



**par.a.dox** \ n [L *paradoxum*, fr. Gk *paradoxon*, fr. neut. of *paradoxos* contrary to expectation] 3: something with seemingly contradictory qualities or phases : something involving an inherent contradiction (Webster 1977)

The best and the worst. The sublime amid the abhorrent. In birding the Lake Calumet area on Chicago's far southeast side, birders are indeed confronted with paradox - a landscape where superb natural areas, extensive wetlands, and rookeries of endangered birds are juxtaposed against a harsh backdrop of rusting industry, dump sites, and sewage treatment lagoons. The dichotomous nature of this landscape has inspired projects of diverse and often contradictory intent, ranging from a recently aborted call for an international airport to a local push for a national park by area residents. Given the ecological bounty of the area, this writer believes that the latter project would constitute a far more appropriate use of the area.

### The Birds

Birding the Lake Calumet area can be spectacular. Almost anything can and has turned up here, including one of the few North American records of Large-billed Tern, a South American species found by A.L. Campbell in 1949 (Bohlen 1989). The area boasts two recent Illinois first state records including a Reddish

Egret seen the summer of 1993 (Meadowlark 2:45) and a Glaucous-winged Gull seen in 1992, pending approval by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee.

Due to the abundant local wetlands, migrant shorebirds naturally provide much of the attraction. Numbers vary from year to year, depending on the presence of suitable habitat (mud flats), but recent years have been good, as attested by IOS' August 1993 Calumet field trip in which 17 species, including a Willet and 22 Baird's Sandpipers, were found.

Spring migrant shorebirds are most often detected during May, but fall migrants are typically far more numerous. Fall shorebirds begin to arrive in late June, peaking in July and August. Numbers often begin to diminish by mid-September.

Gulls provide excitement during the winter months. Thousands of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls winter here annually, and it is not unusual to find small numbers of some of the rarer species mixed in with the crowd. Lesser Black-backed Gull has become a regular visitor in recent years. Glaucous Gull also occurs annually. Thayer's Gull is virtually impossible

## Lake Calumet: Birders in Paradox

by Walter J. Marcisz

to miss on any given winter day. Iceland and Great Black-backed Gulls, although much rarer, are also reported every winter.

Best numbers of gulls are present when lakes and rivers are half iced-over, providing open water for foraging and ice on which the gulls rest (Bohlen 1989). Gulls also forage at garbage dumps, and excellent views can be obtained on days when garbage is being dumped at various area landfills (Monday through Saturday - gulls can sometimes be difficult to find on Sundays).

Gulls also occur as nesting species in the Calumet area. Although small numbers of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls have recently begun to nest elsewhere in Illinois, the Lake Calumet colony remains by far the largest in the state. In a survey conducted on behalf of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1989, researchers William C. Sharf and Gary W. Shugart found 8,155 Ring-billed Gull nests and 195 Herring Gull nests on the island and slips at the southeast corner of the lake (Mierzwa, Culbertson et al 1991). The colony appears to have increased in size since then, with a minimum of 10,000 estimated nesting pairs currently present (J. Landing - pers. comm.).

Of perhaps greater significance are the numerous wetland species including several state-endangered or state-threatened birds which nest at Lake Calumet. The area currently hosts the largest documented breeding colony of state-endangered Black-

*The Common Moorhen, endangered in Illinois, nests regularly at Lake Calumet. Drawing by Walter Marcisz.*