

GULLS ESTABLISH BREEDING COLONY ON SQUAW ISLAND, CANANDAIGUA LAKE

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Abstract—2016 was the eighth consecutive year that gulls have bred on Squaw Island in Canandaigua Lake. Breeding Ring-billed Gulls were first observed and documented in 2009. Their numbers have increased steadily and dramatically each year after. Herring Gulls possibly began breeding in 2014, were probable in 2015, but breeding by this species was not confirmed and photo-documented until 2016.

Squaw Island, located in the northeast corner of Canandaigua Lake is one of only two islands in the eleven Finger Lakes. The other is Frontenac Island in Cayuga Lake near Union Springs. Squaw Island is designated a NYS Unique Area, and at 0.25 acre, the smallest in NYS. The island is protected from erosion by large rocks (rip-rap) placed around its shoreline. Vegetation on the island consists of two large Cottonwoods about 40 feet, a few Black Locusts, one Basswood, one Box Elder, one Willow, and vines—Virginia Creeper and Morning Glory (Bindweed).

CONFIRMED BREEDING OF RING-BILLED GULLS—2009

In spring of 2009, Carolyn Jacobs, a resident on Canandaigua Lake, and a birder and kayaker, heard calls described as begging whines. To investigate, she kayaked around Squaw Island. She observed six adult Ring-billed Gulls standing on the rip-rap, then others—juveniles, smaller with downy brown plumage. Returning later with her camera, she photographed a downy chick and two eggs. She observed a total of 11 adults, five juveniles and two eggs. Three nest sites were observed, one of which held the unattended eggs. This was the first confirmation of breeding gulls on Canandaigua Lake (Figs. 1 and 2, p. 297).

The proximity of the island to human habitation makes this an unlikely spot for gulls to nest successfully. As soon as the weather warms, the sand bar adjacent to the island becomes a popular boat parking area. Although climbing over the rocky barrier is not inviting or easy, people do go onto the island. Nevertheless, the gulls have prevailed.

CONFIRMED BREEDING OF HERRING GULLS—2016

While kayaking 4 June, 2016 on Canandaigua Lake, Doug Daniels observed several age-stages of Herring Gulls breeding on Squaw Island: first, two adult

birds carrying nesting material to the island, second, two different adult birds on nest and finally, an adult feeding a chick standing next to it. Due to very windy conditions for several days, photo-documentation of the breeding was not possible until 10 June (Figs. 3-6, pp 297-298).

SUMMARY OF BREEDING GULLS ON SQUAW ISLAND

The following is a summary of eBird data reported by Doug Daniels and Carolyn Jacobs while kayaking around Squaw Island.

2009 16 July – 11 adult Ring-billed Gulls (RBGU), 3 juvenile, some with downy plumage.

19 July – 8 adult RBGU, 5 juvenile, 2 eggs, 3 nests. Photo documentation.

2012 12 adult RBGU, 13 juvenile.

2014 150 adult RBGU, estimated 25 juvenile nesting on island. Possible breeding of Herring Gull (HERG) on 10 August. By 24 August, all the nesting gulls, both RBGU and HERG had left the island.

2015 12 June, an estimated 450 RBGU on Squaw Island plus 50 fledged juveniles; 6 HERG were reported with one adult believed to be on nest.

2016 10 June – eBird report (Doug Daniels): “kayaked around the Squaw Island three times, taking accurate counts and photographing the birds. From a photograph of the east shore of the island, zoomed in and counted 186 RBGU. The west shore is similarly populated and the center of the island has even greater numbers; therefore, estimated the total number of adult RBGU to be 600 adults with 75 young (more to hatch with adults on nest). A second circling was done to count the HERG—48 adults (many still on nest) and 14 young.

