

23-91-34

A

Species: Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) (1st winter plumage)

Date: December 14, 1991

Observer: Joey M. Kellner

Time: 2:30pm - 4:30pm MST

Location: Chatfield Reservoir State Park (on sand spit near marina and flying around lake)

Nearest Town: Littleton, Colorado

County: Jefferson County / Douglas County

Other Observers Who Independently Identified This Bird:

Jack Reddall; 4450 South Alton; Englewood, Colorado 80111
Glenn Hageman; 448 South Leyden St.; Denver, Colorado 80224

Optical Equipment: Kowa TSN-4 77mm spotting scope (20-60X zoom) and Zeiss 10x40 binoculars

Weather Conditions: Clear, sunny, wind West 19-25mph

Bird/Sun Orientation: Sun was in back and to the left of observers

Distance From Bird and How Measured: 30 - 500+ yards (estimated)

Discovery:

This gull was first observed at 2:30pm, standing on the sandy "hook" Northeast of the Chatfield marina, in a flock of about 8 adult herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*). After about 10 minutes of study, we started to walk out on the sand hook for a closer look. We again stopped and studied the bird (distance about 30 yards). We were able to study the bill, head and scapulars and compare wing length to the surrounding herring gulls. When we tried to get even closer, the bird flew. The surrounding herring gulls did not fly until we moved about 10 yards closer yet (This was an additional clue to us that this bird was probably another species and not a herring gull). The gull flew out onto the reservoir, made a few circles and then settled down on the water. When in flight we were able to see the upperwing, underwing and the rump and tail feathers well. For the next hour the bird would fly up and land about 10-20 feet away from its previous location. It repeated this behavior many times (it did not appear to be eating or trying to get food). The bird then flew along and then over the dam and headed North.

Size of bird:

This gull was much smaller than the surrounding adult herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*), about 3-4 inches smaller.

Head:

Forehead and crown very pale brown; darker auricular "smudge"; feathers near the base of the bill white (see attached sketch).

Neck:

Neck also pale brown. The head and neck appeared almost dirty white from a distance (reminiscent of the bald eagle look of a Greater Black-backed gull).

Eyes & Lores:

Eyes dark (blackish); lores pale brown turning white at base of bill; brown "smudge" over eyes and ears.

Bill:

Both mandibles solid black from tip to base; lower mandible almost straight; bill proportionately smaller than nearby herring gulls (by this I mean that if one could increase this bird in all dimensions to the size of the surrounding herring gulls, the bill would be about the same size. But direct comparison of this gull's bill with the surrounding herring gull's bill, showed that this gull's bill was definitely smaller).

Legs:

Legs and feet were a grayish pink color.

Nape:

Pale brown (same as head and neck color).

Mantle:

Medium brown.

Scapulars:

Same as mantle (medium brown) with pale tan edgings lending a scaly look to the back.

Tertiaries:

Also medium brown with pale tan edgings.

Rump:

Brown.

Uppertail coverts:

The uppertail coverts were mostly white with some light brown markings (see attached sketch).

Throat & Belly:

Very pale with faint light brown streaking; breast also pale with slightly heavier brown markings, sides slightly darker but not as dark as back.

Flanks:

Not particularly noted during observation.

Rectrices:

Single black terminal band on tail. Base of outer rectrices white with light brown markings. Because the uppertail coverts were the same color it was difficult to separate the base of the outer tail rectrices from the uppertail coverts. From the end of the tail the black tail band went in to about where the upper tail coverts start (see wing sketch).

Wings:

Appeared long at rest compared to surrounding herring gulls.

Upperwing:

Primaries and all primary coverts were blackish-brown. (The entire outer wing from the wrist to the tip of the wing, including all primaries and primary coverts were blackish-brown.)

Secondaries and greater secondary coverts were also blackish-brown. The secondary coverts had light brown tips creating a light colored line between the secondary coverts and the secondaries.

The remainder of the secondary coverts were medium brown (same color as the back and scapulars.)

