

Observer: Steven Feldstein

Species: Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)

Subspecies: *graellsii*

Date and time of observation: Feb. 27, 1993, 11:30 am.

Weather: Sunny with a few scattered clouds

Duration of observation: Approx. 20 min

Bird-sun orientation: Sun toward south, bird seen toward east

Distance from bird: Approx. 50 yards

Optical equipment: Bushnell Spacemaster spotting scope; power 22X.

Habitat: At Baseline Reservoir in Boulder, CO, which is a fairly deep reservoir.

The bird was first observed through my spotting scope standing on ice at a distance of about 50 yards. The bird was seen together in the company of several Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). After an observation period of about 20 minutes, the bird started to fly. It first flew toward the north end of the reservoir. The bird then started to chase after a Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). While pursuing the Mallard, the bird flew past me at a distance of about 20 yards. The bird then stopped chasing the Mallard, and flew past me one more time also at a distance of about 20 yards. Then the bird returned to the same location on the ice that I first saw it. In addition, on the day of the observation, there was an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull present at Baseline Reservoir. That gull was first found one week earlier.

The shape of the bird was typical of that of a gull. As mentioned above, the bird was together with several Ring-billed Gulls. The bird was obviously larger than all of the Ring-billed Gulls. In addition, as I have seen Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) on many occasions, I had the impression that the bird was smaller than a Herring Gull.

The entire head and neck of the bird was white with moderate streaking on its crown, and the top half of its nape. The density and intensity of this streaking was less than is typically seen on most winter adult Lesser Black-backed Gulls. There was also light streaking on the side of its neck. The bird also had a much flatter forehead than the Ring-billed Gulls. I had the impression that the forehead of the bird was about as flat as that of most Herring Gulls. When the bird was standing on the ice, I could not determine whether it had light or dark eyes. However, when it flew by at a closer distance I could see that it had pale eyes.

The bill of the bird was yellow, with a black subterminal band on both its upper and lower mandibles. The tip of the bill was also yellow. As the bird would change its direction while standing on the ice, the color of the bill would sometimes appear all black with a yellow tip. I attributed this to the angle of the sun, and whether clouds were present. The bill of the bird also looked wider than those of the nearby Ring-billed Gulls. In addition, the tip of the bill did not appear wider than the rest of the bill.

Both legs and feet of the bird were fairly bright yellow.

The color of the mantle and scapulars (hereafter, I will refer to the mantle and scapular feathers as the "back") of the bird was a uniform very dark gray. Its back was not as dark as an adult Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) but obviously darker than that of a California Gull (*Larus californicus*). Also the back lacked any white scapular crescents which is typical of most adult dark-backed gulls. In flight it could be seen that the rump and uppertail coverts of the bird were white.

The throat, breast, and belly of the bird were the same shade of white as its head. There was a small area of dark brown streaking on the side of the breast, and some brown mottling on its belly. The undertail coverts of the bird were also white.

The tail of the bird was white with a dark brown subterminal band on its upper surface. The tail band was mostly mottled with dark brown and white on both of its boundaries. This tail band was also rather narrow as its width was about one-quarter the length of the tail.

While the bird was standing, I could see that its primaries projected farther back than those on the nearby Ring-billed Gulls. In addition, the color of the primaries, secondaries, and tertials were very dark brown, appearing almost black. Also, on the standing bird, it could be seen that the wing coverts were almost as dark as the primaries. As a result, there was little contrast between the dark brown wings, and the dark grey back. When the bird was in flight, it could be also be seen that the entire primaries (the inner primaries were just as dark as the outer primaries), secondaries, and primary coverts were very dark brown. Thus much of the *uppersurface* of the wing of the bird was very dark brown. There were no white mirrors anywhere on the uppersurface of the wings. These dark areas contrasted the rest of the secondary wing coverts, which were a lighter shade of brown.

When the bird flew past me, I could also observe the *undersurface* of its wings. The outer primaries and primary coverts were a dark shade of brown. This gave the impression that the entire outer wing was dark as seen from below. This contrasted the inner primaries which were slightly paler. The darkness of its secondaries were intermediate between that of the inner and outer primaries. The remainder of the underwing coverts were mottled irregularly with gray and brown.

