



THE PLAIN DEALER

Gulls raise quite a flap at Gordon State Park - Aerial View

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If it's possible to have too much of a good thing with birds, we approached that level last weekend, during the spectacular gull event along the Lake Erie shoreline at Cleveland's Gordon State Park.

Not that I'm complaining, but the birding there was an assault on the senses.

The sheer number of gulls and varieties of plumage created potentially overwhelming conditions for those less than confident in their identification skills - myself included.

It required special focus to filter out the incessant screaming gulls in eight-part disharmony;

The smell of dead and dying gizzard shad;

The optical illusion created by thousands of gulls flapping, diving, swimming and fighting in a nonstop feeding frenzy;

And the frigid breezes from the north that numbed our fingers and toes and caused our eyes to blink and tear up.

But none of those factors deterred dozens of birders from all over Ohio from flocking to the epicenter of this gull phenomenon at the East 72nd Street warm-water release site.

As ice formed on the lake and crept toward the shoreline, the heated emissions from the power plant attracted huge schools of fish and kept the ice at bay, which, in turn, attracted the multitudes of gulls for our viewing pleasure.

A feeling of helplessness combined with a sense of overwhelming amazement struck me on my arrival at the East 72nd Street parking lot. My initial thought was: How could I possibly sift through so many gulls in search of the rare and uncommon ones? But as I settled in, my thoughts changed to: With so many gulls concentrated in one place, there had to be some good ones for the picking.

Fortunately, several of the sharpest birding eyes in the state were present and actively searching the flock. Not surprisingly, they made some exciting discoveries.

Confronted with a plethora of similar gulls, all but one of the dozens of birders passed over the solitary gull slightly larger than a ring-billed and slightly smaller than a herring. It also had a black-and-red spot on its bill, and its back was a shade of gray darker than the herring's.

John Pogacnik noticed the bird as something different and then nailed the ID: a California gull, a rarity in these parts on the eastern edge of its range.

You know the birding opportunities are special when the numbers of Iceland, glaucous and lesser black-backed gulls reach double figures. With that the case over the weekend, many of the newly arrived birders'

first question was: "Seen any Thayer's gulls?"

On Saturday, the reply was in the affirmative, as the talented Gabe Leidy, Ben Winger, Andy Jones and Pogacnik pulled in two of these rare visitors from the Arctic: a distant adult Thayer's on the ice, plus stunning close-ups of a juvenile bird.

Leidy discovered the second-winter Thayer's gull, with its brownish wingtips and a grayish back just beginning to emerge. Then, as if we had mentally reeled it in for a better look, the bird landed practically at our feet and paddled around for a while before taking off.

By Sunday, the Thayer's and California gulls were nowhere to be found. But the profusion of gulls that remained was a joy to behold.

Combined with a surprise appearance by some remarkably tame snow buntings, birders had more than enough subjects to occupy their time before an impending thaw threatened to disperse this amazing collection of water birds for a while.

Sightings

Waterfowl opportunities decreased, as ice covered most inland lakes. Where open water remained, ducks and geese were often present.

Gregory Bennett found redhead, ring-necked, ruddy, bufflehead, common goldeneye and lesser scaup ducks at Turkeyfoot Lake south of Akron. The Wellington Reservoir in Lorain County had ring-necked, bufflehead, canvasback, redhead, ruddy and black ducks, Craig Caldwell reported. Paula Lozano found canvasback and ruddy ducks on the Cuyahoga River in the Flats. Larry Rosche spotted greater scaup at Headlands Beach State Park, common mergansers and canvasbacks at the mouth of the Grand River and tundra swans, ring-necked ducks and gadwalls at Lake Pippin in Kent.

Woody Stover saw a Northern shrike at the Bath Nature Preserve in Summit County.

An Eastern phoebe at Mentor Lagoons was a surprising discovery by Jerry Talkington.

At a cemetery in Kent, Greg Cudworth found a purple finch and a flock of common redpolls. Other redpoll reports came from Jeff Wert in Granger Township, Medina County; Judy Semroc in Uniontown; Diann Rucki in Bainbridge Township; Sally Isacco in Chardon; and Pogacnik in Perry Township, Lake County.

A white-winged crossbill also made return appearances at Pogacnik's feeders.

Golden-crowned kinglets were a welcome sight for Suzanne Wagner while hiking the trails at the West Woods Reservation of the Geauga County Parks.

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