

BIRDS

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Camera studies at the nest

THE MYSTERIOUS ROSS'S GULL
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A QUARTERLY JOURNAL DEVOTED TO
THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD





BIRDS AND BRAVE MEN IN THE ARCTIC NORTH

Polar explorers, the
Russo-Japanese war, and
the ever mysterious
Ross's Gull

Text and photos by Eugene Potapov

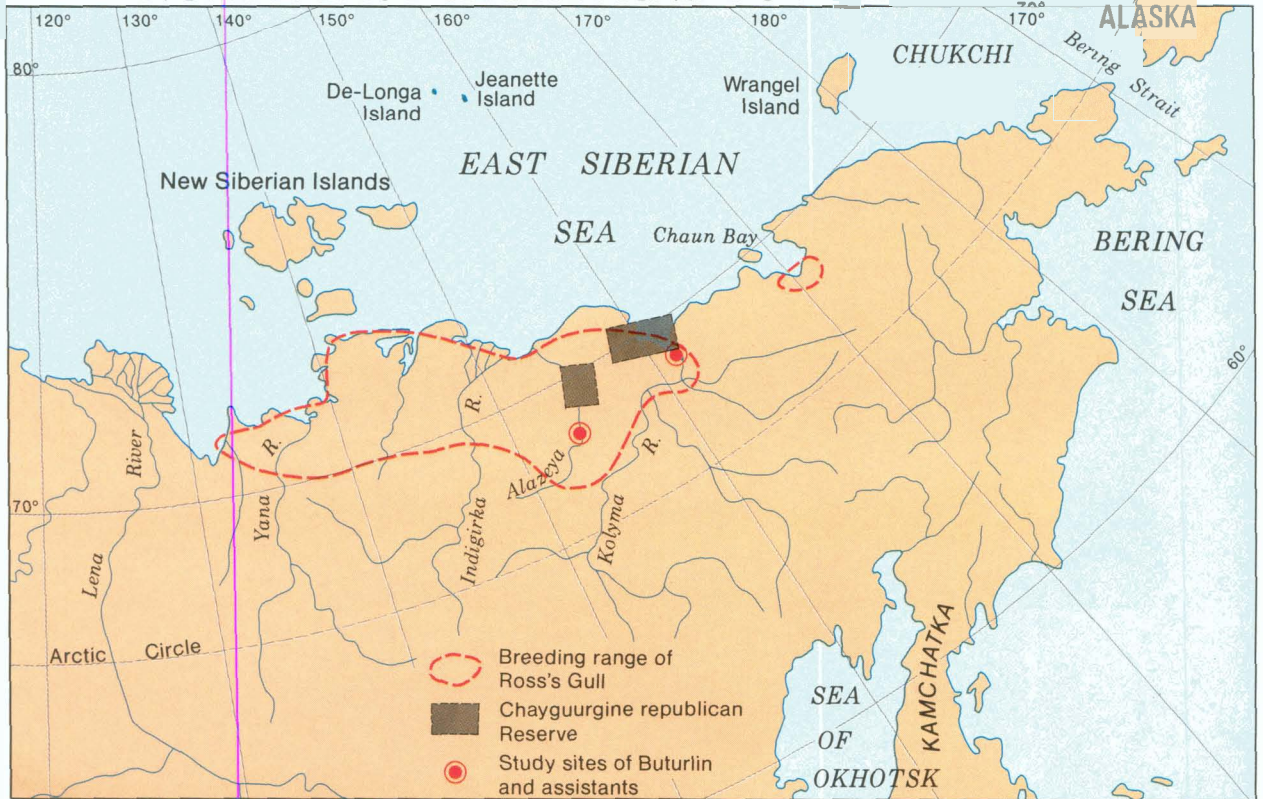
Above: Aerial view of the boggy Arctic tundra, inhospitable lands where polar explorers discovered Ross's Gull.

*Opposite: More than a century after its discovery, Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* remains a little-known inhabitant of the Arctic tundra.*

UNIQUE in its exquisite beauty and with an aura of myth and legend, Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* was the source of inspiration to several generations of staunch polar explorers. Even today, it is difficult to think of another species that evokes so many romantic dreams and such yearning in ornithologists and travellers as does this nomad of the sparkling northern ice fields.

