

# Observations on a GLAUCOUS GULL at Calgary, Alberta

by D. VAUGHN WESELOH\* and  
R. A. OWENS\*\*

California and Ring-billed gulls nest at several locations near Calgary, Alberta. After their arrival in the early spring but before nesting activities are fully established, these gulls, as well as other migrant gulls, roost communally on several different sloughs within and near the city limits of southeast Calgary. In the early spring they roost primarily on large ice-bound sloughs. Later, as break-up progresses, they move to a single, large, alkaline slough shallow enough to stand in. It was during observations of these two gull species at their early spring roosts that the senior author first, and then repeatedly, observed a Glaucous Gull.

The gull, an almost totally white second year bird was first observed on March 28, 1972, at 6:30 p.m. It was discovered at about 500 yards distance with a 20 - 40 X binocular telescope sitting with a small group of adult California and Ring-billed gulls. At this time it was studied for approximately 15 minutes: the plumage was reminiscent of a Snowy Owl, the wings, back and head being white with slight brown mottling. It was much larger than either the California or Ring-billed gulls and, when sitting, was at least as large as several adult Herring Gulls which were also present.

At his point the junior author was notified. However, due to the great number of gulls present at the roost by this time (3,600 - 4,000 birds) and the gull's flighty nature as dusk rapidly approached, the Glaucous Gull could not be found again.

Two days later, March 30, a second

year Glaucous Gull (presumably the same individual, as are all subsequent sightings) was again located during routine observations at the roost (1 mile west and 2 miles south of Shepard, Alberta). A more complete description which included the following points was taken: 1. no black or gray on wing tips or mantle; 2. bill, which was black-tipped, and legs appeared flesh pinkish in colour; 3. tail all white; 4. faint mottling on wings, back and head; 5. larger than adult Herring Gull when both were standing. These points are in general agreement with J. Dwight's description of a second year Glaucous Gull.<sup>1</sup>

On this occasion the gull was again seen at a distance of 500 - 600 yards but within the next hour flew to about 300 yards where all the above points of the description were confirmed. It remained at this location until observations were discontinued at 7:30 p.m. At the next sighting, like the one two days previously, the gull was sitting on the ground with a small group of adult California, Ring-billed and Herring gulls but a considerable distance removed from the main mass of roosting gulls.

The Glaucous Gull remained in the Calgary area until at least April 12 and was seen on 10 different occasions by fewer than 14 different people during that period. These sightings are summarized in Table 1.

Because this Glaucous Gull was carefully observed over a relatively extended period of time (16 days and more than 8 3/4 observation hours) so many experienced observers, so many general comments about its behavior might be in order. One was impressed with its great periods of inactivity. On at least one evening, the gull remained s

\*Department of Biology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.

\*\*No. 115, 163 West 5th St., North Vancouver, British Columbia

ing, head tucked under the wing, during the entire time it was observed (about 1 1/2 hours). At other times great pains had to be taken by various observers to arouse the gull so that its diagnostic features could be seen. Also, during all periods of observation at the roost, the gull showed absolutely no individual interaction with any of the other gull species; however, it appeared to take part in the all communal activities associated with the roosting gulls, i.e., it participated equally in upflight displays, pre-roosting assemblages and activities and it appeared at the same roost for more than 2 weeks.

Much to the surprise of the observers, the Glaucous Gull was found during mid-morning on the Bow River at a point approximately 6 miles south of the Shepard roost on April 5. It was also seen at this location during mid-morning on April 7 and 8. At these times it appeared to be scavenging for food on the ice flows and along the shore as it flew up and down the river. The fact that it was feeding along the river (a natural food source) becomes more interesting when it is realized that during that period when this gull was in the Calgary area, nearly 40 hours of gull-oriented observations were made at the three Calgary Sanitary Land Fill sites (garbage dumps) and never once

was this large gull observed. Contrary to this, in at least two other cases where Glaucous Gulls have been observed in southern Canada (Vancouver, B.C., 1971, R. Drent, pers. comm.; and Nelson B.C., 1972, W. Merilees, pers. comm. and personal observation) they are known to frequent dumps regularly. The significance, if any, of these contradictory observations is not known.

The normal wintering range of the Glaucous Gull extends south from the Arctic coast and islands along both Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Canada. It is scarce and irregular in most of the southern interior even in migration, though it appears regularly in small numbers on the upper St. Lawrence River and on the Great Lakes.<sup>2</sup>

The weather during the period March 28 to April 12 was quite variable and included periods of extremes, i.e., unseasonably cold and snowy as well as warm and sunny. Two days prior to the first sighting of the Glaucous Gull, there was an extensive cold front with much northerly and northwesterly wind that brought 2-3 inches of snow to the Calgary area. It is not untenable that the gull was blown inland by this storm.

