

Great Black-backed Gull
Cherry Creek Reservoir near Denver
14 October 1995

ACCEPT

RD 1 5-2
RECIRC 7-0

REJECTED AS WESTERN GULL

Shawneen Finnegan, B.J. Rose, Bob Pyle, Virginia Maynard, and myself drove up from Colorado Springs to see the "Western Gull" reported to have been present at Cherry Creek Reservoir for about a month. Upon arriving at the marina area, we quickly found the near-adult (probably 4th winter) dark-mantled gull standing with many Californias, a few Ring-billeds, and one adult Herring. Both Shawneen and I were immediately struck that the bird best fit a Great Black-backed. We studied it for about an hour, during which time we checked all characters we could possibly see and discussed the identification with members of our group. By the end, they, too, believed it to be a Great Black-backed.

Here is a description of the bird written in my field notes the same day as the sighting:

"Substantially larger than nearby Herring Gull and California Gulls, with relatively short primary projection, and large (relatively thick-based) bill--quite large but lacking bulbous gonys. Relatively narrow dusky area extended back from eye; fine pencil-like dusky streaking to crown and separate patch on center rear nape; head otherwise whitish. Mantle a very dark slaty-blackish, typical of GBGU and same color or even slightly darker than most southern Westerns. Outermost primary broadly tipped white without black subterminal bar; next 2-3 primaries inward had subterminal white mirrors; all remaining primaries had small white tips. Underside of primaries and secondaries pale-to-medium ashy-gray, not as dark as in typical Western. Underparts and tail entirely white. Eye an amber-pale; appearing dusky in many light conditions, dusky-pale in direct light--typical of GBGU. Bill dull pale yellow with dull reddish spot at gonys and with some dusky smudging next to the red. Legs thick (thicker than Herring's) and duller, paler horn-flesh, not as true pinkish as in Herring Gull nearby or in typical Western Gull. Judged a probable female based on overall size and bill and head size and shape. Photo'd by B.J. Rose."

The next two days, before leaving Colorado, I called and personally talked to several local observers concerning the identity of this bird. They included Tony Leukering, Mark Janos, Jack Reddall, High Kingery, and Peter Gent. Some who were not home I only left messages for. Everyone I actually talked to agreed with the details of what the bird looked like and some were willing to agree at the time that it was probably a Great Black-backed.

On the following page, originally written for Tony, we list the reasons we think this bird is a Great Black-backed rather than a Western, and briefly mention our field experience with these two species.

I am happy to discuss this bird with anyone interested.

--Paul Lehman, PO Box 379, Cape May, NJ 08204

Paul Lehman

9 November 1995

To: COBIRDOB@aol.com
From: birding@aba.org (Paul Lehman)
Subject: Re: Gull details
Cc:
Bcc:
X-Attachments:

TONY: If you get this message before going to the DFO meeting, here are the reasons we think it's a GBBGU:

--size is fine for female GBBGU (the bird was clearly larger than Herring standing near it), as is head and bill shape (more on that below)

--mantle color fine for GBBGU and only good for southern (not northern) Western, but head pattern and eye color (usually) wrong for southern Western

--head pattern of dusky narrow smudge behind eye and fine, pencil-like dusky streaks on crown and separate patch on nape is matched perfectly by many GBGUs in winter. I have gone out and seen many many just like that here in Cape May. That pattern is INCORRECT for southern Westerns, which have more immaculate white heads (as do some Great B-backed). Northern Westerns typically have more extensive smudgey streaks and mottling to head and neck, but that is quite variable.

--eye color of this bird--and amber yellow, appearing dusky in many lights but dirty pale in direct light, is perfect for adult GBBGU, and not quite right for southern Western.

--Bill size and shape--rather massive but without bulging (thickening) at gonys shown by most Westerns. Just fine for female GBBGU; a male's bill would average even slightly larger/longer.

--primary pattern fine for GBBGU, with large white tip to outermost primary and white subterminal mirrors on next two primaries at least. Also large white tips to those next several primaries. Underside of primaries and secondaries not as dark as in Western.

