

## Status and Occurrence of Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) is an enigmatic species found mostly in the pelagic waters of the Arctic Ocean (Environment Canada 2007). This species is only known from a few breeding areas around the Arctic Circle (Environment Canada 2007). This species is not very numerous anywhere in the Arctic with the global population estimated at 50,000 breeding adults (Environment Canada 2007). The breeding habitat of the Ross's Gull includes gravel reefs, marshy wetlands, and hummocky areas in the subarctic, boreal, and high arctic tundra (Environment Canada 2007). Ross's Gulls seem to require access to open water such as lakes, ponds, or openings in the pack ice (Environment Canada 2007). Nests are often located in areas near Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) colonies (Environment Canada 2007). The largest known breeding population is found in Far Eastern Arctic Russia from Northern Yakutia between Khroma and Kolyman Rivers where there are 12,000 breeding pairs (Olsen and Larsson 2004, Brazil 2009). There are also isolated breeding populations found along the Taymyr Peninsula and the area of the Laptev Sea (Blomqvist' and Elander 1981, Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a small isolated breeding population found along the coast of Greenland and Spitsbergen Island in the Svalbard Archipelago (Egevang and Boertmann 2008). This species winters at sea near ice floes in the Arctic Ocean (Hjort *et al.* 1997, Brazil 2009). In Europe, the Ross's Gull is a casual, but increasingly regular, fall and winter vagrant with birds recorded from most countries and as far south as Spain and Macedonia (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The Ross's Gull is a rare, but regular fall and winter migrant to Japan with records of small flocks occurring between the months of December and February (Brazil 2009) Individual birds have been found in the winter as far south as Korea and Liaoning China (Brazil 2009). In North America, the Ross's Gull is known to have bred in Churchill, Manitoba (Godfrey 1986) and in Penny Strait, Nunavut (Mallory *et al.* 2006) where there are only a few known pairs (Environment Canada 2007). The Ross's Gull has been listed in Canada by the COSEWIC review panel as threatened due to the small known population, and to the potential disturbance in some breeding areas, and changes in ice and snow patterns associated with climate change (Environment Canada 2007); however, it is believed that the Ross's Gull population is currently stable and not in decline (Environment Canada 2007). The Ross's Gull is an accidental species south of the Arctic Circle with records from all over southern Canada and the United States (Bledsoe and Sibley 1985). In the Chukchi Sea to Point Barrow Alaska, the Ross's Gull is classified as fairly common to common in the fall from late September into October with numbers estimated in the tens of thousands in the region (Alderfer 2006). This species is harder find at other times of year at Point Barrow, and is classified as a casual spring migrant and summer visitant (West 2008). Elsewhere this species is a rare fall migrant in the eastern Beaufort Sea coast (West 2008). At

Gambell, the Ross's Gull is a rare, but regular, late fall migrant from November to December and very rare too casual in the spring and early part of the fall (West 2008). In most other regions of Alaska, the Ross's Gull is a casual migrant (West 2008). Along the West Coast of North America, the Ross's Gull is an accidental vagrant with very few records south of Alaska. There are only a couple of records for British Columbia from widely scattered locations (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). In Washington State, there are only 2 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In Oregon, there are only 2 accepted state records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). There is only 1 accepted record in California by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Ross's Gull is covered in all standard North American field guides. The Ross's Gull takes two years to mature into an adult bird (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In all ages the plumages of this species are unique and, therefore, should not pose any identification challenges for keen observers. The Ross's Gull is a small gull measuring 34 cm (13.5 inches) in length with a wingspan of 84 cm (33 inches) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In British Columbia, this species is the exact same size as a Bonaparte's Gull (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) which measures 34 cm (13.5 inches) in length with a wingspan of 84 cm (33 inches) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are some very obvious differences in plumage, wing shape; body shape and tail shape that help distinguish Bonaparte's Gull from Ross's Gull (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Immature Ross's Gull does have a similar wing pattern to the much larger immature Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) which measures 43 cm (17 inches) in length with a wingspan of 91 cm (36 inches) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are also some similarities to some ages of the much smaller, rare, but regular occurring Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) which measures 28 cm (11 inches) in length with a wingspan of 61 cm (24 inches) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult birds hold their breeding plumage from April to August (Grant 1986). These birds are one of the most beautiful birds in nature. The head, back of the neck, down to the breast to the ventral area is pink (Brazil 2009). The intensity of the pink is variable and highly dependent on diet (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a thin black line that runs from the top of the head, down the neck, the side of the head and across the throat (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The mantle and folded wings are silver gray with a thin white edge along the secondary edge, and a thin gray edge along the outermost primary feather (Jonsson 1992). The primary tips are edged in white (Sibley 2000). In flight, the upper wings are completely silver gray with a thick white trailing edge that slightly bulges and extends along the primary tips (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The outermost primary feather has thin gray along the entire feather length (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The underside of the wing is a dark gray that extends up the entire wing to the

