



THE GOLDFINCH



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A TALE OF TWO RARE GULLS!

BY DARIUS ECKER

One of the fascinating things about birding for me is chasing a rare bird, and succeeding. All of us have had our share of failures, whether it's just a failed trip to a local lake to see a migrant we just heard about, or a trip across the county to look for a species we've never seen before. In the end, a lot of it amounts to luck. We can improve our chances by honing our observation skills, and by visiting the right habitat at the right time of year, but for me it seems that to see a bird, I have to be looking for something else.



"The Silver Gull was spectacular, it's scarlet legs and feet, and scarlet bill made it stand out"

In mid-November of 1996, I was just getting over a very bad cold. I hadn't been birding it over three weeks. I was anxious to go birding, but I was really just thinking about taking a short walk around Lake Elkhorn in Columbia near my home. My wife, Paula, had been reading the reports on the Internet of a rare gull, a Silver Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*) that had been sighted in New Jersey. Silver Gull is a bird of the South Pacific, and is common in Australia and New Zealand. It is so unusual that one would show up in Pennsville, New Jersey that many people are still questioning it's origin. Paula wanted to go look for this bird, so with a little arm twisting, I agreed. In my mind, I was thinking we would go by Conowingo Dam, and we could stop and check for birds there, maybe see some Bald Eagles. I never thought we would actually see the Silver Gull.

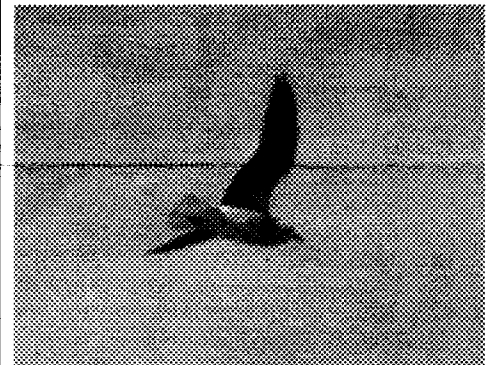
We arrived in Pennsville in the early afternoon, after a two hour drive. We located the park where the bird had been seen. We followed the directions we'd received and drove by the park, to the first road to that went back to the river, and followed it to the end of the road.

The next thing Paula heard was me saying something like "There it isthere it is!" and me scrambling for my camera. Paula said, "Where is it, where is it, where is it?" I replied, "It's right by the truck, No now it's under our front bumper!" Paula slid over to the center of the seat and admired the bird. The Silver Gull was spectacular, it's scarlet legs and feet, and scarlet bill made it stand out like a neon sign against the background of blacktop and Ring-billed Gulls. The bird stayed by our vehicle until a car came in behind me. I was blocking the road, and had to move. The Silver Gull flew over to the pond in the park, where about fifty Canada Geese and more Ring-billed Gulls were located. We parked the truck, and walked with our scope over to the pond's edge. We quickly located the Silver Gull again, and studied it for another 20 minutes or so. Success. Now we could relax.

In the days following the Silver Gull sightings, we've heard that Silver Gull has been split into two species, Silver Gull and Red-billed Gull. The two species are separated by subtle differences. Photographs of this bird are being studied to determine which of these two species the Pennsville bird was. For me, I'll always associate Silver Gull with the striking bird I first saw in a small park on the shores of the Delaware River.

The following week, we were again contemplating what we would do for the weekend. Again, the answer came from the Internet. On Saturday afternoon, the title of the e-mail message read something like "Ross' Gull in Delaware." Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) is a bird of the Arctic Circle. Many birders travel to Churchill, Manitoba on the Hudson Bay to see this bird, since there is a breeding popula-

tion there. The most recent Ross' Gull sighting in Maryland came when a Ross' Gull showed up at the Back River Sewage Treatment plant near Dundalk a few years ago. Paula and I had not seen this bird, so we were hoping to see the Ross' Gull in Delaware. We set aside Sunday to go look for the gull. This time, it was me who wanted to go. I made some excuse about looking for a Northern Shrike in Cape Henlopen State Park. I really wanted to see the Ross' Gull, but couldn't admit it for fear of jinxing my chances.



