

SOME GULL WAYS

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"Birds of a feather," well, at times they do not flock together. In this discussion, two allied species, the Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) and the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) are to be initiated quite different from each other, but to the general public they are known as sea gulls. However, by size, habits and subtle markings, the two species are different. Consult any field guide to straighten out this matter. In the past few years, the writer has encountered these two species, both together and separately, in and around Jerome Park Reservoir in northwest Bronx County, New York. Except during the summer months, flocks of Ring-billed Gulls occur, mainly in gray adult phase with a scattering of subadults. And in their company at times, we cannot but notice conspicuous dark first-year Herring Gulls. This fact is more impressive when the birds are seen close at hand on land.

While the two species are rather common birds in the reservoir area through the year, lately the Ring-billed Gull has become the more numerous, except when the Herring Gulls are migrating through, or during interregional shifting, when severe winter weather drives the birds south seeking open water. During the latter moves, Herring Gulls settle on the reservoir waters almost exclusively. Though the Ring-billed Gull also may be found in the reservoir, it is just as commonly seen on land that surround the reservoir, in small to large flocks.

The reservoir, which both species visit each morning, is but a stop-off before the birds disperse to feeding places. A view of the birds in the reservoir in the early morning might give an impression that the two species are mingling, but a careful examination of the flocks is likely to show that haphazard mixing is not the case, and that flocks for the most part are by species. This fact may be ascertained by a close scrutiny of the swimming birds. This separation is more visible and proveable in the winter, when the two species are standing on ice.

After a temporary halt at the reservoir, the birds continue their daily journeys, by several exits from the area. The targets of the moves are the Harlem and Hudson rivers to the west and southwest, the south shore of the Bronx (the western extremity of Long Island Sound), and the great lawns of Van Cortlandt Park. Both species use these paths; the Ring-billed Gull favors the route to the Sound; the

Herring and other gulls go southwest, west and northwest to the estuarine areas.

Within the reservoir, there is a northward movement, from where the birds have landed in the middle. By short and lingering hops, the gulls either fly out to the north or in most cases accumulate on the earth and concrete northern sector of the reservoir that acts as a dam to that low-lying area. At times there may be hundreds of gulls, representative of the species in the reservoir, but usually the two gulls under consideration are the majority. The positioning of the species is not unlike that in the reservoir. The Ring-billed Gulls enjoy the watery edge of the inclined border and—before a woven wire security fence was put in place—the flat top of the section. The Herring Gulls on the other hand, preferred the sloping grassy portion, though some of these larger gulls found the flat top portion to their liking although they remained apart from the Ring-billed Gulls.

From observations both recalled and recorded, I have come to the conclusion that there appears to be a symbiotic relationship between certain age groups of the two species of gulls, that seems to be out of the realm of coincidence. These repeated observations have elicited a feeling, totally anthropomorphic, regarding these closely related species. The matter concerns the dark-plumaged young Herring Gull, which by some signal or action has been found to be unwanted in the company of the grey and white adults. This feeling of alienation is strong enough to drive the less than one-year-old bird out of the flock. It, therefore, seeks refuge in the company of gull flocks of a similar looking, but different species that is less chastising than adult Herring Gulls. Since the Ring-billed Gull is a reduced copy of the larger gull, and, more importantly, is relatively unaggressive, the move is unopposed. Thus, at times in the company of local Laughing Gulls during their season, a young Herring Gull finds a peaceful resting place among the Ring-billed Gulls. However, after the Herring Gulls begin to attain grey feathering, in the second year, this act becomes unnecessary. The dark birds, found often in the dry-land flocks of Ring-billed Gulls, are less obvious in the flocks on the water.

To help visualize what occurs in the foregoing paragraphs, it might be helpful to describe the appearance of a first-year Herring Gull. The normal plumage of a fully grown young bird of the year is a dull ash-brown, making it the darkest overall gull in our region. In contrast, all of the plumages of the Ring-billed Gulls in our area when they arrive from northerly breeding sites contain some traces of tan, grey or black and white, never the somber shades of the larger gull.

Since the tan, greyish-white Ring-billed Gulls predominate locally, the striking contrast of a yearling Herring Gull catches the observer's eye immediately. Not only does the dark plumage make the birds conspicuous, but to the practiced eye, the height, bulk and long black bill make the birds stand out from the more delicate Ring-billed Gulls.

When you find an accumulation of gulls at the northern sector of the reservoir, they almost invariably have originated from the flocks sitting on the water in the middle of the reservoir. In entering the reservoir, from whatever direction, the gulls land on water approximately in the median area of the reservoir. After a period of time, the resting gulls either fly out or by small progressive flights gather at the north end of the reservoir. Several times I have witnessed the entire evacuation of birds from the reservoir in a matter of moments, with the motives unknown or unseen. But generally, the gulls leaving do so along specific exits.

While the Herring and other large gulls depart to the rivers to the southwest and west, the Ring-billed Gulls use two routes from the reservoir. In one, the birds go to the south and southeast, to the Harlem River and the south shore of the Bronx; or they accumulate on the north side of the reservoir and may be seen from Van Cortlandt Park, volplaning down from the heights where the reservoir is located to the broad fields of the Parade Grounds of Van Cortlandt. At this locale they rest, preen and feed, near the busy thoroughfare of Broadway.

The Ring-billed Gull is a more terrestrial bird than any of our local gulls, preferring at times areas around shopping malls, picnic recreation grounds, and any open, traffic-free park lands. Lack of water in these situations, other than puddles after rain, does not inhibit them at all, even when the lots are full of cars, trucks and pedestrians. Here, the Ring-billed Gull has a wide choice of foods and is unhampered by the larger bolder species. Competition for food might consist of smaller birds such as the European Starling, House Sparrow or Rock Dove. Feasting on discarded foods and other refuse, the Ring-billed Gull acts as a scavenger and thrives in this milieu. We have witnessed an increase of this species in the last several decades, abetted in part by the winter survival, which is directly related to the constant supply of food available. One is always pleasantly surprised at the tameness of the Ring-billed Gull. A good example of this may be seen at Rockland Lake, Hook Mountain State Park, where along the lake's parking areas, visitors feed water birds. At one's feet may be Mallards, Muscovy Ducks and Ring-billed Gulls as tame as barnyard fowl.

This trust in humanity does not extend to our other common gulls. Although the Herring Gull has been part of our coastal civilization for centuries, no such trust is evident. Great Black-backed, Laughing and Bonaparte's Gulls are even more cautious than the Herring Gulls, preferring to keep a safe distance from humans. Their favorite habitats have wide, open escape routes, even in the best of feeding places.

Incidentally, I have noted, especially in winter, American Crows attacking single low-flying Ring-billed Gulls, giving the gull a worrisome time. I also have a recollection of a passing Rock Dove, which, as it flew over a Ring-billed Gull, stooped predaciously, eliciting panic maneuvers in the unoffending gull.

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