

The Osprey



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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

RARE GULL VISITS ST. CHARLES TOWN CENTER

by George Jett

On the afternoon of January 23 I stopped at the St. Charles Towne Center Shopping Center to see what gulls were lounging on the ice. With the cold weather we were having, part of the storm water pond behind the movie theater had frozen, and good numbers of gulls were resting there. I had stopped perhaps a dozen times in the past two weeks with only Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed gulls being present.

On that January afternoon the numbers of gulls had grown, so I stopped once again. Much to my surprise I found an unusual one that I could not put to species at first. The image below shows the bird to be intermediate in size between the Ring-billed and Herring Gull. My first instinct was a goofy Lesser Black-backed Gull (LBBG), since their numbers have increased in our region in the past decade.

Having a bit of experience with LBBG, I quickly dismissed this possibility. The shape of my "mystery gull" was wrong for LBBG. The bird of interest is in its second winter (second plumage cycle), the color and length of legs, the shape of bill and head, and overall appearance told me this was not a LBBG. The light was good so I took a number of images.

When I got home I took out my three field guides for gulls (you can't have too many field guides), and began to evaluate my photos. Overall size, shape, color and length of the legs, bill pattern, and a number of other field marks told me I had just photographed a second cycle California Gull, *Larus californicus*. California Gull, as the name implies, is a western bird and there is only a handful of records of this species in Maryland.

Since California Gull has never been documented in Charles County, and is one of the species that must be reviewed by the Maryland Ornithological Society Records Committee before official acceptance, I wanted some corroboration from some of the gull experts I know. Yes, some people find the study of gulls interesting. They take their dates to landfills, sewage treatment ponds, and other places where gulls hang out. They don't get many dates. Of the four gull experts that I can reach quickly, three responded immediately, and all agreed that the image was of a second cycle California Gull.

I was keen to get others to see this rare bird, and especially Gwen Brewer, my partner, but I had a problem. She was at work (I am retired), it was after 4 PM, and the sun was going to set soon. She and others could only hope the bird remained over night. At dawn on January 24 she and I

met Tom Field and others at the pond, but unfortunately the bird was not present. After many additional tries, I was unable to find this bird again. Clearly it was in transit, as many gulls were during that time of the year.

On the next day, January 25, I did find three LBBGs that had not been there on all my previous visits, but still no California Gull. The only advice I can give to find rare birds like the California Gull is to be persistent. Learn the varied plumages, learn the habitat the birds frequent, go often (with or without a date), study large flocks carefully, and eventually you will get lucky. Gull watching can be frustrating owing to identification subtleties within the group, but can be very exciting when you find something unusual.



Probable second winter California Gull (center), surrounded by adult Ring-billed gulls (foreground and left) and Herring Gull (rear) taken in Waldorf at Charles Towne Center on 23 January by George Jett. Note its intermediate size. View it in color in this issue at www.geocities.com/smdaudubon.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Birding Naval Air Station Patuxent River Saturday, January 19, 2008, by Dean Newman.

The forecast predicted wintry mix turning to snow by 9:00 AM. Pre-scouting had revealed nothing more note worthy than Tundra Swan and Ruddy Duck. "You pay your money and you take your chances," I thought, while remembering I had signed up to lead this field trip six months earlier. It was warm and sunny then.

Such was my attitude when I arrived at the Park 'n Ride Lot in Lexington Park that Saturday morning. I had even sent a discouraging e-mail to the SMAS list server the prior

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Thursday hoping to keep birders from the far edges of our tri-county area from wasting their time and gas for a trip that would surely be called off for weather at the last minute.

While waiting in the cold I ticked off names of those I thought might be brave or foolhardy enough to join me. It was a short list. In fact if only one or two showed I would count myself lucky and we'd have a great "social birding" morning as opposed to knocking down a long list of sightings. Maybe, if the right one or two showed, we could throw in a little spice like, "South Polar Skua sighted over Goose Creek Campground." That would make a great title for this report I knew I'd have to submit. After all, why does truth have to get in the way of a really good story? Otherwise, what was I going to write about on a day like this?

