From parking lots to landfills, 22 species of these flying scavengers roam the Prairie State.

Gulls of Illinois: Beauties or beasts?

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On a sunny February day—with temperatures predicted to be only in the teens—people stand on the Lake Michigan shoreline in Winthrop Harbor. Wearing layers for warmth, knit hats and sturdy gloves, they peer through binoculars and spotting scopes (bird-watching telescopes) trying to find an unusual gull.

"There's an adult Iceland," someone calls, while others respond, "Where?" and "Oh, isn't it beautiful? It's so white." Meanwhile, several gull experts are tossing loaves of stale bread into the water to bring the rare birds in closer.

This is the scene at the annual Gull Frolic sponsored by the Illinois Ornithological Society and other birding groups. Those who come to this social and birding occasion, on seemingly the coldest day of the year, never look the same way again at the noisy scavengers called gulls. In fact, gull-watching can actually cure cabin fever, at least for a day, and also offer a sense of appreciation for a group of 30 North American species belonging to the family Laridae with descriptive names such as ring-billed gull, Iceland gull and great black-backed gull.

The call of a "seagull" as its white form plies the sky over the ocean continues to be equated with a peaceful walk along the sandy shoreline. But today, gulls, whose numbers have increased in Illinois and elsewhere, also are considered nuisances on beaches, in parking lots and at nesting sites of rare birds. Gulls also are becoming more popular with birders.

Many consider gulls flying scavengers, a characteristic exploited by birders and photographers attending the annual Winthrop Harbor Gull Frolic.

"They are challenging to identify and there's always a chance at finding a really extraordinary species," said Chicagoan and gull expert Robert Hughes, who has seen nearly all of the 22 species of gulls identified in Illinois. "Gulls haven't been separated genetically for long, compared with other birds."

That means they are closely related and often have only subtle plumage differences. Add that to the fact that gulls change their plumages as many as eight times while they mature, and you've definitely got an identification challenge.

The word "seagull" is a misnomer,

(Photo by Robert Hughes.)

In adult plumage, the great black-backed gull is easy to identify. It's big, with a dark back and a huge bill. Numbers of this European species have been increasing in Illinois.

since many gulls spend most of their time in or near fresh water. In fact, many gulls cruise over active landfills looking for whatever's edible—which is just about anything. (A laughing gull, a dark-headed bird with a red bill, has taken residence at a Chicago-area fast-food restaurant, snatching spilled French fries for his supper.)

Gulls can be seen in Illinois year-round loafing and feeding at downstate reservoirs such as Carlyle Lake and Lake Springfield, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, along rivers and at locks and dams where water is open in winter, as well as at landfills and even in shopping mall parking lots. Gulls eat fish and the young and eggs of other birds, but when garbage is readily available, they're on it. Different species come and go with the seasons.

The most common gull in Illinois, the ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*), has a light gray back, white head and underparts, yellow bill with a black ring near the tip, and yellow legs. The ring-billed can be found year-round in Illinois, with many migrating to southern Illinois and farther south in winter.

In the late 19th century, the ring-billed and other gull species were killed along with egrets and terns to retrieve white feathers for ladies' hats. These species suffered drastic declines, prompting the 1916 Migratory Bird Treaty Act between Canada and the United States, which protects these and other birds.

Ring-billed gull numbers began to rise after the treaty was passed; by 1930, the Great Lakes region had about 3,000 nesting pairs and by 1967 there were more than 300,000 nesting pairs, according to a paper written by D.V. Weseloh and H. Blokpoel for the Canadian Ministry.

In Illinois, gull numbers in general (not only ring-billed gulls) increased even more between the 1940s and the 1990s.

"This increase in numbers did not happen by accident," wrote gull expert Jim Landing in an article published in "Meadowlark: A Journal of Illinois Birds."

Landing, who recently passed away, wrote that gulls thrive in degraded environments, "and are attracted to the worst examples of land use and human habitat known." He linked the increase of gulls in Illinois to increased air, water and land pollution, as well as the proliferation of landfills.

