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THE RING-BILLED GULL IN OKLAHOMA IN WINTER

BY HOBART F. LANDRETH

The Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) is a common-to-abundant winter bird in many parts of Oklahoma today. Records filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range make clear that it may arrive from the north as early as mid-September; that it lingers until the end of May; that a few may remain all summer, though not to breed; and that the species has never been reported from several counties in which it almost certainly occurs from time to time. Too, these records show that during the past twenty years it has become steadily commoner during the season of migration and in winter at almost all of the larger impoundments in the main body of the state — i.e., east of the one-hundredth meridian. It has become especially common at the Salt Plains



RING-BILLED GULLS

Photographed on 26 January 1972 by Jim Argo, a staff photographer of the Oklahoma Publishing Company, as the birds flew up from a favorite feeding spot just south of the Pachyderm Building at the Oklahoma City Zoo. Among the fully adult gulls with pure white tail are several "yearlings" with dark gray secondary wing feathers and subterminal tail-band.

and Fort Gibson Reservoirs and at Lakes Carl Blackwell, Texoma, Hefner, and Overholser. There are comparatively few records of any sort for the Panhandle. This may well be because the water-level of the larger water courses fluctuates so greatly there; it may be, too, because of shortage of observers.

The Ring-bill has not always been common in Oklahoma — at any season. Forty years ago Margaret Morse Nice (1931, Birds of Oklahoma, p. 96) called it an "uncommon transient." Fifty years ago Bent (1921, Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. 113, p. 139) summarized its winter range thus: "From Massachusetts (irregularly) southward along the Atlantic coast to Florida and Cuba; and along the Gulf Coast to Mexico (Tehuantepec); west to the Pacific coasts of Mexico and the United States, southward to Oaxaca, and northward to British Columbia; in the interior north to Colorado (Barr Lakes), more rarely Idaho (Fort Sherman), Montana (Lewiston), and the Great Lakes (Chicago and Detroit)." There must have been very few valid records for interior North America in Bent's time, for Dwight, in his monographic study of "The Gulls (Laridae) of the World" (1925, Bull. American Mus. Nat. Hist. 52: 169), said not a word about winter occurrence of *Larus delawarensis* away from ocean coasts. This could, of course, have been a mere oversight; on the other hand, various factors, including amelioration of climate with concomitant availability of open water, could have led such highly adaptable species as the Ring-billed Gull to widen their winter ranges considerably as, moving up the larger rivers, they discovered a dependable food supply — even in the cities.

By 1957, authorities had come to consider *Larus delawarensis* more or less regular in winter "in the interior of Mexico and the United States around larger lakes and rivers north to Lake Michigan and the lower Great Lakes, wherever there is open water" (1957, AOU Check-list, pp. 223-24). Whether or not this statement reflected an actual extension of range, an increase in the number of large impoundments, an increase in the number of competent observers, or a gradual amelioration of climate, it did stress the fact that the Ring-billed Gull was to be looked for in the United States in winter not only along ocean coasts but wherever there was ice-free fresh water.

Abundance of the species in Oklahoma has, to be sure, varied with the food supply. When, at Lake Texoma, in south-central Oklahoma, continuing cold weather has lowered the water temperature sufficiently to kill gizzard shad (*Dorosoma cepedianum*) and threadfin shad (*D. petenensis*) by the million, Ring-billed Gulls have gathered in a veritable swarm (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 218). At the city dump along the southwest edge of Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls have gathered each winter during the past five years or so, eating until gorged, then idling in the wide sandy bed of the Canadian River close by. At Lakes Hefner and Overholser in Oklahoma City, John G. Newell has observed both Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Glaucous Gulls (*L. hyperboreus*) stealing fish

from hard-working Common Mergansers (*Mergus merganser*). Ring-billed Gulls, too, resort to this sort of thieving: Warren Harden saw a Ring-bill snatch a fish from an American Coot (*Fulica americana*) at Lake Thunderbird near Norman (1971, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 4: 5-6).

Many gull species, the Ring-bill included, have what Witherby *et al.* (1948, Handb. British birds, 5: 66, 81, 90, 96, 99, 104) call "very varied" food habits. The Ring-billed Gulls at Lake Texoma sometimes desert the water in fall to "feed extensively on peanuts" (Sutton, *op. cit.*), thus incurring the dislike of the farmers. This habit clearly shows how adaptable the species is. Whether the gulls go after the peanuts only when fish are difficult to obtain remains to be ascertained. Also to be determined is whether the Ring-bill's stomach becomes a hard-muscled gizzard when its diet changes from fish to peanuts.

At Oklahoma City, Ring-billed Gulls feed regularly at several dumps and sewage-disposal plants. They find a few dead fish along the shores of Lakes Hefner and Overholser, but obtain a good deal of their food away from water. Those that go to the open grassland catch grasshoppers and other insects when the sun has warmed the air. If ice covers the lakes, the gulls move off, presumably southward.

A considerable flock of Ring-billed Gulls has gathered winter after winter recently at the Oklahoma City Zoo in Lincoln Park. Here they find fish that die in Northeast Lake, but they also feed on undigested material in the feces of the larger zoo mammals and on scattered grain near the feeding troughs of the outdoors exhibits. The birds become surprisingly tame. When frightened, they fly up in a cloud — as shown in the accompanying photograph.

No one asked our Ring-billed Gulls to winter here. No food was put out to attract them. But the hungry birds soon found that "artificial" food was just as edible as "wild" food, so to the dumps and sewage-disposal plants and pens in the zoo they have come. Bird students may observe them at any time of the day nearly all winter long. When full of food, they line up on the shore or float lazily in the water. At night they go to one of the larger impoundments not far away as a rule.

Those who watch them may study the various plumage-stages to their hearts' content. Many of the birds are "yearlings," with dark-tipped tails. With the Ring-bills occasionally appears a fine gull of another species, frequently a Herring, exceptionally a Glaucous.

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A LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH NEST IN GHOST HOLLOW

BY MILDRED RICKSTREW

Two miles northeast of Ripley, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma is an isolated area, almost a wilderness, known as Ghost Hollow. A narrow, little