

**ROSS'S GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*) IN MONROE CO.,
9 – 13 JAN 2003**

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Early on the afternoon of 9 Jan 2003, I decided to check Irondequoit Bay (Towns of Irondequoit, Penfield, and Webster, Monroe County) for open water and the presence of waterfowl to be counted on the weekend's FNYSSBC Annual Waterfowl Count. A good vantage point is a small boat launch parking lot about half a mile north of the south end of the bay, on the west side at the foot of Orchard Park Blvd. Nearing the end of my sweep around the south end, I located a small gull standing on the ice at the edge of one of the open water areas about 100-150 yards away.

Features immediately visible were: small size, short dark legs, short thin black bill, light gray head and body, black on the coverts and primaries of the folded wings, large-appearing black (or very dark) eye and dark spot at the back of the auricular area. The first thought was a first- winter Little Gull. Of the couple of hundred Little Gulls I have seen here and at Niagara Falls over the past 30 years, only 2 have been immatures, the rest adults. But the very small bill and the lack of dark crown and nape didn't compute, and another probable ID was sinking in and I double-checked with the Peterson guide I had in the car. When I turned to view the gull again in the scope it obligingly lifted off and flew a short loop toward, then away from me and landed in a slightly more distant open water area. The black "M" pattern on the upper wing surface was clearly visible, as was the fact that there was more white in the primaries than I recalled from Little Gulls in this plumage. The wings also seemed very long and pointed for a Little Gull in any plumage. Finally, as it banked to land, it was clear that the black-tipped tail was wedge-shaped and the black was only on the central feathers, not the outermost. This all added up to ROSS'S GULL!

Driving to a restaurant at the base of the bay, I called my wife Sue (not home) and then Dominic Sherony, who would make a couple of calls and head right out. I then crossed the street to a marina and asked permission to view from out back, thinking the bird might be closer or in better light from there. It was easily found, but closer to 250 or so yards to the north. I studied it very carefully for the 20 minutes or so it took for Dominic to arrive and started second guessing all the things which might make the call wrong. I noted that it had a light gray patch on the top of the crown and a bit of light gray on the back of the neck. Could it be an aberrant Little Gull, and those normally very dark and wider spread areas reduced and faded? If I had recalled the details from Grant (P.J. Grant, *Gulls a Guide to Identification*, Buteo Books: Vermilion, SD, 1982), neither of these would have caused any problem as both are expected for Ross's Gull.

The bird had also moved and landed in pools of water close to some Bonaparte's Gulls and was clearly much smaller, whereas the guide put Ross's Gull near Bonaparte's Gull size

By the time Dominic arrived I was really wondering if I'd missed on the ID. After he arrived, between the size, the gray on the crown, and his thinking the tail tip seemed square when it flew once, briefly and at longer range, we talked ourselves into calling it an odd Little Gull.

During the wait, I had also noticed some interesting behavior. The bird swam with a pumping action of the head and neck similar to a coot. When it fed in the water, it jabbed around reminiscent of a phalarope. In climbing out onto the ice it seemed to heave its breast ahead up onto the ice first, then walk up under it. These impressions were noted again later both by myself and other viewers.

Now about 3:00 PM, as I was leaving the marina, I spotted Sue at LaSalle Landing Park a couple of hundred yards east and waited for her. She wasn't really interested in looking at an immature Little Gull, so we headed home. As soon as we entered the house, I picked up the Sibley guide (David Allen Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2000) and after a few seconds look at illustrations of the two species told her it was Ross's Gull. We headed back to the foot of Orchard Park Blvd. The first time the bird flew away from us we had a great look at the bright white secondaries, and the extensive white on the middle of the inner primaries with no sign of the secondary bar present on first- winter Little Gull. Now certain, we got on Sue's cell phone to Dominic and then to everyone else whose numbers I could recall. Dominic, Gary Chapin, and Bob McKinney arrived shortly, and we all celebrated Ross's Gull!!