"Why do you put yourself in this position?" I asked myself for the hundredth time. What's so irresistible about George Jett's siren call when assembling the upcoming year's trip schedule? What kept me from saying "Absolutely not!" or at least "No", until he offered up one of the "gravy" assignments he saves for Tyler Bell and Bob Boxwell? They always get trips in the peak of migration when birds are plentiful and the skies are sunny. "Nothing like this morning," I thought as I gazed at the steadily darkening sky.

"Well," I thought as the first car pulled up, "it's time to face the music". It was Ernie Willoughby. "There goes the South Polar Skua," I muttered. Ernie's way too credible, but on the other hand I could think of no one with whom I'd rather spend an hour or two socializing. He's such a wealth of knowledge and I always walk away from time with him smarter than I was before.

Soon another car pulled up, one I didn't recognize. It was Brad Bates and his wife, Carol. Brad and I work together and I vaguely remember inviting him a month or so earlier. Who would have thought he'd remember? With him were Marty Cribb and his significant other birding "ringer", Lucy. Lucy was the one on last year's Pax River outing who nailed rarity after rarity. She really made me look good on that trip. I found myself becoming cautiously optimistic.

Four other cars pulled up in quick succession, one of them Sue Hamilton, another bird guru. I checked my watch with dread and realized it was show time. What was I going to show? Imitations of Larry the Cable Guy and Andy Griffith can only take you so far, and these ten folks came to see birds. I resigned myself to the inevitable and hoped that they really wouldn't tar and feather an inept bird guide who had dragged them out in the cold and rain for nothing.

I wish my report could say my thoughts about the day turned out all wrong. I wish I could tick off bird after bird that would make those of you who exercised better judgment than ours green with envy. That wasn't the case. We amassed a solid list of thirty-plus species—no South Polar Skua—including Cedar Waxwing, Bald Eagle, Common Loon, Horned Grebe and Brown Pelican, but in the end it was a great "social" day. The rain held until long after the magic noon ending time but the cold was there, intensified by hard

wind and our continually setting up and standing on open beaches. A duck hunter did give us a great close up of a Red-breasted Merganser, stiff with rigor mortis or was that hypothermia?

No, we didn't accumulate a long list. Bob and Tyler beat me again. But there was something bonding about a group of like-minded hard-core birders sharing misery without reward. It left me thinking, "Does every bird trip need a long list of sightings to be considered successful?" The slow birding engendered increased conversation—when I could get Ernie out of the car. I learned things about my co-club members I never knew. I learned things about birds, nature and local history. I made new friends. I also walked away with a new definition of a "successful" trip.

Eat your heart out Tyler and Bob. George, I'll take the same slot next year and pray for dismal weather.

Groundhog Day Birding in Charles County, February 2, 2008 by George Jett.

Five SMAS members headed out to find our shadows, and as many bird species as we could on a 2/3 day trip around Charles County. The weather was great and we finished with a list of 60 species.

Highlights were 15 species of waterfowl including Tundra Swan, our first of the year Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, both Scaup, Hooded Merganser, Long-tailed Duck, Surf Scoter, and Common Goldeneye. We also had one Horned Grebe.

We had a pretty good raptor day with numerous Bald Eagles in various places, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, both Red-tail and Red-shouldered hawk, and American Kestrel. We did not do as well on the woodpeckers, but did find five of the normally expected species including Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Northern Flicker.

Sparrows, another of my favorite groups, were fairly represented with seven species. Highlights were Eastern Towhee, Field and Savannah sparrows. Other species of note were Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Pine Warbler, and Eastern Meadowlark.

We also saw our shadows, so legend has it that we will have six more weeks of winter. With outdoor temperatures near normal room temperature on February 5, it does not feel like that. Good birding and thanks to all who attended. The couch potatoes missed a good one.

