



North Country Notes

The Newsletter of the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society
Marquette and Alger Counties, Michigan

May 2013

Rare Slaty-Backed Gull Brings Excitement to Marquette

by Beth Olson

On March 15th, I was at Picnic Rocks to look at the gulls. J.D. Phillips had given a presentation the weekend before and talked about the wonderful variety of gulls that can be found in late winter here in Marquette and I wanted to see some for myself. It was a blustery and snowy day which can cause the gulls to congregate along the shoreline and I wasn't disappointed by the variety or number of gulls. Among the numerous Herring gulls and recently returning Ring-billed gulls, there were 9 Glaucous gulls, which are slightly larger than Herring gulls and 2 Iceland gulls, which are a bit larger than the Ring-billed gulls. I enjoy seeing these last two species because they are so attractive. The first 2 years of their life they are mostly white or mottled off white and quite striking. In their 3rd year and beyond, they obtain a gray back much like the Herring and Ring-billed gulls with the exception of their wing tips. Those remain white.

There was one dark mantled gull hunkered down on a rock along with a number of other gulls. I quickly checked this gull (it was COLD and WINDY out there, everything was done quickly!), noted the dark back and pink legs and thought it looked larger than the nearby Herring gulls and deduced Great Black-backed gull, a large, dark backed occasional visitor here from the east coast.

I let J.D. Phillips know about the great variety and number of gulls at Picnic Rocks. He said "If you told me there was a Slaty-backed gull out there I'd be hyperventilating right now!". Slaty-backed gulls are native to Siberia, Japan and far northwestern Alaska but are known to travel far and wide in the breeding off-season. Apparently, J.D. had been hoping to see one for many years.

I took a picture of the rock with numerous gulls on it including the dark mantled bird and posted it on my flickr page asking for help to ID another bird. That night Chris a birder and friend of Skye Haas's, from New Jersey, called Skye and asked if he had seen the picture. Skye happened to be looking at it right at that moment. Chris lives in Great Black-backed gull territory, and knew that the dark mantled bird was not a Great Black-backed gull and actually thought it looked more like a Slaty-backed gull! Skye agreed and emailed J.D. and me notifying us of this potential rarity. He asked for more details about the bird that could help confirm the ID such as if the legs were bright pink as opposed to a more fleshy pink, or if any photos were taken with the wings fully extended. Unfortunately I couldn't help with any more details. Darn!

I could hardly sleep that night because my mind was whirling about that gull. Wow. A possible rarity! Would that bird still be there the next day to give us the chance to positively ID it? If it was a Slaty-backed gull how on earth did it get here and what on earth was it doing here? And how did a birder from New Jersey get wind of my picture!? I was very glad that I posted that picture and posed a query to the Birdnet for the ID help and I was also very grateful to Skye and this person from New Jersey for being diligent about this bird if it indeed was a rare Slaty-backed gull.

The next day, Saturday March 16th, J.D., and his son went to Picnic Rocks looking for the gull and were later joined by Skye. Whew. It was still there. Now they had the tricky task of getting a positive ID on it. They also had to rule out a hybrid bird. Slaty-backed gulls are known to hybridize with other gulls including Herring Gulls. They took some amazing photos of the

gull in flight and were quite sure it was a Slaty-backed gull by the color of the back (slaty colored not black), size of the bird (comparable to the Herring gulls), streaked neck and bright pink legs. I later took a few more pictures with the wings fully extended which showed a diagnostic line of white subterminal spots on the primary feathers known as the "string of pearls". That clinched the ID. It took 4 birders to get to

that ID, Chris from New Jersey, Skye, J.D. Phillips and myself but Marquette was official host of the 3rd known Slaty-backed gull in Michigan and 2nd one in the U.P.! Excitement spread like wildfire through the birding community. By Sunday night, Picnic Rocks was party central for birders celebrating this rare find right in our own town.



Slaty-backed gull
photo by J.D. Phillips



Nice look at the "string-of-pearls"
photo by Skye Haas

Over the next 3-4 weeks the Slaty-backed gull remained in Marquette and birders continued to come see it from near and far. On many occasions I saw people at Picnic Rocks with binoculars and scopes and it was almost certain that they were there to see the Slaty-backed gull. On one of those occasions, I broke into conversation with a man who was dressed for the outdoors and searching through the gulls with binoculars and scope. I asked him where he was from. He said "New Jersey.". I was stunned silent for a moment. This couldn't possibly be the same person who consulted Skye about my picture? Could it? After all, New Jersey is a big state with lots of people. Then I had to ask, "Are you the one who called Skye about the picture posted on Flickr?!" Yup. It was that Chris. What a small world! Then I wanted to know how he came to see the picture that got this whole event started. I learned that he worked last year doing bird surveys in the U.P. during the spring and summer and is here to work again this That mystery was solved and I got to thank him in person for his role in helping

ID this bird and make us Marquette birders very happy.



