

WINTER IVORY GULL

Third State Record

by Eric Walters

On a windy, frigid Christmas Day last year, I tossed stale bread into Chicago's Montrose Harbor hoping to attract a rare gull. Little did I know that I soon would be seeing the now-famous Ivory Gull, (*Pagophila eburnea*), a bird that made its third recorded appearance in Illinois last winter.

The all-white gull with short black legs and a yellow-tipped black bill made headlines last winter, gracing the front pages of local newspapers as well as suburban televisions during the nightly news. Crazy birders flocked for miles and stood in blowing wind to see the bird, the newspapers reported. "The biggest spectacle out at the harbor wasn't the little white bird who sat innocuously on a floating pier most of the day, but the odd ducks who congregated on the far shore to watch him," wrote Laurie Goering in the *Chicago Tribune*.

But these "odd ducks" knew the Ivory Gull was special. Indeed, the species has been confirmed only twice before in Illinois.

The first sighting (an adult) occurred at the cooling ponds at the north end of Waukegan beach during a Christmas Bird Count 1 January 1949 (Mayfield, 1949). The only other confirmed incidence was of an immature bird at Lake Spring-

field 1 January 1991 (Bohlen, 1991). The 1949 record has been classed as hypothetical in some literature, but a recent interview with the only surviving member from that sighting revealed further details including no pink on the legs, eyes, and bill that verify the identification as an Ivory (Grant,

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1986). Grant knows of no cases of true albino gulls, but if one occurred it would have pink on the bare parts of its body.

An all-white gull videotaped at Rock Cut State Park mid-November 1989 is under review as a possible albinistic bird, but could be accepted as

an adult Ivory Gull. A report of one seen along the river last January at Goose Lake Prairie State Park wasn't documented and unfortunately must be dismissed.

The Chicago Ivory Gull, first seen 25 December 1991 was an immature plumaged bird. Dark markings splashed on its face made it appear as if it had dipped its head in mud. Light black speckling occurred throughout its wings. Thicker black markings were seen at the end of each wing feather tip and at the end of each tail feather. All the bare parts were dark except for the yellowish bill tip. These markings are typical of a first-winter Ivory Gull (Grant, 1986).

The Chicago bird remained in the vicinity until 2 January 1992. An out-of-town birder observed it flying along the lakefront across from Burnham Harbor 26 December. It was relocated in the harbor 28 December where it stayed for the next five days while hundreds of birders watched and photographed it. The Ivory Gull is a scavenger with a voracious appetite. Dead, small fish thrown out on the ice by fishermen could have enticed the Ivory Gull to stay at Burnham Harbor. Grant states that the bird "is strong and aggressive and often more than a match