

GULLS AND BRIDGES

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Above High Rock fly the Herring Gulls on their daily crossing of Staten Island. In the morning they travel westward to their feeding grounds. They are to be seen along the Arthur Kill and around Newark Bay but the greatest numbers, reaching an estimated total of as many as 25,000 concentrate at Fresh Kills in the western portion of Staten Island, attracted by the city's garbage dumped on the salt meadows in an operation termed landfill. In late afternoon, their scavenging for the day accomplished, the gulls return eastward across the island to spend the night on or near salt water.

The behavior of the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) in relation to the bridges spanning the different waterways around New York has interested me for many years. The Outerbridge Crossing, so named in honor of Eugenius H. Outerbridge, first chairman of the Port Authority, being but a mile from my home in Pleasant Plains, is the bridge I have used most during the thirty-four years of residence in the Plains. On many occasions I have seen gulls following the course of the Arthur Kill and noticed that as they approached the bridge they elevated themselves in order to pass *over* the structure altho much less effort would be required to fly under. The 135-ft. clearance at mid-channel is sufficient to permit a small plane to fly safely under the bridge, yet I have never seen a Herring Gull pass beneath the Outerbridge.

This gull versus bridge observation prompted me to mention it to interested individuals and at meetings of the Natural History Section of our Institute. From Mrs. Kay Dorr of Mystic, Conn., a former Staten Islander, I received a letter telling of gulls reported to have been seen flying under bridges. Mrs. Dorr stated that a man who at one time worked on tugboats in New York Harbor told of seeing gulls fly under bridges in following garbage scows towed on the East River. Feeling that first hand observation is often best, I decided to spy on the East River gulls. Choosing a position in Manhattan affording a clear view of the Queensboro Bridge, I remained on location for about an hour. No scows appeared during that time but gulls in moderate numbers were in flight patrolling the river, some flying north, others south.

Well, sure enough, some of the gulls—maybe one out of every eight or ten—flew under the bridge. The others elevated themselves and passed above it. One wonders whether the under-the-bridge fliers were "scow-broken" birds or individual innovators.

When the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge connecting Staten Island with Long Island was dedicated in November 1964, I was absent from the Island, but I did a lot of speculating about Verrazano and the gulls. This bridge differs from the others in a number of respects. The impressive supporting piers, about 600 feet tall, are close to the shore at each end. Clearance at midspan is 250 feet, 115 feet greater than that at Outer-

bridge. To pass over Verrazano at the lowest point, gulls would be forced to elevate themselves to a much higher level than at either Outerbridge or Queensboro. What would the gulls do about Verrazano?

Several times during spring and summer of 1965 I stationed myself at Fort Wadsworth where parking was permitted in order that people may view the bridge, surely one of man's master achievements. The bridge caused me to feel small and rather humble. The gulls behaved as if the bridge had made an impression on them too. They flew neither over nor under the bridge, but around the ends above the land at a point where the superstructure and supporting cables are low. This detour pattern of flight was dominant, but a few deviations were noted. A group of five Bonaparte's Gulls accompanied by three immature Herring Gulls flew over the bridge at about mid-channel and three adult Herring Gulls closely following a charter fishing boat, stayed with the craft as it passed under the bridge. I watched an adult Herring Gull flying slowly along the shore far below me as it scanned the beach for food. This gull, as did two others later, passed between the bridge pier and the shore and thus flew under the bridge. Were these gulls so intent in searching for food below as to be unaware of what was over head?

Many persons are superstitious, their conduct influenced by taboos. It is thought to bring bad luck, even disaster, to walk under a ladder, to break a mirror, to have a black cat cross in front of you. Gulls are not superstitious, but they are suspicious, and to me they appear to have a real aversion to going under bridges. Two other observers and I witnessed an amusing example of this in early August 1965. We saw a tugboat pushing, not towing, a long scow on which we counted twenty Herring Gulls hitch hiking! The tug was moving north toward the Upper Bay and would pass beneath the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in a matter of minutes. Through our binoculars we watched as the scow drew closer and closer to the bridge. I felt a tension as one does during a count-down. The gulls continued standing in loose array on the scow with no sign of uneasiness, almost as if they belonged on the craft. Then, shortly before the bridge was reached, all twenty gulls flew away, choosing not to be pushed under the bridge.

If you are near any of the high bridges, especially in winter when the gulls are with us in greatest numbers, take a little time to observe what the gulls are doing.

Even in summer some of the gulls remain with us as nonbreeders, and in June 1964 an amazing discovery was made when Guin Polevoy, Game Warden, took me in his fast boat to Swinburne Island, easily visible from South Beach. On this 2½-acre bit of land we found a thriving breeding colony of Herring Gulls. We counted 105 nests, 192 eggs and 51 chicks, an experience thrilling to any bird enthusiast.

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