

# **Chicago birders rejoice as Arctic gull makes rare visit to local beaches: 'This is about as good as it gets'**

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It was 8:15 on a Saturday morning when Woody Goss' phone started buzzing.

Annoyed, he checked the screen to find that one of his birding groups was puzzling over a small white [gull](#) with distinctive black markings. The bird looked like a Ross's gull—a very rare visitor from the high Arctic that last stopped for an extended visit at Chicago-area beaches in 1978.

But could it be?

Goss—a "gull person" among birders—had no doubt. He ran out of the house and drove from Lakeview to Rainbow Beach on the South Side "faster than I'll admit to a reporter."

And there it was, 2,000 miles from its icy home.

"This is about as good as it gets for me, not just as a birder, but in life," said Goss, 34.

The bird that drew crowds of up to 200 people Saturday, and reappeared to the delight of onlookers at nearby Steelworkers Park on Tuesday and Wednesday, is indeed the long-awaited Ross's gull, according to John Bates, curator of birds at Chicago's Field Museum.

"It's absolutely happening," said Bates, who saw the bird foraging on the shoreline at Rainbow Beach on Saturday.

"Most of the time they're only above the Arctic Circle, and occasionally they wander down into the lower 48, but they often don't stay around very long. So the idea that this bird allowed itself to be seen by so many people was really fun," Bates said.

Bigger than a crow, with a small black beak and a lovely wash of soft pink across its breast and head during breeding season, the Ross's gull typically prefers places such as Siberia, northern Canada and the icy Arctic Ocean.

But every few years, for reasons that are not clearly understood, one of these hearty little seabirds will venture south to the United States, according to Bates. These visits can be very brief. About a dozen years ago, a Ross's gull was spotted at Montrose Beach. One person took a good photo, birders said, and then the gull was gone.

What really gets the birding community excited is when a Ross's gull stops in for a nice leisurely visit, and the last time that happened in Cook County was 1978.

A few years earlier, a Ross's gull appeared near Boston, drawing crowds of up to 3,000, according to *The New York Times*.

"You never know where it's going to be, and because of that, it has this kind of mythical reputation," Goss said.

This time, the storied bird made its initial appearance at Park 566, just north of Steelworkers Park. Dan Lory, 68, of Hyde Park, was doing his customary bird walk there when he spotted an unusual bird out of the corner of his eye. He thought it might be a Bonaparte's gull or a black-legged Kittiwake, but when he consulted his [field guide](#) there was only one identification that really made sense.

Lory posted a photo of the bird on Cook County Bird Chat, not even daring to say what he thought he had found, but the rest of the group confirmed his suspicion—and within an hour close to 100 people had arrived on the scene.

Among those who have seen the bird in recent days is John Viramontes, 71, a retired accountant who lives in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood. During a break from the search at Rainbow Beach this week, he pulled up a photo on his camera that showed the distinctive m-shaped black markings along a young Ross's gull's upper wings; the short black beak; the dapper wedge-shaped tail.

Amanda Parrish, 37, a lab manager from Woodstock, managed to see the bird Saturday, despite crutches and a broken ankle. She was back for more Wednesday with friends from the McHenry County Audubon Society.

Also on the scene was Greg Neise, the American Birding Association's web czar and a longtime Chicago birder.

Neise had left his home in the west suburbs while the bird was still in view at Steelworkers Park in the South Chicago neighborhood, but by the time he arrived, it had flown north and disappeared.

"This is a 45-year-long saga," Neise said with a sigh. He was just 15 during the 1978 Ross's gull sightings, but he was there at North Avenue Beach, trying to get a look. The blizzard of 1978 had started, but birders stood their ground. Someone spotted the gull, and Neise ran over. Two experienced birders told him, "There it is," and just as they said it, the bird got up and started flying.

"It got it in my binoculars and it flew away into the snowstorm, and I never saw enough on it to identify it for myself," Neise said.

Then, about 10 years ago, he tried again. He did manage to see a Ross's gull in Cherry Creek, Colorado. It was way out in the water, but then it started flying toward him.



"It comes flying in, and as it gets close, my camera malfunctions—and it came right in front of us," Neise said.

Neise joined about 15 birders at Steelworkers Park, in a trash-strewn field perched above the copper-green waters of Lake Michigan. The wind blew, fingers grew stiff, but the mood was upbeat as birders with powerful scopes on tripods peered out over a channel where the bird had been seen earlier that day.

Birders had come in from as far as Ohio, Michigan and Minnesota.

"It's a good day for a drive anyway, and let's keep our fingers crossed," said Kris Knutson of Berrien County, Michigan, a birder of 30 years who made the trek with her husband, Denis Fortin, a teacher.

Darlene Friedman, a retired veterinarian who drove in from the Detroit area with a friend, said they had missed the gull by about 15 minutes.

Neise stayed at Steelworkers Park on Wednesday afternoon, holding a camera as big as his forearm and chatting with a fellow birder, Tom Lally of Chicago. They looked into the pale winter sky, they scanned the bright waters, they speculated as to their target's whereabouts.

"It could be sitting in a grassy field, just loafing," Neise said.

"It could be in the slip at 92nd," Lally mused.

Birds did show up. A male red-breasted merganser with a jade-green Mohawk settled in on a tiny stretch of beach across from the birders, as if waiting patiently for his close-up.

A kestrel, America's smallest falcon, sat high up in a tree, bright orange markings on full display. With the aid of one of the birders' scopes, you

could even see the tiny legs of the mouse the bird held in its claws.

Snow-white gulls soared majestically overhead. Red-winged blackbirds called out their electric "twe-ee-ee-ee-ee."

And still, the birders waited.

Finally, at about 6 p.m., with the sky over the lake blushing faintly and dusk just starting to fall, Neise was ready to leave. In a nod to his previous bad luck with the Ross's gull, he told the crowd of about 20 that the bird, which he had missed earlier in the day by about an hour, would likely show up within 15 minutes of his departure.

Asked how he was feeling, he laughed and declared the defeat "par for the course."

"Decades of disappointment!" Neise said. "You just kind of have to say, 'Pile it on! I'll take it.'"

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