NOMINATIONS WANTED

Southern Maryland Audubon Society needs nominees to fill the positions of President, Vice-president, Treasurer, Secretary, and two Directors, on the ballot for elections at the annual meeting in June. We invite anyone interested in standing for election to any of these positions, or wishing to nominate anyone else, or just wanting more information to contact Bob Lukinic, Chair of the Nominating Committee, at 301-283-6317, or email rlukinic@peoplepc.com

CONGRATULATIONS TO 2008 SCIENCE FAIR WINNERS

Congratulations to the Southern Maryland school science fair winners, and thanks to our SMAS judges. Each first place winner in high school and middle school categories received \$50 and a one-year membership in the National Audubon Society and Southern Maryland Audubon Society.

Calvert County, Judges: Sue Noble and Leslie Bridgett.
Senior Division Winner: Katherine Lewis, Patuxent High School, project title "Paper and Plastic: Double Trouble".
Junior Division Winner: Rose Miller, Mill Creek Middle School, project title "Saving Soil for a Rainy Day".

Charles County, Judge: Millie Kriemelmeyer.
Senior Division Winner: Kristina Millman, North Point High School, project title "How's the Bay's Health".
Junior Division Winner: Valerie Garza, John Hanson Middle School, project title "Oyster Wars: Virginica vs. Ariakensis".
Elementary Division Winner (Prize is an Audubon bird field guide): Tabitha Rea, J. P. Ryon Elementary School, project title "How Does Groundwater Affect Runoff".

St. Mary's County, Judges: Bev and Warren Walker:
Senior Division Winner: Shefali Shah, Great Mills High School, project title "The Big, the Bad, and the Small".
Junior Division Winner: Madeleine Taylor, St. John's School, project title "Every Drop Counts".

BUSH APPROVES OIL LEASING IN POLAR BEAR SEA

STATEMENT OF BETSY LOYLESS, AUDUBON'S
DONAL O'BRIEN CHAIR FOR ADVOCACY
AND POLICY

Washington, DC, February 6, 2008 - "An oil spill in Alaska's Chukchi Sea could spell disaster for many polar bears. The only explanation for the Interior Department's insistence on drilling in polar bear habitat is its lopsided commitment to doing favors for oil companies and special interests.

"After seven years of pandering to oil companies, selling off pristine polar bear habitat the size of Pennsylvania simply goes too far."

More information— The U.S. Interior Department moved ahead today with auctioning oil and gas leases in Alaska's Chukchi Sea, despite stiff opposition from conservation groups and some members of Congress.

The Chukchi Sea, off Alaska's northern coast has also been called the Polar Bear Sea because it is prime habitat for the bear. The lease sale encompasses about 30 million acres, the equivalent of the state of Pennsylvania.

A decision on whether to list the polar bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act was expected weeks ago, but has been stalled. Many have questioned the tim-

ing of that decision, saying it appears the listing was shelved to allow the leasing to move ahead first.

Last week, Audubon joined other conservation groups together with Alaska natives in suing to force the agency to reassess the legality and environmental impact of oil and gas leasing in the Chukchi Sea.

According to internal documents released by the whistleblower group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), the Interior Department ignored warnings by agency scientists that oil spills in the Chukchi would harm polar bears.

Editor's note: Besides polar bears, many millions of sea-birds (shearwaters, petrels, auklets, guillemots, murre, puffins, gulls, etc.), waterfowl (eiders and other marine ducks and geese), and marine mammals (Walrus, various seals, whales, porpoises), and the people who depend on them for subsistence, will be harmed by oil extraction activities in the Chukchi Sea.

PLAN NOW FOR THE HORSESHOE CRAB & MIGRATORY SHOREBIRD TRIP

by Millie Kriemelmeyer

This special field trip is scheduled for May 16, 17, 18.

Spawning horseshoe crabs and migrating shorebirds are the targets for the field trip to Delaware Bay. The spring full moon and high tide period is the narrow window of opportunity to observe thousands of migrating shorebirds feasting along the shore on just-laid horseshoe crab eggs.

Reserve with trip leader, Millie Kriemelmeyer, 301-372-8766, milliek@radix.net. Recommended directions & lodging information will be sent.