"The Ross' Gull was in winter plumage, but the pink on the breast was still evident"

We got off to a late start, but headed directly for Indian River Inlet to look for the gull. We arrived at about 11:15 am. I had camped here with my family as a boy, so the area was familiar. We went to the area of the last known sighting and found no gulls. We then drove over to the inlet, and parked at the parking lot for the North Marina. Paula walked left, and I walked right. Her instincts were right. While I was looking at some gulls on the northwest side of the inlet, Paula was seeing her "life bird" Ross' Gull. When I saw her waving her arm, I quickly walked over to see what she was watching. "There it is, Ross' Gull, Ross' Gull." she exclaimed. I replied, "Is it still there? Did it fly off? No, there it is Wow.... Look at the pink!"

The Ross' Gull was in winter plumage, but the pink on the breast was still evident. It's all white wedge-shaped tail, dark underwing with light upperwing, tiny bill, and gray on the back of the head separated it from the other gulls. It was continually moving, flying down

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BOUNDARIES FOR HOWARD COUNTY BIRD COUNT AREAS

BY CHUCK STIRRAT AND MIKE MCCLURE

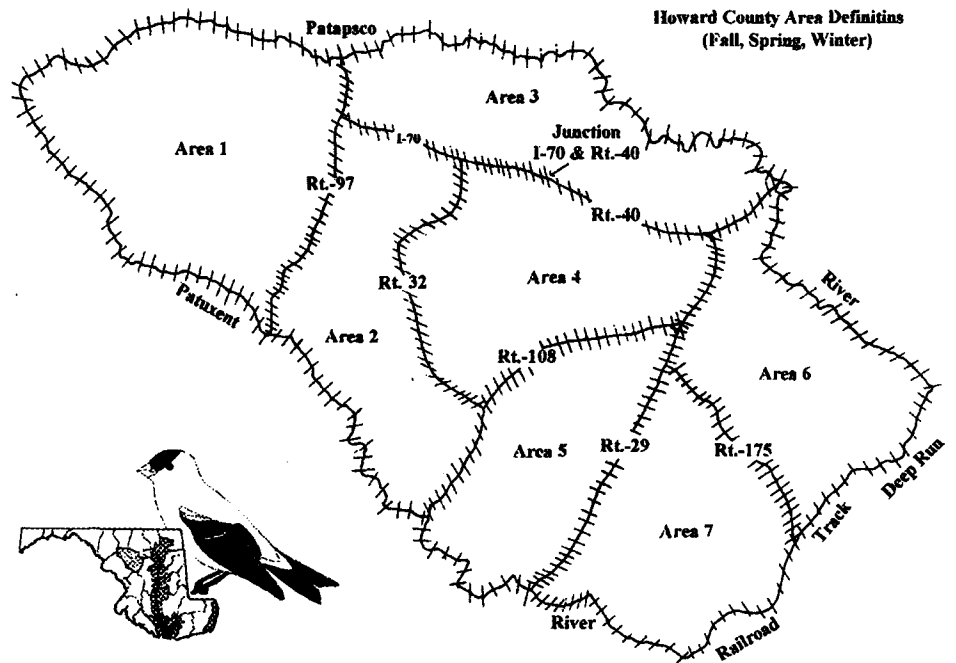
A standard set of areas are now used for all three seasonal bird counts conducted in Howard County. The definitions of these areas are described below and shown in the accompanying figure. The count results are collected and published using these area boundaries. If you have a preference for counting in one area contact the coordinator for that area or specify the area when you call the county count coordinator to volunteer.

Area 1: Western sections of Howard County west of MD 97, bordered by Montgomery County to southwest and Carroll County to the north. Includes the western end of Patuxent River State Park. Rural farm areas. Several farms not open to the public are accessed.

Area 2: Bordered by MD 97 on west, I-70 on north, Montgomery County on south, and on east is bounded by MD 32 north of Clarksville and MD 108 south to county line. Includes Triadelphia Reservoir area of WSSC.