Underwing:

Underwing primaries and coverts were blackish-brown (again dark from the wrist to the tip of the wing). The secondaries and coverts were dark but did not appear as dark (blackish) as the primaries.

Vocalizations:

No vocalizations were heard.

Elimination of Similar Species:

The "herring gull complex" can be broken down with the help of a table from Jack Connor's book "The Complete Birder" page 226 (Figure 1):

Glaucous (*Larus hyperboreus*) & Glaucous-winged (*Larus glaucescens*):

Too, large. These birds are usually much larger than a herring gull or at best the same size as a herring gull due to size variability. Never smaller than a herring gull. The gull at Chatfield was much smaller than the surrounding herring gulls.

Too, light. These two birds are very light colored (white to pale gray-brown) overall. The wings are pale on both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls. The outer wings were very dark (black) on the bird we observed.

The bills on Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls are quite massive. The bill on the bird at Chatfield was small, proportionally smaller than the surrounding herring gulls (see "Bill:" above).

The bird at Chatfield could not have been a Glaucous or Glaucous-winged gull.

Greater Black-backed (*Larus marinus*) & Western/Yellow-footed (*Larus occidentalis/Larus livens*):

Too, large. Once again these birds are usually much larger than a herring gull or at best the same size as a herring gull. The bird at Chatfield was much smaller than a herring gull.

The bill is massive on Greater Black-backed & Western/Yellow-footed gulls, not small as the Chatfield gull showed. The Chatfield gull had an entirely black bill and lacked the light tip of the Greater Black-backed gull, and also lacked the pale base which is sometimes seen on 1st winter Westerns/Yellow-footed gulls.

There was no gray on the Chatfield gull's back like a Yellow-footed gull sometimes has in its 1st winter plumage.

The gull observed at Chatfield was neither a Greater Black-backed nor a Western/Yellow-footed gull.

Iceland (Larus glaucopterus):

The size is close (maybe a bit small, but size can be variable). The bill looks too small on an Iceland gull (but again, size can be variable).

Iceland gulls are very light/white overall. Even the darkest race (L. g. Kumlienii) is very light and doesn't show a black outer wing. The Chatfield gull was relatively dark with black outer wings, dark secondaries and secondary coverts and a black tail band.

Iceland gulls also do not have a black tail band in any plumage.

This gull was not an Iceland gull.

Thayer's (Larus thayeri):

The bill looks right (size and color); Body size looks right (smaller than a herring gull).

Thayer's gulls can have a dark, diffuse auricular mark just as the bird at Chatfield showed, but many gulls in the "herring gull complex" can show this mark and is therefore not diagnostic.

The tail band on a Thayer's gull is brownish not black like the Chatfield gull (color can be variable).

The rump on a Thayer's gull does not contrast with the back and scapulars. However, the Chatfield gull's rump contrasted sharply with the back, scapulars and especially the tail band.

Thayer's gulls (in any plumage) do not have an all black outer wing as the gull in question has. Thayer's gulls usually show a "window" on the inner primaries, our gull did not show this. The secondaries on a Thayer's gull are dark and form a band along the trailing edge of the wing. However, the greater secondary coverts are light brown as are the rest of the secondary coverts. The gull at Chatfield had noticeably dark greater secondary coverts.

Because of the light inner-webs of the flight feathers on a Thayer's gull, the appearance of the underwing is light or silvery. The Chatfield gull did not show a light or silvery color on the underwing flight feathers, but instead had a very dark (blackish) flight feathers and underwing coverts.

The gull seen at Chatfield does not fit the field marks for a Thayer's gull.

California (*Larus californicus*):

Because of head shape (long sloping forehead) the bill on a California gull looks long; in 1st winter the bill is light with a black tip on both mandibles (from the gonys to the tip). The gull at Chatfield showed an all black bill that did not appear long.

California gulls can show a pale "window" on the inner primaries although this is more common on 2nd winter birds. The Chatfield gull showed no light coloring at all on the inner primaries.

