

Photographs by Peter C. Alden and Kenneth Zurland
Text by Paul J. Baicich

Whether or not you realize it, this cover of *Birding* helps illustrate the changes in our pastime over the past 30+ years. Yes, these are both photos of Ross's Gulls, but they serve as bookends to the way we've come to bird.

Back in the 1970s, the "only" place to find Ross's Gull in North America was at Point Barrow, Alaska, in late September and October, where the lucky observer might see small groups of these larids flying eastward. In North America, the species was in fact virtually unknown south of the Arctic.

That was to change in 1975 at Newburyport, Massachusetts, where a Ross's Gull stunned the birding world. That Ross's Gull, a winter-plumage adult, had actually been present in Newburyport Harbor from at least 12 January 1975 and identified by Phil Parsons and Herman Weissberg. (The bird might actually have been there as early as 7 December 1974.) The January report was virtually dismissed; no rare-bird-alert was initiated. The gull was found again, however, on Sunday, 2 March, by a band of seasoned birders consisting of Walter and George Ellison, Paul Miliotis, and Mr. and Mrs. Edward Gruson. This time, birders were drawn by the hundreds to the banks of the Merrimac River.

The flying bird on the cover, photographed by Peter Alden, was that famed Newburyport gull. By Tuesday, the Ross's Gull reached the front page of *The New York Times* (4 March 1975), where there appeared a photo and onsite comments by Roger Tory Peterson. The gull was also the center of attention in three minutes of coverage on the *NBC Nightly News* anchored by John Chancellor on Friday, 7 March.

(If you visit Newburyport, be sure to stop at Mass Audubon's delightful Joppa Flats Center. There you can view the display in the rear of the entry room, where a tape of that very *NBC Nightly News* segment can be viewed at the easy press of a button.)

The "high-tech" telephone RBAs in 1975 were now abuzz with the gull report, and birding phone-trees were

NEWS FLASH FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON SOCIETY
TUESDAY, MARCH 18 1975

ROSS' GULL
Rhosstethia rossii

FAINT DARKENING ON NECK AND FACE
VERY SHORT NECK
PALE GRAY MANTLE
LONG WINGS NO BLACK TIPS
SHORT RED LEGS
SHORT BLACK BILL
FAINT PINK WASH
SHORT RED LEGS

WHERE HAS IT BEEN SEEN?
The best places to watch for it are (A) The Newburyport seawall, (B) the "clamshack" and (C) and (D) which require some hiking over saltmarshes and jumping over creeks. Once a parking spot is found, the Newburyport side is the best for "lazy" birders and has been the most consistent place to find the bird. It feeds on the exposed mudflats at times 2 to 4 hours before and after high tide. The bird is best seen there because at dead low tide it is a long way off. At high tide it can sometimes be seen between the brackwaters, or at (E) where a Tufted Duck remains

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR?
The best field mark is a line of wildly enthusiastic birders with every telescope pointed in the same direction. Look over flying groups of Bonaparte's Gulls (mixed with Black-headed and Little) for a very white gull with no black nor very distinct white flush on the wings. Its underwings are uniform gray not with black and white patterns. It is small, just a little smaller than a Bonaparte's Gull. The clincher is the wedge shaped white tail.

If seen walking on a mudflat look for its small bill, its short red legs, lack of a real neck, and its lack of an "ear patch".
Most field guides show only an adult in summer "dress", and an immature. This is a winter-plumaged adult and although the wing and tail colors and shape are constant, the rosy wash on the head and breast and the black collar are lacking.

IMPORTANT NOTE: A long series of slides, prints and films have been obtained already and no further documentation is necessary. Please do not walk out on the mudflats to photograph it or flush it. Let others on their way enjoy it if he decides to stay.

WEDGE-SHAPED "POINTED" TAIL
WHITE TRAILING EDGE THICKEST AT END
UNIFORM GRAY UNDERWING
LONG WEDGE TAIL
NO BLACK WING TIPS
UNIFORM PALE GRAY WINGS
ITS STILL THERE!

quickly initiated. Lucky birders were soon mailed (*snail-mailed*, in today's parlance) copies of a two-page summary of the finding, released by Massachusetts Audubon Society and written by Peter Alden and Jim Baird.

The word spread very quickly—very quickly, that is, for the 1970s—and the rush of birders was more than significant. Roger Tory Peterson commented on the very first morning of the surge (3 March), "When we reached the beach to see the gull, there were already 59 telescopes trained on the Merrimack River. More and more people came." As Pete Dunne perceptively wrote in *The Feather Quest*, "thousands of birders flooded the town. They came spontaneously, from across the country, to bear witness to a miracle...In the process, birders discovered something that took them completely by surprise. They discovered that they were many."



would be the first record of this species for California. Shockingly, it was not at any anticipated northern California coastal location, but inland almost as far south in the state as one can travel. This was the southernmost Ross's Gull ever seen in the world and also the lowest, at 226.4 feet below sea level!

By dawn on 18 November, at least 50 birders were at the site. Many had driven all night to see the bird. By the end of the day, by dint of internet, e-mail, digital photography, and cell-phone use, at least 150 birders had arrived in the area of the boat launch. The small gull calmly fed along the mud and shore, even working to within a dozen feet of waiting photographers.

In the years to follow, Ross's Gulls were to be seen and identified by skilled birders at a number of locations in the U.S.: Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Colorado, and Oregon, as well as Alaska and elsewhere. In Canada, meanwhile, Ross's Gulls would be found visiting Newfoundland, Québec, Ontario, British Columbia, and elsewhere. There would also be the spectacular discovery of breeding at Churchill, Manitoba.

Fast forward, if you will, another 31 years from the original Newburyport event.

On the afternoon of 17 November 2006, Guy McCaskie, reigning godfather of modern California birding, was at the southeastern end of the Salton Sea in California, at the boat-launching site at Red Hill. Right in front of him, in the wet mud north of the boat launch channel, was a completely unexpected Ross's Gull catching flies. According to McCaskie, in his 2007 recap in *Western Birds*, "I fumbled with a list of cell-phone numbers and finally calmed down enough to alert some southern California birders." Birders began to arrive that afternoon, and the gull was soon photographed, conveniently remaining within 100 feet of the spot and actively catching flies for the rest of the day.

By the evening, images had been posted on the internet, and yet another rush began.

The Salton Sea Ross's Gull, pictured in a photograph ("inside" the screen) by Kenneth Kurland on the cover,

On the morning of the 19th, the Ross's Gull was again at Red Hill. Intrepid birders present at dawn that day saw the bird take off, fly east along the shoreline, and then disap-



pear, never to be seen again.

No, the Salton Sea bird did not remain as long as the Newburyport individual had (at least two months, to early May 1975), but it was our current communications technology that made the difference to many a fortunate birder rushing to the Salton Sea in November 2006.

— Paul J. Baicich

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