

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTATION FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS

1) Reason for documenting this sighting - unusual species, unusual number, unusual date, unusual plumage, unusual breeding record, Christmas Bird Count record, Spring Bird Count record (include all that apply): **unusual species**

2) Species: **Slaty-backed Gull**

3) Number of birds: **1**

4) Age/Sex/Plumage: **First summer**

5) Date(s): **June 2, 2011**

6) Location (include county): **North Point Marina, Winthrop Harbor, Lake County**

7) Observers: **Greg Neise, Karen Mansfield, Adam Sell, Jeff Skrentny**

8) Your name: **Greg Neise**

9) Your mailing address: [REDACTED]

10) Your e-mail address: [REDACTED]

11) Others agreeing with the identification: **Karen Mansfield, Adam Sell, Jeff Skrentny**

12) Observers NOT agreeing with the identification:

13) Description of bird (size, shape, proportions, details of both color and pattern on head, back, chin, throat, breast, flanks, wings, undertail, and tail, etc.; coloration of soft parts: bill, legs, and feet). Include only details actually seen in the field:

Large, white-headed and largely white-backed, with very noticeably contrasting new, dark scapular feathers coming in and a completely dark, brownish, tail. Bill mostly dark, with pink at the base and a small patch on the upper mandible. Bill shape: stout with parallel edges and little gonys expansion.

Wing panel mostly bleached and worn. Lesser and greater coverts bleached and worn almost down to the quills. Two or three incoming feathers on the lesser coverts appeared to be the same color and tone as the incoming scapular feathers.

Secondaries brownish, with little pattern. Outermost 4 feathers appear to show a pale trailing edge. Outer primaries the same color and tone as the secondaries; inner primaries paler. Undersides of primaries whitish.

Tail completely dark brown. Head neck and upper breast white, with very limited brownish markings. Lower breast and belly mottled/smudged brown. Vent area white. Undertail coverts white with limited brown barring. Legs and feet pink. Iris honey-colored.

14) Description of behavior: **Sitting on the rocks and preening.**

- 15) Description of vocalizations: **none**
- 16) Description of immediate and surrounding habitat(s): **Lake Michigan harbor, outer breakwater.**
- 17) Optical equipment used for observation (type, power): **Leica 10x50 Ultravid binoculars; Kowa Prominar 883 spotting scope (20-60x), with digiscoping attachment.**
- 18) Distance/how measured? **650 feet, measured using Google Earth.**
- 19) Time(s) of observation: **7:45 pm**
- 20) Total time of observation: **45 minutes**
- 21) Weather conditions: **Clear and calm**
- 22) Previous experience with this species and similar species: **None with SBGU in this plumage, considerable experience with Herring Gull in this plumage.**
- 23) Please eliminate other similar species and/or hybrids: **See additional remarks.**
- 24) Were photos obtained? **Yes, see below.**
- 25) If so, by whom? **Greg Neise**
- 26) Books and illustrations consulted and advice received. How did these influence this description?
Several books and web sites were consulted and much advice was received. The literature has very little information on SBGU in this plumage.
- Comments/advice from observers familiar with this species in this plumage were few (although comments from observers *not* familiar with summer SBGU were plentiful).**
- 27) How long after the observation were field notes recorded? **Immediately.**
- 28) How long after the observation was this form completed? **~3 months.**
- 29) Additional remarks:



Large—noticeably larger/heavier than nearby Herring Gulls—stocky build, heavy bill and patchwork of slate gray and brown feathers made this bird stand out among the Herring Gulls on the breakwater.

Key to this identification is ascertaining the correct age of the bird. This is a first-summer (nearing the end of first cycle) bird... according to Humphrey - Parkes terminology, this bird has completed its first molt cycle and has started its second (because it has new, 2nd-gen. inner primaries).

Peter Adriens, concerning this bird's age, via email: "there can be little doubt about the age of the Chicago gull: it has juvenile central/outer primaries and juvenile secondaries, so it is approximately one year old. Note how the outermost primary is so worn that a projecting shaft becomes visible - typical of a very worn, juvenile primary. As for the "new feathers showing at bend of rear wing edge", they are incoming 2nd-generation inner primaries (again entirely consistent with a bird of about one year old). Third-generation primaries would show prominent white tips, almost as in adult birds."



Note how the contrast between the brown belly and slate gray scapular and back feathers on a mostly white bird creates a distinctive “piebald” look.

From Olsen and Larsson description of first winter SBGU, page 355: "(Apr–Sep) as first winter, but coverts (especially greater coverts) and rump fade to whitish; flight feathers and tail bleach to brown. New upperpart feathers dark, creating **piebald pattern**. Bill often acquires pale base/tip and eye becomes paler."

