

ROSS' GULL NEAR SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN

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My birding highlight in 1989 was on 24 October when a Pileated Woodpecker, a Clark's Grebe and a Ross' Gull, all Saskatoon area rarities, were seen. Always-hoped-for conditions prevailed each time: light from behind the observer, bird sufficiently close for good viewing and staying long enough for adequate study. Need to assure myself of the gull's identity was fillip for further inquiry on it.

About 7:30, shortly after sunrise under broken overcast, I was scanning the valley from a 5-m high bank on the east side of the South Saskatchewan River some 18 km south of Saskatoon. Immediately catching my eye was a small pink gull associated with a few Ring-billed Gulls milling over a stretch of channels, backwaters and sandbars.

The visitor was studied for 15 minutes (20x scope, 7.5x binoculars). Ranging from 100 to 300 m distant, it flew back and forth over a 200 m stretch of the river. Continuously in flight, the gull wheeled, banked, towered and swooped, occasionally hovering with tail spread. Seemingly scanning the water, at times it appeared to feed from the surface. These manoeuvres yielded excellent views of the bird.

Following initial observation of the visitor, a field guide was scrutinized, turned first to Ross' Gull, then leafed through for other possible gull candidates.¹² Ross' it seemed to be, but there were several differences between bird seen and bird illustrated. Basic field marks and variances were rechecked and noted, and the unusual underwing pattern was sketched — after the pink body, it was the most prominent feature. Char-

acteristics of winter-plumaged Franklin Bonaparte's and Sabine's gulls — even Red-legged Kittiwake — were looked for especially the light bill, head and wing but these species were dismissed as possibilities. Because of changing light conditions, nearby Ring-billeds were compared to ensure the pink color was not sun-glow. But I left, puzzled by obvious Ross' Gull with features differing from or not covered by the guide.

Observation Details

The bird was a small white-headed white-tailed gull with salmon-pink body and pink underwing. Decidedly smaller than a Ring-billed Gull, in size and flight it was reminiscent of Bonaparte's Gull (which many were still in the district). Bill was light, no rings, spots or two-tones (specifically rechecked), proportionately shorter than Ring-billed's. The head was white, with no trace of cap, no graying streaking on pate, no ear patch or trace neck ring, no pink wash, with dark eye. Breast was deep salmon-pink (a much stronger color than a mere wash; considerably deeper and more extensive than on spring Franklin's Gulls). Flanks were light grayed-pink, under parts pink, plain with no streaks, bars or banding. Upper parts were light blue-grey, plain. The tail was white, with no pink wash, no streaks, bars or banding, its end rounded. Upperwings were light blue-grey over most of surface. Trailing edge of the wing was white from root to beyond the carpal joint; the white was wide, prominent. Outer forewing showed black from almost to carpal joint; the line of demarcation between black area and light blue-grey area was straight, at a highly acute angle with axis of wing. The black patch was shaped like that on a Sabine's Gull.

— a long, narrow triangle with its tip at the wrist and extending to the wingtip — enough taking up less of the outer wing than on that bird); two small unequalized “mirrors” occurred near the tip of black primaries. Underwings were pink, except for the white trailing edge and black outer forewing patch; pink on axillaries was almost as deep as on breast, pink beyond axillaries was lighter and faded.

Discussion

Identification was incomplete because pocket guides inherently have space only for normal field marks. The guide with me that day showed only two of the five Ross' Gull plumages — the wrong two.¹² Later course to references, including a specialized work on gulls, provided needed information on plumage details, ranges in characteristics and seldom-encountered variations.⁷

Normally in autumn, Ross' Gull undergoes a complete moult out of the first summer plumage. Moulting commences with inner primary feathers and terminates with the outer ones, all other feathers being replaced between these two events.⁷ The Saskatoon bird's field marks appeared to fit this pattern of a Ross' Gull moulting into adult winter plumage.⁸ The absence of dark tips on the outer primaries implied moulting had started, winter adults not having such tips. Continued presence of black outer primaries indicated moulting was incomplete — they formed the prominent dark patch on the outer forewing, feathers yet to be replaced by their light winter counterparts.⁸ Similarly, only the outer part of the dark broad “W” on the upper part of first summer birds was present, inner legs (carpal bars) of the W being absent, their constituent feathers having moulted (or faded).⁷ Apparently the moult of head feathers was also incomplete: the black neck ring characteristic of a first summer but not an adult winter bird was seen; yet, the dark patch, which

adults show behind the eye in winter, was still to appear.

Present on the tail were neither the slight extensions of the two central feathers on Ross' in all plumages, nor the dark terminal band of the pristine first summer plumage. These protrusions are sometimes broken off or worn to points, and the black band can be faded or worn.⁷ Thus, moulting of tail feathers appeared not to have started, and the condition seen was due to wear and fading. Heavy feather wear was thought to have transformed the tail from a wedge to the rounded shape observed, although this was not confirmed in the literature then at hand.