California gulls have an evenly colored, dark tail that does not show white at the base of the outer rectrices. This makes the banded rump stand-out against the base of the rectrices. The gull at Chatfield showed dirty white at the base of the outer rectrices, thus creating no contrast between the tail and the rump.

While the outer wing on a California is dark like the gull at Chatfield, the greater secondary coverts on a California gull generally the same color as the rest of the secondary coverts. The Chatfield gull showed dark greater secondary coverts that contrasted with the rest of the secondary coverts.

The field marks of the gull in question do not fit those of a California gull.

Herring (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*):

Note: Side by side comparisons were possible due to the surrounding adult herring gulls.

Although there is much size variation in herring gulls, this bird was much smaller when compared to the surrounding herring gulls.

The tail of a herring gull shows a dark band at the end, and the base of the outer rectrices are dirty white. This mark seems to be shared with the gull in question.

The bill on a herring is fairly large. The Chatfield gull, by comparison, showed a relatively smaller bill. Usually only juvenile herring gulls have an all black bill. The bill on a 1st winter herring gull usually is black with a very noticeable pale base to the lower mandible. The gull at Chatfield did not show any paleness at the base of the lower mandible.

The outer wing (from the wrist to the tip of the wing, including all primaries) of the gull at Chatfield was all blackish-brown. No pale "window" was noticed on this bird. Herring gulls show a very noticeable "window" on the top and underside of the wing on the inner primaries.

This race of herring gull (L. a. smithsonianus) does not display the dark greater secondary coverts as the gull at Chatfield had.

This gull was not the Smithsonianus race of herring gull.

Other races of herring gull have rarely (if ever) been reported in North America.

L. a. atlantis, of the West African coast, averages smaller than L. a. Smithsonianus; has much black on wing tips; has dark inner primaries and a greater covert bar. The best possibility outside of Lesser Black-backed gull!

There are many other races of herring gull, but again, never recorded in North America except L. a. vegae. A very few of these birds summer in Alaska. This bird in 1st winter plumage lacks the dark greater secondary coverts, and has a noticeable pale "window" on the inner primaries. (This is not a likely candidate.)

The chances of the Chatfield gull being a stray herring gull from the "other side of the world" (West African coast) would seem to be extremely small at best.

Hybrids:

I thought about this bird being a hybrid gull. I can't imagine any two species that would produce offspring having:

- 1) no pale, inner primaries forming a "window"
- 2) a small, all black bill
- 3) very dark (blackish-brown) greater secondary coverts
- 4) a white headed appearance from a distance
- 5) black tail band with the base of the outer rectrices and rump being white, and
- 6) all black outer wing (both top and bottom)

Even if one of the parents was a Lesser Black-backed gull, there should be some hint of non-Lesser Black-backed field marks (a pale "window", dark tail overall, larger bill, lighter greater secondary coverts, etc).

Comments:

Since the number of Lesser Black-backed gulls being seen in the Northeastern United States seems to be on the rise, there has been speculation that they may breed in North America (Jack Connor, Page 229). In this light, it would seem that a Lesser Black-backed gull would be quite possible, even probable (more probable than a stray herring gull from the "other-side-of-the-world").

It would only seem logical that if Lesser Black-backed gulls breed somewhere in North America, that there should be some young birds around (as a matter of fact, of all Lesser Black-backed strays, the 1st winter plumage should be more abundant).

I realize that a 1st winter Lesser Black-backed gull is a very hard gull to identify (we were lucky to see such a model bird), but no other species fits all the field marks that we observed.

References used in the preparation of this report:

Connor, Jack. 1988. *The Complete Birder*. Houghton Mifflin Co.

Farrand, John, Jr. 1983. *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Grant, Peter J. 1986. *Gulls, A Guide to Identification*. Buteo Books

Kaufman, Kenn. 1990. *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*. Houghton Mifflin Co.

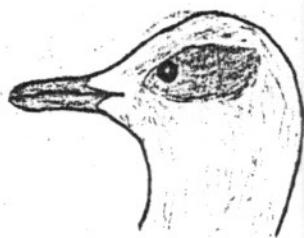
Zimmer, Kevin J. 1985. *The Western Birdwatcher*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

This Report was written Based upon notes written (with input from all observers) in the field AT THE TIME of observation.

