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Rare Seagull Lands at Coney Island



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A bird seen on Coney Island on Sunday appeared to be a gray-hooded gull, a rare species in North America.

By TIM STELLOH
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They came from as far as Chicago, Johnstown, Pa., and Pomfret, Conn., making for an unusual scene, even for Coney Island.

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Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Birders like Ardith Bondi, left, of the Upper West Side and John Gluth of Long Island trekked to the beach for a glimpse of the rare gull.

They lugged cameras with telephoto lenses, binoculars and tripods by the Boardwalk. They excitedly congregated around a yellow pole on the beach. They pointed their cameras toward a light post atop Gyro Corner, on the Boardwalk itself, and then to a puddle in the sand.

Clearly, it was not easy keeping track of [a single seagull at the beach](#).

This, however, was no ordinary seagull. It was apparently a gray-hooded gull, possibly from Africa or South America. And the only known sighting of one in the United States accepted by the [American Birding Association](#) was in Apalachicola, Fla., [on Dec. 26, 1998](#).

"This is a 'life bird,' which means that I've never seen one before anywhere," said Rob

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Fanning, 35, who drove up from northern New Jersey to see the gull.

It might be hard for nonbirders to imagine that one gull could stand out from the innumerable seagulls that populate the shore, but Mr. Fanning said the gray-hooded gull was distinguished by its light-gray head, pale eyes, red legs and red bill.

A photo of the bird, *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus*, was first reported on July 24 to [eBird.org](#), a Web site run by Cornell University's ornithology lab and the National Audubon Society, which compiles and reviews such submissions, said Lisa Ann, 38, a birder from Marlboro, N.J.

An additional review process that may take up to year is required to determine the bird's origin, and if it is actually the gray-hooded gull.

But the birding community seems to be already convinced, buoyed by experts who have seen photos of the bird and agree that it is the gray-hooded gull.

"The question now is: How did it get there? Did it escape from somewhere?" said Mr. Fanning, who reviews submissions of birds seen in New Jersey for [eBird.org](#). He added that if it was someone's pet or if it had escaped from a zoo, it would not be considered an official sighting by the birding association.

Still, committed birders did not risk missing the rare gull: As Web forums and the like erupted with news of the sighting, Kevin George, 56, a retired iron worker from Pennsylvania, left home at 3 a.m. Sunday to make the five-hour drive to Coney Island.

"This is only the second time they've seen this particular gull," said Mr. George, who once drove to Nova Scotia to see a redwing (successfully) and to Florida to see a loggerhead kingbird (unsuccessfully).

Amar Ayyash, 33, a community college math teacher from Chicago, heard about the gull a couple of days ago and followed its movements to make sure it would stay on Coney Island. By 9 a.m. Sunday, he had landed at La Guardia Airport; by 10 a.m., he had rented a car and driven to the beach.

"I probably broke a couple of speed limit rules on the way," he said.

Though he has taken similar trips to Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey and California, New York will top his best-of list.

"Record-wise, this is probably the rarest seagull I've seen," he said.

For some nonbirders enjoying a Sunday at the Boardwalk, the site of men and women with large cameras chasing a seagull seemed, well, odd.

"When I first saw them looking at the seagulls, I thought, 'Boy, New York City birders are desperate,'" said Neil Stewart, 42. Things began to make sense, however, once the gull's possible origin and rarity were explained.

"Anything that rare has value," he said.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 1, 2011, on page A15 of the New York edition with the headline: Seagull? Eh. With Gray Head and Red Bill? Get in the Car!.

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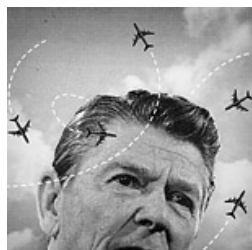
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