

## ROSS'S GULL AT NIAGARA FALLS

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Sunday, January 27, 2008 started like many other winter weekend days for Betsy Potter and me—meeting Jean Iron of Toronto, Ontario and Kevin McLaughlin of Hamilton, Ontario at the Sir Adam Beck overlook on the Niagara River. For the avid gull-watcher, the Niagara River provides loads of gulls to look over, with a bewildering variety of shapes and plumages to ponder and discuss. We really enjoy studying gulls and, of course, there is always the chance for an exciting rarity. It is not unusual for us to stay at one place for hours and we have been known to bird only one or two spots on the river for the entire day. This day was like that—the morning was spent at Sir Adam Beck, overlooking the New York and Ontario power plants, and the afternoon was spent below the control gates, looking over the gulls feeding and resting above Niagara Falls.

Other than seeing over 15 Iceland Gulls at the power plants, my notes from the day are dominated by one bird. We saw it around 2:00 at the control gates from the Ontario side. Feeling empowered by my new spotting scope, I was searching through ever more distant flocks of loafing gulls in search of a Glaucous Gull, a species we had managed to see only in flight so far this day. My search was stopped short by a small gull on the ice in front of Goat Island, about a half-mile away and across the river from where we stood. The strangeness of this gull struck me immediately and Bonaparte's Gull, the expected small-gull species, never entered my mind. However, not wanting to falsely raise the hopes of the others, I kept the possible identification to myself. After all, at this distance, I could easily be mistaken. Nevertheless, the others knew that I might have something really good, based upon my obvious excitement, as well as my relative incoherence!

The others were having great difficulty finding the bird in their scopes. Indeed, I could not even find it for them, an indication of just how far away this bird was. But finally, after what seemed like an eternity, all four of us were watching the gull. I was becoming convinced of its identity and the others were not disagreeing. It was an adult Ross's Gull! After studying the bird for five to ten minutes, we agreed that we had to cross the bridge back into the United States in order to properly document it—that is, to take recognizable photographs.

It was a tense 15-minute drive behind some of the world's slowest drivers but when Betsy and I arrived at Goat Island, I found the Ross's Gull on the ice very quickly. I started digiscoping immediately while Betsy phoned Jean and

Kevin to let them know that the bird was still there. Unfortunately, they were held up by the Customs officer for five minutes and it cost them a chance for the much closer view which we briefly enjoyed. The bird flew shortly after I started photographing it and neither Betsy nor I could follow it as it went directly into the line of the sun, which temporarily blinded us.

We alerted others and before the end of daylight, over a dozen birders were assembled on Goat Island. They left disappointed, however, as the bird was not found again until the next day. The Ross's Gull was seen every day during the work-week, and to the dismay of many, disappeared before the following weekend when there were literally hundreds of birders on the Ontario and New York sides of the Niagara River looking for it.

### **Status of Ross's Gull**

Ross's Gulls breed in the arctic and rarely venture very far south of the breeding grounds. Formerly considered an extreme rarity, the first continental United States Ross's Gull was not discovered until 1975—in Newburyport, Massachusetts. This bird is credited with helping to jump-start the growth of birding in North America. People from across the continent came to the Bay State to see this little gem and birders suddenly realized "that they were many"! (Quote from *The Feather Quest* by Pete Dunne.) There have been several other sightings since then but the species is still not recorded annually south of the arctic in North America. The Buffalo Ornithological Society (B.O.S.) study area, which includes much of the Niagara Peninsula of Ontario, may well have the highest number of records of Ross's Gull away from the arctic (five), of any comparably-sized area. On November 12, 1995 Glenn Coady found the first for the Niagara River at the river's source in Fort Erie, Ontario, across from Buffalo. This wide-ranging bird was seen throughout the 32-mile length of the river and also ten miles to the west of the river's mouth at Port Weller, Ontario. Sightings were very intermittent between the original sighting and January 1, 1996 when it was found for the final time, back at its original spot in Fort Erie (D'Anna 1996, Dobos 1997)! In 2001 Ron Scovell of Toronto, Ontario found and Mark Cranford of Mississauga, Ontario identified the second one on the river, flying in the mist below Niagara Falls. This was a one-day wonder, appearing only on December 1, 2002 (Crins 2003).