--leg color-- this is particularly good for GBBGU and incorrect for Western. This bird has sickly pale horn-flesh legs, a color reminiscent of those of an oystercatcher. Absolutely perfect for GBBGU. Western Gulls have truer pinkish legs, as in Herring.

--We have seen countless tens of thousands of Western and Great Black-backed Gulls, having lived 20 years in coastal southern California and now in Cape May, with many trips up and down the East and West Coasts.

--Great Black-backed is more likely than Western in Colorado anyway. Western simply does not wander inland much at all. It is casual even in inland California. Sure, it could possibly occur in Colorado, and should be considered. But Great Black-backed, and even Slaty-backed, are more likely to occur there.

Please take these comments with you to the meeting, and feel free to share them with anyone who might want to read them. We'll be sending our write-ups on the bird to Hugh Kingery and the CO committee secretary soon.

--Paul L. and Shawneen F.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

14 October 1995

Cherry Creek Reservoir, CO

Observer: Shawneen Finnegan

Paul Lehman and I were in Colorado Springs for a multi-day meeting. On the day of this observation Paul, Bob Pyle, B.J. Rose, Virginia Maynard, and I drove up early in the morning to see the "Western" Gull which had been present for about a month. We had previously seen Great Black-backed Gull two years earlier near Pueblo, Colorado. Knowing how rare it is for Western Gull to be found anywhere away from the Pacific Coast I was most interested to see this bird. The farthest inland I had ever seen a Western was the Salton Sea.

After we pulled into the parking lot at the Marina we found the bird rather quickly sitting on the marina booms. The dark mantle-color made it stick out like a sore thumb as it was sitting amongst some Ring-billed, many California, and one Herring Gull. Paul put the scope on it and looked at it briefly. He backed away from the scope and let me look without letting on as what his thoughts were. I turned to him and we realized we had had the same reaction. After years of living in California seeing Western Gulls daily, followed by daily sightings of Great Black-backed while living in Cape May, NJ, for the past year, the bird just didn't look right to be a Western Gull. We spent well over one hour studying this gull, watching it preen, stretch its wings, bathe, looking at overall shape, wingtip pattern, underwing, soft-part color, and other relevant field marks. A number of features shown by this bird were correct for Great Black-backed and incorrect for Western. The following is taken from field notes written in the afternoon of 14 October 1995.

Description: A large dark-mantled gull. Larger, taller, and heavier than the surrounding gulls, including the Herring, particularly noticeable in flight. There was no brownish tinges to the plumage, no black on the bill, and the tail was all white, indicating it was an adult. The head was white except for fine dusky streaks behind the eye which extended around the back of the crown. The lower nape was also finely streaked. The bill was massive, not particular long, with an arched culmen. The thick base swelled a little towards the tip, but not as much as a Western Gull. Western Gulls tend to be a bit thinner at the base relative to the tip with a swollen gonys. The bill was a warm yellow with a large red oval spot on the gonys. The eye color appeared to be dark at a distance, but when the bird turned so that the light hit the eye at the right angle, the color could be seen to be amber. This is typical of Great Black-backed Gulls, despite what is shown in the field guides. The mantle and wing color was blackish, as dark or darker than the extreme southern Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis wymani*).

The wingtip pattern showed a large white tip on the outermost primary, with some white on the next primary, though I could not tell how much. It was less than on the outermost one. This wingtip pattern is typical of Great Black-backed Gull, whereas Westerns only have a white subapical spot on the outermost primary. I was also quite impressed by the pale color of the underwing coverts. Western Gulls have very dark underwing coverts, almost the same color as the mantle. Greater Black-backed Gulls show lighter gray underwing coverts, several shades paler than the mantle. There is variation, some Great Black-backed Gull have darker underwing coverts than others, but this bird's underwing was clearly a

number of shades lighter than the upperparts, a pearly gray. As far as I can remember Western Gulls always have dark underwing coverts. Another feature that I was struck by on the wings was the size of the white tips to the remaining primaries, which were visible when the bird was at rest. These white tips were quite large, bigger and wider than Western Gull. This is more like Great Black-backed Gull than Western Gull.

