

MICHAEL CUTLIP

The Playground, 2012
Mixed Media on Panel, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHARLES HOOD

Last Meal

Our Obsession
with Rare Birds

There's a seagull most birders jones to see from the far northern ice pack: the Ivory Gull. It feeds by scavenging polar bear kills. Some years back, a stray Ivory Gull turned up in Orange County for one day only—the only California record, then or since.

How far north do these things usually stay? Nome, Alaska, normally would be thought of as too far south to expect to find the Ivory Gull—it lives way, way up there. Yet, birds wander, and this particular seagull wandered one January to Doheny State Beach, on land named for the Daniel Day-Lewis character in *There Will be Blood*. Some astute beachcomber noticed it, phone calls were made, other people saw it, the sun went down, everybody went home. By dawn it was gone, never seen again. Who was the last person to see this mega-rare, fond-of-icebergs seagull? Answer: a late-arriving fellow who went out at midnight with a flashlight, and who checked every roosting seagull on the beach, maybe 2,000 individual birds—Western Gulls, Heermann's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls.

But he got it. He got the Ivory Gull. He ticked it off his list. Question is, was he a savant or a murderer, our flashlight man? Should he brag about it, or never, ever bring it up? The bird in question (according to the records) “appeared ill when found midmorning.” It was harassed all day, then finally, relief: it was dark, the birders went home. What next? Then this final guy showed up, started it all over again. The bird could have flown off to Hawaii—there's no way to know—or, more likely, it passed away in the night, killed by one stress too many. If so, coyotes cleaned up the evidence. All we know is, when the sun rose, the bird was gone.

Birding has a code of ethics, along the lines of “first, do no harm;” but in reality, to chase birds seriously means buying \$2000 binoculars and \$5000 cameras, using up absurd amounts of gasoline, and once at a rare bird site, tromping over meadow and berm like a drunken orc. This is not benign, as hobbies go, no matter how much one donates to Greenpeace afterwards.

A normal person thinks, okay, there are like fifty kinds or whatever: pigeon, hummingbird, duck hawk, mockingjay. See them and be done. Ah, but no. According to the record keepers, the California list glows with an incandescent 657 species. Even the Texas list looks paltry in comparison. Numbers accrete because vagrants arrive