Recently, ring-billed gulls have been blamed for E. coli outbreaks, which caused beach closings along Lake Michigan. The City of Chicago estimated that ring-billed gull numbers along the beach rose by 31 percent between 1980 and 2004. Gull waste contributed to the E. coli outbreaks, according to the city, which has since oiled eggs where gulls were nesting to prevent young from hatching. Officials also used dogs to scare gulls away. Some birders think the gulls are being used as scapegoats for a problem with many causes.

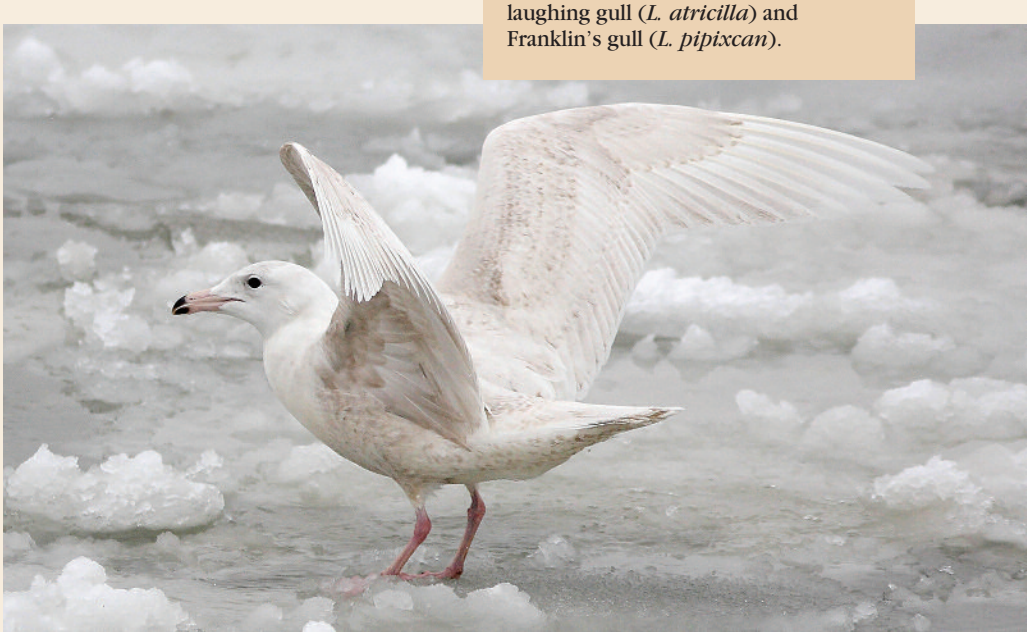
Gulls also prey on the eggs of other birds, and have made it difficult for the state-endangered common tern to successfully raise young in northern Illinois, said Brad Semel of the Department of Natural Resources. He is working to keep this tern on the state's list of breeding species.

"Gull predation also may be causing the decline of the common nighthawk in the Chicago area," said Steven D. Bailey, an ornithologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey.

As landfills, which attract gulls, close and are capped, some experts expect numbers of the common species,

A beginner's guide to gull identification

Start first by looking for the more numerous ring-billed and herring gulls, both with grayish backs. The herring is larger with pink legs. The ring-billed has yellow legs. Then search for other gulls with the following traits.
Dark-mantled gulls: Great black-backed gull, huge with a massive bill and pink legs; lesser black-backed gull, smaller overall with yellow legs.
White-winged gulls: Mostly seen in fall and winter. Iceland and glaucous gulls have no dark markings on their wingtips. The Iceland is much smaller.
Dark-headed gulls: Bonaparte's gull (*L. philadelphia*), a small, tern-like gull with a dark head, commonly is seen during migration, mostly at large, downstate reservoirs and along Lake Michigan. Much less common are laughing gull (*L. atricilla*) and Franklin's gull (*L. pipixcan*).



The glaucous gull is a winter visitor to Illinois and has much lighter wings than the more common ring-billed gulls.

The herring gull is a common gull in Illinois, increasing in numbers during winter when some come from the north to feed in Lake Michigan and other lager bodies of water.

including the ring-billed gull, to stabilize. Gull populations have begun declining along the East Coast, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports. Gull expert Walter Reid, who spoke at the 2009 Gull Frolic, said, "Because of the capping of landfills and decreased air and land pollution, gull numbers might be stabilizing or even declining."