15 June – a fairly accurate count of 750 gulls (both RBGU and HERG) was made. The entire island was covered with gulls during the breeding season and some even occupied the dense coverings of Virginia Creeper five to ten feet above ground level. From the various counts taken between 4 June and 12 July, the maximum number of fledged RBGU was 100 and the maximum number of fledged HERG was 15. Of interest, the nesting HERG occupied both ends of the island while the RBGU occupied the shore lines and center of the island. By 12 July, all the RBGU were fledged and all adults and immature birds were gone from Squaw Island; 25 adult and 12 juvenile HERG remained. By 22 July, ALL gulls were gone from Squaw Island.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From his comprehensive record of bird life in New York State, E.H. Eaton (1910) described Ring-billed Gull as a “rare and transient visitant” in Ontario County, stating, “On Canandaigua and Seneca Lakes, I have found it decidedly less common than Herring and Bonaparte Gulls.” Since then, Ring-billed Gulls have proliferated in NYS in the latter half of the 20th Century which may be tied

to their opportunistic feeding at waste disposal sites and parking lots (Richmond, 2008, *The Second Breeding Bird Atlas of NYS*). Seneca, Ontario and Monroe Counties each have a huge landfill which accepts garbage from seven states and Canada.

Communicating with birders who are regional reporters, regional coordinators of the NYS Breeding Bird Atlas 2000-2005 and a former editor of *The Kingbird*, the following data should be enlightening regarding the breeding events reported above.

There have been no previous reports of gulls breeding on Canandaigua Lake. A few pairs have bred in the Chemung River in downtown Elmira but when Ring-billed Gull numbers increased to about 1,000 pairs, the city undertook to discourage them annually by collecting their eggs.

There has been confirmed breeding of gulls on Seneca Lake on the break wall in Watkins Glen.

There are no records of breeding Herring Gulls in Region 2.

IMPLICATIONS

The progression of RBGU, HERG and then Double-crested Cormorants on the Galoo Islands in the St. Lawrence River and in the Niagara River has been rapid. "The breeding birds took over at an alarming rate and created huge conflicts with recreation, fishing, boating, etc." (pers. comm., Gerry Rising).

"No matter what we may think of the implications from effects on other bird species, fish, human health or olfactory perceptions, gulls are a federally protected species and actions must come from state or federal authorities. There have been similar issues around breeding gull colonies at Kodak Park, a store in Batavia and the 'borrow pits' in the parking lot at Market Place Mall in Henrietta." (pers. comm., Bob Spahn).

The DEC was involved in 2014 when a man attempted to disrupt the breeding of Ring-billed Gulls on Squaw Island. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 does include gulls and cormorants. When birds have created disturbances to the balance between communities and said species, permits may be granted to those communities to take action to remove or disrupt the breeding of those cormorants.

While cormorants have not bred on Squaw Island, both Carolyn Jacobs and Doug Daniels have observed increasing numbers in both spring and late summer on and around the island. The highest count on Squaw Island was 37 on 15 May, 2016. They have not bred on Canandaigua Lake as of 2016.

In the September 2, 2016 issue of *The Democrat & Chronicle* (Rochester's daily newspaper), the front page and feature article was about Double-crested Cormorants in Irondequoit Bay. In 2015, the landowners, Robert and Janice Frank, reported that 1,000 birds roosted on Fish Island (a 1.2 acre property) near the western shore. The owner reports 10,000 birds in 2016 are destroying his property and claims he has a permit to kill them. "Frank may hold the first so-

called depredation permit issued to a private party in the area. US Fish & Wildlife Service spokesperson, Terri Edwards stated that the permit, reissued each year, requires non-lethal means first; if unsuccessful, up to 50 cormorants may be shot a day to a total of 300 per year.”

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Herring Gull with downy young, Squaw Island, *Ontario*, 6 Jun 2016. © Doug Daniels.



Figures 1 & 2. Downy young and eggs of Ring-billed Gulls, Squaw Island, *Ontario*, 19 Jul 2009, © Carolyn Jacobs. See article, pp. 260-263.



Figures 3 & 4. Eastern shore of Squaw Island; some of the many Ring-billed Gulls, 10 Jun 2016, © Doug Daniels. See article, pp. 260-263.



Figures 5-6. Herring Gull with nest; Herring Gull with Downy young, Squaw Island, Ontario, 10 Jun 2016, © Doug Daniels. See article, pp. 260-263.