

# Island Birds Get Bolder with Prolonged Exposure to Humans

This has been quite a summer for me. Earlier in the year, as my regular readers know, I was slugged, and now just yesterday, I was mugged. What is happening to Mackinac Island? Just to reassure you, both of these incidents involved members of the animal world. The first revolved around accidentally picking up a slug and having major slug slime smeared all over my shirt (luckily, my brother sent me Slug Slime Soap to help with any such problems in the future). The second incident occurred right after the reception for the Mackinac Island Community Foundation. My mother, myself, and a friend of mine decided to get an ice cream cone on the way home. While walking, pushing my bike and carrying my cone, a gull dive-bombed me and flew past me. We all laughed, but then he made a second pass, reached out with his bill and grabbed the edge of my cone and flew away. I was



## Nature Notes

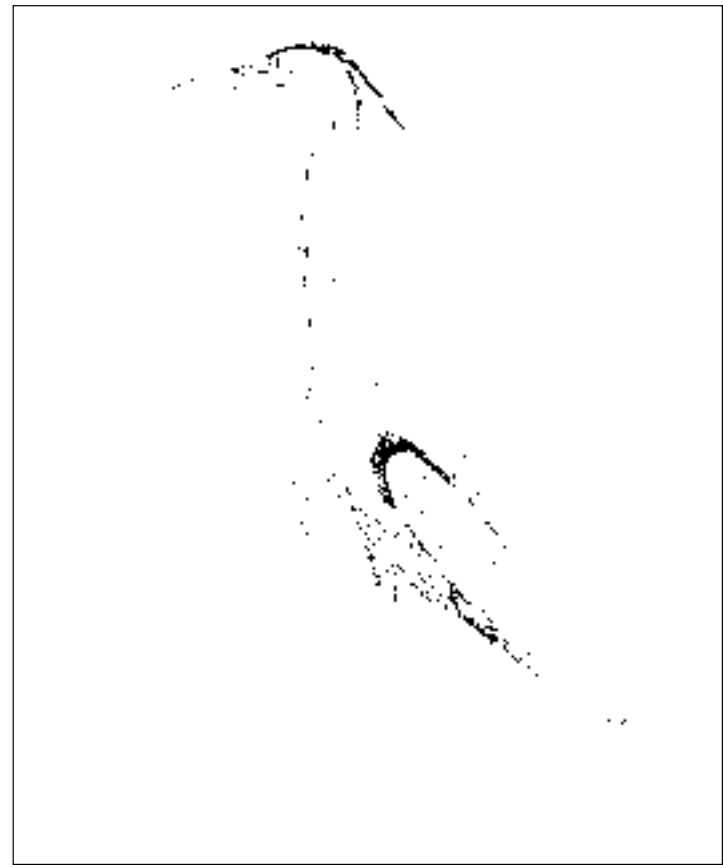
By Patricia Martin

startled, but immediately ran after the bird with my bike and startled it enough to make it drop the cone. I picked up the ice cream cone and dropped it in the trash. You see, I did not want that gull to benefit from his crime. I was particularly bummed, as it was my first ice cream cone of the summer.

This type of behavior is not uncommon among gulls, particularly the ring-billed gull who hang around town. I've heard many reports of people being dived at by these birds, but I think I was surprised that it would literally take it from my hand. Most people are familiar with the ring-billed gull, and I've written about them before. They have a white head, yellow bill and legs, and they have a black ring around the tip of their bill. The underparts are white and the back and wings are gray with black wing tips. The immature ring-bills have a gray back and brown wings and breast. These birds do not breed on Mackinac, but instead nest

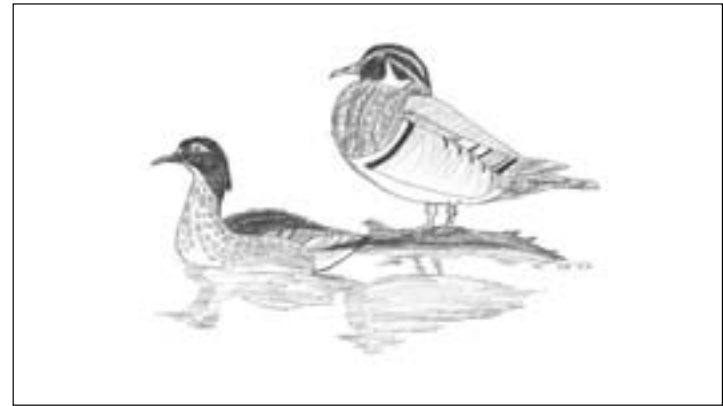
on some of the uninhabited islands and shores in the Straits area. They just come to Mackinac to feed. Before the advent of humans in this region, the ring-bills usually ate spiders and insects, rodents, earthworms, grubs, and scavenged for carrion. They also would skim the surface of the lake for aquatic invertebrates and fish. Today, however, they've become adapt at living on human waste, and apparently some human food that people were not ready to give up yet.

If you think that there are more ring-bills than there have been in the past, you're right. "Its tolerance for humans has made it a part of our everyday life" to quote the "Birds of Michigan" field guide. In the early part of the 20th century, scientists were not even sure if these birds bred in Michigan. In the 1940s, there were 20,000 breeding ring-bills in the state, and 20 years later, in the 1960s, you couldn't miss the more than 100,000 birds in Michigan, and that number has certainly not declined. Because of their numbers and the locations that they frequent - beaches, golf courses, fast-food parking lots, and parks - these birds have certainly adapted well to the expansion of humans, unlike many wild creatures. As one of my bird books put it, in describing places where one might view these birds, they listed the Great Lakes shores, large



Above: Great Blue Heron

Below: Female and male Wood Ducks



inland lakes, and "landfills and supermarket parking lots."

Another gull that I was recently asked about is a larger cousin of the ring-billed, called the herring gull. They're considerably larger than the ring-billed and, of course, they do not have a ring on their bill. They have a yellow bill with a red dot on their lower mandible. They have light eyes and pink legs. While they do eat human byproducts and are often seen at the dump, they're

not as common as the ring-billed in urban settings or in downtown Mackinac Island.

Another odd bird behavior I was asked about recently involved another of our water birds, a duck. The person who talked to me about it wasn't sure what kind of duck it was that his wife saw, but she told him that the duck was perched on the branch of a tree along the bluff on the west side of the Island, not far from the airport.

\*Please turn to page 23

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