

NYSOA Gull ID Workshop & Field Trip, January 7-8, 2012

The New York State Ornithological Association (NYSOA) held gull workshop and field trip events this weekend. The workshop, given by Jean Iron of Toronto in Niagara Falls, Ontario on Saturday, was free and open to anyone. Jean discussed and showed slides of the different plumages of all of the gull species that have occurred on the Niagara River (19 species) and in Ontario (two additional species). The talk was very well received by a large gathering of birders from all over New York and Ontario.

On Sunday, I led the field trip along the Niagara River, with much appreciated assistance from Jean Iron, Ron Pittaway, and Betsy Potter. The trip was only open to members of NYSOA and included some 30 participants. In order to help learn the ID points from Jean's talk the day before, assignments were given to find as many different ages of Herring Gull (all four were found), Great Black-backed Gull (three were found), and Bonaparte's Gull (both were found). Of course, it was not all work and we found a lot of great birds on the day, a few of which were lifers for several attendees. We started at the Adam Beck overlook at the power plants and, right off the bat, an adult THAYER'S GULL was found perched on the NY shoreline. There were also several ICELAND GULLS here and more above the falls. An adult LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL flew around in front of the power dam for us; a few more were seen above the falls. The boat ramp in lower Queenston produced at least three adult LITTLE GULLS, which everyone got to see in their scopes (looking downriver). While looking for the Little Gulls, someone spotted two BLACK VULTURES flapping and soaring over the trees on the NY side.

Above the falls, we found a second winter GLAUCOUS GULL on the large rock island below the control gates. An adult GLAUCOUS GULL on the same island was only seen by the leader and one other. An adult Iceland/Thayer's Gull on the breakwall exhibited a lot of black in the wingtips but was fairly clean-headed and small-billed – we let that one go unidentified. We had heard a report of an adult male Barrow's Goldeneye near where the creek flows into the river across from Dufferin Islands but we only saw Common Goldeneyes there. However, we did see a female HARLEQUIN DUCK halfway across. There have been up to four Harlequin Ducks that like to sit on or near a small rock island that has two scrubby trees on it, located along the ridge that extends across the river. This is a hundred yards or so upriver from the stranded barge.

Next, we made the long trek to the Buffalo waterfront, where there has been an impressive collection of Bonaparte's Gulls in a relatively small area. We were off to a great start there in that we did not lose anyone along the way! An adult BALD EAGLE greeted our group shortly after arriving with a nice flyover. We checked over the small gulls in the marina through the fence from Hertel Avenue, then moved over to the north end of Squaw Island in order to get the sun behind us. Two highlights here were great looks at a first winter LITTLE GULL and a first year BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE, both birds initially picked out by Dave Gordon at a distance. The incredible assemblage of small gulls here, many of them quite close, provides a very special experience, even for veteran river rats. Whether it's watching the swirling mass of Bonaparte's Gulls as they practice evasive maneuvers or to see them diving for the super-abundant minnows, half a dozen or more hitting the water at once and looking like miniature Gannets, it was both beautiful and fascinating. After this, the remnants of the group made one last stop at the tower at Erie Basin Marina, where the long-staying SNOWY OWL was finally seen at a great distance on rocks behind the coast guard station.

For the day we had 10 species of gulls and lots of individuals to study. The number of gulls here is still very high, both large gulls and Bonaparte's Gulls. Keep in mind that this varies. Weekdays seem to be

poorer for large gulls (although Mondays may be an exception), presumably due to the dumps drawing them away. We were very fortunate with the weather, which could not have been better – I heard not a single complaint about being cold.

I would like to extend a big thank-you to NYSOA and Kathy Schneider, who did such a great job organizing the weekend. Kayo Roy deserves special mention for helping with the lodging, as well as finding the venue for Jean Iron's gull workshop (the Niagara Falls Library). Jean put together a wonderful program and was especially helpful on the field trip. The participants were a great group coming from as far away as Long Island and Vermont, eager to learn about this challenging group of birds.

Good gulling!

Willie

Willie D'Anna

Betsy Potter

Wilson, NY