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See Gulls, Not Seagulls



The Ring-billed is the most ubiquitous of Michigan's gulls.

“There is no such bird as a *seagull*.” We often use this statement as an example to illustrate how most of society does not acknowledge bird diversity, much less, species diversity in general. Usage of the word *seagull* slaps a bland, generic label on all members of the avian family, Laridae. As a result, the amazing variety that exists among gull species becomes effectively blurred to banality. Actually, there are up to a dozen or so species of gulls to be encountered in Michigan – that is, if you are willing to drive hefty miles, risk biting wind and frostbite, and endure offensive odors, depending which way the wind blows.

Of course, the reduction of all gull species to *seagull* is not necessarily done with malice or with any other conscious purpose. Rather, it seems, at some stretch in human history *Homo sapiens* interest in differentiating between the gull species managed to fall through the sieve that cradles our stores of knowledge. Apparently, this was detail not worth assimilating. The shortfall seems to have persisted without consideration from parent to child, through generations, ad infinitum.

Why would this be? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that, although large, the gulls are not colorful birds. White, mixed with varying shades of gray is hardly an attention-grabber. The wide open landscapes they occupy - abundant sky, water and sand - tend to undermine their size in our minds' eyes, as well. Finally, perhaps our propensity to judge them according to their diet plays a role in not giving them their due. Scavengers play important roles in the ecosystem, but, with the possible exception of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, they have hardly been depicted as admirable characters in cartoons or fantasy literature.

Students at Montessori Children's House, Stepping Stones Montessori and Okemos Nursery School, who receive weekly Michigan wildlife lessons from us throughout the school year, learn what we mean by there being “no such bird as a *seagull*.” Away from school they bring the topic to light for family members and other acquaintances. Our own kids - now grown – have been through the drill, as well. Opposition sometimes occurs, and how they learn to cope with it is a life lesson in itself...

One day when our daughter, Lily, was in fifth grade, she stepped from the school bus onto our driveway in tears. We asked what happened. She and some friends had been seated just behind the driver. In conversation, one of her friends happened to mention the word *seagull*. Lily then matter-of-factly stated that there was actually no such bird. She meant to continue to explain that there were different species of gulls, each with its own name, like Ring-billed Gull and Herring Gull, but no species called the Seagull.



The Herring Gull sports an orange spot on its bill and pink legs. Photo © Greg Smith

She didn't get the chance. All the girls around her jumped to refute her statement. She continued to try and make her point, but the vocal majority would hear none of it. The volume of the debate escalated. Finally, the driver's patience was spent: "Enough! Lily, there *is* a bird called a seagull, so stop arguing about it!"

The Ring-billed Gull is, by far, the most commonly-seen species in Michigan. This medium-sized gull is only about crow-sized but with a substantially greater wingspan. A close look at an adult bird allows recognition of a black ring around the bright yellow bill that gives it its name. This species can be found around just about any larger body of water in almost any season, and is also

the most likely culprit attempting to steal your chips at the beach. Field guides mention that this gull has a propensity to forage far away from water. Thus, the Ring-billed is the usually the species seen picking en masse through newly-plowed agricultural fields or standing guard on the light posts in the local Meijer parking lot.

This and the larger Herring Gull are the only species that breed on the Great Lakes, and therefore, they are the only two you will see at this latitude between June and August. They intermingle often. When a closely-packed flock of gulls is gathered on a beach or jetty Herring Gull heads protrude several inches above those of the more abundant Ring-billed.

Gulls need large bodies of water, but not just to access small fish, floating carrion and a smorgasbord of organic flotsam. The water is also their collective bed. The cold of winter doesn't faze a gull, but when the large lakes in an area freeze-over, the gulls have no choice but to move out. Lake Lansing freezes by the end of December in most years. Before it does, Ring-billed and Herring gulls, accompanied by an increasing number of migrants from The North, will continue to flock to the water every late-afternoon then settle on the undulating surface by the hundreds to spend the night. Late fall offers local opportunities to see as many as a half dozen migrants on Lake Lansing in addition to the two regulars. These may include the diminutive Bonaparte's, the Franklin's, Thayer's, Glaucous, Lesser Black-backed, or the "beastiest" of them all - the Great Black-backed Gull. This one - the world's largest - stands another full head taller than the Herring, almost rivaling an eagle in size!



The white spear extending from the tip of the front edge of the primaries is a slam-dunk field mark for the Bonaparte's Gull in flight.

When Lake Lansing freezes the gulls abruptly vanish. However, they don't necessarily fly south, but head east or west to a Great Lake where open water abounds. Indeed, the Great Lakes are where it's at for experiencing gull diversity. Unfortunately, the greatest diversity is found through the year's coldest months (hence, the frostbite risk).

Other great locations to experience gull diversity over the winter are around power plants, where the warm effluent keeps the water ice-free through the coldest stretches, and around landfills (hence, the stench), especially those near large, open bodies of water.

Other species that have shown up in the Lower Great Lakes area with varying levels of frequency include Little Gull, Sabine's Gull, Iceland Gull, Ivory Gull, Black-headed Gull, Laughing Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake. Check out a bird guide for individual field marks.

If you are inclined to visit Lake Lansing to see gulls this fall, check the internet first for recent sightings - an efficient strategy. Area birders routinely post their sightings on the Mid-Michigan Birders listserve,



The world's largest gull, the Great Black-backed, can sometimes be seen at Lake Lansing in late fall. Photo © Greg Smith

including what is being seen at Lake Lansing and Park Lake. To subscribe simply send an email to midmichiganbirders-subscribe@yahoo.com. It also helps to be aware that when viewing from the Lake Lansing South Beach or from the boat launch on the north shore of the lake the gulls typically settle so far away that binoculars are rendered inadequate. A good spotting scope is almost a must. However, if you don't have your own, take your binoculars and go there late in the afternoon anyway. Chances are good that an accomplished birder with a scope may be there. If so, he/she is usually happy to share looks and even help you with identification. Scanning the waves this time of year usually yields a nice list of other migrant waterfowl, including diving ducks, grebes and even loons.

