



The Bonaparte's Gull is small and tern-like in appearance and foraging methods



The Great Black-backed Gull is the world's largest gull and had just as soon be at the landfill

## Brunswick Wildlife Gulls of Winter

Over the past three years, I have moved through phases of retirement going from fulltime business person and part time birder to fulltime nature boy. The transition at times has been mentally challenging but the final result is very rewarding.

Unfortunately the management best seller I was writing (in my head) when up in smoke. *Who Moved My Cheese?* was one of many management books I read over my career. My version of that book was to be titled *Who Stole My Fish Head?* It would have covered the darker, Dilbertesque side of organizational behavior, heavily influenced by the writings of one of the most respected philosophers and organizational gurus of our day. Yes, of course, I am talking about Scott Adams.

If you have seen the interaction of gulls over a fish head and have not seen a similar interaction of people within an organization, you have probably spent considerable time as a resident of a monastery. Even then...

Alas, I write about gulls not people. Gulls are the managers of our beaches and parking lots, cleaning up the fish heads and discarded remains of our Happy Meals. They provide very valuable services.

The two gulls honored this month spend the winter with us. The Boss of the Month is the Great Black-backed Gull. It is obviously a "suit"...dark jacket and white shirt. It truly is the boss among the gulls, being the largest and strongest.

The Great Black-backed Gull is common in the northeastern United States and breeds along the coast from Cape Hatteras north to Labrador and around the Great Lakes. They are extending their breeding range southward and may nest in our area. They generally winter throughout their breeding grounds and as far south as northern Florida.

In North America, Great Black-backed Gulls were nearly wiped out by feather hunters and egg collectors before the early 1900's; however, given protection and plentiful human-generated food their numbers have been restored. Their numbers now exceed previous highs and they are still increasing.

During this period, it expanded its range southward into Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Unfortunately, its success has displaced Herring Gulls from breeding grounds in New England and wreaked havoc with many tern colonies.

The Great Black-back Gull is a dietary generalist, opportunistically feeding on natural prey such as fish and invertebrates plus mammals, insects, carrion, and human garbage. It preys on adults, eggs, and chicks of breeding seabirds, waterfowl, and other gulls, even the eggs and chicks of large Herring Gulls. Also, it is a kleptoparasite, stealing food from other birds.

The Worker of the Month is the much smaller Bonaparte's Gull. It is one of the smallest gulls in North America, a very graceful gull with buoyant flight and tern-like features and foraging methods.

Bonaparte's Gulls nest in single pairs or in loosely established colonies in very remote habitats...places like Alaskan and Canadian ponds, bogs, and bays. They are the only gull that generally nests only in trees, their nests hidden in conifers.

The Bonaparte's may be common during migration and winter over most of the country. During these times, it is found on inland lakes, rivers, and coastal bays and estuaries, as far north as the water remains free of ice. Large flocks of thousands of birds may be seen in coastal areas. I encounter massive flocks off the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel and Outer Banks; however, the flocks I have observed locally have been less than one hundred birds.

Among Bonaparte's Gulls you might find a prize...rare Black-headed and Little Gulls which are close relatives. They are sometimes found in Bonaparte's flocks and are, to a birder, a prize akin to a gull finding a well-aged fish head on the beach, with no other birds around. All three are hooded gulls (breeding plumage), with a portion of the hood remaining for their winter plumage that includes a dark ear spot and possibly other dark smudges.

In winter the larger and heavier Black-headed Gull will look much like a Bonaparte's but with a red bill. Though rare in North America, it is the most abundant gull in Europe and the UK.

The Little Gull looks like its two relatives; however, it has a black bill, is smaller, and it can be differentiated from the other two if seen in flight by its completely dark underwing with a white trailing edge. True to its name, it is the world's smallest gull.

Now go find some winter gulls and have a Merry Christmas and a Wild 2008!!!

John Ennis



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