The discovery of Ross's Gull was very much connected with the heroic period of polar exploration. Its description is associated with a brave traveller, scientist and sailor, in whose honour the gull was named — Sir James Clark Ross. James Ross became a polar researcher thanks to his uncle, Sir John Ross, who introduced his 18 year-old nephew to the Arctic when he took him on an expedition looking for the North-West Passage, which then was supposed to be an alternative route to China. During his first expedition, James was responsible for collecting zoological specimens, studying the marine life and obtaining ethnographical material. Besides this, he was in charge of providing the expedition with fresh meat — i.e. hunting. During further expeditions, James not only conducted zoological, botanical, geological and

NORTH-EAST SIBERIA AND SOVIET FAR EAST



anthropological observations but also had service duties — first as midshipman, then as second lieutenant, later as a post captain, commander, and eventually as a rear-admiral. In addition to taking part in epic expeditions in search of the North-West Passage, as a naturalist Ross carried out magnetic surveys, and was the first man to locate the North Magnetic Pole. The greatest fame he achieved was in the field of magnetic studies, and for these scientific achievements he was awarded the Founders Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of Paris and an Honorary Degree by Oxford University.

It was during his third Polar expedition that this courageous man and famous scientist first encountered the gull that was to bear his name. This expedition was led by William Edward Parry and once again the main aim was to search for the North-West Passage. The expedition spent two winters in the Arctic, and during the second winter at Igloolik — a small island not far from Melville Peninsula — James Ross shot a gull unknown to science. Captain Parry noted in his journal: “On June 23rd Mr Ross procured a specimen of gull having a black ring round its neck and which, in its present plumage, we could not find described. The bird was alone when killed, but flying at no great distance from a flock of tern, which latter it somewhat resembles in size as well as its red

legs; but is on closer inspection easily distinguished by its beak and tail, as well as by a beautiful tint of most delicate rose-colour on its breast”. Within a month the ice let the imprisoned ships go and the expedition returned home.

Legend of bringing good luck

This story, which perhaps was badly translated or transformed by being constantly retold, still enjoys wide popularity, though in a distorted variant in North Siberian settlements. It goes on as follows: “Captain Ross's expedition vessel was trapped in the ice and he was forced to spend two winters in the Arctic. It was only when a Rosy Gull flew over his head that the ice broke up and set the ship free”. This fascinating legend about the gull's bringing good luck to polar researchers is often cited by inhabitants of polar regions when they chance upon these gulls.

Dr John Richardson was in charge of identifying the ornithological collection brought back by Sir James, and he intended to name the new species *Larus Rossii* — Ross's Gull, in honour of the discoverer. However, the gull was first mentioned in print by William MacGillivray who was then a zoological assistant at the Edinburgh University Museum, so in keeping with the Code of Zoological Nomenclature the gull retained the binomial name *Rhodostethia*

rosea MacGillivray 1824. The bird acquired its English name — Ross's Gull — after publication of Richardson's report as an appendix to Parry's work.

For more than 50 years thereafter, Ross's Gull, described from just two specimens, remained a mystery. Only its discoverer, Sir James Clark Ross, recorded two pairs during his and Parry's attempt to reach the North Pole in 1827. Other 19th-century records are easily enumerated: polar explorers recorded only single birds, nobody saw a flock, to say nothing of a nest. Thus the impatience of scientists and researchers thirsty for knowledge of Ross's Gull is easily understood.

Fulfilling the legend?

In this situation the heroism of Raymond Lee Newcombe seems even more impressive. Newcombe was a naturalist on the ship *Jeannette* in which the expedition of Lieutenant George De Long tried to reach the North Pole. In 1879, *Jeannette* was ice-bound and for two years drifted with the ice fields northwards from Gerald Island in the vicinity of which Newcombe and members of the crew shot five Ross's Gulls. In 1881, when *Jeannette* sank west of the New Siberian Islands, Raymond Newcombe acted as an exemplary scientist — he lost everything on the ship, but managed to save his life and ... three skins of this graceful gull under his shirt!

