



Bald Eagle

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## Winter Bird Notes

### *Larus marinus* (Great Black-backed Gull)

**ORDER:** Charadriiformes (19 Family)

**FAMILY:** Laridae (103 Species)

The spring-like warmth was welcoming this week. One day in particular, while I was birdwatching at Lakeshore State Park, I noticed the ice cover was retreating and waterfowl were closer to the shore. Ducks were flying low over the water in groups, gulls were swirling at the river mouth, and geese were calling and flying in “V” formation. The male red-breasted mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) were perfecting their salute and curtsy courtship display. Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) were finding rest on loose floating ice chunks. Greater scaups (*Aythya marila*) and common goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*) were diving to the lake floor and returning to the surface with mollusks to consume. So much activity under dark gray clouds threatening a winter storm. There were only a few moments of brief glimpses, of what I call, February blue sky between the clouds. The westerly wind was brisk which caused some ducks to loosely flock in more protected locations. As I walked south around the island, there was a female hooded merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) mixed with goldeneyes, scaups, and mallards in a patch of open water near the fishing pier. As I continued south, ice fishermen were bravely camped under colorful tents on thinning ice. When I neared the southernmost point of the island, I spotted a great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) flying alongside other herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*). The coal-black upper wing of this larger gull is so distinctive and thrilling to see against the white and gray background of the landscape in winter!! I will normally see this gull perched along the breakwater wall at Lake Express Car Ferry. However, what a treat to see this bird flying during my walk!

I experienced another amazing sight in front of the Milwaukee Art Museum as I was about to start walking away from the lakefront. I decided to look out in the region of the breakwater wall one more time. And to my surprise, I saw not one but **two** adult bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) perched next to one another on the ice right at the water’s edge. They lingered together for quite some time. What a sight!! Were they taking a reprieve from nesting, or courting, or resting alongside a family member? At any rate, what a terrific experience to witness! If you are interested,

there are many live bird cams available on YouTube and currently, bald eagles, great horned owls, and hummingbird nests are streaming. Be sure to check some of these out and enjoy!



*Great Black-backed Gull*

Now, back to the gulls. There are a few characteristics of the great black-backed gull and they are:

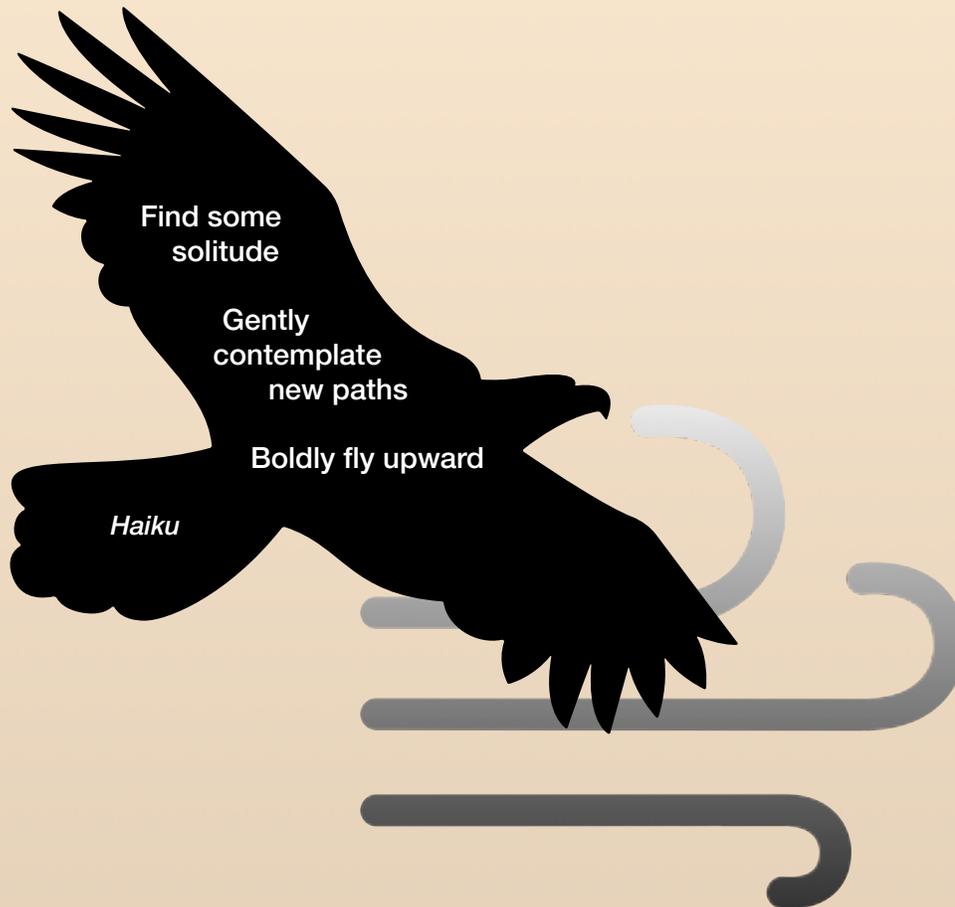
- **hulkingly huge**
- **brutal bullies**
- **Attracted to their predators**

This massive gull is distinctive in appearance by the thick, heavy bill, bulging chest, coal-black upper wings and white head. The color scheme of the black top of the wings and white bottom is also called countershading and acts as camouflage during attacks on prey. In flight, the front part of the body looks wedge-shaped from the thick chest to the long heavy bill. The tip of the bill is swollen and has a red spot which is the same color as the eye ring on close inspection. The long legs are a dull pink and the three toes are webbed for walking on land and swimming.

One anatomical feature not visible is the salt gland located above the eye. This gland can remove all the salt ingested and retain pure water. One experiment demonstrated that the salt gland is capable of eliminating salt equal to one-tenth of the gull's body weight and doing this 10 times more efficiently than the kidney. This is equivalent to a person weighing around 150 lb. consuming 2 gallons of seawater, which would be fatal. The salt gland is an important adaptation since this gull breeds in Greenland and along the Atlantic coast.

The great black-backed gull is a consummate kleptoparasite. They will steal food from ducks, gulls, cormorants, auks, puffins, etc. This gull can capture and consume chicks, nesting birds, shorebirds, passerines, coots, woodpeckers and even swallow a boat-tailed grackle all at once. In fact, "gull" means to swallow. People who believe untrue or incredible things are gullible - they will swallow almost everything whole just like a gull! Another predatory technique the great black-backed gull employs, which may be difficult for some readers, is the drowning of their prey. What a bird bully!

Do you know the phrase “keep your friends close, but, keep your enemies closer”? Well, this gull is more attracted to predators, like foxes, when a dead gull is present. Researches have hypothesized that the attraction is a method of learning about the predator and how it successfully catches prey. Since foxes may leave extra food or “surplus killing” this is an added benefit to lingering around their predator. Additionally, the gulls observe and learn how to attack other gulls or prey.



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