Area 3: Bordered on west by MD 97, on north and east by Patapsco River and on south by US 40 till it joins I-70 and then I-70 west to MD 97. Includes Mt. Pleasant, Patapsco St. Park [Daniels, Hollofield (N), Henryton], David Force Park, Hugg-Thomas WMA, and Alpha Ridge Landfill and Park.

Area 4: Central portions of county bordered on west by MD 32, on south by MD 108, on east by US 29 and on north by US 40/I-70. Includes Centennial Park, Univ. of Maryland Central Farm, Benson Branch Environmental Area, and Glenelg Country School.



Area 5: South central portion of county bordered by MD 108 on west & north, by US 29 on east, and Montgomery County to south. Includes Wilde Lake, Browns Bridge (WSSC), Howard Comm. College, Lake Kitamaquindi, JHU/APL, Middle Patuxent River valley, Schooley Mill Park.

Area 6: Eastern end of county bordered by US 40 and the Patapsco River on the north, US 29 on the west, MD 175 on the south, and

Anne Arundel County on the east. It includes Rockburn Branch Park, Patapsco Valley St. Park (Avalon, Hollofield (S)), Belmont Conference Center, and New Cut Landfill.

Area 7: South-east corner of county, bordered by US 29 on the west, MD 175 on the north, Prince Georges County on the south and Anne Arundel County on the east. Includes Rocky Gorge Reservoir area (WSSC), Lake Elkhorn, and Gateway.

(Continued from page 1)

to the surface of the water to feed by picking food off the surface. We watched and photographed it near the Coast Guard Station for the next two hours. When the gull stopped to float on the surface for a few minutes, we watched it through the scope. You could see the remnants of the line that circles the back of the neck. An exquisite bird.

We didn't understand how lucky we had been until we returned the following Saturday to look for the Ross' Gull again. It was now associating with a group of Bonaparte's Gulls. We waited all afternoon, just getting a brief thirty second look at the Ross' Gull before sunset. A look that left us wanting more, but we realized the extended views we'd had the week before were exceptional.

In the preceding weeks we had seen two birds we could have missed, "once in a lifetime" birds. In both of these cases, we just dropped everything and went, getting to the location soon after the bird was found, another element that improves your "luck." Of course, we were looking for something else.

BIRDS TO LOOK FOR IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

January and February can bring some exciting bird discoveries both at our bird feeders and in the field. If there is open water on our lakes, check for lingering waterfowl. You may see widgeons, shovelers or other ducks among the mallards. On fields with exposed ground look for Horned Larks and pipits. Check weedy edges and tangles for sparrows, such as White-crowned, American Tree, and possible Fox. Check wooded areas for Red-breasted Nuthatches. Keep the feeders filled and watch for Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins, Purple Finches, and, as happened a few years ago, Common Redpolls. Indications are this could be a good year for Red Crossbills. After the middle of February and depending on the weather, ducks may begin to migrate through. After a thaw, Fox Sparrows and Woodcock first appear. Also after mid-February, Killdeer and robins begin to appear and later in the month, snipe may be seen. Remember, ice storms may strand birds in unusual places, so always be alert !!!

1997 MOS ANNUAL CONFERENCE ANNOUNCED

The 1997 MOS Annual Conference will be held next year in Ocean City, the weekend of May 2, 3, and 4 at the Sheraton Fountainebleau, 10100 Ocean Highway. The dates for this year's conference fall during the peak of songbird migration. There will be many exciting activities and field trip planned by the conference committee. Detailed information will be mailed to you early in 1997.

1997 POT LUCK SUPPER UPDATE

The Howard County Bird Club will continue it's tradition of having a pot luck supper in 1997. As this newsletter goes to print, plans have not yet been finalized. We anticipate the pot luck will be scheduled for a Saturday evening in late February or early March. Look for details, either in a special mailing or in the March-April issue of the newsletter.

CALENDAR OF PROGRAMS AND FIELD TRIPS

Programs are held at Longfellow Elementary School, 5470 Hesperus Dr., Columbia. Meeting is cancelled if schools are closed for any reason. Hospitality session at 7:30 pm. Meeting/program begins at 8:00 pm. Club bookstore opens at 7:30 pm.

