

*Ivory Gull. Saratoga Springs, Saratoga County.
15 January 1982*

Ron LaForce



IVORY GULL VISITS A BIRD FEEDER IN SARATOGA SPRINGS

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Ivory Gulls (*Pagophila eburnea*) are known to be quite resourceful in finding food. In the Arctic they wander widely, feeding opportunistically on the carcasses of whales, walruses and seals as well as the excrement of seals and polar bears (Bent, 1921, p. 29). The immature bird present for weeks at Salisbury, Massachusetts in 1976 aggressively pursued handouts from birders and walked around on the cutting boards of fishing boats where the catch was being cleaned. Nevertheless, I think no one could have predicted the appearance of an adult Ivory Gull at a backyard feeder in upstate New York, many miles from open water. Yet on 14 January 1982 Mrs. James Coleman noticed a small, entirely white gull with short black legs walking about under her feeder in the northern outskirts of Saratoga Springs, Saratoga County. The area is quite open and the yard contained only a couple of very small trees and some shrubs. Perhaps initially attracted by bread, or scraps from a hanging suet feeder, the gull repeatedly visited the feeder area where it ate the remains of a pork roast, chicken, and minced clams offered by Mrs. Coleman. Between visits to the feeder, the bird sat atop two outbuildings at the edge of the yard; it apparently spent the night of 14-15 January on the roof of one of these buildings.

On the morning of 15 January, the gull was first noted at the feeder at about 7:30 A.M. At approximately 12:00, under sunny skies, C. Benkman, J. Cherry, P. Kerlinger, S. Terrill, and I confirmed its identity, and I photographed the gull as it sat on the barn roof. The immaculate, glistening white plumage and deep red eye-ring indicated that it was an adult bird, *i.e.*, more than one year old (Grant, 1981, p. 139). First-winter Ivory Gulls can apparently be entirely white, but have a black eye-ring (*Amer. Birds*, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 264; May 1979). The bird remained on the roof until we left at about 12:45 P.M. After we left in the early afternoon of 15 January, the gull was captured and banded. A few minutes after being released the bird soared high up in the air and disappeared toward the east, a direction in which it had been seen to fly earlier in the day (R. LaForce, pers. comm.). Unfortunately, it was not seen again, in spite of a search of all open water in the general area on 16 January.

The weather immediately prior to the arrival of the gull was not particularly remarkable except that the region had been enduring a period of sustained bitter cold. The movement of a coastal low-pressure storm off Long Island produced moderate to strong northerly winds over New York and southern Canada prior to the arrival of light snow in the area late on 14 January.

Beginning in the latter half of the 1970's, Ivory Gulls began to appear in unprecedented numbers off the shores of maritime Canada. In January and February of 1979, hundreds were seen in northern Newfoundland, part of a flight estimated to involve at least several thousand birds (*Amer. Birds*, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 264; May 1979). Coupled with this increase in more northern areas, stragglers reached southern Canada and New England with greater than usual frequency. The winter of 1975-76 brought Ivory Gulls to New Brunswick, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York; the winter of 1977-78 found two in Maine and single birds in Ontario, Massachusetts, and New York. The winter of 1980-81 produced a minor invasion of inland New York (Treacy, 1981, p. 63; Davis, 1981, p. 85). The species was considered casual or accidental in all of these areas at the time the fifth edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds* was published in 1957.

This record constitutes the fourteenth for New York. Bull (1974, p. 288; 1976, p. 20) lists seven records. Omitted is a sighting of an adult in the gorge at Niagara Falls in December 1924 (Beardslee and Mitchell, 1965, p. 256). Since 1976 there have been six additional records: 8-9 February 1976, Southold, Suffolk Co. (imm.); 8 December 1977 and 13 January 1978, Robert Moses Power Dam near Masena, St. Lawrence Co. (imm.); 22 December 1980-1 January 1981, gorge at Niagara Falls, Niagara Co. (imm.); 11 January 1981, Newburgh, Orange Co. (adult); 11-20 January 1981, Newburgh, Orange Co. (imm.); and 21 January 1981, Charlotte, Monroe Co. (imm.). The fourteen records are almost equally divided between coastal (6) and inland (8) areas. They include five adults, eight immatures and one bird of unspecified age. The preponderance of upstate occurrences in recent years suggests either that the birds are arriving overland from Hudson Bay, or more likely, perhaps from the population off Atlantic Canada via the St. Lawrence River.

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