

How to see a Sabine's Gull

To find one of these natty birds in the Midwest, first mark your calendar for several September and October trips. If at all possible, start your search during the last half of September. Make every effort to be afield during, or immediately following, passage of a cold front, as many birds appear on northerly winds behind these fronts.

Birders searching the central Illinois lakes would be well-advised to keep close tabs on the Central Illinois Rare Bird alert (217) 785-1083. Techniques for birding these remarkably productive impoundments vary with location. On Lake Springfield, H. David Bohlen (pers. comm.) searches for birds displaying the Sabine's characteristic tern-like flight. He also notes that this species often executes short flights from a floating position, followed by an arching descent back to the water. Robert Chapel (pers. comm.) reports having found Sabine's Gulls resting on sand spits with other gulls or in association with shorebirds in shallow water or on mud flats.

Finding Sabine's Gulls on enormous Carlyle Lake requires special techniques. Dan Kassebaum (pers. comm.) has developed the following strategy for locating Sabine's Gulls on the lake. Observations over several years reveal that most birds remain near the center of the lake; frequently between the Allen Branch boat launch (west shore) and Coles Creek (east shore). At this location the birds are at least a mile from the nearest shore; thus, a good telescope is essential. Dan begins serious searching during the second week of September; he uses the numerous Ring-billed Gulls for a size comparison and to aid in locating gull-feeding areas. Typical Sabine's Gull behaviors include long periods of resting on the water (rendering them almost impossible to see), feeding in a large circular pattern over the lake's center, executing quick flights across the water, and suddenly dropping to the water by executing a lateral turn

into a dive (often revealing the upperpart pattern). Dan also notes that the gulls are more easily seen when boaters are most active. For optimal viewing, he recommends South Shore State Park in the morning and Hazlet State Park in the afternoon.

Weather is the single most critical factor for finding Sabine's Gulls on Lake Michigan; the great majority of sightings are associated with cold fronts. Accordingly, your best bet is to head for Lake Michigan during the passage of a front, find a sheltered area, and simply watch the lake (be sure to dress warmly). Your chances are better if you watch from an eastern or southern shore, as northwest winds typically drift south-bound birds to the eastern margin of the lake. These vigils, of course, can also be rewarded by the sighting of a passing jaeger or Little Gull (*Larus minutus*).

On Indiana's lakefront Sabine's Gulls are most frequently seen flying westward along the shoreline. They typically fly low over the water near shore. Most sightings involve singletons, but almost one-third of the records involve multiple birds (occasionally in small flocks, but more often several birds over several hours). The Indiana record is four (23 September 1990, at Miller Beach, AB 45:111), but three birds have been logged on five different occasions. Lake Michigan Sabine's Gulls almost never land, and they rarely associate with other gulls.

Regardless of where you find a Sabine's Gull, it will almost certainly be a juvenile, similar to the individual shown in Figure III. On the gray overcast days that typically follow autumn cold fronts, these birds look like dark Franklin's-sized gulls, with distinctive white triangles on the inner upperwings. Contrast between the black primaries and brown mantle is usually not evident; they simply

look like dark-backed gulls with white wing triangles. The most similar birds are juvenile Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*), and Little Gulls. Both of these, however, normally display the bold, "W" upperpart pattern, rather than the seemingly uniformly dark primaries, upperwing coverts, and mantle.

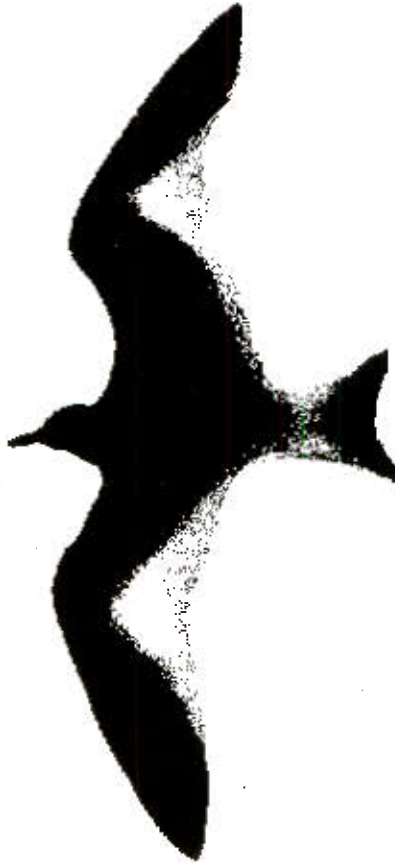


Figure III:

The characteristic appearance of a flying juvenile Sabine's Gull. Most birds appear uniformly dark above, with bold white triangles on trailing edges of the wings.