January 9, Thursday "Butterflies for Birders," by Richard Smith. Our local butterfly expert will discuss butterfly identification using binoculars and get us thinking about warmer weather.

February 13, Thursday "Birding Adventures of a Spice Buyer," by Hank Kaestner. Hank, a world traveling birder and photographer, will describe some recent adventures to spice producing countries, and will treat us to viewing some of his splendid slides.

Field trips meet as described for each trip. Carpooling is encouraged; riders share the cost of gas and tolls. Dress for the field trip with stout, reasonably waterproof footwear and layers of clothes. Trips do not always follow paths. NO pets. Leaders may cancel due to inclement weather or fewer than three participants. FOR INFORMATION, CALL BONNIE OTT, at (410) 461-3361.

January 1, Wednesday Start Your New Year List - Meet at 8:30 am at the Broken Land Parkway parking lot at Lake Elkhorn. Leaders: Darius and Paula Ecker. Join Darius and Paula on this half-day trip touring Howard County to start off our new year lists off in style. Call leaders at (410) 312-9165 for more information.

January 5, Sunday Patuxent Wildlife Visitor Center - Meet at 9:30 am at the Route 32 and Broken Land Parkway park and ride to carpool to the visitor center. Leaders: Darius and Paula Ecker. We'll be indoors exploring the various exhibits at the center and will bird from the warm comfort of the observation area. A short movie will also be playing. Call leaders at (410) 312-9165 for more information.

January 18, Saturday Winter Seed Sale - Details and order forms will be mailed to you separately.

January 19, Sunday Walking in a Winter Wonderland - Meet at 8:30 am at the west end parking lot of Centennial Park. Leader: Bonnie Ott. Will Jack Frost be nipping at our noses? Will we be treated to a waterfowl bonanza? Will we turn up a rare species for Howard County? Join us to answer these questions. Call Bonnie for more information.

February 1, Saturday Midwinter Count - See details below.

February 8, Saturday New Design Road (Joint trip with Baltimore County club) - Meet at 8:00 am at a location to be announced in the Maryland Yellowthroat. Leader: Jim Wilkinson. We'll search the farm fields for larks, pipits, and longspurs. Call Bonnie for more information.

✓ **February 22, Saturday** Gulls at Alpha Ridge Landfill - Meet at 9:30 am at the Route 108 and 29 park and ride to carpool to the landfill. Leader will be present. Be prepared for lots of mud, cold, and standing on a trash heap to sort through a billion gulls searching for the one Lesser Black-backed, Iceland, or Glaucous. Call Bonnie for more information.

February 28, Friday Deadline for Submission of 1996 Annual Lists - See details below.

Board of Directors meetings are held the fourth Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm, unless otherwise noted, at the home of the board member listed. If directions are required, please call the hosting board member.

January 23, Thursday Maud Banks, 6666 Downdale Place, Columbia, MD 21045, phone (410) 381-3240.

February 27, Thursday Bob and Jo Solem, 10617 Graeoch Road, Laurel, MD 20723, phone (301) 725-5037.

MARCH - APRIL 1997 NEWSLETTER MATERIAL is due **JANUARY 24, 1997**. Anyone is welcome to contribute articles or ideas which you think will be of interest to other birders. Call or mail to Paula and Darius Ecker, 9270 Crazyquilt Court, Columbia, MD 21045, Phone (410) 312-9165 or upload to the Electronic Goldfinch at (301) 596-2167. Also, please visit the club's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.abs.net/~dariuse.birding.html>.

HOWARD COUNTY ANNUAL LISTS DUE FEBRUARY 28, 1997

A list of all the birds seen in the county during the 1996 calendar year is being compiled for the 18th consecutive year. Did we break any records this year? Only you can help us decide. Assemble your sightings for the year (even if the list was compiled in your neighborhood or your yard) and mail to Jane Farrell, 6324 Sandchain Road, Columbia MD 21045 by February 28, 1997. The length of the list isn't important, because your list may contain the bird that will make 1996 a year for the record books.

