

Slaty-backed Gull

10RLC # 1983.004

Jan. 10, 1984

Due to the pressures of leaving this week for a long trip, I prepared this documentation based on our observations through Jan. 5.

On Jan. 6 the gull was relocated at Alton Dam, and from Jan. 6-8 was studied by numerous observers under various conditions. Many saw the bird for an extended time, swimming, flapping and in flight, at 100-200 yds. in ideal light.

Additional comments based on my subsequent observations:

The swimming bird seemed quite distinctly larger than Herring Gulls, but smaller than Glaucous by direct (same scope view) comparison with both species. The heavy head, neck and chest gave it a front-heavy appearance, and this plus the long, thick bill made the bird appear somewhat like a small albatross. This thought was expressed independently by Bill Rudden, Barbara Spencer (NY) and me.

In flight there was noticeable white on the leading wing edge, very much as in the photo in the Aud. Master Guide.

All points mentioned in my documentation of the wing patterning were reinforced and seen repeatedly, above and below.

Total observers through Jan. 8 : 200+ from 15 states.

Phoebe Inetinger

Kern - I'm not absolutely sure you got a definitive look at the wing pattern, but you were there when Peterjohn & Pogacnik did, so I included your name -

Glad you came down -

I'm sending a copy of all this to Bruce Peterjohn.

DOCUMENTATION OF SLATY-BACKED GULL

Phoebe Snetsinger

Species: Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), one adult

Location: St. Louis area. Mississippi River, near I-270-bridge and Chain o' Rocks. On both Missouri and Ill. sides of river.
Best study from St. Louis City waterworks on Missouri side.

Date: Dec. 31, 1983. (Bird initially found Dec. 20 and seen again 23, 26 and 30 but not identified until 31.) Still present Jan. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (until 10 AM)

Time: Studied from about 10:30 AM to 12 noon. Seen at varying distances off and on until 5 PM.

Equipment: 8x40 Leitz binoculars, 20-45x Bushnell zoom scope

Distance: about 125 yards, estimated.

Light: Overcast. Obscured sun to our right. Light adequate to good.

Observers: On 12/31 careful close study made by Bill Rudden, Ron Goetz, Phoebe Snetsinger, Dick Anderson, Dave Jones.

Observers on subsequent days who had at least a brief or reasonably satisfactory view of wing pattern (and a lengthy scope study of the distant standing bird) include:

Jan. 1 : Carmen Patterson (St. Louis)
Dave Bohlen (Springfield, Ill.)
Dick Sandburg (Decatur, Ill.)
Tom McLean (Ill.)
Jim Landing } (Chicago)
Richard Biss }
Denny Jones } (Ill.)
Leroy Harrison }

Jan. 2: Larry Feavler (Indianapolis)
Erinard Palmer-Ball (Kentucky)
Louise Augustine (Ill.)
Tim Barksdale (Columbia, Mo.)
Chris Hobbs (Kansas City, Mo.)

Jan. 4: Bruce Peterjohn } (Ohio)
John Pogacnik }
Vernon Kleen (Ill.)

Through Jan 5 the bird was seen by nearly 100 people from 5 states.

Weather: Conditions just prior to the initial sighting of the bird on Dec. 20 should be mentioned. A strong cold front hit St. Louis on Dec. 18, with strong northwest winds. Temperatures the next several days plunged well below 0° with record wind chills of 50-60° below. Such conditions make the appearance of an Asian-Alaskan vagrant seem not too outrageously impossible.

Behavior: The gull in question was consistently with Herring (up to several hundred) and occasional Glaucous and Thayer's Gulls. It sat on the ice of the Mississippi River with the other gulls, sometimes swimming in the water. It flew with all the gulls when eagles periodically passed over, circled with them and often returned to the same area of ice.

The bird did not seem to feed in the Chain o' Rocks rapids where many of the others did. From Dec. 31 on it seemed to have a pattern of resting on the ice most of the morning, leaving around noon to fly far downriver (essentially alone), probably to feed, and returning to its resting place by early afternoon. It did not seem aggressive toward the other gulls, nor was it harassed by them.

