

Trip Report- Gulling in Tillamook County with Nick Mrvelj

January 18, 2025

Oregon Birding Association

On a freezing mid-January morning, fifteen birders and myself met up at a local Safeway in Tillamook, Oregon. These birders, from all over the state of Oregon, had gathered in the hopes of practicing their ability to recognize and identify different species of gulls. Gull identification is a notoriously challenging part of the birding world, which is made all the more challenging in the Pacific Northwest owing to widespread hybridization. After some brief introductions, we set out into the frosty morning to hopefully track down some gulls!

Our main goal was to track down gulls feeding in the grassy agricultural fields. Ideally, we would approach close enough to study the gulls without spooking them off. As the grass was still frozen early on, we initially had some trouble finding any gulls. It was a perfectly bright and sunny morning, but cold. Great for vitamin D deficient winter time residents of Oregon, but not ideal for gull watching. Our caravan of birders drove toward Long Prairie Road, near the Tillamook Air Museum. We continued to struggle to find any gulls. When we did find some gulls, we could only look at them facing into the sun. This highlighted an additional challenge that had nothing to do with gull ID: finding gulls in a place that allowed for close approach and tolerable lighting! The search continued. In areas like Tillamook, many of the large gull species we were looking for were feeding primarily on earthworms. Eventually, we found a group of 25-30 gulls across from the old UPS building on the north side of Long Prairie Road. It was time to set up the scopes and start crunching IDs!



There was just enough room for us to line up slightly off the road with our scopes. This would be a theme for the morning: birding just off of roads. Similarly to how gulls can be rather opportunistic about food sources, so can gull watchers when it comes time to look at their namesake subject. As we started looking through the gulls, this time with the sun at our backs,

we saw several target species. Glaucous-winged Gulls, "Thayer's" Iceland Gulls, and an American Herring Gull. We also saw two different types of hybrids there. Olympic Gulls (Glaucous-winged Gull x Western Gull) and Cook Inlet Gulls (Glaucous-winged Gull x American Herring Gull). It would turn out to be an especially good day for the latter hybrid species.

After this first stop, we drove west along Long Prairie Road and found two more solid locations to look at gulls. During this second and third stop, we found several hundred gulls, but only about a hundred that could be safely identified. In addition to seeing several more GWGUs and ICGUs, we added five new gull species to our daily total. One Short-billed Gull, two Ring-billed Gulls, one Western Gull, and two California Gulls obliged us with their presence. The last new gull species we would see that morning turned out to be our best gull of the day! Some of the participants pointed out a beautiful first cycle GLAUCOUS GULL at our third stop. A rare visitor from the high north, Glaucous Gulls are some of the biggest gulls out there. This one happened to be a first cycle, and showed a wonderfully whitish appearance above with a neatly bi-colored bill. The perfect frosty looking gull on a frigid, frozen morning.

As the morning wore on, we eventually relocated to Goodspeed Road, where we largely struck out on gulls, but saw a well-known Northern Mockingbird.

Afterward, we paid a brief visit to nearby Makinster Road, where we ran in to nearly 300 more gulls.

They were unfortunately between us and the sun though, so viewing was difficult. It was around this time that some of the participants alerted the group to a male BAIKAL TEAL being seen on Sauvie Island outside of Portland! Thankfully the field trip was just about over, as the news of this mega discovery reverberated through the group, and caused many of us to get a little giddy and distracted. After the field trip ended, several of us were able to drive over to Sauvie Island and steal a glance at the Baikal Teal. This was something that certainly wasn't in the script!

All told, we spent the better part of five hours looking at gulls. Of the nearly 800 gulls we saw, only 233 of them were able to be identified to the species level. The most numerous species we saw were Glaucous-winged Gulls, with 110 individuals. Surprisingly, we only saw 1 Western Gull and 1 American Herring Gull! That latter was especially shocking, considering we saw as many as 12 Cook Inlet Gulls (which are American Herring Gull hybrids).



Looking forward to more gulling field trips in the future!
-Nick Mrvelj

