

RING-BILLED GULL CAPTURES BARN SWALLOW IN FLIGHT

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Throughout its range in North America, the omnivorous Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) feeds mainly on fishes, insects, earthworms, rodents, and grain (Ryder 1993). It forages in flight or may pick up food items while swimming, walking, or wading. It also scavenges for food and frequently pirates food, much like a jaeger, from a variety of species including its own species (Clapp et al. 1983, Elston and Southern 1983). Ring-billed Gull is also opportunistic and may shift feeding activities temporarily to take advantage of local fluctuations in food (Kirkham and Morris 1979).

On 25 June 2009, while surveying birds in Salmon Arm Bay from the end of the municipal wharf at the south end of Shuswap Lake, British Columbia (Figure 1) my wife Barbara and I were watching numerous Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) foraging between the end of the wharf and the breakwater. Approximately 20 to 25 swallows were skimming the surface of the water, while many others were foraging higher. Suddenly an adult Ring-billed Gull flew up behind one Barn Swallow and snatched it in mid-air, partially swallowing it. This gull was immediately attacked by a couple of other Ring-billed Gulls, which tried unsuccessfully to force it to disgorge the swallow. The gull flew off with some of the swallow still hanging out of its mouth, and was not pursued by any of the other gulls. The Barn Swallows continued foraging as if nothing had happened. The whole episode was over in seconds and we would not have seen it happen if we had not been actively looking in the right place at the right time.

The Barn Swallow was likely from the small colony that breeds under the municipal wharf. I was unable to determine the age of the bird but newly fledged young from the first nesting would have



Figure 1. Municipal wharf at Salmon Arm, BC., that supports a small colony of nesting Barn Swallows. 30 May 2009 (R. Wayne Campbell).

been in the area. I do not know why a particular swallow was chosen as a meal as they all appeared to be foraging in the same manner.

Ring-billed Gull is a common bird in the region and hundreds breed nearby (Figure 2). Numbers regularly patrol the lakeshore for food items but this is the first time in 35 years I have witnessed a Ring-billed Gull taking prey, other than insects, directly from the air. I had previously assumed that the swift and agile flight of Barn Swallows protected them from marauding gulls. It also appears that this behaviour has not previously been reported for the species (Ryder 1993).

Brown and Brown (1999), in their comprehensive summary of Barn Swallow life history in North America, do not list gulls as predators of Barn Swallow. Wheelwright and Dorsey (1991), however, report that in a nesting colony of Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), also an opportunistic predator, adult Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) were

seized and eaten by perching gulls as they left or entered nest boxes.



Figure 2. Hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls breed on Christmas Island in Shuswap Lake, BC. and their omnivorous and opportunistic feeding habits in the region include a wide variety of foods, from cherries and earthworms to fishes and small chicks. 29 May 1995 (R. Wayne Campbell).

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About the Author

Ted is a keen birder in the Shuswap area. For the past several years he has maintained a daily log of all birds in the vicinity of Salmon Arm Bay. He is currently the regional co-ordinator for the BC Breeding Bird Atlas project for the Shuswap region.