Of eight guides and references, only in Grant was it noted that a pinkish color may be present on the underwing of some birds.⁷ According to him, the pink on this and certain other gulls is reported to be a colorant in the preening oil. The color intensity, which is highly variable, is thought to depend on species, age, condition, season and diet. Pink tones show better on nearby birds and under overcast — the circumstances with the Saskatoon bird. The pink seen on the breast was much deeper than shown in three field guides (Farrand, Peterson and Scott), but was of about the same intensity as Robbins depicts (assuming consistency of color in runs and editions).^{4 11 13 12}

Thus, observed field marks appeared to reconcile with known characteristics of Ross' Gull — aside from the tail and excepting just the bill (without exception all the references give its color as black). Do, in fact, some first-summer birds follow the deduced moult and wear sequence, and in October exhibit the field marks observed? Available references do not address all aspects of plumage transitions, and the question was referred to the National Museum. In reply, Henri Ouellet, Curator of Ornithology, while noting points in question, concluded that there

is a very high probability the bird is a Ross' Gull. His points were: pattern of black on wings (question likely due to a fault in my description, since corrected), color of legs (which I had not given), color of back, color of bill and shape of tail (pers. corr.).

A back color of light blue-gray, as observed, is not agreed by all authorities: soft blue-gray (Cramp), gray (Godfrey), pale gray (Grant) and pearl-gray (Harrison).^{3 6 7 8} At this remove, clarification is impossible. Color of the bill remains an enigma.

Tail shape is crucial. In eight guides and references a wedge shape is noted as a diagnostic field mark for Ross' Gull. As remarked, no confirmation had been found for an assumption that feather wear sometimes results in a rounded end, that is, until the August, 1989, issue of *Birding* arrived in January, 1990. It had a photograph of an adult winter-plumaged (February) Ross' Gull in flight at close range.¹⁰ And the much worn tail was rounded. A second photo, a flying adult taken close up (September), displayed less tail wear, yet enough to round off the mid-part of the tail.⁹ These photos resolved the remaining critical point in an interesting identification poser. The "pink gull" was an aberrant in more ways than one: out of range, partly moulted, atypical bill color, tail uncommonly rounded and a deeper and more extensive pink coloration than usual.

Where did the gull come from? There are several small breeding colonies in the Western Hemisphere: Hudson Bay (Churchill, Manitoba), two or three islands in the Canadian Arctic, and Greenland.^{2 7} The bulk of the scant population, however, breeds on the Siberian coast, from where numbers migrate eastward each autumn, biding on the Alaskan and Yukon north shore before returning to the Arctic Far East.^{9 8} Ross' is thought to winter along the edge of the pack ice and in the northern seas.⁸ As both breeding and wintering

ranges are in the high north, this t Arctic species is seen but rarely in temperate zone.⁷

Ross' Gull is on the rare and endangered species list for Canada. Godfrey did not record it for Saskatchewan,⁶ and neither the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (P.C. James, pers. corr.), nor the Saskatchewan Bird Atlas (A.R. Smith, Canadian Wildlife Service, pers. comm.) has any report of it. A hypothetical entry on the Saskatoon Area bird checklist, a record of mine, also of a fall visitor in 1986, a bird which flew low overhead and was seen for only a few seconds.⁵ The 1989 sighting was a much superior and a more challenging — observation of a Ross' Gull, the first one written up in the province.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Henri Ouellet for examining the Museum's specimen collection and commenting on my observation report, and to Bernie Gollop for assistance with references.

- ¹ COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF ENDANGERED WILDLIFE IN CANADA. 1989. List of species with designated status. COSEWIC. 2 pp.
- ² COPLAND, H. *et al.* 1986. Field checklist of the birds of Manitoba. Manitoba Avian Research Committee. 14 pp.
- ³ CRAMP, S. 1983. Birds of the western Palearctic. Oxford Univ. Press. 913 pp.
- ⁴ FARRAND, J.A. (editor) 1983. Audubon Society master guide to birds of North America. 3 vol. Knopf, N.Y. 447, 398, 399 pp.
- ⁵ GILLILAND, M. and J.B. GOLLUB. 1987. Saskatoon area birds: a seasonal checklist. Saskatoon Natural History Society, Saskatoon. 8 pp.
- ⁶ GODFREY, W.E. 1986. The birds of Canada. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa. 595 pp.

GRANT, P.J. 1986. Gulls: a guide to identification. T. & A.D. Poyser, Calton, UK. 352 pp.

HARRISON, P. 1983. Seabirds: an identification guide. Houghton Mifflin. 448 pp.

MAYNARD, W.R. 1989. Jewels of the north. *Birding* 31:200-204.

O'BRIEN, R. 1989. Photograph, adult Ross' Gull. *Birding* 31(4):cover.

¹¹ PETERSON, R.T. 1980. A field guide to the birds of eastern and central North America. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 384 pp.

¹² ROBBINS, C.S. B. BRUUN, and H.S. ZIM 1966. A guide to field identification: birds of North America. Golden Press, New York. 340 pp.

¹³ SCOTT, S.L. (editor) 1983. Field guide to the birds of North America. National Geog. Soc., Washington, D.C. 464 pp.

INFORMATION REQUEST -- SAPSUCKER vs HUMMINGBIRD

Richard Miller, author of an article on sapsucker - hummingbird relationships (MILLER, R.S. and R.W. NERO. 1983. Hummingbird - sapsucker associations in northern climates. *Can. J. Zool.* 61:1540-1546.), is seeking information relative to these two species for further analysis. He is looking for long-term migration data, specifically spring arrival dates and fall departure dates for both sexes of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. Send information you may have to :

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Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding at sapsucker drills

Anonymous