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Lesser Black-Backed Gull



12-14-91

TOP VIEW



Looking Down on TOP of Bird

A

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL - Larus fuscus (graellsii-?)

23-91-34

DATE: December 14, 1991.

LOCATION: Chatfield Reservoir SRA, Jefferson/Douglas Counties, Colorado.

NUMBER OF BIRDS SEEN: One.

PLUMAGE AND SEX: Juvenile probably beginning to molt into first-winter immature. Sex unknown.

TIME OF OBSERVATION: 1430-1630 MST.

WEATHER CONDITIONS: Clear sky; Wind, West @ 10-15 MPH, occasional gusts to 25 MPH; Temperature 45°F.

HABITAT: Fresh-water reservoir on the high plains along the front range of the Rocky Mountains.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT: 10X50 Bushnell Binoculars; 15X-60X B/L Zoom telescope.

OTHER OBSERVERS:

Glen Hageman - 448 S. Leyden St., Denver, Colorado 80224.

Joey Kellner - 8612 W. Hinsdale Place, Littleton, Colorado 80123.

DISTANCE FROM BIRD: First spotted standing on a sandy spit approximately 100 yards away. Approached to within 30-40 yards viewing it through the telescope. Advanced further and the bird flew off some 200-300 yards into the reservoir. Observed later on for 30-45 minutes from 500+ yards in the water along the face of Chatfield Dam. Bird eventually left the area flying northward past the tower and over the dam. Although it was roughly 500-700 yards distant as it departed, it circled a couple of times in full sunlight providing adequate views in flight.

BIRD/SUN ORIENTATION: During most of the time that this gull was under observation, bright sunlight was directly upon it coming from behind the observers. Light waves were minimal even when the bird was being observed at some distance out on the reservoir.

BEHAVIOR AND DEMEANOR: When first seen, the bird was standing and facing away from the observers on a sandy spit jutting into the reservoir just east of the boat marina along the south shore of the reservoir. There were 8 or 9 adult Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus) standing immediately nearby providing good size comparisons. As we approached closer to the bird, it became alarmed assuming an anxiety upright posture, stretching its neck upward, bill held horizontal with its eyes on the alert. It quickly flushed, heading out over the reservoir finally settling on the surface of the water. After resting a few moments, it took flight again briefly, then returning to the surface of the water. This action was repeated several times when an adult Herring Gull flew into to join it. At this point the Lesser Black-backed Gull took off far across the reservoir and we lost sight of it. Some time later we rediscovered it far across the reservoir near the face of the dam where it was swimming and occasionally indulging in short, low-level flights ending with swift plunges back onto the water. There were 15 or so Common Goldeneyes (Bucephala clangula) diving in the immediate area which seemed to interest the gull. After about 30 minutes, it took to the air again and gaining considerable altitude, it flew away over the dam to the north. Its flight was quite graceful and less labored than that of L. argentatus. The long, narrow wings were easily noted at this time.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION: A large-sized gull, but noticeably smaller and less bulky than the nearby L. argentatus with a less deep bill, a more rounded head, longer legs and proportionately longer wings which extended well beyond the tail when folded at rest giving the bird a "large-ended" profile. The bird's obvious smaller, more slender structure is what directed our attention to the bird to begin with. At first glance we suspected an immature California Gull (Larus californicus) since size-wise that is what it appeared to be. However, upon closer examination, it failed to match the key identification points for a juvenal or first-winter L. californicus.

HEAD AND NECK: Grayish-brown heavily streaked with white. There was a prominent dark smudge encircling the eye. While many accounts mention a dark auricular patch, this feature was not readily apparent. However, as juvenal plumage is replaced by first-winter immature, the dark ear patch becomes suffused leading to speculation that this bird was quite possibly changing plumage. At a distance, the head and nape (and underparts as well) appeared quite pale as contrasted with the mantle. Head shape rounder than in L. argentatus.

