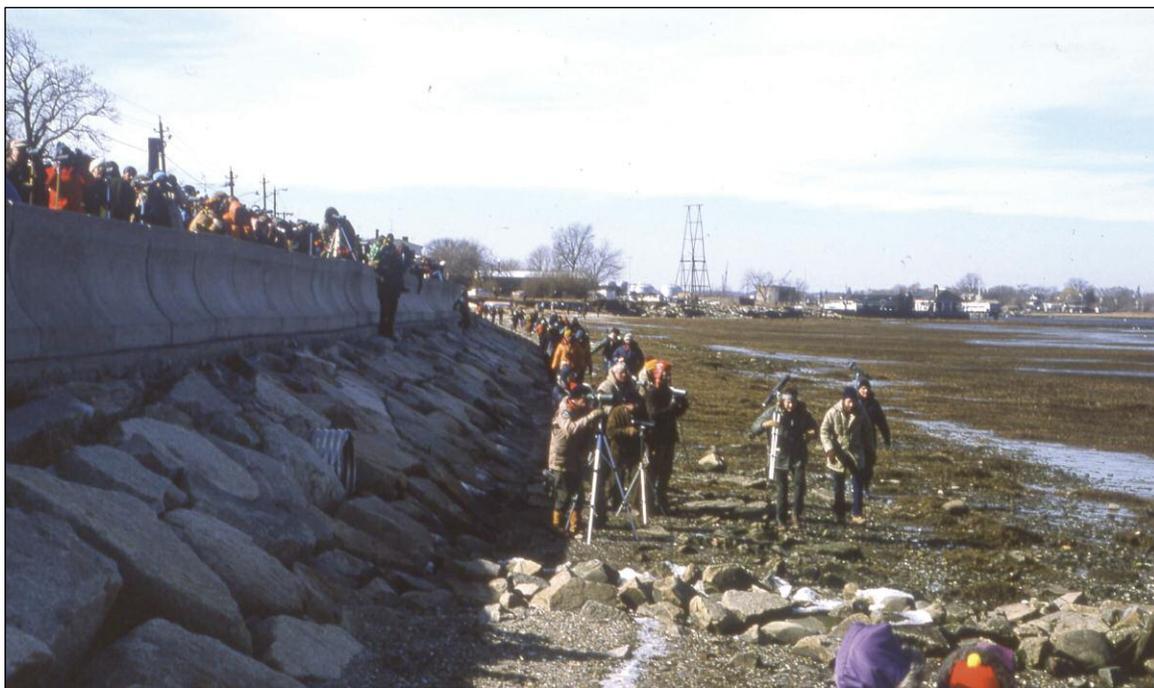


# The Gull, the Seawall, the Experience

Photo by © Betty Petersen



It was 33 years ago that the birding world shifted its axis. The transformation took place on the banks of the Merrimac River at Newburyport, Massachusetts. In this quiet seaport, a Ross's Gull was found, a species virtually unknown to North American birders at the time. The "only" place to find Ross's Gull in 1975 in North America was Point Barrow, Alaska, in late September and October, where small flocks might, just might, be seen flying eastward.

The Newburyport Ross's Gull, a winter-plumage adult, had been present in Newburyport Harbor from at least 12 January 1975 and was identified by Phil Parsons and Herman Weissberg. Their original sighting was virtually dismissed: No rarity

alert was triggered. The gull, however, was relocated by a band of seasoned birders on Sunday, 2 March, resulting, in the words of Mass Audubon's Chris Leahy, in "a ridiculous flapdoodle over who discovered its presence *first*."

No matter. The rush to Newburyport began, bringing birders by the hundreds to the banks of the Merrimac River.

Newburyport had long enjoyed a reputation for being a winter birding hotspot, with "white-winged" gulls, Snowy Owls, and sea and bay ducks (for example, Barrow's Goldeneye) being found there with regularity. At the time of the 1975 Ross's Gull sighting, there were also Little and Black-headed Gulls in the harbor and a Tufted Duck in

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the nearby Salisbury area.

The Ross's Gull reached the front page of *The New York Times* (Tuesday, 4 March 1975) along with a photo and onsite comments by Roger Tory Peterson. Furthermore, the bird was treated to three minutes of glorious coverage on the *NBC Nightly News* anchored by John Chancellor on 7 March.

Within a few days of the discovery, a birdfinding pattern had begun: The best places to watch for the gull became the Newbury "seawall," the "clam shack" area slightly to the east, and spots across the river on the Salisbury side of the Merrimac requiring some hiking over saltmarshes and jumping over creeks.

Before long, accessing some of these sites began to appear something "like a chase scene from *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*," according to veteran New York birder Thomas H. Davis. Soon, most of the crowds converged on the Newburyport side of the river, with the wall at a central and consistent location. The rare and modest visitor could best be found on exposed mudflats, often two to four hours before and after high tide. At high tide, the gull would sometimes be encountered between the breakwaters at the mouth of the Merrimac River.

As Pete Dunne wrote in *The Feather Quest*, "[I]f Newburyport, Massachusetts, may be fairly called one of birding's shrines, then the seawall is its in-

ner sanctum. In March 1975, birding reached its high-water mark as thousands of birders flooded the town. They came spontaneously, from across the country, to bear witness to a miracle...In the process, birders discovered something that took them completely by surprise. They discovered that they were many."

No one knows for sure how the Ross's Gull arrived in New England. It could have come from the direction of Scandinavia, from far northern Canada, from Greenland, or from Siberia. It remained at the site through 9 May 1975.

The provenance of the bird, at least for the purposes of this article, is not as important as was its impact on birders. It was not simply the discovery of an ultra-rare bird by birders that was important; it was the discovery by birders of *each other* that was so crucial.

Numbers of birders came through Newburyport by the hundreds that winter, perhaps by the thousands.

Birding had arrived.

To this day, birders standing by the seawall in Newburyport are often greeted with commentary (occasionally very colorful) about the Ross's Gull from local long-term residents in passing cars.

Thanks to Dave Larson and Wayne Petersen, both from Mass Audubon, for help with collecting background information for this Traditions feature.

— Paul J. Baicich