

Living OUTSIDE

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BIRDERS LOOK FOR BLACK-TAILED GULL

By Joshua Brown
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Last Friday, Jackie and Malcolm Harter got into their car in Pittsburgh at 7 in the evening and drove all night until they reached the town beach in Charlotte.

Dotty Robbins flew in from High Springs, Fla. Steve Matthews cashed in his frequent-flier miles to make the trip from Houston.

They all had traveled a long way — but not as far as the bird they had come to see: a black-tailed gull, usually found on the coasts of Japan and China.

Saturday dawned clear. The Harters were already on the beach, waiting with their spotting scope. By

11:30 that morning, a small crowd stood behind tripods, panning high-powered lenses across the water. Dotty Robbins peered through Zeiss binoculars. Steve Matthews tossed Smartfood into the air as bait. It was the kind of crisp day that makes the Adirondacks seem close and paints the edge of wings in gold. Great for birding.

They had only one problem: no black-tailed gull.

"That's a 10-

hour drive," Jackie Harter said, "and the bird's not here."

"I'm not giving up hope," her husband said.

This gull was sighted on the beach in mid-October by local birder Julie

Hart of Chester. It was the first time the species had ever been seen in Vermont and one of only a few sightings in North America. Whether carried by storm or ship or

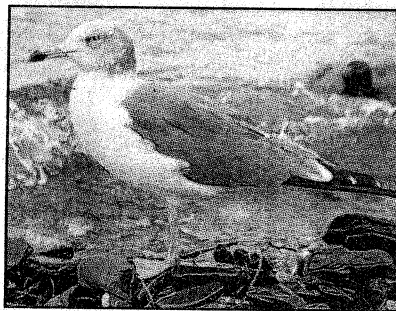
strange hope nobody could say, but news of the errant bird soon was circulating by e-mail on state and rare bird lists. The Associated Press, then CNN and National Public Radio picked up the story.

"We saw it on the birdingonthenet.com Web site," Jackie Harter said.

For 24 glorious days, birders trekked to the stony beach in Charlotte to pay homage to this red-beaked Asian visitor. Matt Medler, one of Julie Hart's friends who helped her identify the gull, kept tabs on the daily doings of the bird — and on the people who came to see it.

"Someone drove from Virginia.

See GULL, 3B



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GULL: Beguiled birders flock to state

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Someone from Cincinnati," he said. "They came from Tennessee, Delaware, all of New England, Pennsylvania, most of the Canadian provinces, too: New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec. Some guys even came from British Columbia."

During most daylight hours, people could be seen standing on the edge of Lake Road just above the beach, ignoring the covered bridge nearby. All fingers and cameras pointed toward this one gull. Sometimes it was hard to see amidst a swirl of similar-looking local ring-billed gulls. Sometimes it flew alone or fed on crayfish on the shore. It seemed to like popcorn. "On the weekends, you could see 30 or 50 people at time," Medler said.

The Harters read that the gull was still there Nov. 10, so they decided to use their Veterans Day holiday to come to Charlotte.

"We're trying to get more birds on our life list," Jackie Harter said, whose tally of bird species is 310. She started birding three years ago. "I don't know how to explain it," she said, searching for the right words. "It's an addiction, and it's fun."

"It's like coin collecting," Steve Matthews said, "except I'm not into materialist things." His life list runs more than 3,400, about a third of the known bird species on the planet.

"I was in Korea recently looking for birds, and I saw the black-tailed gull," he said. "I've got it on my list, but not

for the U.S." Matthews had traveled to every continent except Australia in search of birds, but never to Vermont. So he took a chance.

"Of course it's disappointing when you don't see the bird you came for," said Dotty Robbins, whose life list stands more than 3,200. "My hope was that we'd see it early and then be free," she said, sitting down with a laugh. "Now I'm chained to this bench for the weekend."

"As a birder," she said, "I wonder what other people do when they travel."

"Even if it doesn't show, I can take home some Vermont maple syrup," Matthews said. "Look at this beautiful place."

Three days of searching didn't turn up the black-tailed gull, and it hasn't been spotted since.