Features we noted not clearly pointed out in the guides were: the appearance of large black eyes due to black feathering around the eyes and the odd head shape as viewed from directly in front or behind – the sides of the head bulge out, reminiscent of a plover or of ET. From the side, the bird had the peaked head shape suggested as a fieldmark in the guides. Clearly visible even at great distance in side view on the water or ice was a bright white line, due to the white secondary tips, between the dark on the coverts and primaries. Also obvious were the very long wings, where the primary tips actually crossed above and behind the tail. On many of the flights, the wedge-shaped tail was clear, as was the fact that the black tips did not include the outer rectrices, which were completely white. The reddish leg color was NOT easy to see most of the time, probably due to the bird's body shadowing the short legs unless the viewer's angle and the light were just right. I did not see this well until the next afternoon.

That evening we all spread the word, and by 7:50 AM on Friday, 1/10, there were already about a half- dozen people present, but no bird. About 8:00, it appeared on the water in front of a group of large gulls nearly half a mile away across the bay. The small size, light head and white line between black areas on the folded wing made for instant id as *the bird*. Fortunately, it very quickly flew across the bay to the same area where it had been resting and feeding the day



1st Winter Ross's Gull 9 Jan 2003
Irondequoit Bay
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before, only a couple of hundred yards away and even closer at times. All present saw the field marks noted above, as well as others, such as the short, thick appearance of the neck. Gerard Phillips made some excellent field sketches and obtained some reasonable digiscope photos. By cell phone word was spread that the bird was still present. Through the rest of the day many observers arrived and viewed the bird for long periods, including Matt Victoria whose digiscope photo accompanies this note.

During the several hours I spent, additional observations included: 1) the bird established a feeding area very early and several times attacked and drove off Bonaparte's Gulls that swam into this area, putting its head down and rushing toward them and even starting up their backs if they were too slow in leaving; 2) compared to Bonaparte's Gull, it was a much slower swimmer and continued with the pumping type motion noted earlier; 3) it basically did not associate with the other gulls and spent as much time alone or close to ducks as near gulls; 4) in the afternoon in good light, it seemed to me to have a light pinkish or peachy blush to the belly and lower breast, which others saw as definitely off-white but not necessarily pinkish; 5) finally did see the reddish legs a couple of times when the light was just right.

Overnight most of the open water froze, so on Saturday morning there were many fewer gulls and ducks present and by 8:00 AM lots of birders, but no gull. About 8:30 the bird arrived flying down the far east side of the bay.

It circled round and round at various heights. Those present had good looks, though mostly distant. It first settled in an open area around docks with bubblers about half a mile to the southeast. It then flew and landed in the open creek channel in the bay about 300+ yards away. It was soon up again and off far to the south, but close to other observers we could see at LaSalle Landing Park on Empire Blvd. About 9:30, all decided that was the place to be. Just as we were pulling in to park, Kevin Griffith watched the gull lift off and head north up the bay at higher than usual altitude. We feared it had gone.

Later in the day, it was found on the next large area of open water north on the bay, fortunately also accessible from a public area, part of the West Irondequoit Bay Park in the Town of Irondequoit. Unfortunately, the bird spent most of the time along the far side of the bay approximately one-half mile away. Most views were in flight at that distance, though occasionally it rested on the water or ice or flew by at closer range. The bird remained at this location and was seen by many off and on all day Sunday and Monday, 12 & 13 Jan.

On Tuesday, 14 Jan, the morning was plagued by heavy snow squalls covering all of Irondequoit Bay. Through 11:00 AM about 8-10" of snow fell and visibility remained shorter than from the edge of the bay to the open water area. When I checked at 2:00 PM, essentially the whole bay had frozen over other than a couple of very small areas. On both the 14th and 15th I checked other areas to the west along Lake Ontario with no luck.

Over the period of 5 days that the Ross's Gull was here, our best estimate is that at least 50 people were able to obtain identifiable views of it. Visitors came from many parts of New York and from as far away as Ohio, Tennessee, and Florida.

This will be the sixth or seventh verified record of Ross's Gull for New York State. There were five noted in *Bulls' Birds of New York State* (*Bulls' Birds of New York State*, ed. E. Levine, Cornell University Press: Ithaca & London, 1998, pp 291-292), two accepted by NYSARC, one in 1986 and one in 1994, and three under review, with two of those from 1995 since accepted. There were two additional 1995 reports submitted to NYSARC, with one accepted. The 1986 and 1994 birds were from Nassau Co., as was one of the 1995 records. The other accepted 1995 records were from Cayuga Lake and the Niagara River. There was also a report of a winter adult seen by several observers in the Niagara River gorge on one day in Nov. 2002.