The best views were obtained when the bird in preening would stretch out a wing, or best of all, stretch both wings up over its back, holding them momentarily fully spread. The gull was hard to follow in flight in the milling pack, and even when flying alone not much detail could be seen on the wing pattern except the wide white trailing edge on the very dark wing. It never flew close to the observers for really good flight views.

Description: A large gull with dark slate-gray mantle and contrasting black wingtips was found sitting on the ice near the edge of the river with Herring Gulls and one first-winter Glaucous. It appeared essentially the size of a Herring Gull, marginally larger than most Herrings but distinctly smaller than the Glaucous standing next to it. The head, neck and chest seemed more massive and bulky than than the Herrings near it. The forehead was sloped and the crown very flat, coming to a sharp angle on the rear crown.

The mantle color (dark slate-gray) looked darker (less contrast with the black wingtips) than that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull, one of which was studied at Lake Carlyle, Ill. on 12/17 by Rudden, Anderson and me. At any great distance the whole wing appeared quite uniformly blackish, but closer views showed definite contrast of the dark gray mantle with the blacker wingtips. The mantle color seemed to me at least as dark and probably darker than the southern race of the Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis wymani*) and Yellow-footed Gull (*Larus livens*), which I studied at San Diego and the Salton Sea respectively this past Sept.

The bill was yellow with a large red spot, roughly round in shape, on the lower mandible at the gonys. The bill was obviously longer and somewhat deeper than the Herrings next to it, but not

swollen or bulbous on the distal part as in a typical Western. The mouth lining was pinkish, seen as the bird yawned.

The eye was a clear, very pale yellow. The orbital ring seemed dark, but no color was perceived. Either dark feathering around the eye or a heavy dark orbital ring gave a dark eye-ring effect, almost like mascara make-up.

The head and neck were heavily streaked brownish. A dark streak extended back and upward from the rear of the eye (rather as portrayed in A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan, p.89, but angled more upwards from the rear of the eye.) Streaking was heavy on crown and especially heavy on back of neck, but also extended to front of neck and terminated in a V on upper breast. Overall this gave a brown-hooded effect comparable in extent to a heavily streaked Herring Gull, but browner in tone, less gray than in Herrings.

The legs and feet were a deep, bright pink, more intense than the usual Herring Gull, though there were occasional Herrings present that showed comparable leg color. The feet seemed a particularly bright reddish-pink.

The folded primaries on the sitting bird showed a row of five separate white tips, the innermost being partly obscured by the tertial crescent. The bird showed a white scapular crescent typical of many adult gulls and a very wide white tertial crescent, noticeably wider than on nearby Herrings. There was a narrow white line visible where the secondary tips protruded below the greater coverts. The white areas on the sitting bird appeared exactly as in the photo on p. 190 of Roberson's Rare Birds of the West Coast.

The tail was entirely white. The folded wingtips extended very slightly past the end of the tail.

In flight from above and below the very wide white trailing edge to the wing was striking and obvious. This is shown well in the Aud. Soc. Master Guide to Birding, Vol. 2, p. 67, and in Armstrong, Birds of Alaska (1980) p. 160. The flight feathers from below were gray, becoming darker (but not black) toward the outer primaries.

Primary patterning: This provided the best clue to the bird's identity, and we concentrated our efforts on being absolutely sure of the significant features, both from above and below. The bird stretched its wings in a leisurely fashion several times, at various angles, and finally held both wings up simultaneously for a satisfying several seconds, so that the upperside of the far wing and the underside of the near wing were visible at the same time. (This performance was repeated on Jan. 1 for the many observers present, though at a much greater distance). We were able to observe and agree upon the following patterning. (Primaries numbered inward, with #1 as the outermost.):

All primaries were white-tipped.

Primary #1 showed a subterminal long white mirror, separated from the white tip by a narrow black area. This mirror could be

seen from above on the extended wing and also on the underside of the far wingtip as the bird stood with wings folded.