Leg color was another significant feature which helped clinched the identification for me. This bird's leg color was a pasty, pale pinkish color similar to an oystercatcher. It is a sickly color and absolutely correct for Great Black-backed Gull and incorrect for Western. Western Gulls have much brighter pink legs, more like a Herring Gull. Fortunately we had a Herring standing just down the boom a bit for easy comparison. Its legs were much, much pinker than the bird in question.

The overall shape of the head and size of the bird was just fine for a small female Great Black-backed. There is so much variation in size within this species. I thought that the bird looked too big and broad-winged in flight when compared with the California Gulls to be a Western.

The streaking on the head was just like Great Black-backed Gulls I see here in Cape May, whereas it is the northern paler subspecies of Western *L.o. occidentalis* that gets mottling about the head during the winter, not *wymani*. The markings on a winter *occidentalis* tend to be more obvious with broad smudgy streaking, not thin and pencil-like, as this bird showed. *Wymani* retain an all-white head during the winter.

The evidence, in my opinion, is stacked against this bird being a Western.


Shawneen Finnegan
P.O. Box 379
Cape May, NJ 08204-0379

Bob Righter
2358 So. Fillmore
Denver, Colorado 80210-5502

October 3, 1995

To: Colorado Birds Record Committee

To Whom This May Concern:

I first noticed on September 20 between 9-10 am. at Cherry Creek State Park, standing on a pylon at the boat marina was a very large white bodied, dark-backed, four year type gull. On Oct. 1 between 8:45 to 9:15 am, I subsequently viewed from the prairie loop vantage point what I would presume to be the same large dark-backed gull swimming 150-200 yards away. The day was foggy on the 20th. with no direct sunlight and on Oct. 1 it was sunny with the sun almost behind me. Combined I was able to view the gull from about 150-200 yards to as close as about 50 yards away (Oct. 1). Both days I viewed the gull with a 30X scope and I took voice notes with a cassette recorder. The following is a result of that combined discourse.

The gull appeared significantly **larger than** an adult California gull that it was standing next to it on the pylon on Sept. 26. The head appeared white, accented slightly with a dusky fringe. In contrast the head of the adult California Gull appeared grayish with its winter hood markings. At times the **crown** was distinctly flat and slightly peaked at the rear (as on Sept. 20); other times the crown appeared domed (when swimming on Oct 1). The **gape** was noticeable and visible to below the eye, it did not appear to go beyond the eye. The **bill** was large as one would expect for a large four year gull. There was a **gonys angle** but not significant enough to give the distal end the large noticeable bulbous look that I would associate with a **large male** Western or Great Black-backed Gull. While at rest (Sept. 26), the **neck** appeared thick and "football player" shaped, being wider where it meets the back, when the gull was swimming, (as Oct 1), the head was more attenuated and the neck appeared less "football player" shaped. The overall **facial expression** was not particularly fierce, maybe because there was not the noticeable bony protruding structure over the eye (at least at a distance of 50 yds. it was not distinctly noticeable). The **color of the bill** from the proximate to the gonys was a pale yellow color with a trace of olive tones. On the lower mandible from the gonys to the bill tip appeared a **darkish red spot**. Towards the rear of this spot there was dark shading that slightly distracted from this spot being totally dark red (although this spot appeared dark red from 50 yards away, the light at that time of day could have caused the red to be darker?). The **back** was blackish with dark brownish tones scattered over apx.. 15 to 20% of the area. The **leg color** from 50 yds. appeared a pale pink. From 100 yds. it was difficult to tell if the legs were not olive (as on Sept. 26). Decidedly the legs did not appear strikingly pink. At 50 yards away the **eye** appeared proportionally small and darkish. I could not say categorically the eye was dark only that the eye appeared darkish from that distance.