The crew of the *Jeannette* were obliged to head south on foot, pulling a small boat. Fourteen, including the captain, perished, while 21, Newcombe among them, survived. Thanks to the brave naturalist, the scientific world acquired three specimens of Ross's Gull and Newcombe's field journal. Either Ross's Gull served as a lucky charm or his physical fitness helped him to survive — no one can tell! The event is however, inscribed in the annals of history and only added to the atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery surrounding Ross's Gull.

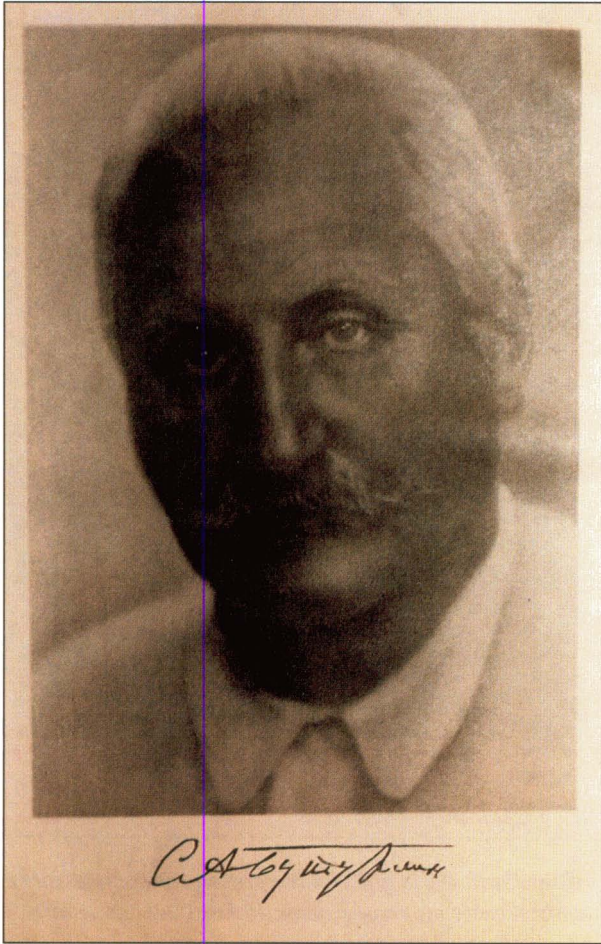
The next explorer to visit the northern polar deserts was the famous biologist and traveller Fridtjof Nansen, who led a very well-equipped expedition in an attempt to reach the North Pole. His ship *Fram* was specially designed for sailing in the ice. In 1893, the ship became ice-bound near the New Siberian Islands and, as she drifted north, Nansen and his companions managed to shoot several young Ross's Gulls. On 3rd August, Nansen wrote in his journal: "Today my longing has at last been satisfied, I have shot a Ross's Gull. This rare and mysterious inhabitant of the unknown north, which is only occasionally seen, and of which no one knows whence it came or whither it goeth, which belongs exclusively to the world to which the imagination aspires, is that I have



Above: A pair of gulls arrive at their nesting site, much of which is still snow-covered.

Below: Particularly graceful in appearance and with an unmbtakeable plumage pattern, Ross's Gull has aroused great interest among ornithologists.





High Court Judge Sergei Alexandrovich Buturlin played a key role in studying Ross's Gull, and early this century discovered the first nests.

always longed to discover”.

Nansen's attempt to reach the North Pole failed, but he managed to get to Spitzbergen on foot and from there was able to return safely to Norway.

In contrast, a Swedish attempt, led by A. Andree, to reach the North Pole by hydrogen-filled balloon ended in tragedy. Trouble with the balloon meant that the crew had to return across the ice. The journals of these courageous men, found by their frozen bodies on an island east of Spitzbergen 33 years later, recorded several sightings of Ross's Gull during the ill-fated return journey.

Attention shifts to north-eastern Siberia

Thus, by the turn of the century, several encounters with Ross's Gull had been recorded in the Arctic Ocean, and yet scientists had no data on the species' biology. During this period, man explored the north-

ern territories of both the American and Asian continents. Whalers, trappers and adventurers settled in the deltas of great rivers, founded new ports, investigated geological resources, developed industries and trade. Unpopulated territories attracted many expeditions and thanks to their efforts some new information on the migration of Ross's Gull was obtained. At this time, the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences received the results of studies of the North-West Passage and north-eastern Siberia carried out by Maidel, Middendorff, Nordenskiold and De Toll. Nansen's records of juveniles and the observations by the afore-mentioned scientists suggested that Ross's Gull nested in north-eastern Siberia.