Meanwhile, birders are becoming more savvy with gull identification and more interested in adding new species to their life lists.

Hughes' favorite gull often is seen in mid to late September, albeit just one or two and often in juvenile plumage, at Lake Carlyle in southern Illinois. It's the rare Sabine's gull (*Xema sabini*) , which breeds in the high Arctic and spends most of the year in the ocean. Birders take a boat onto the lake each September hoping to spot the gull, which has a striking, pied-wing pattern, appearing like an M-shape that frames white triangular patches.

About 20 years ago, two European species of gulls began populating the United States, including Illinois—first the great black-backed gull (*L. marinus*) and the lesser black-backed gull (*L. fuscus*).

"It's the biggest gull in the world," said Hughes of the great black-backed. "It has a very dark, almost black, back and a large bill. It's a big, mean-looking gull."

Those tell-tale characteristics make this gull species easy to identify.

These two dark-mantled gulls seem to fluctuate in numbers and are much more common in winter in northeastern Illinois than any other part of the state.

In winter, the ring-billed gulls migrate southward, becoming more numerous in southern Illinois, while herrings gulls (*L. argentatus*), which look similar, but are larger and have pink legs, become more numerous in northern Illinois, retreating to the harsher climates farther north.

9th Annual IOS (Illinois Ornithological Society) Gull Frolic at Winthrop Harbor Yacht Club, Saturday, February 20, 8 a.m.

We're chumming in gulls and ducks. Bring your binoculars, scope and cold-weather gear. Experts will be available to help ID and answer questions.
Directions: To reach the Winthrop Harbor Yacht Club take the I-94 toll road north toward Milwaukee. Exit at Route 173. Turn right (east) and go to Sheridan Road (Rt. 137). Turn left and proceed to 7th Street. Turn right on 7th Street and follow the North Point Marina signs to the yacht club.
Fee: $10 registration fee includes continental breakfast, lunch, drinks, facility and speaker. This fee will help defray facility expenses. Any surplus will go to the IOS Grant Program to benefit Illinois birds and birding.

Additional information posted at illinoisbirds.org.

Birders look for the rare, but regular Iceland gull (*L. glaucoides*) and glaucous gull (*L. hyperboreus*) in winter, mostly found in northeastern Illinois, but moving south along rivers and wherever they can find open water.

"The Iceland and glaucous gulls are from the high Arctic and come down Hudson Bay and fly over Canada to winter on the northeast coast and west to the Great Lakes," said Hughes. These species have light wings compared with the ring-billed and herring, and they have no dark tips at the edge of their wings.

Gull-watchers toss bread where these birds frequent in winter to get a closer look.

Said Hughes, "Winter would be unbearable in Chicago if there weren't any gulls."

Where and how to watch gulls in winter

You can watch gulls any time of year, but the best time to get a nice collection of different species is in late fall through winter wherever there is some open water (or landfills). Here are some good gull-watching spots in Illinois.

NORTH

- **North Point Marina**, Winthrop Harbor—For an introduction to gull-watching and lots of experts available to tell you what you're seeing, attend the annual Gull Frolic. Visit www.illinoisbirds.org for details on the 2010 frolic.
- **Chicago lakefront**—Many gulls loaf and fly along the beach throughout the year; and birders are typically available to help identify them. Montrose Harbor is a popular gull-watching spot.
- **Starved Rock State Park**, Utica—Park by the Army Corps of Engineer Lock and Dam Visitor Center off Dee Bennett Road, where bald eagles, gulls and ducks can be found.

CENTRAL

- **Lake Springfield**—Drive around the lake, pulling off where it's safe to view gulls and ducks.

SOUTH

- **Carlyle Lake**—The fall and winter of 2008/2009 was a banner one for finding some unusual varieties, said Dan Kassebaum, a southern Illinois gull expert. Best places to go include the beach and the dam. "If the lake completely freezes, nearly all the gulls will move down river to the power plant or locks and dams along the Mississippi River," said Kassebaum.