EYES: Dark, surrounded by the aforementioned dark smudge.

UPPER AND LOWER MANDIBLES: Entirely black from base to distal end. Bill smaller and thinner than that of L. argentatus with no evidence of "swelling" at the tip on upper mandible.

LEGS AND FEET: Somewhat longer proportionately when compared to closeby L. argentatus. Leg color was pale, possibly light gray. Feet color not noted.

UPPERPARTS: Scapulars and mantle scaly promoted by brownish-black centers of individual feathers strongly edged with white. This scaly appearance was most evident when the bird was observed from roughly 40 yards away with its back towards the observers. Rump and uppertail coverts were white and sparsely marked with dark barring which contrasted well with the overall dark mantle.

UNDERPARTS: Pale with dark barring on breast and flanks. Lower belly and vent mostly white. The underparts were a marked contrast with the overall dark mantle.

RETRICES: Square tail. Uppertail pale with a prominent, wide, black sub-terminal band clearly contrasting with the paleness of the upper part of the tail and rump. Undertail not noted.

WINGS: Long and rather slender, extending well beyond the tail when folded at rest. Upperwing: mostly black (primaries, secondaries and greater coverts) with median and lesser coverts much like mantle. Complete dark trailing edge. Underwing: dark uniformly throughout.

VOCALIZATION: None heard.

ELIMINATION OF SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES (juvenal plumages in all examples):

HERRING GULL (Larus argentatus): While there are always overlaps in size, typical L. argentatus are normally larger, more bulky with shorter wings. In addition, the mandible is larger, deeper with a bulbous end. There is only a slight contrast between the rump and the tail and mantle. Mantle lacks the distinctive scaly effect of L. fuscus. There is no prominent dark sub-terminal band to the uppertail. KEY DIFFERENCE: L. argentatus has pale inner primaries forming a pale "window" in both the upper and lower wings. L. fuscus lacks this mark.

THAYER'S GULL (Larus thayeri): Similar in size and shape (smaller, rounded head with smaller all black bill), but typical individuals are uniformly pale grayish brown overall. Some individuals display a checkered effect on the mantle. Lacks whitish head in juvenal and first-winter. The primaries are generally brownish or a dark tan on the upperwing with quite pale centers in typical birds which give the appearance of a "white-winged" gull. KEY DIFFERENCE: Entire underwing flashes silvery throughout with only the outermost primaries having dusky tips.

CALIFORNIA GULL (Larus californicus): Roughly the same size, possibly only slightly smaller in typical birds. Upperparts and underparts mostly brownish-black. Tail entirely dark brown. KEY DIFFERENCE: Bill is longer and more slender, flesh-colored at base with dark tip.

RING-BILLED GULL (Larus delawarensis): Much smaller and structured much differently (much daintier). KEY DIFFERENCE: Besides obvious size difference, there is considerable gray-brown in the mantle along with considerable feathering in the inner part of the upper wing. A strong, dark carpal bar is present on the upperwing in flight. In addition, the rump and tail are mostly white with a narrow, black sub-terminal band on the uppertail.

COMMON GULL (Larus canus): Much smaller with plumage somewhat like L. delawarensis. KEY DIFFERENCE: Very small, short bill which is mostly dark, flesh colored base with dark tip in some individuals. Upperwing shows gray midpanel in flight.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (Larus marinus): Much larger (larger than L. argentatus). KEY DIFFERENCE: Very large, thick bill with bulbous tip. Mantle is checkered, not scaly. Many individuals show a pale window in the inner primaries of the wing.

WESTERN GULL (Larus occidentalis): KEY DIFFERENCE: Generally larger and more heavily built. Has large, deep bill with bulbous tip. Much shorter winged. Uppertail lacks strong, dark sub-terminal band. This is a very pelagic species and would be badly out of range in Colorado (but certainly not impossible).