A growing revolutionary-democratic movement in Russia led to government prosecution of extremists, and a fair number of people were exiled to remote Siberian settlements. Consequently, there was no shortage of police officials in north-eastern Siberia, their duties being to keep both political exiles and natives in order.

Also it was necessary to provide a large staff of employees with guns, rifles, powder and the like. Until 1903, all supplies were transported by railway from the European part of Russia to Vladivostok. From there, goods were shipped to the town of Okhotsk — an old fortress-township on the northern coast of the Sea of Okhotsk — and then conveyed farther by horses, using a very narrow path through the taiga to the Kolyma River where they were shipped downstream by small barges. However, the situation had changed by the end of 1903 — the Japanese fleet dominated at sea and had blockaded the port of Vladivostok. Therefore a decision was made to purchase all necessary commodities from the USA, and then ship them to Okhotsk through the northern Pacific. The transaction was carried out, though hardly had the ship *Mineola*, carrying the goods from San Francisco, left the port when she foundered and sank.

The Siberian local authorities, cruelly robbed of necessary provisions, sent a despatch to St Petersburg describing the horrible starvation of local people. Having received the information on 'starvation', the Ministry of Home Affairs had to react immediately. Since it had no other vessels in the Northern Pacific and had spent the available money in 1904, the Government commissioned Sergei Alexandrovich Buturlin, the High Court Judge, in January 1905, to the Kolyma region to organize the state supplies by horses from Yakutsk to make up for the lost cargoes and "to take measures to mitigate food shortages if such existed and, if possible, to investigate the reasons for recurrent 'starvation' and to study the area's food resources".

As you can see, the expedition's targets were far from being zoological and the heroic discoverer of the breeding grounds of Ross's Gull — High Court Judge Sergei Alexandrovich Buturlin — had no zoological training; he was a lawyer, born on the 22nd November 1872 in the town of Montreaux; Switzerland, and his father, Alexei Sergeevich Buturlin (1845-1916) was a physician by profession. Sergei graduated with a Diploma in Law from St. Petersburg School of Law in 1895, and settled in the small town of Wesenberg, Estonia. He had never received any ornithological education, but was an ornithologist by vocation. No other Russian ornithologist has left such a legacy of articles, papers, communications and "letters to the editor". For instance, 40 per cent of the specialized journal *Messenger ornithologique (Ornithologicheskiiy vestnik)* (Moscow 1910-1927) consists of his papers and comments.

The right person in the right place

Sergei Buturlin valued a quiet solitary life in the countryside, being interested in ornithological observations and hunting. His preferences lay far from St. Petersburg — he preferred either Wesenberg, or

Moscow which at that time was not overcrowded. He visited ornithological collections in the Imperial Zoological Museum of the State Academy of Sciences only once. He made a tour of the museum, checked the identification of skins in the Ornithological Department, found several mistakes and with a snort of disdain, left for Wesenberg, never to return. Nevertheless, his disregard for the Zoological Museum did not keep him from sending reprints, reports and notes there. He was known and highly esteemed in St. Petersburg.

In 1918, immediately after the revolution, Germany was still in a state of war with Russia. When German troops occupied Estonia, Buturlin fled to Moscow where he owned a house, and obtained a post as assistant at the Zoological Museum belonging to the University of Moscow. All manuscripts and ornithological collections left in Wesenberg perished in the fire during the German attack.

In the Zoological Museum in Moscow, Buturlin worked as an ornithologist, adding to and supervising the collections, and writing the multi-volume handbook *Birds of the USSR* — a complete identi

Ever watchful, an adult gull stands guard near its nest.