primaries, but the white trailing edge is prominent and bulges slightly (Brazil 2009). The wings are long and pointed (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In flight, the wings are held forward giving this species a more tern-like flight style (Sibley 2000). The tail is all white and wedge-shaped at the tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are bright red (Grant 1986).

Adult birds in winter plumage hold this plumage from September to April (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In this plumage, the head is gray with a dark ear spot behind the eye (Grant 1986). There is also dark feathering around the eye (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is no black necklace or black line on the head in this plumage (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The wing pattern found on birds of this plumage is the same as birds in breeding plumage (Grant 1986). The intensity of the pink on the breast can vary in this plumage (Grant 1986). Some birds can almost look whitish on the breast, depending on their diet (Olsen and Larsson 2004).

Juvenile birds hold their plumage from August to September, and quickly change into first winter birds by September (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). This plumage is rarely reported as it is usually seen near the nesting grounds (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The head is white with a blackish-brown eye-crescent, ear-spot, crown and hindneck (Grant 1986, Howell and Dunn 2007). The bill is small and black (Sibley 2000). The eyes are black (Sibley 2000). The head is fat and round in shape (Howell and Dunn 2007). The mantle, back, upper rump and scapulars are blackish-brown, with buff or golden fringes, giving these birds a scaly look that is most prominent on the scapulars (Grant 1986). The underparts and lower rump are white except for blackish-brown patches on the sides of the breast (Grant 1986). On the folded wing, the coverts on the inner wing are pale gray except for clear-cut, blackish-brown carpal-bar that has feathers fringed with white, and mainly very pale gray or whitish greater coverts (Grant 1986). In flight, the innermost secondaries have small black marks with the remainder white (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The alula and outer coverts of the outer wing are mainly blackish with the innermost coverts gray (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The outer web and half of the inner web of the outer three primaries are black (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). This gives this age of Ross's Gull a dramatic "M" across the top of the wing (Brazil 2009). The underside of the wing in flight is dark gray along the entire wing except for the extensive white secondary edge with black on the outermost primary feather tips (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The tail is long and wedge-shaped with a black tip (Jonsson 1992). The legs and feet are dull red (Grant 1986).

First winter birds hold this plumage from September to April (Olsen and Larsson 2004). This age of Ross's Gull is a striking plumage with the same wing pattern as juvenile birds (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The head is white with a gray-washed crown and hindneck which is an extension of the mantle colour (Grant 1986). This gray extends onto the sides of the breast or

as a complete breast-band below the line of where adult birds have their necklace (Grant 1986). There is a blackish ear-spot that often appears as a dark crescent with extensive dark in front of and below the eye that usually looks like a dark mask (Grant 1986). There are thin white crescents above and below the eye (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The mantle and scapulars are a uniform pale gray, often having retained blackish juvenile back feathers and sometimes a few feathers among the mantle feather and scapulars (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). There are thin white scapular and tertial-crescent feathers (Grant 1986). The sides of the breast and often the entire upper breast and upper flanks are washed with gray (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The remainder of the underparts is sometimes faintly pink-washed (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004).

1<sup>st</sup> summer birds have a wing pattern that is the same as in 1<sup>st</sup> winter plumage, but is often faded in intensity through feather wear (Grant 1986). Birds at this age develop a partial or full necklace (Olsen and Larsson 2004). Many birds acquire a bright pink flush on the underparts, and some gray on the breast and flanks (Grant 1986). The tail pattern is the same as in 1<sup>st</sup> winter birds, but is usually faded in intensity through feather wear (Grant 1986).

Though the Ross's Gull is the exact size of the Bonaparte's Gull, the Bonaparte's Gull does not have a wedge-shaped tail in any plumage (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Also this species has a broad white leading edge to the primaries, and lacks any dark colour on the underside of the wing (Sibley 2000).

