Dump and then on June 19, 1960, he found it once more on Christie Island, nesting within a few feet of where it had nested the year before. The long distance record is held by an adult Thayer's (Herring) Gull banded at Cambridge Bay, Victoria Land, N.W.T., on August 27, 1962, and observed by Oldaker in Vancouver on October 24, 1962, after it had made a journey of at least 1600 miles.

"When time and circumstances permit, Mr. Oldaker keeps careful notes of the plumages, bill patterns, molts, etc., of many banded gulls. Since

these are virtually all birds of known age (having been banded as nestlings), he has been able to add much new information to what was previously known in this regard, and has even corrected some of the statements advanced in standard reference works, based on unbanded collected specimens.

I felt it would be of interest to tabulate the 29 Oldaker observations of my California Gulls banded in Saskatchewan. These represent 27 individuals, as two birds were observed in Vancouver on successive years. This represents nearly 1.8% of the 1519 California Gulls banded in Saskatchewan between 1955 and 1962. This figure should rise well over the 2% mark as further observations are made of these birds in the next few years.

Of the 124 Californias banded at four localities in 1956, and 73 banded at two localities in 1957, none was sighted at Vancouver. Also none of the small group of 17 banded at Last Mountain Lake in 1961 has yet been seen. The remaining eight California Gull banding expeditions to four lakes yielded a total of 29 sightings by Oldaker, as listed in the table.

Ring-billed Gulls from Saskatchewan appear to be proportionately less frequent visitors to Vancouver. Of 7964 individuals banded, only one, banded at Crane Lake, June 23, 1960, was sighted by Oldaker at Vancouver—on August 17, 1960.

Oldaker Observations of Saskatchewan-banded California Gulls

Location of banding	No.	Date	Date sighted by R. F. Oldaker at Vancouver, B.C.				
			Same fall	2nd Year	3rd year	4th year	5th year
Redberry Lake	134	July 23/55					
	261	June 25/60	Aug. 12/60 Sept. 8/60 Oct. 19/60	Aug. 14/61	April 12/62 Aug. 9/62		Aug. 7/59
	207	June 25/61	Aug. 10/61				
	264	June 18/62	Aug. 11/62 Aug. 15/62 Aug. 17/62 Aug. 21/62 Aug. 28/62				
Crane Lake	346	June 23/60	Aug. 18/60	May 31/61 June 7/61 (to July 8/61) June 8/61 June 20/61 June 28/61 July 8/61 July 18/61 (to Aug. 5/61)			
Last Mountain Lake	31	June 23/58		June 29/59 July 16/59		July 18/60	
	20	June 26/60	Aug. 31/60 Sept. 13/60	Aug. 1/61			
"Lozinski Slough," Kindersley	42	June 24/58				May 18/60 July 18/60	
Various localities (see text)	214		No Recoveries				
	1519		12	11	5	0	1

These results are extremely interesting, even if they raise as many questions as they answer. The California Gulls reared in Saskatchewan and banded late in June, usually learn to fly during the first week of July and apparently stay in the vicinity for another week or two. Some of these birds reach Vancouver by the second week in August, after flying at least 700 miles in a westerly direction across the Rocky Mountains. Oldaker has sighted 12 of my California Gulls the first fall, the earliest arriving on August 10, 11 and 12. The shortest recorded elapsed time between banding of flightless young in Saskatchewan and their arrival in Vancouver is 46 days.

Not all of the gulls leave so quickly, however. I have records of six banded Californias still present in Saskatchewan in August. One banded at Crane Lake on June 23, 1960, wandered 200 miles north to be hit by a car on August 4, 25 miles north of

North Battleford. Redberry Lake gulls were shot at Hague on August 6, found injured in Saskatoon on August 10, and shot at Saskatoon airport on August 29 of the same year. Another Redberry Lake gull moved over to Last Mountain Lake where it was caught on a fishing hook on August 20, and yet another was injured at Lebret on August 28. A California Gull from Redberry was found dead along the South Saskatchewan River near Clarkboro on September 28 the same year, but its date of death is not known and illness or injury may have prevented its migration.

We know that gulls take several years to reach full breeding status. Oldaker's records suggest that some Saskatchewan gulls spent their second summer as one-year-olds along the Pacific Coast without returning to the prairies. He has sighted 11 birds throughout this year.

The five records for the third sum-

mer (two-year-old birds) suggest that some at least pass through Vancouver in migration, and again some may remain for the summer. As yet we have no Vancouver sightings for the fourth summer (three-year-olds) and only one, possibly early in fall migration, from the fifth year.

A small amount of additional information may be gleaned from records of three of my California Gulls that returned to the prairies in succeeding years. A California Gull, banded at Last Mountain Lake on June 23, 1958, returned in its fifth summer (as a four-year-old) to the same lake on May 21, 1962—at an age when we would expect it to return to its native lake to breed. There are also two records of California Gulls banded at Redberry Lake in June, 1960, that returned to the prairies in their third summer as two-year-olds: one was found dead at Drumheller, Alberta, on June 20, 1962, and one at Parkbeg, Sask., reported in a letter of July 22, 1962. Since neither had returned to its lake of origin, it is possible that they were non-breeding wanderers.

More distant recoveries remain comparatively few, but all are from localities along the Pacific Coast:—two from California, three from Sonora, one from Sinolca, and one from Baja California (the last five in Mexico). These numbers are rather

insignificant when compared with the Vancouver observations.

It is obvious that the careful observations and long hours expended by R. F. Oldaker have produced valuable results. He deserves wide recognition, for he has amply demonstrated the efficacy of his method. Although it is doubtful whether anyone else will read a fraction of the number of bands that he has, we can nevertheless hope that similar studies of other suitable species will result in years to come. Not only is Mr. Oldaker adding steadily to our knowledge of gull migration every year, but he has even induced some banders to mend their ways—for after the haphazard application of bands to twenty-thousand-odd birds, I am now careful to apply all bands with the numbers right-side-up!

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Gray-crowned Rosy Finch at Fort Qu'Appelle

by E. Manley Callin, Fort San

On February 2, 1963, an alert observer, Dr. Harley D. Jenner of Fort San, telephoned to report that there were two unusual birds at his feeding station and they could not be found in his bird book (Peterson's eastern guide). Armed with Peterson's western guide, I called at the Jenner home the next day and was rewarded with a close view of the first Gray-crowned Rosy Finches (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*) I had ever seen.

The two birds, both males, first appeared on February 2 and, with their unusual but beautiful combination of brown, rose and gray colors, regularly graced the Jenner's

feeding station for the next two months. If a fairly close watch was maintained, they could be seen half a dozen times a day, sometimes two birds and sometimes only one. The last bird was seen on April 3, but there was never more than one bird seen at any one time after March 15 and this of course posed unanswerable questions to whether both birds were still present, whether one had left or whether one had fallen to a predator.

It is interesting to note that these or other birds may have been in the vicinity at an earlier date. Dr. A. L. Swanton has described a bird seen at Fort San on January 21, 1963, which