Another option is to join us on a scheduled birding trip. We offer monthly, day-long field trips for small groups of adults from fall through winter in which a Great Lake shoreline is often the destination. Most participants have such a good time they sign-up for more. We've developed quite the following. Our October birding trip to Allegan County has now been rained out and rescheduled twice. We will be trying it again on Wednesday, November 9, and one opening still remains. Additionally, on Wednesday, November 30, we will be leading a birding trip to the Muskegon area. For details on that trip read on...

-Jim McGrath

Catch Jim on Coffee Break Friday, November 4

Jim is scheduled to appear on Friday, November 4 at 9:30am, discussing wildlife topics. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on our Facebook page.



Halloween, snakes and teens converge at Baldwin Public Library in Birmingham.

Around the State in November

- ❖ ***Thursday, November 3: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Marble Elementary Science Night, East Lansing.***
- ❖ ***Thursday, November 17: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Glencairn Elementary Science Night, East Lansing.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, November 20: 1pm. Michigan Owls Presentation; Brandon Township Library, Ortonville.***



Northern Harrier.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Allegan County Birding Day – Rescheduled!

Wednesday, November 9

6:30am to 4:30pm

Our scheduled birding trip to Allegan County, initially scheduled for October 26, has been rained out and rescheduled *twice*! One opening still remains for our Wednesday, November 9 trip. For more details see the October newsletter on the website.



Open Hours

Sunday, November 13

2pm Presentation

***Winter Birds -
Backyard & Beyond
1 to 5pm; \$5 admission***

A huge percentage of Michigan's summer resident birds fly south for the winter. While there are substantially less species to be seen here in the winter, many folks are unaware that a long list of birds that cannot be found here in the warmer seasons can *only* be found here over the colder months! From finches to snowy owls, these include migrants from the far north. From their perspective Lower Michigan is "south." At 2pm sit-in on our original Powerpoint presentation, *Winter Birds: Backyard & Beyond*. Beautiful color images are used to introduce participants to a host of birds from The North that call our yards, fields, forests and Great Lakes "home" over the winter months. Find out where to find them, including tips on the best locations to visit in order to encounter them.

As always, come early or stay late to interact with our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders before, during, or after the presentation. Our knowledgeable staff is always on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit!



Snowy Owl. Photo © Barb Meining

Muskegon Area Birding Day

Wednesday, November 30

6:30am to 4:30pm

On Wednesday, November 30, from 6:30am to about 4:30 pm, join us on a guided trip to the Muskegon area for some great, late-fall birding. Jim will lead and drive a maximum of five participants on this full-day odyssey to tally as many species as possible through habitats that harbor thousands of birds.

Wastewater treatment facilities are typically hot birding locales. Holding ponds of various depths are waterfowl magnets. Density of water birds in turn, attracts predatory hawks, eagles and owls. The expansive Muskegon Wastewater Facility, several miles from Lake Michigan, allows birders to acquire a special permit to access their facility. Jim has one!

Miles of dikes surround vast holding ponds crammed with thousands of ducks of over a dozen species, plus geese, swans, grebes and other surprises. Miles of open area north and south of the ponds offer a slew of other species, including Bald, and sometimes, Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawks, kestrels, shrikes, Snow Buntings and lots more.



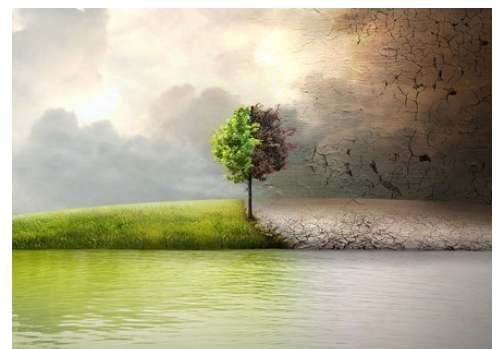
We'll head to Lake Michigan to pick up more birds from the shore and on the breakwater. Diving ducks, loons, grebes and more, forage everywhere in the water. The uncommon Purple Sandpiper, migrates along Lake Michigan in late fall and can be found foraging on rocky shorelines.

Weather-permitting, we should tally nearly 50 species. The only extended walking will be on the breakwater. Each participant will receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds.

COST: Only \$70/person, includes all transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery. With notice, we can also arrange to pick you up at a convenient location for you. Contact us to reserve a spot.

NGC Offers Must-Viewing for Our Times

Trying to find quality programming on TV that addresses human activity-induced climate change, repercussions and solutions has been a challenge in the past. Even the Weather Channel falls short, given that – mother of all ironies – its founder, John Coleman, calls climate change “baloney.” Thank goodness The National Geographic Channel has picked up the ball. This week the channel aired the documentary movie, *Before the Flood*.



<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com>

You can watch the movie any time at your leisure on You Tube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90CkXVF-Q8M>

Must-viewing for every American.

The second season of *Years of Living Dangerously* is also being aired by NGC. The second episode airs Wednesday night, November 2. If you've got a subscription to WOW, Comcast, or satellite TV, you can watch new or previous episodes of *YLD* online. Go to <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com> for details.

-JM



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NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895
(517) 655-5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net