

Christmas Day Surprise

by Al Stokie

December 25, 1991 started off like any other Christmas Day. For me, that means driving to Chicago's Montrose Harbor to take part in the annual lakefront Christmas count. Two groups cover the lakefront harbors from opposite directions and supposedly converge at Navy Pier to compare results at mid-day. However, it seems that although both groups are able to find, identify, and count various species of ducks, gulls, and the occasional Snowy Owl or cormorant, neither group can locate the other group at Navy Pier or anywhere else for that matter. This results from the frivolous, non-essential needs of some people to find a place to eat or to locate a bathroom on Christmas Day when most public places are closed. This lack of communication resulted in Joel Greenberg's group being unaware of the one very good species my group found. I am sure they would love to return the favor.

My group consisted of Kanae Hirabayashi, Jeff Sanders, Eric Walters, and me. Kanae regularly birds the Lincoln Park area and is aware of current sightings. She also acts as group photographer mainly because she is the only one smart enough to remember to bring her camera. Jeff and Eric, who have larger county lists than my state list, act as our experts in case we actually find something rare or difficult to identify. After six years on this

count, it seems my only function is to keep the tally sheet and make comments like, "What's that funny looking gull over there?" or "We'd better move on or we'll be late for Christmas dinner."

As we started out, Kanae reminded us that Black Duck, Snowy Owl, Glaucous, Thayer's, and Great Black-backed Gulls had all been seen in the

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area within the last few days. This reminder was a great help to group morale. None of those species could be found and it's always nice to know what you missed by a day or two. In spite of this poor start, Eric soon confirmed his status as expert by finding an adult Thayer's Gull on the harbor ice. Jeff maintained his expert status by agreeing with Eric and I kept my non-expert status by saying I did not see any such Thayer's Gull. After that, we decided to take one last

look at the gulls in the harbor.

Jeff and Eric went directly to view the gulls while Kanae and I walked along the rocks bordering Lake Michigan hoping to add a duck species or two. While walking, we noticed a strange white bird standing on the rocks. "Its head sort of looks like a pigeon," said Kanae. After making some comment about wasting time on pigeons when we were looking for ducks, I noticed that the pigeon-like head had a dirty face. As we got closer, we noticed the bird was all white and was about the size of a Ring-billed Gull. It had various brown and black marks on its back and sides, black marks at the tips of its wings and tail, and best of all, its feet and legs were black.

In short, it was a first-winter Ivory Gull and you don't need an expert to know that. Still, I wondered. I called out to Eric and Jeff, who hurried over and shouted, "It's an Ivory Gull." (One reason I'll never consider myself an expert is that even when I am sure I am right, I am not sure I am right.)

Our group; henceforth, known as the Ivory Gull Gang of Four, viewed the gull through a Kowa scope, took field notes, and congratulated ourselves for being in the right spot at the right time. Kanae took a few photos as I gave Eric all my change so he could call the Chicago hotline at a phone booth. Of course while