The combination of the dark gray back and the extensively brown wings indicate to me that the bird is a second winter gull. The additional field marks, as described above, indicate to me that this bird is a second winter Lesser Black-backed Gull. Furthermore, as the back of the bird was not black, as in a Great Black-backed Gull, I regard the subspecies of the bird to be *L. f. graellsii* (the nominate subspecies and the subspecies *intermedius* both have much darker backs than *graellsii*). This is certainly the subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gull to be expected in Colorado, since as far as I know, there are no satisfactory documented sightings of *L. f. fuscus* and *L. f. intermedius* in North America.

There are several similar species that one could confuse with Lesser Black-backed Gull. This list of species includes California Gull, Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*), Great Black-backed Gull, Yellow-footed Gull (*Larus livens*), Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), and Herring Gull. As the plumage of gulls tend to vary more within a species than between species, I will compare my description of the observed bird with that of second winter gulls from the above list of species (Yellow-footed Gull will be an exception where a comparison will be made with its first summer plumage, since the molt to first summer plumage occurs between December and February).

Most large second winter gulls have the same general pattern on their upperwing surface. This pattern consists of dark brown outer primaries and primary coverts, pale inner primaries, dark secondaries, and pale secondary coverts. Each of the above six species of gulls that resemble Lesser Black-backed gull do have this pattern. However, second winter Lesser Black-backed Gulls have a different pattern as their inner primaries are just as dark as their outer primaries, and their greater secondary coverts also tend to be dark brown.

There are also other differences between Lesser Black-backed Gulls and the other six species of gulls. Second winter California Gulls have paler backs than Lesser Black-backed Gulls. They also have dark eyes, grayish legs, and a two-toned bill. The southern subspecies *L. o. wymani* of Western Gull does have a back color that from my experience does resemble that of Lesser Black-backed Gull. However, this species has pink legs, it is much larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull, with a bill that is particularly more massive toward the tip than Lesser Black-backed Gull (as stated above, the bill of the observed bird appeared to have a uniform width from the base to the tip). Second winter Great Black-backed Gull has a darker back than Lesser Black-backed Gull. It has pink legs (never yellow legs as the bird observed), and is significantly larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull. First summer Yellow-footed Gulls are also much larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull, with a darker back, and as with Western Gull, has a more massive bill with a tip that is much wider. Also, based on range, Yellow-footed Gull would be extremely unlikely. Second winter Slaty-backed Gull is also larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull, with a darker back and pink legs. In addition, although second winter Slaty-backed Gulls have the general upperwing pattern discussed in the preceding paragraph, all shades of brown are very pale, much paler than all the species presently discussed. The back color of most subspecies of second winter Herring Gull is much paler than that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull. However, there is one subspecies *L. a. heuglini*, which breeds in NW Russia and winters near the Black Sea, that can have a back color that is very similar to that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull. In addition, *L. a. heuglini* does have yellow legs. However, this subspecies is larger in size than a Lesser Black-backed Gull, and has the general upperwing pattern discussed above. In addition, since this subspecies has never been recorded in North America, its appearance in Colorado would be extremely unlikely.

Lesser Black-backed Gull is a bird that I have had a fair amount of experience with as it is a rare but regular species in New Jersey and Ontario (in particular along the Niagara

River) where I previously lived. I have probably seen about 15 Lesser Black-backed Gulls before the present observation. Even though I haven't previously seen a *second winter* Lesser Black-backed Gull, of the approximately 15 Lesser Black-backed Gulls that I have seen, one of these birds was a *first winter* individual, and another a *third winter* individual. The above description of the Lesser Black-backed Gull was written in the afternoon at home on the day of the observation. A field guide was never consulted in writing the above description of the observed bird. However, after the description was first written, I checked "Gulls: A guide to identification" by Peter Grant in order to read about the leg color of 2nd winter Lesser Black-backed Gulls. I wanted to check this point as at the time of the observation I had the understanding that 2nd winter Lesser Black-backed Gulls have pink legs. However, this book indicated that 2nd winter individuals can have either pink or yellow legs. In addition, I consulted the same book in order to add some points to the above comparison between Lesser Black-backed Gulls and other similar gulls. This guide was consulted only after the description of the observed bird was completed.

