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## First Record of Ross' Gull for Pennsylvania

By Ed Kwater

On October 9, 1991, Karen Lippy and Jeff Wentz were birding at Lake Marburg in York County. At 5:30 p.m. in the Black Rock Flats area, they found a unfamiliar small gull behaving in a tern-like fashion. They tape-recorded a description of the bird and after consulting a field guide, identified it as a Ross' Gull, Rhodostethia rosea, the first for Pennsylvania. The bird was observed for about an hour by the two astonished observers. Although it was searched for on October 10th, it did not show again till 5:30 p.m. on that day. The original observers were again present and managed to videotape the bird for half an hour. The bird was then absent on October 11th and 12th, but showed briefly to Karen Lippy on the 13th. It was not seen subsequently.

The videotape and a written transcription of the tape recording made by Karen Lippy were submitted to P.O.R.C. as evidence of the record. Although the quality of the videotape does not allow for instant recognition of the bird as a Ross' Gull, the P.O.R.C. undertook a careful review of all the evidence presented and came to the inescapable conclusion that the bird is indeed of that species.

The size of the bird can be judged fairly accurately from the videotape when it flies past a Ring-billed Gull, Larus delawarensis. It is obviously smaller, being the approximate size of a Bonaparte's Gull, L. philadelphia, when compared to the Ring-billed. The most striking character shown by the Ross' Gull is the tail shape. In at least two instances on the video, when the bird is closest to the camera, the diagnostic wedge-shaped tail can be seen with the central rectrices being clearly longer than the rest. It could be argued that this is just some other small gull species in active molt, with the outer rectrices still growing, but no other gulls show rectrices as long as the central rectrices on this bird, in comparison to the body length. The wing shape is also strongly indicative of Ross' Gull with relatively broad wing bases narrowing quickly to long, sharply attenuated primaries.

As far as the plumage of this bird is concerned, aging it is not altogether easy. It is clearly not an adult. The written description mentions black tips to the central rectrices which are not visible in the video but which obviously point to immaturity. Stills taken from the video show some black on the outer primaries and also a fairly thin black diagonal bar from the carpal joint across the upper

wing coverts. The written description mentions these field marks and also notes black "across the bottom of its wings out<sup>to</sup> the tips which are black". This clearly corresponds to the black primary tips found on Ross' Gulls in juvenile, basic 1 and alternate 1 plumages. The bird appears rather overexposed and "bleached out" in the video making the extent of these black markings rather difficult to discern. Indeed, much of the footage might indicate that the bird was in basic definitive plumage were it not for the presence of some black in the wings in the closest views. In the written description the observers state that when the bird flew towards them the carpal areas were so black that they looked like "black headlights". In some views the underwing surface appears white, in others distinctly gray. The observers also noted a small dark spot behind the eye, a small black bill (a very good character for Ross' Gull) and yellow legs.

What was rather puzzling to the records committee was the extent of black on the upperwing surface - too little for a juvenile but too much for a bird in basic 1 plumage or basic definitive plumage. This suggests basic 2 plumage. However Grant (1986) states that Ross' Gull molts into basic definitive plumage between June and September of its second calendar year. He therefore draws no apparent distinction between basic 2 and basic definitive plumages in this species. Cramp and Simmons (1983) claim that basic 2 and alternate 2 plumages have not been examined in Ross' Gull but that they probably differ from corresponding plumages of adults as in Little Gull, L. minutus. The Little Gull is a prime example of a small gull with distinct basic 2 and alternate 2 plumages in many individuals. The fact that Bonaparte's Gulls and Common Black-headed Gulls (L. ridibundus) can also show signs of immaturity in these plumages will be the subject of a separate discussion (Kwater, in prep.). Photographs of a Ross' Gull in distinct basic 2 plumage at Ijmuiden, Holland in Birding World (1992) and Dutch Birding (Moerbeek, 1993) clearly show very similar plumage characters to those in Karen Lippy's video and description. The yellow leg color of the Lake Marburg bird is inconsistent with that given by Grant (186), who states that the leg color of first and second calendar year Ross' Gulls is brown, dull flesh or dull red. Cramp and Simmons (1983) give the leg and foot color of juvenile Ross' Gulls as being flesh-brown. The legs of the basic 2 bird as Ijmuiden appear to be very dark brown or gray. It may well be that yellow is within the normal range of variation of leg color for Ross' Gulls of this age.