From records available to us, this appears to be the sixth record of a Glaucous Gull in Alberta (photographs

TABLE 1.  
Sightings of a Glaucous Gull near Calgary, Alberta  
March 28 through April 12, 1972

Date	Location	Time	Observer(s)*
March 28	Shepard Roost	6:30 - 6:45 p.m.	DVW
March 30	Shepard Roost	6:30 - 7:30 p.m.	DVW
April 2	Shepard Roost	7:15 - 7:30 p.m.	WH, WGM, RP, MP, DVW
April 3	Shepard Roost	6:10 - 7:30 p.m.	BL, VL, MO, RAO, CWE, WS, DVW
April 4	Shepard Roost	6:10 - 7:30 p.m.	CW, DVW
April 5**	Bow River	9:45 - 10:15 a.m.	RP, VL, DVW
April 7**	Bow River	8:50 - 9:35 a.m.	VL
April 8	Bow River	12:15 - 12:30 p.m.	GA, WB
April 10	Shepard Roost	6:10 - 7:35 p.m.	DVW
April 12	Shepard Roost	6:10 - 7:10 p.m.	DVW

\*DVW — D.V. Weseloh, WH — Willis Hall, WGM — W. Garry McKay, RP — Richard Palindat, MP — Michael Palindat, BL — Bill Lang, VL — Virginia Lang, MO — Majorie Owens, CWE — Cleve Wershler, WS — Wayne Smith, CW — Cliff Wallis, GA — Gerry Ansell, WB — Wendy Beirness.

\*\*photographed.



of this specimen have been accepted by and are on file with Prof. W. Ray Salt, Edmonton). The first specimen, an adult, was collected at Lacombe in 1915. A second specimen was caught in a coyote trap at Youngstown in 1940. Both of these specimens are held by the Alberta Provincial Museum.<sup>3</sup> During the winters of 1960 and 1961, a Glaucous Gull was reported from Lake Saskatoon, where it apparently sat on the ice and fed on dead ducks (W. R. Salt, *in litt.*). From the files of the Calgary Field Naturalists' Society there is a record of a Glaucous Gull observed at Beaverhill Lake (40 miles ESE of Edmonton) by seven observers in May, 1966.

It is hoped that this account will encourage closer observation of all gull congregations so that the frequency and circumstances of future visits by rare species might be better documented.

<sup>1</sup>DWIGHT, J. 1925. *The Gulls (Laridae) of the World: their plumages, moults, variations, relationships and distribution.* Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist. 52: 63-408.

<sup>2</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1966. *The Birds of Canada* National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 203. Queen's Printer, Ottawa 428 pp.

<sup>3</sup>SALT, W. R. and A. L. WILK. 1966. *The Birds of Alberta.* 2nd (Revised) Edition. Dept. of Industry and Development, Edmonton, Alberta. 511 pp.

## SUGAR WATER FOR HUMMINGBIRDS AT LANIGAN, SASKATCHEWAN

by MRS. WALTER GUNTHER\*

My husband and I have derived much pleasure from a mutual hobby. For years we have observed the habits of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

In 1965 we first saw two at one time. We suspected that they had a nest in our trees as we saw them frequently that summer. In 1968, I began keeping records of each sighting. Their visits to our flower garden are as frequent as 5 to 15 minutes. They are extremely busy from 6 to 7 a.m., around noon to 1 p.m., and again from 6 to 7 or 8 p.m.

The earliest we have seen them is June 2 and the latest is September 27. We are sure that my husband discovered their nest, high up in a poplar tree. One year, on the first occasion that I saw the young ones, they and their mother were flying right near the tree where we think the nest is. They put on a spectacular aerial display. At times I could hear their faint chipping sounds. They

became quite unafraid of us. The date on which we see the immature ones is usually August 12 or 13.

In 1970, I was thrilled when I succeeded in obtaining several coloured snapshots of them. I set up my old box type camera on the kitchen window sill which faces east. If a "hummer" came to a certain lily or the feeder, I would snap the shutter and, hopefully, have a picture. One day the female sat on the fence for 20 minutes or more, scratching her head, spreading out her white-tipped fan-shaped tail. Truly a wondrous sight!

If you wish to attract hummingbirds plant deep-throated flowers. Nicotina is splendid, also columbines, delphiniums morning glories, lilies with curled back petals and many others attract them. In 1970, '71, and '72, we had feeders containing red sugar water. They quarrelled over it. Please be advised that a feeder must be washed at regular intervals. Once they become used to it, they depend on it.

Observing hummingbirds is a fascinating and rewarding hobby. We have had countless hours of enjoyment and relaxation from it.

\*Box 114, Lanigan, Saskatchewan