

ILLINOIS BIRDING COMMUNITY MOURNS THE LOSS OF THREE INFLUENTIAL BIRDERS

William McCabe Rudden: (July 13, 1946 - June 30, 2013)

BY TIMOTHY BARKSDALE

For those of us who knew and loved Bill Rudden- we watched as he began birding and developed into one of St. Louis' finest birders.

Bill worked at bettering himself and in the process everyone else around him. His sometimes gruff attitude masked a huge and giving heart.

Something hit Bill one day. He became intrigued with gulls.

I had found the first Thayer's Gulls for Missouri. And one of those cold winter days on the Mississippi, Bill showed up. He gave me quite a bit of grief about risking my neck. I dished it right back. After all he was a firefighter.

I think he was fascinated with the stupidity (my stupidity) of putting a boat onto the frozen sections of the river, with ice jams. He began to call me "macho man" and I returned "super macho" back at him. We traded those names back and forth over many years. The man's way of treating someone with respect includes a certain amount of guff.

Gradually and probably somewhat secretly he began to really study gulls. I think he really enjoyed challenging himself.

Late in the fall of 1983, Bill found a dark-backed gull patrolling a huge section of the Mississippi River from below Hall Street in north St. Louis all the way up to and beyond the old dam at Alton.

Bill had found this odd gull, and had been trying to get closer, better and longer looks but could not get it identified. He called me more than once when I was in Columbia and would talk about it and tried to give me a cohesive rational reason for his growing idea and insistence that this was a hybrid bird.

One December day, I excused myself from family responsibilities and



Photo of Bill Rudden
by Al Smith

drove to St. Louis. I felt confident we would find the bird in question and get it fairly easily identified.

I can't remember anyone else out with us that day except Paul Bauer.

After several appearances in the south, the bird began to move deliberately upstream. We caught it at Chain of Rocks, but it moved on. We passed to the Illinois side and found it again twice before we knew we had better get to the dam.

I had an old friend whose family owned the Alta Villa Marina by the dam. We drove right in. There on the river for a long time was our bird. Sitting perhaps 100-200 yards off shore swimming when it needed, but basically holding its position for several hours, appearing to be full and content.. the light gradually improved and the sun actually shown directly on the bird for quite a while.

We discussed the eyebrow, the leg color, the fact that the back color was not dark enough to be a Great Black-

backed nor quite right to be a Lesser. Bill would return to his almost pedantic refrain that the bird was a hybrid.

I remember yelling, "You are going to have to prove to me that bird is not..." and I hesitated looking for something outrageous - but right there on the bottom of the Harrison's plate 57 (where we had been looking at Western Gull) was ... "a Slaty-backed Gull..."

Paul remained very quiet, always the voice of wisdom and moderation, reasoning with us both, trying to find a middle ground between the two passionate warriors. But it just didn't want to be identified that day. We struggled for another hour perhaps reaching no resolution at all. The bird flew once, but it was bitter cold and we were all in a partially steamed up car with window condensation obscuring our vision. We'd rush out but the bird would only fly 25-50 yards then settle back down to sleep. So we never got the looks at the wings which we later learned we had needed. We also knew that the primary pattern had not been seen well, and knew that would be the key

Bill called birders, including the famous Phoebe Snetsinger, about this sighting. After a lengthy talk with Phoebe, I concluded that because we had not seen the primary pattern well enough, we just did not know. All I could say was that it possibly was an oddly colored runt Great Black-backed Gull. But, again I hesitated due to the folded wings.

The next day was history and how it is made through perseverance. And that also certainly describes Bill. His tenacious attitude extended into many areas of his life. He gathered those who could help him get that thing right.

Finally, at the Chain in perfect light, the bird fully stretched out its wing and revealed the famous "string