

An Intimate View:

The Ring-Billed Gull Life Cycle in the new Waukegan Colony

by Eric Walters

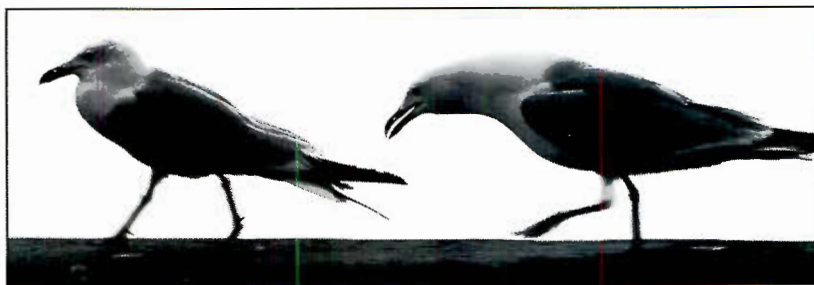
On 3 May 1996, I was birding Waukegan Beach on Lake Michigan in Lake County, Illinois, when a large commotion of gulls about 100 yards west of the beach caught my eye. I walked toward the site to discover an undisturbed area of private property encircled by a protected fence. An enormous flock of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) appeared to be staging in this open and flat area. As I walked closer, I saw hundreds of gulls sitting on vegetation. It appeared that a new gull colony had started in Illinois.

Actually, people who worked near the area had seen similar activity at this location in the spring and summer of 1995. Between 1981 and 1988, observers had also recorded a few gull nests near this colony.

I counted at least 740 nests that day in May. Since I only counted from the east side of the fence, more nests could have present elsewhere that I did not see. I didn't make another nest count that summer. However, I counted 1,460 nests there on 14 May 1997, nearly twice the 1996 total. This count included views from the southwest section, made by gaining access to the private parking lot just south of the colony.

Nest Cycle

Courtship dance and copulation begins the Ring-billed Gull cycle. I have seen Ring-billeds copulating a number of times in April to early May along the Evanston lakefront and at Chicago's Montrose Harbor. These sites are 23 and 20 miles respectively



This Ring-billed Gull is using the long-call display to deter its opponent. Photo taken on 11 June 1997 at Montrose Beach, Chicago, Cook Co. by Eric Walters.

from the nearest colony. I have also seen a subadult pair copulating as late as 22 May in Evanston. These observations suggest the initial stages of the breeding cycle need not occur near the colony.

Ring-billed Gulls express territorial defense and dominance in specific ways. Two common expressions are the "long calls" and "open-wing charges" (Ryder 1993). The "long calls" display starts with a gull slowly bowing its head down towards its feet and then slowly raising it back up to shoulder level. Extended call notes occur during this whole sequence, hence the name, "long call". Bowing of the head doesn't indicate subservience; rather the dominant gull performs this behavior. Its eyes are always on the bird to which it is displaying aggression. If the weaker gull doesn't move away in response to a "long call", the calling gull will often walk slowly in the direction of its opponent. This usually is enough to move the weaker one away. However, if this still doesn't work, then a gull might use an "open-winged charge".

An "open-wing charge" can occur over food disputes, prime roosting locations, and territorial claims. But it is in colonies where it can be seen most frequently. There, gulls are less tolerant to invasion of nesting space. An "open-wing charge" starts with the gull extending its wings perpendicular to its opponent followed by a mad rush with its bill wide open. No calling occurs during this display despite its bill being fully open. This display really looks fearsome and it consistently works.

Ring-billeds are single-brooded, and display a large range of nest dates. For example, peak egg-laying in a southern Ontario colony was from mid-April to July (Ryder 1993). "Birds show strong fidelity to colony site and specific area in colony"; older individuals begin egg laying up to two weeks earlier than young birds; younger birds (second years) breed regularly; two to four eggs are laid. Three is the most common number (Ryder 1993).

My 1997 nest count consisted mainly of full adults. Later in May or

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