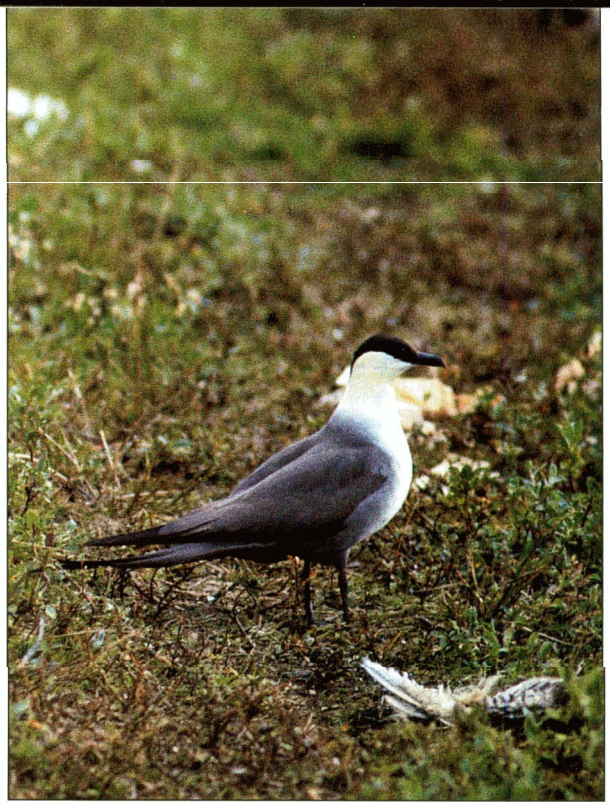


fication guide to the birds of the Soviet Union. It was an undertaking without precedent in Russia and he continued to work on it until his death on 22nd January 1938. The last volume appeared with the obituary and his portrait on the front page.

It now seems clear that the decision by the Ministry of Home Affairs to send Buturlin to the Kolyma region was a key element in obtaining information about the mysterious gull that polar explorers so longed to see.

Thus on 20th January 1905, an official of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the High Court Judge and Privy Councillor Sergei Alexandrovich Buturlin, who was also a Reserve Cavalry Officer and a Corresponding Member of the Imperial Geographical Society, left St. Petersburg for Yakutsk with two assistants. Having set off, Buturlin informed the Imperial Academy of Sciences of his expedition, and requested equipment necessary for preparing the collections be urgently sent to him by post(!)

I put the exclamation mark after the word 'post' because for me, working in still remote Siberia near the end of the 20th century, it seems absolutely unbelievable. Even now, there are neither roads nor railways from Yakutsk to the Lower Kolyma region. There were no planes or helicopters in Siberia at that



Above: A skua on the lookout for unattended eggs or chicks; these predators can cause significant losses in gull colonies.

Adult gull brooding eggs in a nest in a small depression.





*A pair of Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* at their nest near the only nest of Ross's Gull found by the author.*

time and the post travelled either by horses or dog teams in winter, or by river in summer. Yet, in one way or another, the necessary equipment reached Buturlin in the Kolyma area at the beginning of the summer.

Nesting sites found

The starting point for Buturlin's ornithological excursions on the Lower Kolyma was a small settlement called Pokhodsk. This settlement has a long and amazing history, having been founded by orthodox Old-Believers who fled there in the period before the reign of Peter the Great. During the summer of 1905, Buturlin managed to find three breeding colonies of Ross's Gulls — one near Pokhodsk, and two near a small rivulet called 'Chayachya Viska' (Gull's rivulet). It should be noted that at present there are colonies in this area, and generally speaking, it is not every year that the gulls nest in the immediate vicinity of the Kolyma River. This means that either Buturlin had an enormous stroke of luck, or that there have been changes in the breeding range of the species since that time.

While staying in Pokhodsk, and as soon as he had found the nesting colonies of Ross's Gull, the scientist wrote two papers for *Ibis*, the prestigious journal of the British Ornithologists Union. In January 1906, Buturlin returned to St. Petersburg and found both papers published. The one year journey to the Lower Kolyma cost Buturlin, as he wrote laconically, "...two



Incubation is shared, and here one parent gull comes to relieve its sitting mate.

frost-bitten toes, and cured my bronchitis".