Steven Feldstein
673 Walden Circle
Boulder, CO 80303

Home Telephone (303) 499-9883
Work Telephone (303) 492-5997
email sbf@bjerknes.colorado.edu

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Species: Lesser Black-backed Gull | Larus fuscus
(Vernacular Name) (Scientific Name)Date(s): 20 February 1993, 21 February 1993, 1 March 1993Number of birds seen: 1 Sex: _____ Plumage: 3rd to 4th winter adultLocality: Baseline Reservoir Elevation: ~ 5300 feetNearest town: Boulder County: BoulderTime(s) observed: 1430-1645 on 20 February, 0745-0830 & 1600-1625 on February 21, 0830-1000 on 1 MarchDuration of observation (e.g. 1 sec., 5 min., etc.): ~ 1 1/2 hoursOther observers who saw the bird with you (give names, addresses, telephone numbers):
Joe and Adam Mammoser - 2919 Worthington Ave., Ft. Collins 80526-2657 (303) 223-1
David Leatherman - 2048 Whiterock Ct., Ft. Collins, CO 80526 (303) 484-5445Other observers who saw the bird independently (give names, addresses, telephone numbers):
Steve Feldstein - Boulder

Light conditions (position of bird to light and shade, direction and strength of light):

20 February - overcast, soft light 1 March - same as 21 Feb (AM)
21 February (AM) - strong sun behind bird, silhouetted at times but did move north and out of direct sun
21 February (PM) - sun in front of bird, not strongOptical equipment used (e.g. power, types): Bushnell Trophy Spotting Scope 12-36x ocularDistance, and how measured: at closest range: 60 yards Measured by camera lens and inspecIf photographed, type of equipment and film: Canon AE-1 w/ Vivitar 52mm lens & EKtar 100 filmWho else photographed the bird? -Describe the bird's behavior (e.g. flying, feeding, or habits used in identifying): No particular behavior I observed aided significantly in identification. I saw the bird fly and was struck by how long and narrow the wings appeared compared to the other gull species there. On 20 February, the bird tended to be by itself or at least on fringe of flocks of other gulls. This wasn't true hereafter. Interestingly, the bird was observed catching and eating live crickets.

Describe in detail the bird's relative size, overall shape, plumage and color pattern. Include details of bill, wing and tail shape. Give particular emphasis to marks you used to identify the bird. Reference to its resemblance to field guide descriptions and illustrations is not enough. Describe only what you actually observe in the field:

The bird was much larger than surrounding Ring-billed Gulls but only a little smaller than nearby Herring Gulls. The bill was mostly yellow with a red spot on the gonys and some dark smudging near the tip. It was thinner and longer than that of a Herring Gull. The white head had dark streaking on it and the back of the neck. Its head looked less rounded than that of the other gulls and seemed longer from nape to bill tip. The legs of the bird were yellow but not bright yellow as in a yellow legged gull. In fact the legs were a pinkish-yellow. This, coupled with the dark-smudged bill, comprises a small % of the Lesser Black-backed Gull population. I was initially focused on the bill because I was struck by its dark gray mantle color. It was at least two shades darker than

Description* (continued):

the other nearby gulls. It was closer to black than gray. A "fluffy" white patch was midway up the back. The wings in this bird were very long, extending well past the tail on the standing bird. In flight the wings were long and narrow in appearance. It appeared more streamlined than the other gulls. The white trailing edge on the wings were in sharp contrast with the dark mantle.

In pictures note size dichotomy and mantle color. Also dark streaking on back of head and neck.

Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery, (i.e. from perch, in flight, duration): N/A

Describe the general and specific habitat in which you observed the bird: The general habitat was a large reservoir during ice-out. Specifically the reservoir is cobble-bottomed on the SW corner where the bird was observed. This area was also apparently shallow (6"-36") and had exposed gravel bars and points this bird and other gulls used for resting.

How did you eliminate similarly appearing species?

I knew this was probably a Lesser Black-backed Gull because of the dark mantle color but since this could be variable I used other characters in I.D. The yellow legs could only be a Lesser Black-backed Gull. The bill shape was also note consistent w/ a Herring Gull. It was also smaller than a Herring Gull.

What is your prior experience with this and similarly appearing species?

No previous experience with this species.

List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc. consulted and how this influenced your identification:

a) at time of observation: National Geographic Society Field Guide

b) after observation: Seabirds: An Identification Guide

This report was written from reports made during ☒, after observation ☐ from memory ☐
Date and time report was written: 9 March 1993

Reporting observer: David C. Ely Signature: David C. Ely

Address: 4501 E. Boardwalk Drive #2-2 Ft. Collins, CO 80525

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