12TH ANNUAL MIDWINTER BIRD COUNT

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1997

Circle Saturday, February 1, 1997, on your calendar as the day to help with the Howard County Midwinter Count. Observers are needed in the field or watching feeders. You can choose to count for any portion of the day or all day. Contact Jo Solem (301) 725-5037 to volunteer.

Martha and Don Waugh have again graciously offered to host the evening meal and the tally. Call them at (410) 381-8841 to reserve space and choose a food to bring.

FALL SEED SALE A SUCCESS BY EILEEN CLEGG

Another seed sale, another successful bird club event. Thanks to Maud Banks, Mary-Jo Betts, Marty Chestern, Mike Courbron, Dennis Cosken, Jane Farrell, Shiras Gulon, Dave Kublesky, Don Kyle, Dennis Luck, Carol Newman, Ann Marie Raterman, Zelda Simon, Bob and Jo Solem, Chuck Stirrat, Tom Strikwerda, Mark Wallace, and Helen Zeichner. Most of all, a special thanks goes out to everyone who purchased seed from the seed sale. Your generous purchase of seed will enable the club to make much needed monetary donations to a variety of worthwhile conservation efforts. Again, thank you and I hope to see you at the winter seed sale.

CONSERVATION COLUMN BY BOB SOLEM

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The chief of NRCS asked "What is a conservationist?"

Dr. Jeri L. Berc, the NRCS Maryland State Conservationist had some thoughts she put in the "Maryland Conservation Partnership Press," produced by Cooperative Extension Service, Farm Service Agency, Maryland Association of Soil conservation Districts, Maryland Department of Agriculture, NRCS in Maryland, and State Soil Conservation Service. In her view, a conservationist is:

- A person with a vision of the management of natural resources that harnesses the generative power of the natural cycles so harvest is part of a process that continually enriches productive capacity.
- A person with the breadth of vision of comprehend the essential interdependence of all of the natural resources, of all of the basic elements in the landscape.
- A person conscious of the breadth of life within and throughout the earth that connects her to every other living thing which defines, motivates and ignites her mission and results in her daily work.
- A person respectful of the complexity and

diversity of the landscape which requires intimate knowledge to successfully manage and conserve.

- A keen observer with an intuitive eye to assess the signs and sources of degeneration of resource capacity and landscape health.
- A pragmatic person of action who seeks to materialize that vision of conservation on the landscape by influencing the actual management of the natural resources.
- A creative and analytic person who develops, embraces, tests, and adapts new approaches that advance the vision of conservation.
- A person who realizes that conservation requires many people, many tools, many ideas, many systems, many changes, and time.
- A change agent of good will, a communicator with patience, perseverance, passion, and courage.
- A person who find joy in the resonance of working in harmony with nature.

More closely related to birding is news in the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay *Bay Journal* for November, 1996:

For a restoration project, personnel "of the Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge used a warm-season grass drill to plant native grasses and wildflowers at the Naval commu-

nications facility at Greenbury Point. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is helping the U.S. Naval Academy restore wildlife habitat on this 231-acre peninsula in the lower Severn river. Greenbury provides critical open space and habitat for the Annapolis area. It is hoped that the restored grasslands will attract breeding populations of several grassland bird species: the Field, Vesper, and Grasshopper Sparrows; the Eastern Meadowlark; and the Northern Bobwhite." Watch for areas in Howard County that would benefit from restoration of grassland and meadow habitat.

E-MAIL ADDRESSES FOR MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY

If you would like your e-mail address to appear in the upcoming issue of the Howard County Bird Club membership directory, please e-mail a message to bob.solem@hcbc.abs.net. E-mail is a great way to communicate with fellow club members, especially to share exciting bird sightings. In order to be sure your e-mail address is included in the directory, please notify Bob by February 1, 1997. One e-mail address per membership, please.

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RECYCLED PAPER

HOWARD COUNTY BIRD CLUB

Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED