

THE LITTLE GULL IN WESTERN NEW YORK

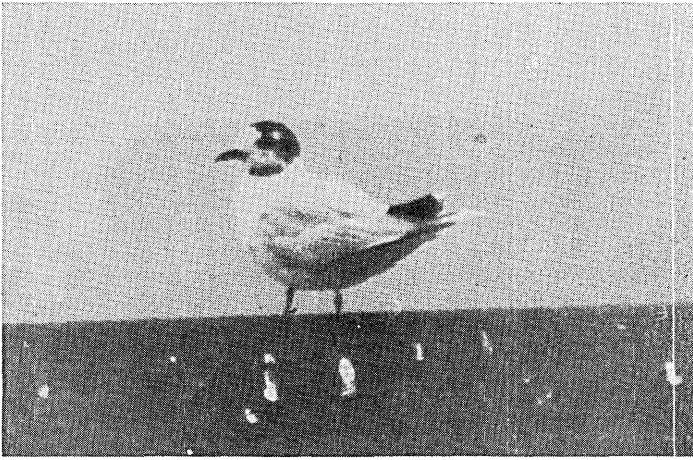
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One of the most interesting events in recent ornithology has been the "invasion" of the Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) into eastern North America from the Old World and the discovery of its breeding in Ontario, Canada. Once considered casual in North America (*A.O.U. Checklist*, 1957), it can now be considered regular in some parts of eastern North America, notably western New York State. A short review of this species' occurrence in North America will be followed by a discussion of its status in western New York.

Baillie (1963) considered the Little Gull to "be a rare but regular associate of Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) on its spring, fall and winter visits to the eastern part of the continent, particularly around the lower Great Lakes and in the northeastern United States." He also stated that this species had occurred in Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania in the United States, and in Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan in Canada (*op. cit.*). Since 1962 the Little Gull has also occurred in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Wisconsin, Michigan and Texas, as reported in *Audubon Field Notes* (Vols. 16-21).

The Little Gull breeds from Denmark, Sweden, Finland and northwestern Russia south to northern Germany, eastern Poland, southcentral Russia and central Siberia (*A.O.U. Checklist*, 1957). There are two major theories concerning the origin of the birds that have led or are in the process of leading to the probable colonization of this species in the New World. The traditional view is that the Little Gull crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Europe (Forbush, 1925). A more recent view holds that the major source of birds is individuals from Asia which wandered across the Bering Sea to North America, where they ultimately encountered flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls and were swept southeastward with them in the fall flight. The latter view is supported by Conkey and Griscom (1935), Chapin (1933, 1936) and reiterated by Baillie (1963).

The steady increase in reports over the last two decades of both adult and immature Little Gulls throughout eastern North America culminated in the discovery of the first New World nesting of this species in Oshawa, Ontario in 1962 by Scott (1963). The nests were masses of cattail leaves floating in two feet of water in a small area of a marsh. On 1 June 1962 the nests held 1, 2, and 3 eggs; each held 3 eggs on 3 June; all eggs had been destroyed by 22 June. On 8 and 15 June 1963, one nest with 3 eggs was found in the same locality. Subsequent visits were not made so the outcome of the nest was not determined. A single adult male and one egg were collected on 11 June 1962 by Baillie (1963) for the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.



*Photograph by Joanna Burger
Niagara River, mid-September 1967.*

In the above photograph of a Little Gull standing on a wall along the Niagara River, note the black wing lining of the right wing, and the smaller, rounder appearance of the head due to the shorter, stubbier bill.

Buffalo Area

Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) classify the Little Gull as an uncommon, sometimes rare fall transient visitant, occasional very rare winter and spring visitant, and a casual summer visitant. The first report for this species in the western New York region is that of a bird observed 20 November 1938 near Bird Island in the Niagara River (Beardslee and Mitchell, 1965). Since that time, however, the species has been recorded every fall, with the lone exception of 1942. It may thus be classified as a "regular" fall transient, occurring from 8 August to 21 January. Records of the Buffalo Ornithological Society indicate that the Little Gull is an irregular spring migrant from 6 April to 9 May. It is an irregular winter visitant in the area.

The autumn flight is typically from late August to early January. Since 1950, there have been two records prior to 19 August (8 Aug 1964, 15 Aug 1966).^{*} A single adult was observed 1 August 1966 at nearby Rock Point Provincial Park, Ontario.

^{*}Unless otherwise noted, records are from the *Prothonotary* for that recording period. Records after September 1967 are not included.

There appear to be two peaks in the numbers of Little Gulls in their fall flight through the western New York area. As many as five individuals have been reported in late September along the Niagara River (20-27 Sept 1966) and as many as ten in late November between Niagara Falls and Lewiston [21 Nov 1964, *Kingbird* 15(1): 27]. Since Little Gulls are invariably found in close association with the Bonaparte's Gulls, it is not surprising to note that the appearance of the second peak movement of Little Gulls correlates positively with the second of two major waves of Bonaparte's Gulls in this area (Beardslee, 1964; Beardslee and Mitchell, 1965).

Little Gulls are likewise most commonly found in areas most frequented by Bonaparte's Gulls in the western New York area: the Niagara River, Dunkirk harbor, and the Canadian shore of easternmost Lake Erie. The authors consider that birds seen on the Ontario side of narrow international waters (e.g. the Niagara River, the extreme NE tip of Lake Erie) should be included with the records from western New York, as not only may most of these birds be observed from New York territory, but these birds also have been observed countless times to cross repeatedly into the waters of both sovereignties.

Until 1962, only one or two individuals were reported for any given day in September. In 1963, four birds were reported on the Niagara River on 7 September and 24 September; and in 1965 and 1966, five birds were recorded on the River in one day (11 Sept 1965 and 20 to 27 Sept 1966).

It is interesting that October records are usually for single birds, although in 1964 as many as four birds were noted in a single day, and in 1965 and 1966 as many as five birds were recorded on the Niagara River (31 Oct 1965, 1 Oct 1966, 5 Oct 1966 and 10 Oct 1966). It is noteworthy that there are more records for the last three years than for the previous thirteen years.

There are more records for November than any other month, and again there are more records in later years. As many as six individuals were recorded in November 1958, seven in November 1959, and the ten in November 1964 mentioned above. The 1959 record, from unpublished data of Richard Brownstein, provides an interesting correlation for the maximum of nine birds noted 90 miles north of Buffalo in Toronto, Ontario by Gunn on 4 October 1959 (Baillie, 1963). It is significant to note that during a similar period in 1959, Brownstein and Schaffner observed 100,000 Bonaparte's Gulls on the Niagara River (Burger and Brownstein, 1968).

December records are usually of single birds, with a maximum of one to four on 1-16 December 1959. All records from January to August are for one or two birds on any given day.

The advent of the typical mid-winter polar systems with sub-freezing temperatures generally signals the withdrawal of the Bonaparte's Gull concentrations with their more illustrious companions. The Little Gull,

nonetheless, has been recorded in 8 of the last 17 Januaries, the latest individual observed on 21 January 1950.

The birds observed in February of 1949, 1950, 1953, 1954 and 1960 as well as one reported 6 March 1960 are presumed to be wintering birds. In all cases they were single birds observed with the wintering flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls on the Niagara River.

The earliest spring record is 6 April 1952. Other early dates include individuals recorded 7 April 1946 (Beardslee and Mitchell, 1965) and 17 April that same year. The reference in Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) to a bird seen in Dunkirk harbor 10 April 1939 appears to be in error. From 1950 through 1966 there have been four records in April and one in May (2 May 1953). Single Little Gulls were observed in Dunkirk harbor on 14 April, 23 April and 9 May of 1967 by the authors, and an immature was reported there 14 May 1967 [*Kingbird* 17(3): 154]. The 9 May bird (also an immature) and the 14 May record, presumably the same bird, represent late spring dates. Three Little Gulls were observed by Curry on the Niagara River on 23 April 1967. It is noteworthy that 6 of the 8 records of spring migrants from the past 16 years occurred in 1966 and 1967.

No summer records exist for Buffalo in June and July. Two July records from Ontario are worth noting: a single bird observed inland by Axtell in Ontario (3 miles from the Niagara River) on 9 July 1966, and one at Rockhouse Point, Ontario on 26 July 1966. A single bird was observed in international waters on 22 July 1967 at Erie Beach, Ontario.

Records of the Buffalo Ornithological Society indicate that the species is increasing. Prior to 1958, one or two birds was the maximum observed on any given day; after that date it was not unusual to observe three or four on the Niagara River in September, October or November. Prior to 1959, the Little Gull was reported on 12 or fewer days in any year. In 1959 it was reported from November 6 until December 16. Since 1959, careful examination of the Bonaparte's Gulls on the Niagara River has usually resulted in finding at least one Little Gull between early September and early December.

