

Two Great Black-backed Gulls, *Larus marinus*, Kill Male Longtailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*

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At Presqu'île Point, Presqu'île Provincial Park, Ontario on 23 March 2003, while interpreting the waterfowl migration for park visitors, we witnessed two adult Great Black-backed Gulls attack and kill a male Long-tailed Duck.

Key Words: Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*, Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*, predation

Great Black-backed Gulls, *Larus marinus*, are known to be scavengers and to take eggs, nestlings, and fledglings of other birds. However, their efficacy as predators is less well documented. On 23 March 2003 we witnessed two adult Great Black-backed Gulls attack and kill a Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*.

We were using a spotting scope (power 45×) to observe diving ducks located 200 to 250 m from shore off Presqu'île Point, Ontario (44°00'N, 77°41'W) as they fed and rested at the front edge of ice in Presqu'île Bay. The ducks routinely lifted off when a predatory bird passed overhead. After one such take-off, we observed a pair of adult Great Black-backed Gulls flying above the ducks. One male Long-tailed Duck failed to lift off and the gulls flew down and began to harass it. We did not see the initial separation of the duck from the flock, so we were unable to observe whether it was healthy and merely caught under water when the rest of the flock flew, or whether it was already injured when attacked.

The attack proceeded in what appeared to be a coordinated effort by the gulls. One Great Black-backed Gull flew in circles overhead when the duck dived and swam under water. When the duck surfaced, the gull alighted on the water and tried to bite him. The second gull then took off from the water and flew overhead, watching the duck as he dived again to avoid the attack of the first gull. When the duck resurfaced, the second gull attacked him while the first gull again took off and watched as the duck tried to make another escape under water.

The Great Black-backed Gulls continued to take turns flying and attacking the duck for 20-25 minutes. At the end of this time, one gull succeeded in grabbing the wing of the Long-tailed Duck and both gulls then pecked at the body of the duck. Less than 5 minutes later the duck was dead, and its limp body could be seen floating on the water. The adult Great Black-backed Gulls were then joined by an immature Great Black-backed Gull and all three gulls began to eat the dead duck. We could not continue observations as the wind and currents had pushed the duck's carcass out into Lake Ontario, beyond the useful range of our spotting scope.

Great Black-backed Gulls have a varied diet, but their main food sources are fish and seabirds (both often consumed as carrion) (Buckley 1990). Their predation of birds is focused on the eggs, nestlings, newly fledged young and sick or injured individuals (Beaman 1978; Mawhinney and Diamond 1999). Healthy adult birds are rarely killed, with the notable exception of predation in some seabird colonies, such as those of the Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) in Northern Europe (Beaman 1978), and Newfoundland (Nettleship 1972).

Great Black-backed Gulls are considered to be predators of waterfowl (Good 1998); however, observations of Great Black-backed Gulls attacking and killing adult ducks are quite rare. One notable record reported by Cleghorn (1942) was of an adult Great Black-backed Gull killing a female Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) and an immature Great Black-backed Gull killing another unidentified duck the same day.

Cobb (1957) observed a single adult Great Black-backed Gull kill an injured Ruddy Duck, *Oxyura jamaicensis*, in Rhode Island. In that case the method of attack was similar to what we witnessed at Presqu'île. The gull hovered above the duck as it dived and then attempted to grab it when it resurfaced (Cobb 1957). Our report corroborates the evidence that Great Black-backed Gulls will fly above diving ducks, presumably to watch them under water, and attack them when they resurface.

Addy (1945) witnessed a group of Great Black-backed Gulls attack and kill an adult American Black Duck, *Anas rubripes*. The gulls chased and swooped at groups of American Black Ducks until one adult gull injured a duck. The gulls then worried the duck by lifting it from the water by its neck and by grasping its back. After about half an hour the duck died, and was consumed, mainly by the gull which had first attacked it (Addy 1945). This observation does not appear to have been a coordinated attack on the duck as in the case we witnessed, because one gull of a group carried out most of the attack and was the primary consumer of the carcass.

In our observation, the two Great Black-backed Gulls showed a level of coordination in their attack that is

unrecorded in the literature. The method they used of taking turns flying overhead and attacking the duck seems to be an efficient means to harass their prey to the point of exhaustion and death.

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