

SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS — WINTER SEASON 1993-1994

State Winter and Christmas Bird Count Record for Northern Gannet

I awoke early 19 December 1993, looking forward to a great Quad Cities Christmas Bird Count. The temperatures were to be rather pleasant for a winter count with a predicted low of 17 degrees and a high of 34 degrees F.

After morning birding in our standard area, we covered a few high priority areas along the Mississippi River including Lock and Dam No. 15, Ben Butterworth Parkway, and Sunset Marina at the west end of Rock Island.

Sunset Marina contains mixture of sloughs adjacent to the Mississippi River and the mouth of the Rock River and is well-known for holding good numbers of birds and rarities, especially during the winter. Located near the lock and dams, the marina has open water in all but the most extreme weather. An American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) had been seen at the marina for more than a week, so we set out for the marina to search for that species and other unusual ducks and gulls. Little did we know how exciting that trip to the marina would be.

As we turned the car into the parking lot next to the slough where the pelican had been observed, I could see a large congregation of gulls, mostly Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) with a few Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). They were chasing shad, but suddenly departed and flew to evade the wrath of a larger diving bird. Immediately, I could see a huge, dark, mottled bird zoom through the gulls and steal a shad from one of them. The bird flew back above the feeding group of gulls and swallowed the shad. The bird then hovered, watched, and waited for the next gull to catch a shad.

We were looking at either an immature Northern Gannet (*Sula bassanus*) or a Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*). My brother and I had just recently observed both gannets along the Texas coast. The family has a unique jizz and silhouette. While looking at the bird, our group carefully began pointing out the different field identification characters. My brother, Corey Blevins, noticed the long, slender, wedge shape of the tail and the white chest and belly. My father, Lewis Blevins, pointed out the massive size of the light gray bill. I could see a faint but distinct single white line running the length of the underwing. The fourth member of our party, Dale Dickenson, noted the whitish mottling on the head and nape. The feet, which were quite large and webbed, were constantly being used as rudders. Putting these field marks together and adding the size and dominance over the gulls; especially when compared with the Herring Gulls,

the group eliminated Masked Booby and agreed on Northern Gannet. A description of this bird is on file with the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC).

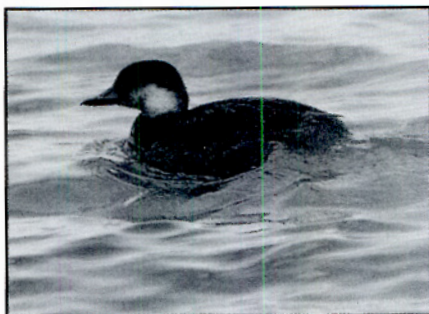
We enjoyed watching this pelagic bird dive into the pack of gulls, easily remove shad, then return to hover over the gulls.

Suddenly, an immature Bald Eagle came swooping in on the gannet. The gannet, nearly the size of the eagle, fought back, hoarsely squawking. The two battled in the air, dispersing the gulls back to the main river channel. The gannet seemed to easily outfly the eagle.

The gulls were by now frightened off, and the gannet finally decided to head upriver. The eagle chased the gannet for about 2.5 to 3 miles. We watched the birds until they disappeared from view.

We learned later that two other Northern Gannet sightings had occurred in northeastern Illinois one month earlier (Brock 1994). Pucelik (1983-84) discovered the only Illinois record, an inland bird seen 19-20 November 1983 by multiple observers at Powerton Lake, Tazewell County, adjacent to the Illinois River. Besides a questionable North Dakota record mentioned by DeSante and Pyle (1986), our Mississippi River record may be one of the westernmost sightings for this maritime species in the Midwest.

— Brian L. Blevins,
2003 E. 12th St.,
Davenport, Iowa 52803



Black Scoter, 20 Jan. 1994, Springfield, one of 27 species of ducks seen there during the winter season. Photo by Dennis Oehmke.

27 Species of Ducks in Sangamon County

From 1 January to 15 March 1994, I recorded 27 species of ducks in Sangamon County. Many days, 20 species of ducks could be seen. High counts were 21 species 19

February and 22 species 6 March.

Some Surf Scoters (*Melanitta perspicillata*) had been seen in December 1993, but the rare ducks really did not start to appear until 1 January 1994, when a Black Scoter (*Melanittanigra*) was discovered at Lake Springfield. Clark Olson and I saw this immature male off the golf course. Fifteen species of ducks were seen that day, including Redheads (*Aythya americana*), Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*), and Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*), all of which are usually difficult to record in winter. The majority of ducks, several hundred each, were Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) and Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*).

Meadowlark