Figure 1 illustrates the Little Gulls observed in the Buffalo area from 1950 until 1966. All birds are from the New York State area of the Niagara Frontier except the single bird for the period of July 1 through 10 and July 20 through 30. Each month is divided into ten-day periods; and the 1 day-1 gull units added and plotted for that ten-day period. For example, in the period of Jan 1 to Jan 10, 8 birds were reported from 1950 to 1966. Note that it could be 1 bird observed for 8 days, or 8 birds observed on 1 day, or any combination of these two. All records are from the *Prothonotary* Vols. 16-32.

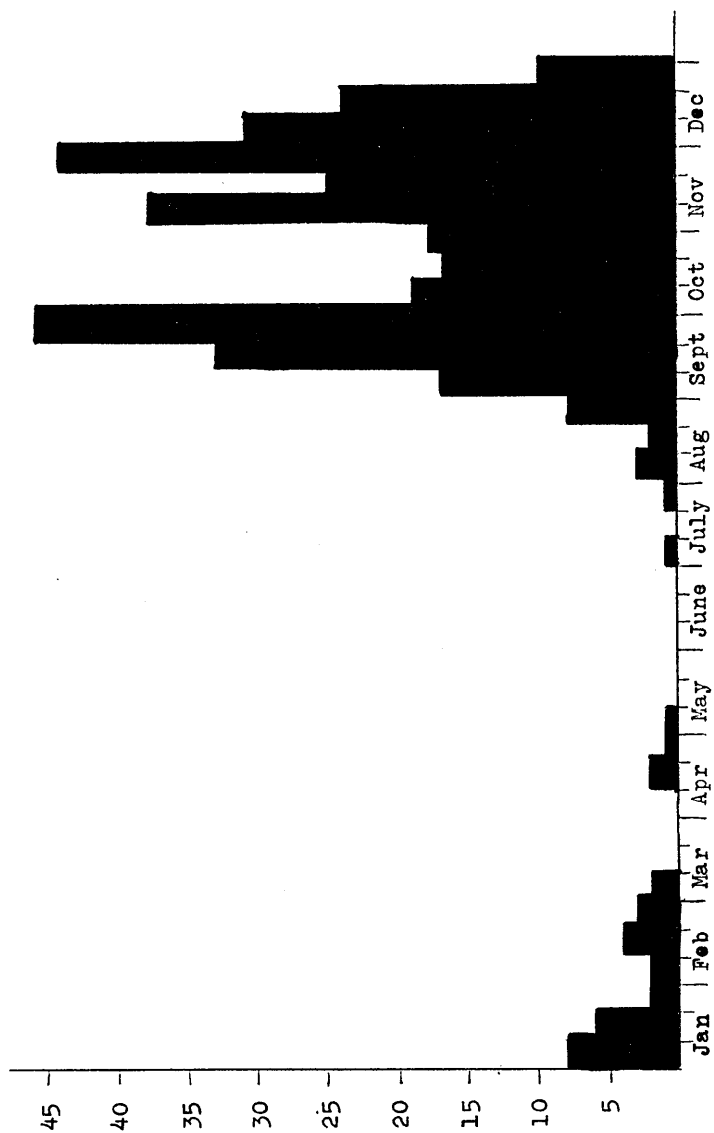


Fig 1. Total Number of Little Gulls Observed in Buffalo, N.Y. 1950-1966.
See the text for explanation.

Maxima: 31 August 1965 — 2
11 Sept. 1965 — 5
27 Sept. 1966 — 5
31 Oct. 1965 — 5
21 Nov. 1964 — 10
23 Nov. 1959 — 7
8 Nov. 1958 — 6
1 Dec. 1959 — 4
8 Jan. 1955 — 2

The Buffalo Museum has three specimens: one collected by H. D. Mitchell on 10 Nov 1941 at Bird Island Pier (BSNS 2030); one collected by R. F. Andrie at Austin Street on the Niagara River, 25 Nov 1959 (BSNS 5083); one collected by R. F. Andrie at Bird Island Pier, 6 Oct 1966 (BSNS 5078).

