

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Peregrine Falcon Attacks a Ring-billed Gull

Gulls accumulate at landfills in winter, sometimes in very large numbers. Landfills have been a source of abundant food for gulls and very likely increase their chances for winter survival. Unfortunately, gulls are considered a nuisance as they interfere with the daily need to cap the landfill with soil. Many methods have been attempted to discourage gulls at landfills. In Perinton, NY at the High Acres Landfill, trained falcons have been used since 2007 and have reduced the visitation by gulls by about 90% (Sherony, D. F. 2009. Highlights of the Season – Winter 2008-09. *Kingbird* 59 (No. 2):174-178).

On a very cold windy Friday, 19 December 2014 at around 2 pm, I drove Perinton Parkway to High Acres Nature Area and passed the north border of the landfill. As I drove east on this road, a flock of about 300 gulls flew out of the landfill and headed directly northeast. They bypassed Lake Edwards where they usually land and roost after feeding. On a normal day, they would leave around 4 pm. I pulled over, stopped the car and watched them flying out. Turning to look south towards the new landfill well, which was below me, I saw a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) about mid-tree height and gaining altitude. Just to the north was a lone straggler gull, at a much higher altitude. It became immediately clear that the falcon was in pursuit of this Ring-billed Gull and it caught up to it from below. It made a wide circular pass and the gull turned back south. The two birds were never very close on this pass but the gull knew it was being chased.

What happened next was amazing to watch; it all took place in the span of one to two minutes. This large immature Peregrine Falcon gained altitude rapidly and made three distinct dives on the gull. It first got up to approximately 100 feet above the gull. It then dove, making a pass and coming very close, but did not appear to strike the gull. The gull gave up altitude, gained speed and tried to escape to the south, but there was a wooded area that partially blocked its path. The falcon, with a quick maneuver, very rapidly converted its downward velocity gain to an increase in height, made one circle and dove on the gull again. This time it struck the gull at about tree top height. Again the falcon gained altitude, made a circle and dove. The gull was now just gliding, not flying very fast at all. On this third attack, the falcon struck the gull again about four feet above the ground and gained altitude again, to about tree height. The gull glided to a landing. The falcon quickly dropped onto the gull, clutching it on the ground with its talons in the gull's back, and began tearing at the gull.

I was about 80 feet away and began walking toward the falcon. It was not disturbed as I watched it feed on the gull; falcons are used to their handlers.

I have seen a Merlin make a shorebird kill and have seen PBS Nature programs where a Peregrine attacks and kills its prey. In both cases, the falcons gained significant altitude and made a long stoop, gaining great speed and

attacking from a long distance away. The event at the landfill was very unlike these cases. Here, the falcon made very short flights to position itself for the next attack and used repeated attacks. It was able to prevent the gull from escaping its attacks by always maintaining altitude superiority. It never reached high velocity, it never made long flights, and it seemed to have the gull cornered. It disabled its prey with very little effort—and this was not an adult falcon.

In literature, much attention is focused on the great speed achieved by the Peregrine Falcon in its stoop and attack. In this case, the bird relied on maneuverability and acceleration to overcome its prey. The ability to accelerate allowed it to catch up with the gull and its maneuverability enabled it to convert its dive velocity to regain altitude quickly, thus preventing the gull's ability to escape. These skills are rarely ever mentioned.

Peregrines have been observed preying on Ring-billed Gulls in the past, as recorded by Harrison Tordoff (1998. Apparent siblicide in Peregrine Falcons. The Raptor Research Foundation, Inc. Raptor Res. 32(2): 184):

“In 1990, the peregrines hatched four young (on the south shore of Lake Superior). When the brood was about 3-wk old, the female began killing Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). Over the next 6 wk, we identified about two dozen Ring-bills that were taken. All were juveniles except for one adult. Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) are abundant on the lakeshore, but Ring-bills are scarce. The female seemed to hunt the Ring-bills selectively.”

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