

Ring-billed Gull, *Larus delawarensis*, Food Piracy on Diving Ducks

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One of four Ring-billed Gulls observed 26 April 2002 at Dauphin Lake, Manitoba attacked a group of diving ducks and took abandoned food items.

Key Words: Ring-billed Gull, *Larus delawarensis*, Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*, kleptoparasitism, Manitoba.

Kleptoparasitism or piracy is the forceful taking of food by one species of bird from another (Terres 1980). According to Bent (1921) Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) have been observed to hover over feeding ducks, notably Red-breasted Mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) darting at them as they re-surfaced apparently to steal their prey although success is not reported. Although Ring-billed Gulls do not usually pirate other gull species (Ryder 1993) they have been observed pirating food from European Starlings, *Sturnus vulgaris* (Burger and Gochfeld 1981). Clapp et al. (1983) state that a variety of species are pirated by the Ring-billed Gull. Jarvis and Southern (1976), in their study of the food habits of this gull in the Great Lakes region, made no mention of piracy or attempted piracy during the breeding season.

Crescent Cove at the south end of Dauphin Lake (51°10'N; 99°53'W) in west central Manitoba was windless and sunny but cold (-11°C) at mid morning on 26 April 2002. There, 15 m from shore, a stretch of water 70 m in length and 30 to 50 m in width had opened up parallel to a sandy beach. Small numbers of grebes and diving ducks, about 5 and 25 respectively, swam about on the calm surface, some diving for food. Ring-billed Gulls were also on the water, stood on the edge of the ice, or flew around in the area.

Upon my arrival on the nearby ridge above the beach 2 Red-necked (*Podiceps grisegena*), 3 Horned grebes (*Podiceps auritus*), 3 Redheads (*Aythya americana*), and 5 Canvasbacks (*Aythya valisineria*), and unhurriedly swam away leaving a half dozen Common Goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*) and 3 Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*). With the ducks diving and returning to the surface, a Ring-billed Gull, only one of four gulls believed to actually be an attacker, typically took wing off the surface from among the waterfowl and flew low toward a duck up to 15 or 20 m away where it had just surfaced. Upon reaching the targeted bird, the gull flew up and hovered just above and behind its head as described by Bent (1921). The duck plunged out of sight and the gull, using its bill, snatched the food item surrendered. One attack was initiated from as close as 1.5 m.

Often a duck surfaced without prey and with several ducks diving it was remarkable how quickly and efficiently the gull identified a successful duck from

the others and attacked it. Two prey items were identified: crayfish (Decapoda) and small fish which, when plucked from the water, were eaten on the spot after the gull alighted on the surface nearby or flew to a shelf of ice where the item was tossed down, re-grasped, then swallowed.

During the forty minute observation, attacks on the diving ducks were initiated 20 – 25 times. With one exception – a female scaup – all attacks targeted the goldeneyes. Other than one instance where four male goldeneyes directed a threat display involving the thrusting of their heads low over the water toward a nearby gull, little aggression was shown by the ducks. Avoidance of contact and hence injury from the gull attacks appeared to be paramount for the ducks. Frustration on the part of the ducks was not in evidence, but determination to capture more prey was.

In April at Dauphin Lake, carrion, notably discarded coarse fish from ice fishing activities, would seem to be an important source of food for early arriving carnivorous or omnivorous birds from the south such as gulls, Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) and some species of hawks, in addition to resident populations of the Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). A possible shortage of fish and/or other sources of food in the Crescent Cove area of the lake and, perhaps, on the lake ice generally due to competition, may have been a factor in the gulls' attacks on the goldeneyes. Observations of the lake from shore at Crescent Cove with the use of a 20 power spotting scope that day revealed only one such food item, the carcass of a Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) lying on the ice 250 m out. In immediate succession at this source of carrion, included: a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) with two crows nearby; an adult Bald Eagle that causing the harrier to fly off and three immature Bald Eagles that displaced the adult eagle at the carcass; all to the exclusion of any gulls, suggesting intensive competition for food. This competition may have resulted in the unusual method of securing food observed in at least one Ring-billed Gull.

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