

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

A Patagonia Rest-stop Adventure in Northern New York

On Friday 19 February 2010, I left Long Island early in the morning in search of a Northern Hawk Owl reported in Champlain, Clinton County, in the extreme northeastern corner of New York State. I arrived at the place where the owl had been reported, but no owl did I see. I traveled back and forth for several hours on the few roads in the area without any luck. Eventually I drove a few miles east to Rouses Point, where I spoke to a store owner who was interested in birds. He directed me to the bridge linking New York with Vermont; I hadn't been to Vermont in many years, so I thought, "Why not?"

Traveling over the bridge at about fifty miles an hour I noted two Great Black-backed Gulls and what I first took to be an Iceland Gull feeding on the ice north of the bridge, on the Vermont side. Next, I was distracted by cheap gas prices at the station just into Vermont—at half a tank, I couldn't refuse a deal.

A few minutes later, I returned to see the Iceland Gull. When I pulled over and stopped, I realized that I was not looking at an Iceland Gull—it was too small. "Ah!" I thought, "An all-white pigeon"—but that didn't seem right either. When I finally put up my binoculars I was astonished. "Could it be an Ivory Gull?" was my next incredulous thought. It would be a lifer for me.

Small. Much shorter than the black-backs. Stubby black legs. What else could it be? I looked at my field guide. Seemed to match. The guide showed a yellow bill-tip. "Yes! Eureka!" It was surely an Ivory Gull. There was no one else around to share my find with. What to do? I called a birding friend on Long Island and asked if he thought he should post the Ivory Gull on the New York State list. He thought not, because it was actually in Vermont, but he offered his congratulations. He had birded this same area a few days earlier and enjoyed great looks at the hawk owl. Now it was time for me to resume my search.

After another hour of futility, I headed down toward Saranac Lake where I planned to continue birding. I had never been to that corner of the State before so I just headed down Route 9 through Plattsburgh and south. Around this time I got a call from Shai Mitra. Shai had called our mutual Long Island friend in advance of his own bid for the hawk owl, and this is how he learned of my mixed luck so far. Shai quizzed me about the identification of the gull, then posted the news to the NYS listserv.

In Valcour, Route 9 runs directly alongside Lake Champlain, and here I noticed a few ducks not too far from shore. I stopped and looked through my binoculars at this small group. "No! Could it be?" I went to my trunk for my scope and set it up on my car window. "Where did it go? There it is, a Tufted Duck!" Two great birds in a few hours—but still no hawk owl. It was getting dark, and I headed for my motel, where I learned from my Long Island friend that the hawk owl was seen later in Champlain after I had left!

Despite much searching, I missed the owl on Saturday, too—but the Ivory Gull continued opposite Rouses Point, and I met many happy Vermont birders there.

On Sunday, I still couldn't find the owl. Just as I was getting ready to head for home, I got a call from my friend who said Shai was looking at the Ivory Gull—on the New York side of the lake. Upon my arrival the gull was in Shai's scope, and I was finally able to tick it as my state bird. After this, Shai, Patricia Lindsay, and I searched for the owl, once again without luck, and I headed for home.

The story of my birding adventures in northern New York ends on a completely happy note. I returned to Champlain a week later and immediately saw the Northern Hawk Owl exactly where it was supposed to be. On the way home I saw Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Pine Siskin, and heard a Black-backed Woodpecker near Bloomingdale. Sometimes it's easier to find birds when one isn't looking for them!

Pat Jones, Massapequa.