The first record for the B.O.S. study area was of a bird found by Kevin McLaughlin, Rob Dobos, and Barb Charlton, all of Hamilton, while conducting a Christmas Bird Count at Port Weller, Ontario on December 18, 1994 (Dobos 1996). Port Weller is where the Welland Canal, a major Great Lakes shipping route, connects with Lake Ontario. The three observers watched the Ross's Gull until it was completely dark, convinced that it had gone to roost for the night. The next morning at dawn, dozens of birders arrived, hoping for their lifer Ross's Gull, this writer included. After much unsuccessful searching from one side of the canal, someone decided to check the exact spot where the gull was seen to go to roost, on the other side. What they found was, as one birder put it,

a tragedy—a pile of Ross's Gull feathers! The first record for the Region had become a victim of owl predation! The feathers were deposited at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

Amazingly, a little over two months later, another Ross's Gull was found at Port Weller—this one by David Milsom and Roy Baker of Toronto on February 26, 1995 (Dobos 1996). With the appearance put in by the first Niagara River bird on November 27 and 28, 1995, the tiny location of Port Weller now claims three records of this arctic jewel, the same as for the Niagara River, and all within a 12-month span! All five of the Port Weller and Niagara River records appear to involve adults although it is possible that one or more cannot be ruled out as pertaining to birds in their second-winter.

In addition to the three Niagara River sightings described above, New York has had five other records accepted by the Avian Records Committee. The first was a single-observer sighting of a bird in first-winter plumage from Montauk, Long Island, in Suffolk County, on December 11, 1986 by Jack Reddall (NYSARC 1987, Reddall 1988). In two consecutive years, an adult appeared at Point Lookout, Long Island, in Nassau County—on March 17, 1994 found by Emanuel Levine, Lester Feldman, and Alvin Wollin (Levine 1995, NYSARC 1996) and on March 12, 1995 found by Robert Kurtz (NYSARC 1998). The only New York record away from the coast and Great Lakes involved an adult bird seen by Christopher Tessaglia-Hymes on Cayuga Lake, Tompkins County on January 12, 1995 (NYSARC 1998). The only other New York record is of a bird in first-winter plumage found at Irondequoit Bay, Monroe County by Robert Spahn on January 9, 2003 (Spahn 2003, NYSARC 2006).

### **Description and Identification**

I was only able to compare the Ross's Gull with Ring-billed Gulls and I have not seen any photographs of it that also show Bonaparte's Gulls. As a result I can say only that it was a small gull, clearly much smaller than a Ring-billed Gull. It had a rounded head and a very short bill. The bill appeared much shorter than on a Bonaparte's Gull, a species with which I am very familiar. There was a patch of dark feathering around each eye, especially in the front, and a small dark auricular spot. There was no dark cap, as would be shown by a Little Gull. The bird's apparent size and the features of the head just described are what struck me when I first saw it, making me immediately suspect that I was looking at a Ross's Gull.

Since I never saw the bird in flight, my description rests upon observation of the bird as it stood on the ice and from photographs. Most of the head and the entire ventral body, from the throat through the undertail coverts, were white but there was a very pale pinkish wash visible on the belly. The back and wing coverts were very pale gray. In fact the bird blended in very well with the snow and ice, making it difficult to pick up. The outermost primaries were visible as the bird preened and, even at the great distance of our initial observation, we could see that the color of the gray mantle extended all the way to the tips of the

outer primaries. That is, there was no white on the trailing edge of these primaries. At the closer distance, from Goat Island, I could easily see the narrow black outer web of the outermost primary. The underside of the far primary tips, when viewed in good light, appeared gray and not appreciably different in value from the tone of the upperside. The tail was white but the shape was never observed. Scott Whittle's flight shots clearly show the typical wedge shape of a Ross's Gull's tail as well as the relatively dark underwings that are about the same value as the upperwings. The very short thin bill was dark, appearing blackish, and the legs were bright red. The large-appearing eyes were dark.

The expected small gull on the Niagara River is the Bonaparte's Gull, which is often abundant. This species is easily ruled out by the tiny bill, dark feathering around the eye, wing pattern, and wedge-shaped tail. Little Gull is the most similar but it is also easily ruled out by the tiny bill, dark feathering around the eye, lack of a dark cap, wing pattern (differences apparent both above and below), pointed as opposed to rounded wingtips, and the wedge-shaped tail. This Ross's Gull's identity is clearly established by photos I took from Goat Island on the day of discovery, and by many excellent photos taken later by others, including Joe Mitchell of Buffalo and Scott Whittle of New York City. See Figure A on page 153 for two photos by Michael Harvey from January 30.

The Ross's Gull was observed on a few occasions over the rapids above Niagara Falls, where it would feed with Bonaparte's Gulls or all by itself. It was also sometimes found standing in the rocky shallows with Bonaparte's Gulls. Unlike previous Ross's Gulls in the B.O.S. study area, which always associated with Bonaparte's Gulls, this bird was as likely to be seen with Ring-billed Gulls. When first discovered at Goat Island, it was standing near but slightly apart from Ring-billed Gulls with no Bonaparte's Gulls visible in the vicinity. When seen in the Goat Island parking lot, it also associated with Ring-billed Gulls.

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