

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Unusual behavior of immature Ring-billed Gull: Living close to Lake Ontario and having probably the largest Ring-billed Gull colony (80,000+ pairs) in the United States nearby on Little Galoo Island provides many chances to observe these gulls on an almost daily basis. On three or four occasions over the years I have observed the following action by immature (first and second year) Ring-billed Gulls: the picking up, flying up and dropping of wood chips or dried-out Alewife carcasses in many repetitions. For lack of a better term or understanding of this action I have called this "playing" and at other times "practice," since these words best describe the reaction of the birds involved. For no apparent reason the gull will quickly pick up a small piece of water soaked wood and immediately fly up into the air about 20 to 25 feet above the water and drop the wood or dried fish, then dive down to pick it up again. This repetitive behavior at times may continue until the bird seems exhausted. Although this behavior involves only one bird at a time, other Ring-billed Gull adults and immatures are "triggered" to mob the performer and attempt to take his catch. Once they learn the object is not food they immediately stop and either leave the area or return to roost on the shore. The performer sometimes also stopped immediately and other times it continued this behavior for a good two to three minutes on its own. The bird involved in these antics seems almost overwhelmed by the action and acts as if possessed by the action itself, repeating it over and over. After one of these flights of "fancy" much preening and strutting may occur or the bird appears dazed and bewildered. The item being used by the gull usually is dropped before the gull settles back on the beach. Thus, the item can be recovered to determine what it is. In only one instance was the item considered edible and then it was an alewife carcass completely dried by the sun and curled into a semicircular shape. The pieces of wood involved are usually the remains of a larger piece of wood that has been eroded by sand and wave action over time and is just barely able to float or is slowly move along the bottom of the water. Wood objects usually are somewhat fish shaped.

These actions always have been observed in the late summer or early fall. This behavior always has involved a flock of gulls of mixed ages. None has been a single immature gull away from the flock. Is this a way for an immature gull to test its hunting skills against other more experienced gulls? Can it can trigger other gulls to mob it and the prey? Is this action or reaction a practice fishing or just for fun? Is it a way for an immature gull to learn how to attack prey and pick it up out of the

water or is it something else? I know we shouldn't think of wild animals in human terms but yet having seen River Otter play with food items and seen their "play slides" on a stream bank, it is hard not to believe that animals don't play or perhaps we should call it entertain themselves. I have seen an American Kestrel in migration dive at other much larger birds of prey also in migration. The intent was not to kill the larger bird for food and the bird was certainly not defending a territory.

A few other active observers in the area have told me when asked, that they too have seen this behavior and that they also wonder what its purpose could be. As far as I am aware there has been no discussion of this behavior in the literature to date.

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