Bearing in mind that the pre-basic molt in Ross' Gull is usually completed by September the Lake Marburg bird would appear to be in a distinct basic 2 plumage rather than an alternate 1 bird still molting into basic definitive plumage. It could however be possible that the bird was in delayed molt and without any information on the exact condition of

the plumage either from the video or the written details it would perhaps be best to leave this as a "probable" basic 2 bird.

The P.O.R.C. would like to thank Karen Lippy for having the foresight to videotape this bird and provide the committee with this underused form of documentation of Pennsylvania's first Ross' Gull.

#### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Andrew Butler for his help in gathering information for this article.

#### References

- 1). Birding World 1992 Vol. 5 # 11
- 2). Cramp S., and K.E.L. Simmons 1983. Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa - The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol. iii p. 862, Oxford University Press.
- 3). Grant P.J. 1986 - Gulls, a Guide to Identification. pp 124-128. Buteo, South Dakota.
- 4). Moerbeek D. 1993. Ross' Meeuw Te IJmuiden in November 1992, Dutch Birding. Vol. 15, # 1 pp 7-13.

SEE ALSO VIDEO & STILLs FROM VIDEO

ROSS'S GULL AT LAKE MARBURG

On oct. 9, 1991 at 5:30 P.M. at the Black Rock Flats area of Lake Marburg Jeff Wentz and I observed a small gull behaving in a tern-like fashion. Because it was unfamiliar to us, I suggested we tape record our description and then look it up in our book.

My Description was as follows:

Jeff: Across the bottom of it's wings are black out to the tips which are black. Shoulders have black mark. Rest of wing is basically gray. on top. The bill is small and black.

Me: But that tail! It is rounded with a point extending from the tail. It can't be many in the book like that. It has yellow legs.

Jeff: The extending point is black on the tip.

Me: Right!

Jeff: The eye is dark.

Me: It has a spot behind the eye. A small dark spot. I saw that real well when it sat just now.

Jeff: When it flies toward us the wings appear so black at the bend they look like black headlights.

Me: It appears to be hawking insects! the air is full of some kind of tiny flies. I feel it is only about  $\frac{1}{2}$  the size of the king bill which just flew by.

Jeff: Maybe a little bigger. The bill is really small compared to the ring bill also.

At this point Jeff got out his Peterson's guide and looked up the bird. He said "It's a Ross's Gull. I said, "Look again! It can't be!" He looked again and still insisted that it was the only bird with a tail like ours had. Still doubting, I grabbed the book and took a long look at the Ross's and all the other gulls and I had to agree. The Ross's is the only one with a tail which has that peak.

We observed the bird that evening for about 1 hour. We had binoculars and a scope. When I got home I immediately called Al Spiese to come and confirm it for us. He came the next day but did not see it.

At about the same time 5:30 P.M. Wednesday evening, the gull returned to the area and again began hawking insects. I had phoned several persons but only Jeff Wentz and I showed up for the gull's performance again. I video taped the gull for about  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour. I feel certain that I have enough verifying marks to confirm our Ross's gull.

Friday Oct. 11, the weather became cold and rainy. The gull was not seen for 2 days. On Sunday after 3 hours of watching, I saw it fly down to the flats area and immediately leave. It has not been seen since.

Record No.: 359-01-1991

# Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

## Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: **Ross' Gull**

Date of Sighting: **October 1991**

Observer(s): **Karen Lippy**

Date of Submission: **1991**

Submitted by: **Karen Lippy**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater	X						
B. Haas	X						
F. Haas	X						
R. Ickes	Abstain						
G. McWilliams	X						
S. Santner	X						
J. Skinner	X						
TOTALS	6						
DECISION	X						

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

*Bm Haas*

Date:

2-27-93