Marquette Iceland Gull
photo by Skye Haas

Peninsula Point Bird Survey

by Gary Palmer

Spring migration is possibly the most exciting times of year for a birder or any naturalist. Here in the Upper Peninsula we are treated to a spectacular display to jolt us out of our winter doldrums as our daily checklists jump from 15 species on a good day to over a hundred over the course of several action-packed weeks. Popular sites such as Whitefish Point and Brockway Mountain may be better known, but U.P. birdwatchers have discovered that the hidden gem known as Peninsula Point, the slender tip of the Stonington Peninsula, extending approximately 15 miles into Lake Michigan located in Delta County, is one of the best birding spots in the entire region.

The Audubon Society's Important Bird Areas (IBA) program has also recognized the special role this area plays in the life of numerous birds; of 102 IBAs in 83 counties throughout Michigan, seven are within Delta County. Of 23 species on the US Fish and Wildlife Service's list of birds of conservation concern for this region, at least 18 have been sighted at or near Peninsula Point. In one striking migratory exodus, observers stationed at Portage Marsh and Peninsula Point recorded a combined total of over 70,000 Long-tailed Ducks flying past the mouth of Little Bay de Noc on May 19th, 2011, part of a trend which has now been observed at the site for several years. This site is also known for its surprising frequency of vagrant birds – in the last few years Delta County had hosted out-of-range Cinnamon Teal, Western Tanager, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Prothonotary Warbler, just to name a few.

Increasingly convinced of this area's importance to a staggering volume and variety of migrant birds, Skye Haas and I have initiated a research project in order to more thoroughly document their occurrence here. The Peninsula Point Bird Survey (PPBS), a joint research project of Michigan Audubon Society and the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society, will use a combination of monitoring techniques to expand on previous research and document the scope of

avian migration on and around the Stonington Peninsula. Michigan Audubon has contributed \$1000 to the project, and at their April meeting the LWAS executive board voted to contribute \$300.

During the initial phase of this project, data will be collected on all birds in the area, with daily visual counts from Peninsula Point of waterbirds, shorebirds, rails, raptors, and passerines throughout the height of spring migration. Concurrent acoustic monitoring of nocturnal passerine migration will also be conducted throughout the spring in order to better assess how detection of these nocturnal flight calls relates to what is being observed on the ground.

The secondary phase of this study will employ similar methods to assess usage of the entire Little and Big Bay de Noc region in Delta County, Michigan by staging shorebirds and breeding waterbirds (e.g. Red-necked Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Common Tern, Black Tern) from June into September. Field observers will travel to sites across Delta County to census breeding waterbirds and staging shorebirds. Population data will be collected at colonies of waterbirds and at shorebird staging sites which are found throughout the county's shoreline.

For the first year of the project data collection will be performed by volunteer birdwatchers, primarily members of the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society and students from Northern Michigan University's Northern Parulas Birding Club. Data collected during the project will be submitted to the Midwest Avian Data Center for use by a wide variety of government agencies as well as the public. It is anticipated that data from the PPBS will contribute significantly to the designation of one or several more Important Bird Areas, documenting the importance of this area for the survival of other sensitive species. To learn more about the project and how you can contribute, contact Gary Palmer (palmerjg@gmail.com) or Skye Haas (theowlranch@gmail.com).

Piping Plover Volunteers Needed

Volunteers are needed to help protect piping plovers chicks along Lake Superior in Grand Marais and along Lake Michigan in the Gulliver area. The Great Lakes piping plovers are an endangered species. There were only 58 pairs nesting along the Great Lakes in 2012.

Piping plovers arrive along the shoreline in late April until mid-May and then establish nesting territory and begin breeding. We have to find the nests and erect rope, fence posts and a mesh enclosure to protect the eggs. Then we have to check the nests twice a day to make sure both parents are sharing the incubation of the eggs. The chicks hatch about 28 days after incubation begins. Plover chicks are precocious and begin searching for food along the beach soon after hatching. Chicks usually hatch from early to late June and then there is a 4 to 5 week period before they are fully fledged. This is the most critical time because these are populated beaches with people, dogs, ATVs, etc. There are also natural predators to try to discourage from being in the chick area like crows, herring gulls, great-blue herons, and merlins.

There is one employee in Grand Marais, Teresa Bertossi and one in Gulliver, Deimetri Lafkas. But they are only paid for 40 hours a week and they usually spend 8 hours 5 days week (or more). This is a great help but we have over 16 hours of daylight and different nesting areas. Volunteers usually spend two 3 hours shifts on the beach each day.

If you can come for 2 days or 2 weeks it would be a great benefit to this declining species. We (Kathy and Bill Davis) provide training and housing for volunteers in Grand Marais. The employee in Gulliver is Demetri Lafkas and he may have some available space for volunteers. Please contact us if you can come!!

Kathy and Bill Davis
906-228-4197 (Marquette)
906-494-2400 (Grand Marais)
kdavismqt@aol.com

Teresa Bertossi
810-931-6173
tbertoss@nmu.edu

Demetri Lafkas
906-362-7056
dlafkas25@hotmail.com

PROGRAMS

All programs begin at 7:00 p.m. in the Community room of Peter White Library in Marquette. For information on any program, call 226-6749.

