

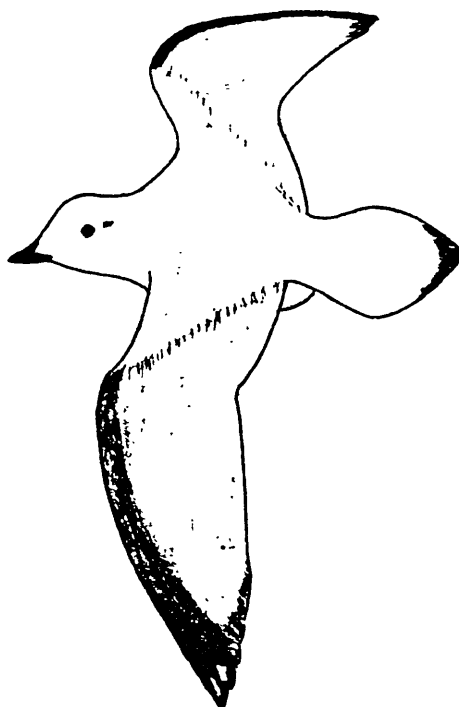
FIRST RECORD OF A ROSS' GULL FOR NEW YORK STATE

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On December 11, 1986, at approximately 11:30 AM, I observed a Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) flying and feeding between the rock jetties at the entrance to Montauk Lake in Suffolk County. The day was overcast, dark and gray, with a brisk northeast wind. As I drove into the parking area adjacent to the east jetty intent on searching for Purple Sandpipers (*Calidris maritima*), my eye quickly caught sight of an all white appearing bird about 100 yards from me flying seaward just inside the west jetty. My initial impression was that it was a white Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) because of its pigeon-like flight, and I therefore paid little attention to it as it disappeared over the west breakwater. Within a few moments the bird reappeared flying low over the water between the two jetties directly opposite from where I was parked. It began to feed from the surface of the water, fluttering here and there, occasionally dropping down to pick up bits of food that was floating by on the ebbing tide. Periodically it would rise up and circle for 20 to 30 yards before dropping down to begin the feeding process over again. Its flight was quite buoyant and pigeon-like, which reinforced my first impressions. Several times the bird plunged into the water coming to rest briefly on the surface where it nervously bobbed its head and pecked at the water. Quite obviously, this was not a Rock Dove, but a small, pale, long-winged gull roughly the same size as the numerous nearby Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*). Most prominent, however, was the bird's long, wedge-shaped tail. The following description was compiled from rough notes which I took at the time of the observation.

HEAD AND NECK: Pure white with a small, suffused, dark auricular spot. This was a very subtle spot and rather difficult to see even when the bird was sitting nearby on the water, noticeable only when it turned its head at just the right angle to me. The bird did not show a discernible neck ring and the head seemed quite small compared with the size of the body. EYE: Small and black. If there was an orbital ring I failed to note it. BILL: Small, pointed and all black. LEGS AND FEET: Dusky (dark). UPPER-PARTS: The mantle was very pale, grayish-white offering only a slight contrast with the underparts. UNDERPARTS: Mostly dull white with no evidence of pink on the breast area. RETRICES: Long, wedge-shape tail. The uppertail including the coverts was white. There was a faded, grayish-black subterminal band confined entirely to the middle retrices with the outer two or three on each side completely white. WINGS: Long and pointed. The

upperwings were very pale, grayish-white. The outer three or four primaries were grayish-black with a small whitish area on each of the webs of the first and second primaries (possibly on the third primary also) that was most evident when the bird was resting on the water with its wings folded back over and beyond the tail. There was a suffused, pale brown carpal bar which required careful, close scrutiny to see when the bird hovered or flew about at close range. The underwing linings were a dull grayish-white. VOCALIZATION: No calls or cries were heard.



Based upon the data compiled, I concluded that this was a Ross' Gull in transitional plumage, molting from first summer into second winter. I continued to watch the bird for 20 to 25 minutes with the aid of 10x50 binoculars and a 15x-60x telescope. It approached as close as 50 yards on a number of occasions while drifting away some 500 yards at the greatest point. On the average it flew about at a distance of 75 to 100 yards. Eventually the bird flew over the west jetty and did not return.

I quickly drove around to the west jetty parking area, a trip of 10 to 12 minutes, but failed to relocate the bird. Regrettably there were no other people who observed this gull although I reported it to the New York City "Rare Bird Alert" later that evening. I returned to the area on December 14 but was unable to relocate the bird.

Similarly appearing species were eliminated as follows: Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) has shorter, more rounded wings and a square tail. A first winter bird is boldly marked with a blackish "W" across the upperwings in flight and has a prominent dark cap and ear-spot. A first summer bird molting in second winter should show some semblance of a hood. Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) has a square tail. A first winter bird would have a prominent dark ear-spot, dark carpal bar with a second bar and a blackish, subterminal tail band. A second winter bird has an all white tail and has acquired the adult upperwing pattern. Fortunately, there were a good number of Bonaparte's Gulls in the immediate area affording excellent opportunities for comparison. Common Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) is also square-tailed, is somewhat larger and is eliminated for the same basic reasons as for *L. philadelphia*. The Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is much too large, has a square tail and a larger, longer bill. First winter birds show a dark "W" pattern across the wings in flight, a dark collar and a bold, black tail band. Second winter Kittiwakes have prominent black-tipped primaries. Sabine's Gulls (*Larus sabini*) have slightly forked tail and are eliminated by the striking, tricolored (black, gray and white) upperwing pattern in all plumages. Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*) is larger and hooded in all plumages. Finally, the Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) is larger still and would have much darker upperwings and mantle. My previous experience with the Ross' Gull is limited to a sighting of a first winter bird that was present at Jumbo Reservoir in Sedgwick County, Colorado, for about two weeks in April-May 1983, representing a first record for that state. Also, in June 1984, I observed two, possibly three, adult birds in breeding plumage on several occasions in and about the Churchill Manitoba area.

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[Editor's Note: This account exemplifies well an account which makes review of records by both your Editor and by a records committee much the easier. This report was reviewed and accepted as the first state record by the New York State Avian Records Committee in their recent report, which appears in The Kingbird 38:200-208; 1987[1988].]