



Carlyle Lake Gulls: a season of rarities with notes on how and when to locate them

By Dan Kassebaum

The fall of 2007 through late winter 2008 produced an exciting season of rare gulls at Carlyle Lake. Although Carlyle Lake occupies parts of three counties, Bond, Clinton, and Fayette, the dam and the deep water are in Clinton County, as are most of the gulls. A lake record high of 13 species was observed for the fall/winter season including: Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*), Franklin's Gull (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*), Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*), Bonaparte's Gull (*Chroicocephalus philadel-*

phia), Mew Gull (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*), Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*), Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*), Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides kumlieni*), Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii*), Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*), and Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*). With the addition of Glaucous-winged Gull and Slaty-backed Gull the season of 2007/2008, the lake list now stands at 17 species.

Identification tips and data

When attempting to identify gulls at Carlyle Lake, it is helpful to break them into groups. The larger species behave differently than the smaller species, and locating the larger gulls versus the smaller gulls requires a different strategy. The larger gulls reach their greatest diversity during the coldest weather and prefer to roost in mixed flocks on the ice. These flocks can reach numbers in the thousands. The larger gulls include: Mew Gull, Ring-billed Gull, California Gull (*Larus californicus*), Herring Gull, Thayer's Gull, Iceland Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Slaty-backed Gull, Glaucous-winged Gull, Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), and Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*). The smaller species are more likely to occur as migrants, especially in fall, and avoid the coldest weather. September, October, and November are the best months for these species, which are generally identified on the wing, through a scope, and often at great distances. The smaller species include: Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Sabine's Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*).

Carlyle Lake was completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1967, but gull data for the lake prior to 1982 are minimal to absent. Sadly, the first 25 years of the lake went nearly undocumented. Beginning with the fall and winter of 1982-83, Carlyle Lake has become a regular destination for birders looking for rare gulls in Illinois. Pioneers from the 1980s as indicated by the published data in Nature Notes – Journal of the Webster Groves Nature Study Society and Illinois Birds and Birding include Dave Jones, Bill Rudden, and Skip Russell of St. Louis; Leroy Harrison of Olney; and Denny Jones of Lawrenceville. Gull data at Carlyle were consistently diverse throughout the 1980s and include most of the first published species records for the lake: Great Black-backed Gull (November 1982 – Dave Jones), Glaucous Gull (December 82 – Rudden), Black-legged Kittiwake (December 83 – Rudden), Lesser Black-backed Gull (December 83 – Russell), Thayer's Gull (March 84 – Harrison and Jones), Little Gull (April 84 – Russell), Laughing Gull (Nov 85 – Rudden), Mew Gull (Feb 86 – Rudden), Sabine's Gull (September 86 – Harrison), and California Gull (October 89 – Rudden).

A shift occurred in the early 1990s with little published data for the lake coming from the initial observers who were so active in the 1980s. Instead, most of the more recent data can be attributed to Dan Kassebaum of Belleville, Keith McMullen of O'Fallon, and Mark Seiffert of Carlyle. Throughout the 1990s and currently, the reputation for Carlyle Lake as a major migrant trap has grown, and as a result has renewed in part an interest from some of the old guard. On any given fall/winter weekend at Carlyle, you're likely to cross paths with Bill Rudden or Leroy Harrison, and if you are a keen observer, you'll pay as much attention to the birders as to the birds. Remember these are the guys (Rudden and Harrison) who established nearly all of the new paradigms for gulls in the St. Louis area and southern Illinois. Take a peek through Rudden's vintage scope, then bust out your Peterson – 4th edition (1980) and see if you are up to the task.

Gull diversity through a given fall and winter season, which I define as the southern movement of birds from northern breeding grounds into Illinois and the return trip in late winter, has been recorded at Carlyle