May 22: "Birds and Lemurs of Madagascar" **(4TH WEDNESDAY)**

Presenter: Jeff Knoop

After a recent trip to Madagascar, Jeff Knoop will discuss the many rare and endemic bird and lemur species seen on this exciting trip that included visiting 6 National Parks on the island. He will also discuss conservation efforts being undertaken to save the rich biodiversity of Madagascar.

JUNE, JULY, AUGUST: no programs

September 11: Presentation on the Chocolate Bird Rehabilitation Center

Presenter: Jerry Maynard

Jerry Maynard will speak about his work operating the raptor rehabilitation center, and he will show the audience several raptors which are unable to be released in the wild. (Suitable for all ages)

October 9: Special showing of the documentary film "The Lost Bird Project"

Presented jointly by LWAS and The Nature Conservancy

This film documents an attempt to memorialize the 5 North American birds lost to extinction in modern times and includes visits to the location of the last known sighting of each species. (www.lostbirdfilm.org)

November 13: Annual Membership Meeting

Board members will be elected or confirmed at this meeting. Mostly, though, it will be a social event where members are invited to show photographs of birds and other nature-oriented pictures. Light refreshments will be served. Computer & digital projector will be provided.

December: NO MEETING – Consider participating in a Christmas Bird Count

FIELD TRIPS & BIRD WALKS

MAY 19 (Sunday): PENINSULA POINT FIELD TRIP

Time: all-day, but plan to arrive at dawn for the best viewing

Picnic: mid-day cookout in the picnic area – bring your own food and beverages

Driving Instructions: From Highway 2, 2.8 miles east of Rapid River, take the exit towards Stonington and travel south on County Road 513. Follow CR 513 for 17.7 miles to the tip of the peninsula, where you will find the Peninsula Point Lighthouse.

Information: Contact Beth Olson (phone: 906-360-4336 or email tolson@chartermi.net) or Skye Haas (phone: 906-869-6165 or email theowlranch@gmail.com)

Hundreds of neo-tropical songbirds like warblers, tanagers, orioles, grosbeaks, vireos, buntings and thrushes are found each year along with shorter-distance migrants like sparrows, jays, woodpeckers, chickadees and finches. Some days the marshy beach can be covered in shorebirds, with uncommon migrants like Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot and Piping Plover seen annually.

GUIDED BIRD WALKS AT PRESQUE ISLE

LWAS will host guided bird walks at the Bog Walk at Presque Isle Park on the second Saturday of the month during June, July, August, and September. Walks begin at 8:00 a.m. and last for about 2 hours. Participants should meet in the parking lot of the Bog Walk. For information call 906-226-6749.

June 8: leader Gary Palmer

July 13: leader Greg Cleary

August 10: leader to be determined

September 14: leader to be determined

NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT

Saturday, May 11 (may be May 12 in some counties):

The North American Migration Count (NAMC) was started in 1992 to give bird watchers the opportunity to enjoy a day's birding during spring migration with the knowledge that the results of their findings, together with the birds counted by others, would reveal the status of bird migration on a specified date. The goals of the NAMC are to get a picture of the progress of spring migration, obtain data on the abundance and distribution of each migratory species, create more challenges and goals for birders, and (most important) have fun.

This count is organized on a county-wide basis. If you want to participate, it's as simple as birding at the site of your choosing, then submitting your observations to the appropriate county compiler:

Marquette County: Melinda Stamp (mstamp@mstamp.net)

Alger County: Scott Hickman (suboscine@hotmail.com)

Delta County: Skye Haas (theowlranch@gmail.com)

POT-LUCK PICNIC PLANNED FOR JULY 13

Greg Cleary is returning to Marquette on weekend of July 13 and has offered to conduct the morning bird walk at Presque Isle. On the evening of the 13th, the club will host a pot-luck dinner for all members, with Greg and Sara as guests of honor. Dinner will be held on Presque Isle from 5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. at the small pavilion located north of Moosewood, near the Community Gardens. Bring a dish to pass and your own beverage. Plates, napkins and table ware will be provided. (Please note that alcoholic beverages are not allowed). We hope you can attend!

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form for 2012-2013

Your dues support the newsletter, program costs, & local birding activities. Donations are tax-deductible.

Name (or names) _____

Address _____

City, State and Zip _____

Phone _____ e-mail _____

(E-mail addresses are not given to other groups or commercial entities)

Membership fees (please check one)

_____ Regular (Individual and Family) Annual - \$15.00 _____ Student - \$5.00

Additional donation \$ _____ (total) You may designate how this contribution is to be used:

\$ _____ Bird seed for feeders at Presque Isle Park

\$ _____ Research Grant to fund birding research in the Upper Peninsula
(Matching funds provided up to \$500 of the amount raised)

\$ _____ General club expenses

Mail this form, along with your check (payable to LWAS) to:

Ann Joyal, 346 W. Crescent St., Marquette, MI 49855 (ajoyal@nmu.edu 906-226-6749)

Check the mailing label on this newsletter to see when your membership expires. Dues are paid for a one year period. If you are currently "paid – up," consider giving this membership form to someone you know who might be interested in joining Laughing Whitefish Audubon.

c/o Beth Olson
5 Arrowhead Dr.
Marquette, MI 49855