SLATY-BACKED GULL (Larus schistisagus): KEY DIFFERENCE: Generally much larger. Uppertail is dark throughout and lacks any strong sub-terminal band. An Alaskan and eastern Asiatic species which, again, would be badly out of range in Colorado.

YELLOW-FOOTED GULL (Larus livens): Larger and very similar to L. occidentalis. KEY DIFFERENCE: Very large, bulbous bill and all dark tail.

HYBRIDS: Hybrids, of course, are always a possibility with Larids. If indeed, this particular gull was a hybrid of some source or another, I do not feel qualified to speculate from whence it came. On the other hand, I feel quite confident that my identification is correct, and that the bird is an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES:

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL: Have seen two winter plumaged adults in Colorado-December 14, 1976, Lake Sangraco, Adams County and February 6, 1988, Hamilton Reservoir, Larimer County. Have observed a number of birds of various ages on September 20, 1989 while crossing the Kattegat Straits between Frederikshavn, Denmark and Göteborg, Sweden. Also observed at Stockholm, Sweden in September of 1989. And just recently, September 1991, observed

a number of birds at various points throughout the British Isles. There were excellent study opportunities at the "Round Pond" in the Kensington Gardens and at "The Serpentine" in Hyde Park, both of which are located in London, England during a one week's stay there. Also observed at various English Channel sites between Portsmouth and Lands End.

HERRING GULL: Observed in all plumages during the past 50 years throughout the continental United States, Canada and Alaska as well as during two trips to Europe (1989 and 1991).

THAYER'S GULL: Have seen and studied this gull thoroughly since 1970 in Colorado where it winters regularly (both immatures and adults). Have also seen in the Churchill area, Manitoba, Canada (June 1984) and in winter along the Washington and California coasts.

CALIFORNIA GULL: Observed in all plumages in good numbers throughout eastern Colorado each spring, summer and fall since 1965. Have also seen along the coasts of Washington and California.

RING-BILLED GULL: Observed throughout most of North America in all plumages over the past 50 years.

COMMON GULL: Observed in Colorado as follows: March 12, 1980, a first-winter bird at Sloan's Lake, Denver; from December 2, 1984 through February 26, 1985, a first-winter bird at Cherry Creek Reservoir SRA, Arapahoe County; from March 6, 1986 through March 13, 1986, a winter adult at Cherry Creek Reservoir SRA, Arapahoe County; October 9, 1988 through December 4, 1988, a first-winter bird at Cherry Creek Reservoir SRA, Arapahoe County and October 3, 1989 through November 14, 1989 at Cherry Creek Reservoir SRA. Found it to be a very common gull during an eight-week motor trip throughout Alaska in 1985. Also observed good numbers in Norway (particularly in and around the harbor at Bergen).

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL: Observed in all plumages along the eastern coast of North America from South Carolina to Newfoundland (primarily on Long Island, New York between 1948 and 1961) during the past 40+ years. Also seen in good numbers in the British Isles during September 1991. Found the first state record for Colorado on January 1, 1980, a first-winter bird at Centennial Park, Englewood, Arapahoe County. Two other records for Colorado: a first-winter immature at Cherry Creek Reservoir, Arapahoe County from January 25, 1982 through February 13, 1982 and a first-winter bird at the same location on November 2, 1988.

WESTERN GULL: Seen only along the coasts of California and Washington in all plumages during numerous visits since 1961.

SLATY-BACKED GULL: Seen twice in Alaska both adult birds. One on July 1, 1985 at the "Homer Spit" on the Kenai Peninsula, and one on May 18, 1988 on Attu Island in the Aleutians.

YELLOW-FOOTED GULL: Have never seen one.

THIS REPORT WAS WRITTEN BASED UPON DISCUSSIONS WITH THE OTHER OBSERVERS AT THE TIME OF OBSERVATION AND NOTES MADE AFTERWARDS.

OBSERVER MAKING THIS REPORT:

Jack Reddall - 4450 South Alton Street, Englewood, Colorado 80111.

Jack Reddall

DATE: December 18, 1991



LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (Larus fuscus) 12-14-91