

New Study Examines Wintering Gull Behavior

If you visit the Sanctuary in winter, you can't help but notice the immense flock of gulls that assembles on the marsh in the afternoon. We've often puzzled over the reasons we are graced with thousands of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls loafing on our doorstep. In terms of overall numbers, gulls dominate the waterbird community here. Our location is a way station in the daily commute that gulls make between their lunch spot at a landfill in Prince George's County and their bedroom community on the open waters of the Chesapeake Bay to our east. But exactly what are the gulls doing on Jug Bay? We rarely observed them foraging here.

Enter Bard College graduate student Lora Wondolowski. Lora spent six months, spotting scope and notebook in hand, meticulously observing the gulls from the Observation Deck as they whiled away the hours on the mudflats. The results of her study were published in her master's thesis in 2002 (*Diurnal Activity Patterns of Wintering Gulls at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, Maryland*). Lora determined that bathing, drinking and preening were the activities

that dominated the gulls time at Jug Bay. The mudflats and deeper water are strategically located along their route and provide useful habitat needed by gulls. There's plenty of space to spread out, commune with one another, keep an eye out for predators (Bald Eagles!) and re-hydrate after a tough day dodging bulldozers and each other at the dump. Garbage also leaves a dry taste in the mouth so the freshwater at Jug Bay must be refreshing. As dusk approaches they often arise en masse and depart to the east, calling

loudly as they go. Lora also discovered that the younger gull age classes linger longer into the spring than do the adults. Adults need to migrate earlier to fly north and west to their breeding grounds while the "kids" can hang out here longer as they have no such reproductive responsibilities yet. So next time you visit in the fall or winter, take some time to observe the gulls and gain new insights into the behavior of some very interesting animals!