Osao and Michiaki Ujihara, on the Japanese Gull Site: “Note the combination of pale head-breast and dark belly...this pattern can be seen very often in this [Slaty-backed Gull] ... Upper parts from lower breast are distinctly whitish, against brown belly. This often can be good key to identification.”

While Herring Gull can show surprisingly dark, sooty scapulars, these feathers are usually confined to the lower scapulars, as Martin Reid points out (via email), “such darker feathers tend to be clustered around the rear and sides of the scapular tract - not scattered throughout that tract,” as we see in the NPM bird. Also note that the sooty feathers in question are usually seen in second-summer HERG (see *Gulls of the Americas*, p. 162).

The feathers on this bird’s back are either white or slate gray. There are effectively no brown-tinted feathers on the scapulars or the back.

This, along with the bird’s size and build eliminates Herring Gull. But there are other things that strongly trend away from HERG as well: 1cy HERG usually shows barring on the undertail coverts

and vent area coming forward nearly to the legs. This bird shows barring only on the undertail coverts. 1cy HERG usually has dark eyes. This bird has honey-colored irides.

Herring X Great Black-backed Gull hybrid: This was our main concern in identifying this bird. Except for the slate gray mantle feathers, this bird shows little in common with GBBG. The bird is larger and bulkier than HERG, but not as large as GBBG. The bill in particular, is not large or “swollen” enough for GBBG, and GBBG rarely shows pink at the base of the bill before well into second cycle. GBBG also typically shows a noticeable horn-colored tip of the bill in 2/3 cycle. The key feature eliminating GBBG is the bird’s tail. The tail is all-dark, with no discernible white markings of any kind. GBBG typically shows a considerable amount of white at the base of the tail, and HERG typically shows *some* white barring, particularly on R5-6. It stands to reason that a hybrid would likely show *some* white in the tail.



Note the all-dark tail. Also note the long secondaries (even taking into account the extremely worn greater coverts).



Note all dark tail and white rump.



Note the difference in color and tone between the slate gray scapulars and the brownish wing feathers. Also note the whitish underside of P10 on the bird's left wing. Alvaro Jaramillo and others point out that SBGU in first cycle has "extensive pale inner vanes to the primaries, giving it a Thayer's Gull like underwing pattern, with only the tips of the undersides of the primaries being dark". Also note the rich pink coloration of the feet.

While Herring Gull can also show whitish undersides of the primary feathers, and Great Black-backed usually shows dark tips, Slaty-backed Gull always shows pale, Thayer's-like undersides to the primaries.



Note barring only on the undertail coverts, with vent and lower belly white. 1cy HERG usually shows barring on the undertail coverts and vent area coming forward nearly to the legs.



Note the pale brown primaries and secondaries compared to the tail. Also note the “secondary skirt”.



Comparison of color and tone of mantle feathers with a 3cy HERG flying past. The swatches represent color grabs from a range locations on each bird's back, both lit and in shadow.



Note the evenly scattered slate gray feathers across the back, and how the color and tone contrasts with the brown belly.



Note honey colored iris, bill shape and slate gray incoming lesser covert feather (blue arrow).

“GISS” comparisons. Via ID Frontiers and IBF, some commenters suggested that this bird’s structure wasn’t “classic” Slaty-backed Gull. Direct comparisons, however, do not show that to be the case.



NPM bird on the left, 1cy (March) SBGU from the Japanese Gull Site at right.

Olsen and Larsson describe SBGU as "large...stocky...alert birds often stretch the neck and adopt a characteristic pot-bellied appearance". Howell and Dunn do not describe SBGU in terms like this at all, saying only that it is "heavier" than HERG.

Note the similarities in body shape (especially the “goose butt”), iris color, brown belly contrasting with white head, chest and breast and undertail coverts.



Comparison of leg length. 1cy SBGU from the Japanese Gull Site at left.

From private email:

I think your bird looks pretty good for 1st-summer SBGU, but I suppose the caution put forth by the others is not unreasonable (maybe a little)...everything seems OK to me, including posture/leg length, the primaries seem fine to me for SBGU as well, and agree with you about the dark upperpart feathers.

I don't think it's a HERG, at least not a pure one - the body structure and bill size seem too stout to me. I agree with Martin [Reid] that jizz is correct for SBGU.

-Peter Pyle, June 13 2011

Another comparison, below, of the NPM bird (inset) and similarly bleached and worn Herring Gulls (taken a week before, also at North Point Marina). Note the differences in overall bulk and body shape, as well as bill shape and size. HERG also has longer primary projection giving it a more attenuated look.

