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In Search of Banded Gulls- A New North American Herring Gull Longevity Record

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News, Notes, Comments

Hummingbirds “High” Return Rate After Two Years

On 2 Aug 2013, eighteen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were banded (2 AHY males, 14 AHY females and 2 HY males) at a private resident in Bond County, IL.

A return visit there was made on 9 Jul 2015 with 66 new birds banded plus another 15 returns from the 2010 through 2013 banding years (18.5% of the total day's capture). Of special note, six (all females) of the 18 birds banded in 2013 (33.3%) were recaptured on 9 Jul. When considering just the females, this is a 42.9% return rate (and does not take into account other banded birds that may have been present and not captured).

After two years, this would seem to be a VERY HIGH return rate for these small, high-energy, well-traveled birds.

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In Search of Banded Gulls A New North American Herring Gull Longevity Record

Every fall several hundred Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) congregate on the Municipal Beach in New Buffalo, Berrien County, MI, after having spent most of the day feeding locally. The beach is used as a resting and preening site by the birds before they fly off to roost offshore on Lake Michigan. For the last three fall seasons, I have been visiting this area several times a month to search for banded Herring Gulls. I often can find one or two banded gulls among the loafing flock of 700 - 900 gulls. Each band takes an average of 15 minutes to record if the bird is unwary. Thus far, I have personally found and documented 27 banded Herring Gulls here.

All of my band readings are done with binoculars and a digital camera (Nikon D7100 with a 150 - 500 mm zoom lens). The banded Herring Gulls have standard butt-end bands which are not usually field readable. Securing the entire band number is sometimes challenging, especially when the bird is obscured in the middle of the flock or decides to fly off before the entire sequence is recorded. Note: I need to get within about 75 ft of the bird for the camera lens that I use; gulls are never handled. Once I find a banded gull on the peripheral of the loafing flock, my success rate at recording the entire band number is about 80%. I then attempt to get photographs of the various feather tracts as it preens and stretches its wings.

On Sunday, 20 Sep 2015, I found three banded adult Herring Gulls on the beach in New Buffalo—all with standard butt-end bands. After acquiring band numbers, one individual, #0846-10957, was flagged by the Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL) due to its age: 29 yr and 3 mo. It had been banded near Egg Harbor, WI, by Dr. Raymond Faber of St. Mary's University, Winona, MN, on 28 Jun 1986. (Dr. Faber, coincidentally, is still banding Herring Gulls in the same general area).

After providing the BBL with the details of my encounter and a set of photographs verifying the band number, I was informed that this individual is now the oldest known Herring Gull in their database. Further, it was the first time the bird had ever been reported to the BBL. Needless to say, I was very excited and humbled. The 29-year-old Herring Gull was left on the beach, untouched and unscathed, appearing alert and healthy.

In addition to notifying the Bird Banding Laboratory, this individual was given a personal profile under the American Herring Gull page on the Gull-Research.org website. Gull-Research.org is a non-profit organization that is loosely made up of about 40 gull enthusiasts world-wide, each with a keen interest in a specific gull species from the

northern hemisphere. Most of us have “ordinary” jobs that do not necessarily relate to birds. One of the primary goals of Gull-Research.org is to draw conclusions from known-age birds that have been banded as chicks. Specifically, we look for reliable field marks to separate subspecies as well as to better understand their distributions and respective ranges. The organization is much more interested in the “identification and ageing” of gulls than anything else—something no other institution or organization has committed to historically.

As one of the coordinators of the American Herring Gull page, my objective is to analyze photographs of each individual and describe its plumage features and molt timings, as well as any pertinent life history notes that may be known. Roughly 200 banded American Herring Gulls have been reported to the site but, admittedly, this pales to the number

of banded gulls reported under other species' accounts. Biologists, ornithologists, gull enthusiasts, bird-watchers, nature-lovers and ordinary people from the public alike, all find and report banded gulls to the site. A citizen science project, if you will, to help us answer questions in what has proven to be one of the most challenging family of birds to identify.

Many basic questions related to the field identification, taxonomy and ecology of gulls remain unanswered and it is no surprise that banded gulls, especially those with field readable bands, provide us with the most information. I am hopeful that I will encounter 0846-10957 again in the future.

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Fig. 1. Herring Gull 0846-10957 photographed 20 Sep 2015 at New Buffalo, MI, and banded as a chick on 28 Jun 1986 at Egg Harbor, WI.