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WEEKEND BREAK



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SABINE GULL STOPS BY PENINSULA ON ROUTE TO ARCTIC TUNDRA

By **MADLINE KALBACH**

LONG BEACH, Wash. — There was excitement on the beach recently. Thousands of sanderlings, a few Caspian terns, flocks of Heermann's gulls, several black-bellied plovers, glaucous-winged gulls and the sighting of a rare Sabine's gull capped a day of exhilaration on the beach. This rare gull was on migration from its breeding grounds in the Arctic tundra.

My friend Linda informed me that Russ Lewis, who faithfully cleans our ocean beach, had photographed a Sabine's gull near some large kelp. The next morning, I set off with my friend Susan for the beach during low tide to look for this rare bird. Luckily, we found it. It was very cooperative as I was able to photograph it feeding, walking and resting.

Sabine's gull is rare on the Peninsula, which means that while it may be seen, it is generally only seen at intervals of two to five years. The Pacific County checklist records it as hard to find, but usually seen annually. This was an especially significant and exciting sighting because it was a life bird for me and a rare sighting on the Peninsula. It is a migrant that mainly travels offshore along the West Coast and one that is rarely seen from land. It was not surprising to see a lone bird because they generally don't mix with other gulls or travel in large flocks. It was by itself walking, resting along the hard beach sand and feeding at the wrack line. In general, the Sabine's gull favors aquatic insects, crustaceans, zooplankton and fish.

The field marks indicating that I had indeed found the Sabine's gull were its black bill with a yellow tip and its dark gray hood with a black lower border. "The Sibley Guide to Birds" (2014) indicates the latter as being characteristically unique. It is a small gull, at 13.5 inches which is about the size of an American crow. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology describes other features that I was unable to see, including the fact that its wings reveal a "bold pattern of black, white and gray triangles in flight," and its tail is notched.

To have an exciting day like this on the beach every day would be absolute heaven, but in retrospect, birding on the beach is always exhilarating and a heavenly experience. The next time you go birding on the beach keep your eyes open for peninsula rarities migrating south from the Arctic tundra such as the Sabine's gull.

Madeline Kalbach is a contributor to the Chinook Observer and professor emerita of sociology at the University of Calgary.

The gull was observed walking the wrack line in search of a tasty morsel.

Madeline Kalbach



Susan Stauffer

Identifying this Sabine's gull on the peninsula was a rare chance for local birders to add a rare species to their lifetime lists of sightings.



Madeline Kalbach

The Sabine's gull sports a black beak with a yellow tip and a dark gray hood with a lower black border.



Madeline Kalbach

A lone Sabine's gull pokes in beach debris in search of a meal, displaying its distinctive forked tail.