Thus, among his many other duties, Buturlin made one of the great ornithological discoveries of this century: he determined the dates of spring and autumn migrations of Ross's Gull, found and described the nest and eggs, and described and analysed its habitats. On the basis of these habitat analyses, and having only poor maps plus an assistant's report on finding a colony on the Alazeya River, Buturlin made a quite remarkable extrapolation. Despite the apparent lack of data, he delineated the breeding range of Ross's Gull as "...all lowlands of the northern half of Kolyma district bordered by the River Chaun, and the Arctic Ocean and the Stansovoi Mountain Range ... The Tas-Khayakh-Tag Mountains, a wild and craggy watershed between the Yana and Indigirka Basins must form the western limit of the breeding grounds...". This range description differs only insignificantly from that based on the most recent data.

Status and preferred nesting habitat

Soviet ornithologists have contributed much to our present knowledge of the distribution and ecology of Ross's Gull. As presently known, the range extends across the marshy plains of the Kolyma-Indigirka depression and along the lower Yana River. Most nesting colonies are situated in the typical tundra, where is found the preferred nesting habitat. In the Arctic tundra, breeding success depends to a consid-

erable extent on prevailing conditions, and nesting does not take place every year in the northern taiga. Outside the normal range, there are reports of nesting on the Taimyr Peninsula, western and north-eastern Greenland, Queen Elizabeth Islands in Arctic Canada, and near Churchill in Manitoba province, Canada. Although the nesting density is not very high, it has been known since the time of Buturlin that Ross's Gull is one of the commonest gulls of the tundra.

On the breeding grounds and in the wintering areas, Ross's Gull seems affected by only natural pressures, so the question arises as to why the species is included in the *Red Data Book of the USSR*. The inclusion has been attributed to its winter ecology being practically unknown, so there is no evidence that the low reproduction rate is balanced by a high degree of adaptation to the conditions of the polar seas.

Staying on ice rather than land

Ross's Gulls return to the tundra late in May or in early June. During the first few days, they tend to be concentrated on ice-covered lakes, near puddles on the river ice, and in tundra pools. It is interesting to note that the birds definitely prefer to stay on the ice rather than on land. At this time of the year, the ice

starts crumbling and breaks up into a myriad of glittering needles. Bathed in dazzling light from the sun's rays reflected by thousands of ice prisms, the rosy gull becomes even more enchantingly beautiful and watching it is a sheer delight.

During this period, the gulls feed on suffocated small fish and invertebrates which they take from thawed puddles and along lakeshores. The river ice begins to break up, and more gulls concentrate on rivers in the narrow meanders where ice-jams form. In such places, I observed large numbers of Ross's Gulls catching suffocated sticklebacks washed out from under the ice.

At the end of May and up to the middle of June, males can be identified by the bright and deep rosy colour on the breast, though it should be noted that most variation in the intensity of rosy colour occurs in spring. By mid July, all birds are pale pink in colour, and eventually turn almost white. I suspect that the bright pink colour is due to their feeding on Arctic shrimps during winter and early spring. When the gulls move to freshwater habitats they lose their colour, and I would point out also that skins in collections usually fade within a few years.

It is a great pity that reversal film for slides does not pick up the exceptionally delicate rosy colour. The only satisfactory results I obtained were with low exposures, less than 1/30 second, on Czech Foma-chrome due to its low contrast, but at such a shutter speed it is impossible to get sharp shots. All other films that I have used show the bird's underparts as white.

Displays and nesting behaviour

The display of Ross's Gull is quite unusual, although similar to that of the Little Gull *Larus minutus*. A bird draws in its neck, then quickly moves the tail and



Ross's Gull nestlings rely on their cryptic plumage colouration to escape detection.

rear part of the body up to an almost vertical position, and bends the neck backwards, with its beak up, while producing shrill trilling sounds. Displaying is more prevalent while birds are still out on the ice, but sometimes can be seen during the first stage of incubation.

The basic habitat requirement for nesting is a large lake with protruding peninsulas and islands, and as soon as open-water channels appear along the edge of the lake, the gulls move there. Nests tend to be on islands or peninsulas which do not have a shallow water zone, and are formed not by floating turf but by the raised borders of ponds which have permafrost ice under the soil. Along the shoreline around the colony grows *Arctophila* grass, but on islands and peninsulas the varied plant cover includes shrub willow, dock, sedge, kingcup and sphagnum-moss. In general, the nesting habitat resembles that of the Siberian White Crane *Grus leucogeranus*, except for the absence of the shallow water zone and the predominance of sphagnum-moss.