Immature Black-legged Kittiwake has a dramatic "M" pattern on the upper surface of the wing that is reminiscent of a 1<sup>st</sup> winter Ross's Gull (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The larger size of the Black-legged Kittiwake and the lack of a wedge-shaped tail are obvious differences between the two species (Sibley 2000).

Immature Little Gull has the same dark "M" pattern across the upper surface of the wings in flight, and a square shaped tail (Olsen and Larsson 2004). Adult birds are gray on the upper wing with a thin white secondary edge that extends into the primary tips (Brazil 2009); however, this species has rounded primary tips, and is jet black on the underside of the wing with a thin white secondary edge that extends to the primary tips (Grant 1986, Olsen and Larsson 2004).

In the context of British Columbia, any Ross's Gull encountered should be readily identifiable unless not seen well or possibly by new inexperienced observers.

## **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Ross's Gull is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only 3 records. The first record was a first cycle bird found at Clover Point by Ralph Fryer from October 27 and November 9, 1966 (Stirling 1967, Campbell *et al.* 1990b). This bird was in the company of Bonaparte's Gulls and Mew Gulls (*Larus canus*), and was documented by 16 mm colour movie footage (Stirling 1967, Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). A picture of this bird appeared on the cover of the Victoria Naturalist's, January 1967, Volume 23, Number 5 issue and was published by the Victoria Natural History Society (Stirling 1967). The timing of this bird fits the movement of birds in Alaska, particularly at Point Barrow and the surrounding Chukchi Sea, when tens of thousands of birds are recorded each fall passing through the regions (Alderfer 2006). This record is unusual in that almost all records from the along the west coast have been of adult birds in winter plumage (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The next record was of an adult found by Nathan Hentze, Jeremy Gatten and others in the company of a very late juvenile Arctic Tern at Tachick Lake, near Vanderhoof from November 10-11, 2007 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The final record was of an adult in winter plumage found at Entry Point, outside Masset on a sea watch by Rick Toochin on December 27, 2013 (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The bird was seen at 100 -150m flying over the waves on its own with many nearby Black-legged Kittiwakes (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The British Columbia records fit into the overall West Coast pattern of vagrancy with birds turning up in the late fall and winter months. Both Washington records come from the winter with the first bird of an adult found and photographed at the McNary Dam, in Benton County, from November 27 -1 December 1, 1994, and a more recent record of an adult photographed at Palmer Lake, Okanogan County, from December 15-22, 2011 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In Oregon, both state records also come from the winter months with the first record of an adult bird photographed at Yaquina Bay, in Lincoln County, from February 18 - March 1, 1987 and the second record of an adult bird found on the border with Washington and Oregon at the McNary Dam, in Umatilla County, from November 27 to December 1, 1994 (OFO 2012). California has only one record of an adult bird (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). It was found and photographed at Red Hill Marina on the south shore of the Salton Sea from November 17-19, 2006 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). When looking at all these records it is clear that mid to late November into December seems to be the best time to look for this species. In the rest of North America, out of range Ross's Gulls have turned up at fish hatcheries, water reservoirs, and lakes with open water in the winter. The Ross's Gull is often found with Bonaparte's Gulls, Mew Gulls or on their own. It is recommended that keen observers look for this species after large strong Low Pressure Systems that come from Alaska in the fall or during large interior Arctic Outflow weather systems (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). This species will likely turn up again in the future in British Columbia, and it is possible anywhere.



Figure 1: Ross's Gull 1<sup>st</sup> winter plumage found at Point Pelee in Ontario on May 17, 1999.  
Photo © Steve Pike.

**Table 1: Records of Ross's Gull for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) first cycle plumage October 27 and November 9, 1966: Ralph Fryer, mobs (RBCM Photo 136) Clover Point, Victoria (Stirling 1967, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(1) adult winter plumage November 10-11, 2007: Nathan Hentze, mobs : Tachick Lake, Vanderhoof (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult winter plumage December 27, 2013: Rick Toochin: Entry Point, Old Masset (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

**Acknowledgements**

I want to thank Don Cecile for editing the manuscript of the article. I also wish to thank Steve Pike for allowing us to use his image of a Ross's Gull from Point Pelee. I wish thank meteorologist Mitch Meredith for his help on what weather systems would best push birds out of the Arctic south into British Columbia. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. These images are not to be retransmitted or used for any purpose without the expressed written consent of the photographer.

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