

First Illinois Record ...

The Wandering Tattler



BY MATTHEW LIGAS

On 8 August 2012, online news showed the weather and wind pattern being conducive to good birding the next day along the Chicago lakefront. Because of the weather discussion on the Illinois Birders Forum, I spent most of the morning of 9 August at the Montrose dunes hoping to observe jaegers or rare gulls. Not seeing anything interesting at all, I walked back to my car and was getting ready to leave; then, I saw a flyover Bonaparte's Gull (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*), the first I had seen for early fall at Montrose. I decided to walk back to the beach and dunes to see if I could re-find the Bonaparte's Gull. That's when I ran into Steve Spitzer who was also birding the beach.

Spitzer's first words to me were something like, "It's amazingly slow," since all he had seen were the more common gulls and a few Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*). I told him I had just seen a Bonaparte's Gull so I was going to stick around a while. Steve continued to scan through the gulls and I watched out over the lake. That's when I saw a dark bird fly low along the beach and land on the Montrose fish hook pier. I went over to where Steve was and pointed out the bird. We both started taking pictures. The bird hung out on the west edge of the pier for a minute and then flew to the east edge before flying away. We lost sight of the bird as it flew off. We observed the bird for fewer than two minutes.

Steve and I talked about the bird and looked at our cameras but we weren't sure what we had seen. We considered Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) but thought that it was more like a Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*). We decided to view the photos on a computer, thinking we'd see nothing more than a Willet.

Steve got home and posted some pictures to the Illinois Birders Forum—looking for identification help. Greg Neise immediately responded that it looked like a Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*) and word spread from there. Many birders checked the northeast Illinois lakefront the next couple of days but the Wandering Tattler was never seen again.

Identification

A few birders mentioned that identification of this bird would need to rule out Gray-tailed Tattler (*Tringa brevipes*). Luckily, the tattler Steve and I photographed was in breeding plumage which made separation from Gray-tailed relatively straightforward. The Montrose tattler had heavy barring on the underside which included the undertail coverts. On Gray-tailed, the barring would be fine and not include the undertail. The Montrose tattler's white "eyebrow" ended at the eye whereas a Gray-tailed would have a more prominent rear supercilium. We were confident this was a Wandering Tattler and not Gray-tailed. I knew nothing of this at the time but have since studied both species in *The Shorebird Guide*

by O'Brien et al. (2006), confirming the identification with diagnostic field marks from our photos. Our photos are on file with the Illinois Ornithological Records committee who have confirmed and accepted this record by photographic evidence (see article in this issue.)

Fall/winter distribution and other records

The normal fall and winter distribution for Wandering Tattler is along the Pacific coast of North America largely determined by presence of suitable rocky habitat with the tattler occurring from southern British Columbia south to Peru. The tattler is rather common on Clipperton Island, Cocos Island, Malpelo Island and the Galápagos Islands. There are uncommon records from eastern Australia and rare records for Japan (Gill et al. 2002). There are only about 15 records away from the Pacific. The most notable of these are Massachusetts (May 1968), Ontario (August 1948, July 1960 and June 1977), Manitoba (June 1981), Texas (April 1992), Arizona (September 1971) and Utah (September 2005) (Neise 2012). There are apparently also records for Alberta and eastern Washington and eastern Oregon (Gill 2002). This sighting represents the first record of this species for Illinois.

*Wandering Tattler.
Montrose Beach, Cook County.
9 August 2012.
Photo by Matthew Ligas*