Bob Righter
2358 So. Fillmore
Denver, Colorado 80210-5502

There was no visible contrasting color of an **orbital ring**. The **tail** was white with dark spots at the distal dorsal outer corners. The **tertials** were worn, frayed, and dusky whitish-tipped. The **end of the wing** extended at least a bill length beyond the tail. Unfortunately, during the hour I was watching (Sept. 26) the gull only stretched its wing once and flew once which was only from pylon down to water. Both of these brief opportunities I could not determine much **wing information** except that on the outer 1 or 2 primaries there appeared a white spot. The **trailing dorsal wing** appeared noticeably whitish, at least to include all the secondaries. On at least some of the dorsal **inner middle and greater coverts** there appeared brownish fringes. From about a 150 yds. away the gull quickly flapped its wings once; during that episode the ventral flight feathers appeared darkish and contrasted with at least the inner wing coverts. The **primaries** appeared worn and frayed. From the field marks I saw, this gull appeared to be a 3rd summer molting to adult 4th year plumage.

Of the dark-backed North American gulls that one could reasonably expect to appear, the **Lesser Black-backed Gull** could be ruled out by size, leg and probably by back color. Although I've seen thousands of both the Great Black-back Gulls as well as Western Gulls, I failed at the various times to take distinct notes of all of the variation that I've potentially encountered. This gull was reported as a **Western Gull** to the rare bird report and it could very well be. Due, however, to the potential variability in size, eye and leg color as well as to various forms of possibly hybridization of the Great Black-backed and of the Western Gull, as well for that matter all the potential variations the Slaty-backed Gull can sport, I don't know how I could categorically separate the Western Gull from the others based on what I was able to view. Unfortunately this report will have to be only supporting evidence to other potential reports. Hopefully others had better as well as more diagnostic views.

Rare Bird Report

Species: Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* or Western Gull *Larus Occidentalis*

Place: Cherry Creek Reservoir

Time: 10/25/1995, 3:30-4:30PM

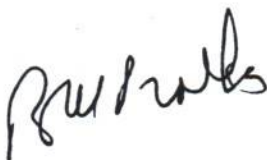
Reporter: Bill Prather The bird was also seen by Inez Prather

Observation conditions: The bird was seen sitting on the water at about 50 yards, flying around with other gulls, and flying-twice going right overhead at about 50 feet.

Plumage and Description: The bird was observed with Ring-billed, California and Herring gulls. It was definitely larger than the California Gulls but appeared very close in size the the Herring Gulls. When both species were swimming together their length was carefully compared and appeared almost equal. When flying, the two species could not be told apart by size. Even when the dark barked gull raised its wings in a threatening display over a piece of food it did not appear larger. The bill of the dark backed bird was deeper than that of the Herring but not much longer. the bill had a spot that appeared red in direct sun but blackish in indirect light. The mantle and upper wings were dark slaty gray but noticeably lighter than the wingtips. Most of the primaries appeared to have small white tips but these did not connect into a larger window on the outermost feathers. The underwings were white on the coverts but very contrastingly dusky on the flight feathers. The head was faintly streaked on white. The eye was dirty yellow and the legs were dull pink.

Separation of similar species: The large size, black back and pink legs rule out all species except Great Black-backed, Western and Slaty-backed Gulls. When we were at the lake observing the bird we were sure it was a Western Gull because of the size, lack of large windows on the wing tips, color contrast between the mantle and the wing tips, and dusky flight feathers when seen from below. I have seen Paul Lehman's report and agree he makes a solid case for GBB but I can't quite believe it because of the unimpressive size and the mantle was not dark enough. I agree he has a lot more experience with both species, however.

