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FIRST RECORD OF A ROSS' GULL FOR NEBRASKA

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On 17 December, 1992, we observed a Ross' Gull in second-winter plumage at Sutherland Reservoir, Lincoln County. We studied the bird in detail from 7:35-10.00 a.m. and again from 11:15 a.m.-1:00 p.m. CST as it fed with several Bonaparte's Gulls at the outlet between the cooling pond and the reservoir. The Ross' Gull remained at this location through 28 December and was seen by many birders from around the Midwest.

During all of our observations, the small size, dark underwings, and wedge-shaped tail set this bird apart from the Bonaparte's Gulls. At first, we overlooked the tail shape and tentatively identified the bird as a Little Gull. However, after studying the bird in greater detail, we noted the wedge-shaped tail and agreed that it was indeed a Ross' Gull in second-winter plumage.



Photos of Ross' Gull taken by B. J. Rose at Sutherland Reservoir
23 December, 1992

We estimated that the Ross' Gull was about 10% smaller than a Bonaparte's Gull, and had proportionately longer wings, a smaller head, and larger eyes. It had a buoyant flight, and often hovered over the water as it fed on small fish. The undersides of the flight feathers were dark gray, similar to the appearance of the underwing of an adult Little Gull. The axillars and wing linings were white. The upperwing was mostly pale gray, with clear remnants of a dark carpal bar. The carpal bar was black, and appeared as a series of spots across the secondary coverts, with a larger black spot at the base of the primaries. There was also a very broad, white trailing edge to the flight feathers, especially along the inner primaries. The mantle was also pale gray, the same color as the upperwing. The head was white except for the hint of a black collar, which appeared as a darker spot behind each eye, connected by a faint, dark line across the back of the neck. The head was very dove-like in appearance, probably due to the rounded shape and

large, dark eye. The bill was black, straight, and very short - barely half the length of a Bonaparte's Gull's bill. The leg color was hard to determine since the bird was always flying. At times the legs appeared dark red, but at other times they looked black. The underparts and undertail coverts were white. The rectrices were white except for small, black spots at the tips of the third rectrix. The tail was distinctly wedge-shaped, with the central rectrices noticeably longer than any of the others. Many of the flight feathers appeared worn and tattered, indicating that the bird was molting. Another indication of molting was that the primaries were about a centimeter longer than the secondaries. We believe that the primaries had been recently molted, and that the bird was in the process of molting the secondaries. Based on these features, we concluded that the bird was in second-winter plumage (see Grant 1986).

Ross' Gulls are very rare vagrants to the Lower 48 states. There are seven records for the Midwest, mainly during the last decade. Other records are from Colorado: 28 April-7 May, 1983, Jumbo Res., near Julesberg (Anonymous 1983); North Dakota: 5-6 June, 1992, Grand Forks (Berkey 1992); Minnesota: 4-14 April, 1984, Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge (Mattsson 1984), and 16 April, 1992, Pennington Co. (Granlund 1992); Illinois: 19 November-1 December, 1978, Chicago (Balch et al. 1979); and Missouri: 31 December 1991-11 January, 1992, Riverlands Area near St. Louis (Barksdale 1992). Most of the records are of adult birds. To our knowledge, the Nebraska sighting represents the first record of a second-winter plumaged Ross' Gull in the Lower 48 states.

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