Rochester

The Little Gull is an irregular spring and fall migrant and winter resident in the Rochester area. No records are known for this species prior to one bird observed at Charlotte on 17 December 1939 (Secker, 1941). This or another individual was observed on 1 January of the following year.

Little Gulls were observed in 1947, 1948 and 1949.* Although previously only single birds had been observed, Chapin saw two at Braddock's Bay on 23 June 1948. The two individuals remained in the area until 22 July 1948. On 23 July 1948 Klonick and Boardman collected a mature male at Braddock's Bay, which is now in the Rochester Museum Collection (specimen unnumbered).

Little Gulls have been recorded in the Rochester area every year since 1953 except for 1955. Previous to 1965, more than two birds were observed at any one time only twice: three at Braddock's Bay 25 June 1961 [*Kingbird* 11(3): 157] and three at Russell Station 5 January 1964 [*Kingbird* 14(2): 99]. In August of 1965 as many as four individuals were observed at one time.

Figure 2 illustrates the Little Gulls observed in the Rochester area from 1950 until 1966. The 1 day-1 gull units used in Figure 1 are used in this illustration. Note that the Little Gull has occurred in every month except February and March.

Summary

The Little Gull is a regular fall migrant, and an irregular spring migrant and winter visitant in western New York. As many as 10 individuals have been noted in one day along the Niagara River from Niagara

*Records for the Rochester area are from the *Goshawk* for that reporting period unless otherwise noted.

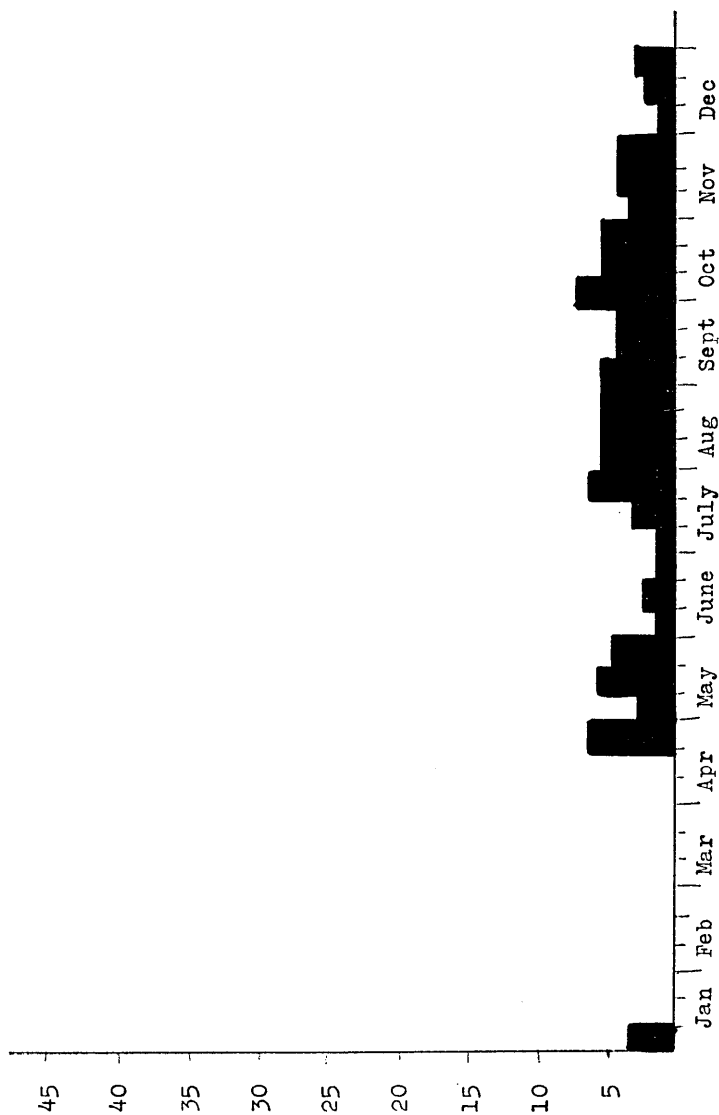


Fig 2. Total Number of Little Gulls Observed in Rochester, N.Y. 1950-1966

Falls to Lewiston and as many as 7 on the River in the Buffalo area; as many as 4 have been noted in one day along the shore of Lake Ontario in the Rochester area. Records of the Buffalo and Genesee Ornithological Societies indicate that the species is increasing in numbers.

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