

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Ring-billed Gull Feeding on Insects Along the Eastern Lake Ontario Shoreline: Although there have been many previous reports of this activity as a rare sight in other Regions by various species of gulls in the past issues of *The Kingbird* (e.g., Sweet, P. 1993. The insect prey of the Laughing Gull. *Kingbird* 43:27), feeding on insects by Ring-billed Gull is a very common occurrence along the eastern Lake Ontario shoreline. I see it annually. It usually occurs in late summer to early fall. It occurs over extensive lakeshore wetland areas, such as the Lakeview Wildlife Management Area and Southwick Beach State Park in the town of Ellisburg in Jefferson County. The species of insect being eaten has only been identified once, when ants were actually seen in the air and floating on the water surface as they were swarming from a nest tree along the lakeshore. On most other occasions it was not possible to see any insects at all, much less the ones being eaten. However, I suspect that many times the prey is small aquatic insects such as gnats or midges hatching from the marsh and nearby environs. The altitude at which gulls normally feed on insects is about 80 to 100 feet above the marsh and well above the height of trees surrounding the marsh perimeter. Birds make repeated forays and seem to pass through a corridor area to feed. The area of feeding activity is not over the entire marsh but seems concentrated over the more heavily vegetated areas of the marsh.

At one time I suspected that dragonflies were the prey being taken. However, dragonflies would be visible with my binoculars. Whatever the gulls are catching is very small and not visible with the resolution of my binoculars or camera telephoto lens. That is why I suspect the prey is gnats, midges or other small insects. Sometimes it may be spiders parachuting in the air currents, as often occurs in the fall along the lakeshore and up to 0.5 mile inland. On some days in the fall the air above my house in Henderson hamlet, about a half mile from Lake Ontario proper but close to Stony Creek, is full of spider webs. Under these circumstances there must be thousands of spiders airborne throughout the area. The young spiders produced during the summer months use a strand of silk as a parachute to move to new habitats. It is almost impossible to see the actual spider on these web strands since they taper their body shape with feet pointed backwards to get maximum lift from the air currents as they lay out web from the spinnerets on their abdomens. But I have never been able to ascertain whether it might be spiders that the gulls are eating.

The gulls do not always fly to the prey but seem to fly through the area, spot the prey and then flare up in the air, sometimes to grasp prey in their bill. The bill is not open as they fly but opens as they flare up

and abruptly stop in the air and grasp the prey. At other times I believe the prey goes directly down the gullet with no grasping by the bill. Then swallowing motions are evident after the gull resumes regular flight.

It would seem that this feeding method would not be very efficient in terms of energy expended verses gained, but maybe it is preformed for other reasons. Perhaps the gulls cannot resist the food items or the sheer numbers causes an automatic feeding response by the gulls. I have seen large numbers of Ring-billed Gull over Henderson during the summer months responding in much the same manner and have noted small gnats or flies hatching from the lawn at this time. The insects are particularly visible when the sun is low to the horizon at sunset and they can be seen better. Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and swallows in the area also take advantage of this bounty of protein, but their smaller body mass seems better matched to this abundant food supply compared to a bird as large as Ring-billed Gull.

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