Colonies may vary in size from two or three nests up to 27 or even 50 nests, though the average number of nests in a colony is about 13. Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* are regular and constant neighbours of nesting Ross's Gulls. Even near the only nest of a Ross's Gull that I found there was a nest of the Arctic Tern. A neighbour with prominent defence behav-

iour, which includes dive-bombing and brave attacks, apparently plays an important role in defending the gull colony from predators.

Other nesting neighbours may include the Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes *Phalaropus fulicarius* and *P. lobatus*, Glaucous and Herring Gulls *Larus hyperboreus* and *L. argentatus*, Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*, Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*, King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*, and Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus*.

The nest of Ross's Gull is a small hollow in the sphagnum-moss lined with sedges. The olive-green eggs are more rounded than those of the Arctic Tern, and the one to three eggs are laid in mid June. Eggs are laid over one to four days, though within a colony the laying period extends over seven to ten days. Incubation takes 20 to 22 days, or sometimes up to 28 days, and is shared by both parents. During incubation, the gulls often have to repulse attacks by skuas, or Glaucous and Herring Gulls. Arctic Jaegers *Stercorarius parasiticus* cause the greatest losses, especially during years when there are no lemmings and

When away from the nest, and near the water's edge, this chick keeps to denser vegetation where it remains well hidden.





The open Arctic Ocean is where Ross's Gull spends much of its life, so it is dependent on clean seas free from pollution.

the skuas congregate in large nomadic flocks to prey on birds. Nesting colonies of Ross's Gulls located in the Arctic tundra subzone are most prone to attacks from marauding skuas, but arctic foxes also cause significant losses.

Chicks need favourable conditions

The first chicks appear in late June or early July, when conditions on the tundra are most favourable. It is very warm, there are no strong winds, and it is the time of peak availability of mosquito larvae, an important food source for the chicks.

After hatching, chicks stay in a territory extending some 10 to 15 metres out from the nest, and are guarded by their parents. They spend their first days in the nest, eating food brought by their parents, but by the third day they can feed themselves, and this is strikingly different from the behaviour of other gull and tern chicks. Recorded food include molluscs, beetles, sticklebacks, insects of the families Tipulidae and Chironomidae, and green parts of plants. The most important item in the chick's diet is a small mollusc called *Siberinauta*, which has a shell length of 9mm and a weight of 0.1 g. As the chicks grow, availability of these molluscs decreases by almost three times, thus forcing gull families to move from a colony to another part of the lake. Chick survival is

closely linked with food supplies in the nesting habitat. A reduction in the food supply means weaker chicks and the need to move from the colony to less well-defended parts of the lake, where consequently the young are more at risk from predators.

Growth to fledging takes 16 to 17 days. A chick in yellow-brown and dark-spotted downy plumage develops into a young bird which bears little resemblance to the adult. It has no rosy colour, being predominantly dark in plumage, with a black cap, white tail with a black band, and a wing pattern that comprises a prominent dark blackish-brown diagonal bar contrasting with the otherwise largely white upper surface. The legs are dark, instead of bright red as in the adult.

Factors affecting reproduction success

Numerically, the reproductive success of Ross's Gull is very low, and losses reach 80 to 85 per cent. Losses of eggs to predators is 28 per cent, as deserted clutches 7 per cent, and 2 per cent are lost during incubation. Highest losses are of chicks, and these reach 39 per cent, caused mainly by predators. As already noted, the most dangerous predators are large gulls, skuas, and arctic foxes. Also, I have found feathers of Ross's Gull in pellets regurgitated by Rough-legged Buzzards *Buteo lagopus* and Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus*, and often I could observe Gyrfalcons *F. rusticolus* and Goshawks *Accipiter gentilis* near colonies. All predators have more success if there is a prolonged period of hatch-

ing within the colony, presumably because then the reaction to a predator is less collective. When egg-laying is synchronous, the gulls react to predators collectively, and therefore more effectively.

In late July or early August, fledged young leave the lake, together with their parents, and fly northwards. Non-breeding adults or birds which have lost clutches or chicks leave earlier, and move from one tundra lake to another until the end of July.

