

First Place Writing – Age 10-13
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The Insane Side of Birding

It never occurred to me that birding could go a little *too* far, but now I am not so sure. I have been birding for nearly six years now, and the birders I have met are some of the nicest people on the planet. Most birders enjoy seeing rare birds, as do I. Although some very good birders might think that anyone looking for a rarity only cares about their lifelist, I find rarity-chasing to be exhilarating. However, a recent rarity chase introduced me to the insane side of birding.

On November 17, 2006, the legendary California birder, Buy McCaskie, reported on the Calbirds list serve a Ross's Gull at Red Hill Marina at the south end of the Salton Sea. Now this was a *ludicrously* rare bird. Not only was this scarce little pink arctic gull the farthest south in North America one had ever been recorded, it was also the first California record. Birders from all over the nation were very excited.

One of those birders was me. I knew that I would do almost anything just to see that gull. However, it was at least a 3-hour drive, and I knew that I could never convince my parents to drive me all that way to see some odd gull. But this was more than some odd gull, so I told them about the Ross's. At first they didn't seem to realize that this was a once in a several life-times bird, and they merely nodded and said, "Oh, that's nice John. Maybe someday you can go when you get your own car." Then I attempted to explain to them exactly how rare it was, and perhaps it was something in my pleading face that changed their minds.

The next day, the Ross's Gull fortunately was still being very frequently reported by numerous satisfied observers. I admit I was very envious of all the lucky birders writing long stories of the terrific views and showing off very close-up photos and videos of it. But again, as it was so far away from my home, I knew that I would only see it in my dreams. My dream of it came true while I was still in the middle of dreaming it. My dad woke me up at approximately 3:30 am and calmly informed me that we were going to the Salton Sea to look for the Ross's Gull. I couldn't believe my ears! I got up, got dressed, and we immediately left.

After nearly 3 hours of driving, my dad and I finally caught sight of the Salton Sea. Swarms of California and Ring-billed Gulls darted at each other above the deep blue water. A few Great Blue Herons powerfully heaved themselves up from the tops of trees and took flight as we drove past. Enormous flocks of White-faced Ibises darkened the sky just as the sun was rising over the distant horizon. Yet perhaps the most notable thing of all at first was the horrid stench of the dead and rotting fish guts that smothered the shore. Past experience, however, assured me that eventually I would get accustomed to it.

We finally approached the Red Hill Marina at about 6:45 am, where the Ross's Gull had been seen by so many other birders. Literally thousands of gulls covered every square foot of water, except for the water near any humans. My heart sank as I realized that looking for the Ross's Gull here would probably be like trying to find a needle in a haystack, even if it was still around. The good news was that there were many birders searching for it.

As we turned towards the marina, we saw our friend Ron Cyger standing on the side of the road scoping some gulls. Ron is the former president of the Pasadena Audubon Society, and a very good birder. My dad and I greeted him and asked if he'd seen the Ross's Gull yet. He said that he had seen it less than 15 minutes before at about 6:30! However, he had only seen it briefly, just as he was arriving, and that was because there were many other birders pointing at it as it was flying away. He was only staying around because he wanted a better look at it. Well, that was a relief, I thought. At least the bird was still around *somewhere*.

We continued on around the corner and arrived at the end of the small peninsula. Other than the fact that there were several hundred-thousand more gulls, the biggest surprise was the great number of birders, all packed on to this little point, which when I had been here before had been nearly devoid of any humans. So there they all were, some of them scoping, some resting, some talking, some loudly complaining about how they had just missed it, and some bragging even more loudly about how they had seen it earlier that morning. I had never seen so many birders in one location other than at special bird festivals and meetings.

My dad and I walked up one of the fish-bone-strewn jetties and set up our scope amongst the others. Most of the flocks were far off in the distance, and the heat-waves made it somewhat difficult. Most of the gulls appeared to be Ring-billed and California, although I found several Bonaparte's and Herring Gulls as well.

Eventually Ron came by and set up his scope next to ours. He told us some of the birds he had seen, and so I temporarily shifted my attention to looking for them. The first was Lesser Black-backed Gull, which was an ABA lifebird for me. Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which once were accidental in California, have become increasingly reported in recent years, especially at the Salton Sea. Once I knew that they were there, they became easy to spot. Yet, although it was very exciting, there was still somehow this aching need to see that Ross's Gull.

We waited many long hours on that peninsula; I was usually scanning, but as that often became boring, I would resort to attempting to photograph some nearby Eared Grebes or soaring American White Pelicans. Ron occasionally left and came back, checking out other areas to see if there was anything interesting. My dad and I tried a few other spots as well. One time we went to Obsidian Butte to look for a Blue-footed Booby that had been reported a week before. No luck with the booby, but we did find a 'Large-billed' Savannah Sparrow and got to see large flocks of Brown Pelicans and American White Pelicans side-by-side.

Back at that peninsula, we waited and scoped some more. Earlier I had noticed the license plates on the cars parked at the marina. Although the majority were from California and about a dozen from Arizona, many of them were from far off. There were cars from New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, and even a few from Kansas, Tennessee, and Maryland! I knew that if a mega-rarity showed up in any one of those states, I probably wouldn't even consider chasing it. These birders were apparently very serious, a hypothesis confirmed by their conversations. For example I overheard some nearby birders talking. One said to the other almost angrily, "Man this is disappointing! Where is that d***ed bird? It's time for it to show up! Just got here from that Aztec Thrush down over in the Chiricahuas! Well Bill, where you wanna go?"

The other, while checking a piece of paper, replied, "Well, it looks as if there's a Falcated Duck still up in Oregon. Ya' wanna go after that?"

"Sure! That sounds good," the first replied. After a few minutes, they packed up their scopes and portable folding stools and left.

These guys were unlike any other birders I had ever met. Where do these listers live and who raised them? I thought that my dad and I were crazy to drive to the Salton Sea, but compared to these listers it seemed like nothing. Here was the insane side of birding, and I was participating in it.

My dad and I went back to the place where we first saw Ron. My dad found us our first Yellow-footed Gull, a bird that had somehow eluded me before. Yet there was still no Ross's Gull. At about noon (5 ½ hours since the Ross's Gull was last seen), Ron said that he had to go back home. An hour later (6 ½ hours and no Ross's...), my dad figured that we should soon head for Pasadena as well. The Ross's Gull hadn't been found since early that morning, and later we would hear that it never returned. Imagine my disappointment at getting up at 3:30 am and being in the car for three hours, only to look for a mega-rarity that had left permanently 15 minutes before our arrival. On the bright side, however, I had seen two lifebirds, the Lesser Black-backed Gull and the Yellow-footed Gull.

We stopped at an IHOP for a late lunch, and the pancakes and syrup cheered us up. Then we went home. Later, when reflecting on this crazy adventure, I realized I had come face-to-face with the 'dark side' of birding. I have heard from many very experienced birders that it is better to bird your own local 'patch,' rather than polluting the Earth traveling to check off some rarity on your lifelist. I still wish that I had seen the Ross's Gull, but maybe I learned more from seeing the insane side of birding.