Fri. May 16 – overnight lodging in Dover, 1st choice is Comfort Inn, 222 South DuPont Hwy, 302-674-3300. Call now – the hotel fills fast for this May weekend.

Sat. May 17 – 7:30 AM - Meet group leaders, Dean Newman & Millie Kriemelmeyer, at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge visitor center for early birding at the refuge searching for spring migrants. The Bombay Hook Spring Festival is this day.

Sat. May 17 – 6:00 PM – Meet at Pizza Delight by Giacomo, Lebanon Valley Rd (Route 10), South Dover for dinner & travel to Pickering Beach for the 8:30 PM night high tide & horseshoe crab spawning. Pizza Delight: RR 10, Ste 150, Dover, 302-698-1500.

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Sun. May 18 – 8AM, leave Comfort Inn for Pickering Beach for daytime high tide photo opportunity. Trip to DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion Beach will follow.

Bring warm coat, hat, gloves, boots, rain gear, flashlight & folding chair (for the beach). Recommend you purchase the De Lorme Maryland-Delaware Atlas.

“GREEN IS KLEEN”: CLOTH BAG FUNDRAISER

Would you like to cut down on your use of plastic bags? Lee Duer of the Wild Bird Center in Waldorf, a great SMAS supporter, is offering cloth bags for sale at his store with the slogan that he has developed, “Green is Kleen!”. These high-quality bags are made of 10oz. recycled cotton in a natural color, are the size of a large grocery bag (18"W X 17.5"H X7"), and have a 25" handle so that they can go over the shoulder. The bags are being sold for \$9.95, with \$3 of every sale going to SMAS. The Wild Bird Center is located in the Waldorf World Shopping Center on Route 301, between Borders Books and Radio Shack. We all know the harm and waste that go into the production and discard of plastic bags. Do your part to reduce the impact on the environment by purchasing a cloth bag to use and reuse, and support SMAS at the same time!

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

- David Baker, Temple Hills
- B J. Barnes, Dunkirk
- William Haile/Joy Bartholomew, Port Republic
- Mary K. Berthiaume, Lusby
- Mary Blackmon, La Plata
- Harold E. Boesch, Solomons
- Donald E. Brown, Ft Washington
- Doris Caddell, Bushwood
- Mr/Mrs. John R. Camero, Piney Point
- James Crawford, Waldorf
- Joe Defranco, Lexington Park
- James/Joan Dunn, La Plata
- Gwen L. Johnson, Oxon Hill
- Dorothy Layton, Clinton
- Clayton Mankey, Waldorf
- Janet McCutcheon, Lexington Park
- Robert Moody, Suitland
- Mel D. Powell, Lusby
- Denise L. Robey, La Plata
- Natalie J. Turner, Waldorf
- Harry Weitzel, Leonardtown

FOSTER PARENTS NEEDED



Southern Maryland Audubon Society sponsors the banding of nestling birds of prey, or raptors, with serially numbered aluminum bands in cooperation with the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U. S. Department of the Interior, as part of our bird research and conservation activities in Southern Maryland. Limited numbers

of Osprey and Barn Owl nestlings become available each year for adoption. The gift of \$10 for an Osprey adoption, or of \$25 for a Barn Owl adoption, contributes to a special fund for the support of raptor research and raptor conservation projects. The foster parent receives:

- A certificate of adoption with the number of the U. S. Department of the Interior band, and the location and date of the banding.
- Information on the ecology and migration patterns of the species, photo of a fledgling, and any other information on whereabouts or fate of the bird that may be available.

Interested? Here's how to become a foster parent of an Osprey or a Barn Owl. Send \$10.00 for each Osprey, or \$25 for each Barn Owl to:

Southern Maryland Audubon Society
ATTN: Adoption Program
11350 Budds Creek Rd.
Charlotte Hall, Maryland 20622



ADOPT A RAPTOR

Name: _____

Address: _____

I wish to adopt (check one):

_____ (number of) Osprey, \$10.00 each

_____ (number of) Barn Owl, \$25.00 each

Amount Enclosed: _____

(Make checks payable to:
 Southern Maryland Audubon Society)