Bill Prather



COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (originally WESTERN GULL)Larus marinusLocation: Cherry Creek Reservoir; Denver, Arapahoe County, ColoradoDate: September 17, 1995

This bird was discovered the previous day and seen by many. I watched it the morning of September 17th for about 2 hours. We observed it from about 75-200 yards. I watched it with binoculars and with Kowa TSN4 20-60X scope. The light was poor because of the angle but there was good sun. I could only sometimes see the face in direct sun and then only briefly. The bird stood perched most of the time on tires but sometimes it flew short distances. This allowed observation of the underwing when it landed. It perched with California and Ring-billed gulls.

Description:

This was a 3rd summer molting into 4th winter (adult) bird. This was evidenced by the adult bill and mantle but the third year tail (black mottling on some tail feathers). The primary molt was about half complete. The bird was very large and dark-backed. It was about 5-6" longer than California Gull, which would make it about 26-27" long. The bill was massive, deep, but short; thick at the tip with a pronounced gonys. The bill color was yellow with a red spot at the gonys. The eye was dark; we called it either "light brown" or "dark yellow" or "amber". The legs and feet were thick and dull pink. The head and underparts were white with fine streaking on the crown, nape and behind the eye. The crown was flattened with a peak at the front and back. The forehead merged with the bill at a low angle. The mantle was dark gray (much darker than California Gull). This color was a couple of shades lighter than the black wing tip. There was a broad white terminal band on the blackish-gray secondaries. All primaries were dull black. The outer 4-5 primaries were worn, with frayed tips; the inner 5-6 primaries were fresh with white tips. The outer primary showed a single long white spot. The inner primaries were fresh, broadly white-tipped, gray down the length and lacked a subterminal white spot. The tail was white with blackish striping and mottling along the vanes of many feathers. The dark gray mantle color contrasted with the black wing tip. The underwing showed dusky primaries -- clearly dark but not nearly as black as the upper wing.

Similar Species:

The large size, and dark back and mantle rule out nearly all other gulls. In direct comparison the bird was much larger, stockier and darker than California Gull, and was pink-legged. Slaty-backed is lighter gray above, with a white border between the black wing tip and the gray distal wing, has a less massive bill, pinker legs and a yellow iris. The Yellow-footed Gull would have yellow legs. Most Western Gulls would be lighter. The darker southern race would have a yellow iris. This bird had streaking on the head, nape and crown which Western lacks in winter. The underwing of Western Gull is nearly as black as the upperwing. This bird had dusky, not black underwing.

Experience with Species:

I have seen many Great Black-backed, Western, Yellow-footed and Herring gulls. I have seen Great Black-backed Gulls four previous times in Colorado.

This report was prepared from notes made at the time of observation. See attached field sketches.

Mark Janos
10 Sedum Ct.
Pueblo, CO 81001



17 Sept 1993
Hannah Ranch

Or-cr Warblers 5

Wils. " 5

→ Cherry Cr. Res.

*Western (?) Gull - 1

3rd summer (?) molting into

4th winter (ad.) A evidenced

by adult (yellow) bill &

adult (dark grey) mantle,

but 3rd year (white w/

blackish striping & mottling)

tail. Primary molt

~ 1/2 complete. Outer

4-5 1sts old w/ white tips

worn off; Inner 5 or 6

fresh, shorter, w/ white

tips: (in folded, stretched)

fresh, wing 10th 1st old, worn 1st



Head & bill shape:

dark iris

yellow bill

red spot

Bill large; not long; very deep; heavier at tip than base.

head flat above; peaked behind

speckled crown, nape, behind eye

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Mantle & inner 2/3 of wing

very dark grey (~ 2-3

shades darker than Cal.

Gull). Color is ~ 2 shades

lighter than black wing

tip. Broad (~ 1-1 1/2")

white terminal band

on 2^o's.

Wingtip (~ outer 5-6 1sts

& coverts) as follows:

Dull black (all) 1sts

above, w/ white tips

lacking. Long, white

window (~ 1-1 1/2") on

outer (1st) primary only.

Second-4-5th 1st are all

blackish. Inner 1sts

fresh, broadly white

tipped, grey down length;

lacking subterminal

white spot:

shorter, darker; white tip; rounded

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed

black, white tip; pointed