Ross's Gulls spend only 60 days or 16.7 per cent of the year on their breeding grounds, and this may explain why there is such a small number of reports from the breeding range compared with those from elsewhere. From the first days of August, birds may be encountered in open parts of the otherwise ice-covered Arctic Ocean, but nothing is known about the gulls' winter life. The majority of reports relate to migratory movements in August-September. At other times, birds have been seen near the Alaskan coast and in the northern Okhotsk Sea, and there have been several winter and spring reports from the British Isles.

Aerial observations undertaken in spring suggest that Ross's Gull winters in the Bering Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk. Buturlin's hypothesis that the species spends the winter north of its nesting places cannot be valid, but to date no ornithologist has seen any really big concentrations of gulls in winter. All observations in the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans and in the Arctic Ocean were made in summer, in autumn, or in spring. The gulls under obser-

vation kept close to the edge of the pack ice and fed on small crustaceans, which they caught while swimming and immersing the head like a phalarope or by snatching from the water's surface while flying.

A precious symbol of the Arctic

When migrating from one ice fracture to another, Ross's Gull may appear in remote areas outside its normal range, for example in Britain. It may stay there several days to the delight of birdwatchers. Next time it may turn up in Greenland, and then disappear again to pass by an ice-breaker leading a merchant convoy through the Arctic Ocean. It may rest in open seas between Gerald and Wrangel Islands, and subsequently perhaps join a flock of such nomads in the Sea of Okhotsk.

Reserves cannot be set aside to protect this species at all stages of its life-cycle, but there are sanctuaries in the nesting areas. Two sections of "Chayguurgino" republican reserve on the Alazeya and Lower Kolyma Rivers were established for the protection of birds, including Ross's Gull. Industrial activities on this reserve are prohibited, and agricultural activities are restricted to hunting in winter and herding reindeer in summer. Local people do not hunt Ross's Gull as it is of no practical value to them.

A major part of its life the gull spends in open parts of the otherwise ice-covered Arctic Ocean. That is why it is vulnerable to factors affecting adversely the general ecological condition of the sea, and most of all to pollution. It is distressing to visualize the delicate rosy plumage of Ross's Gull stained with black oil! This lovely bird is our common heritage and a precious symbol of the purity of the Arctic. ■

A lovely bird and part of our common heritage, Ross's Gull symbolizes the unspoilt Arctic wilderness.



INTRODUCING THE AUTHORS

In his father's footsteps

EUGENE POTAPOV (*Birds and Brave Men in the Arctic North*, pp. 72-83) is the son of well-known Soviet ornithologist specialising in gamebirds, R.L. Potapov, and he graduated from Leningrad State University with degrees in zoology and ornithology. While at university, he studied Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia*, and later commenced an investigation of tundra birds.

After graduating, Eugene moved to the town of Magadan, in north-eastern Siberia, to take up a position with the Institute of Biological Problems of the North. As a research fellow at the Institute, he studied tundra birds of prey, namely Snowy and Short-eared Owls *Nyctea scandiaca* and *Asio flammeus*, the Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, and Gyrfalcon *F. rusticolus*, and became interested in endangered birds such as Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* and the Siberian White Crane *Grus leucogeranus*. He has spent a total of seven summer seasons on the tundra, and is the author of more than ten articles published in Soviet scientific journals.

At present, he is staying at Linacre College, Oxford University, and is the first Soviet ornithologist to prepare a doctoral thesis at the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. A colleague at the Institute, Michael Wilson, helped Eugene with preparation of his article on Ross's Gull.



Writer and ardent birdwatcher



ELAINE GRANDJEAN (*Mollymawks, Stinkers and Whalebirds*, pp 84-89) spent her childhood on the picturesque coast of Massachusetts, in the north-eastern United States, where the lure of woodlands, fields and beaches was more enticing than playing with dolls. It was an ideal environment for a love of wild places to be nurtured, and this she has always retained.

After graduating in environmental studies from Cornell University, she taught conservation, ecology and animal behaviour courses with the New York zoological Society. She now works as an editor and writer in the field of environmental health for an international organization in Copenhagen, Denmark. She has written articles on ecology and conservation for magazines and newspapers in several countries.

An ardent birdwatcher, Elaine met her future Danish husband on a Linnaean Society trip to Hudson Bay, in Canada, to watch Ross's Gulls *Rhodogethia rosea* and whales.