Primary #2 appeared all black except for the white tip. (Possible small mirror noted from below Jan. 4 ?)

Primaries #3-7 showed subterminal elongated white spots on the inner webs, with the spot on #3 being furthest from the tip, and the spots on the succeeding primaries gradually approaching the white tips. The spots on #6 and 7 were partially or wholly joined to the white tips, forming a large, irregularly-shaped white area.

The effect was of a broken white band, or line of white spots rather like a short string of pearls curving inward from the white trailing edge into the black of the primaries. This was well seen on the underwing because of the location of these subterminal spots on the inner webs of the primaries. The primaries have to be well spread to show this feature from above. A couple of times we had a view of the upperwing only partly extended, so that this feature appeared as a row of narrow white slits.

Comments:

This is a unique and diagnostic wing pattern, and is apparently variable in extent. It was more obvious on our bird than in either of the two photos we have available (Aud. Master Guide, Vol. 2, p. 67; Birds of Alaska, p. 160). According to Larry Selch, some Slaty-backed Gulls do not show this feature at all. Harrison (Seabirds, p. 344, under SS) mentions the narrow, indistinct whitish band across the primaries, which is portrayed in exaggerated fashion on Plate 57.

The National Geographic Guide (p. 154) illustrates the pattern as seen on our bird very well. The number of primaries involved in the white spotting and the configuration is very like our bird, but the outer two white spots are a bit too far from the tips-- i.e., the line of spots on our bird did not curve inward quite so sharply. Also the gray of the mantle is much too pale on the plate.

For some unexplained reason (lighting, exposure?) the mantle color in the photo in Birds of Alaska (p. 160) also appears much too pale. The Audubon Master Guide photo (Vol. 2, p. 67) shows the color accurately. Both Roberson (Rare Birds of the West Coast, p. 191) and Harrison (Seabirds, p. 344) state that the mantle color of Slaty-backed Gull is slightly darker than the darkest race of Western Gull (*L. o. wymani*). I saw two second-year Slaty-backed Gulls on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska in June '81 and noted the back color of those birds to be a very dark blackish-gray. The mantle color of our bird therefore seems consistent with what we know to be the color of Slaty-backed Gulls.

The only feature of our bird which is not well described in our available sources is the heavy head and neck streaking. Harrison (Seabirds, p. 344) says head of winter adult is "lightly streaked gray-brown, heaviest on nape and hindneck". The Field Guide to Birds of Japan (p. 89) shows brown winter head streaking, but to a lesser extent than on our bird. Larry Balch discussed the details of our bird with Thede Tobish (Alaska), and the head streaking seems consistent with his experience. None of the Chicago Nat. History Museum skin photos shown us by Larry Peavler were of winter adults.

Consideration of other species:

Bill Rudden, Ron Goetz and I spent 10 days puzzling over the possible identity of this bird and researching the available sources. Rudden saw the bird alone on Dec. 20 and 23, well enough to establish size, mantle coloration, leg color and heavy head streaking. Rudden, Tim Barksdale (Columbia, Mo.) and Paul Bauer (St. Louis) saw the bird bathing and in flight on Dec. 26, but were unable to get a definitive description of the wingtip. On Dec. 30 Rudden (alone) definitely established that there was one long mirror on the outermost primary. Previously he had expressed to us that he thought he had seen a row of subterminal white spots on the underwing. From Bill's verbal description of the bird (Ron and I did not see it until Dec. 31) the three of us had pretty much eliminated the following:

Great Black-backed Gull: From the first sighting it was obvious that the bird was not a normal Great Black-back, since they are much larger than Herrings and the head is essentially unstreaked in winter. The mirror pattern on the outer two primaries of this species is distinctive, and this feature was definitely ruled out on Dec. 30. The mantle-wingtip coloration of this species is also more uniformly blackish.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Both races show yellow legs in the adult, and the bird is generally smaller than Herrings. *Larus fuscus graellsii* has a paler mantle than our bird, and in *L. f. fuscus* with the darker mantle the "head remains more or less white" in winter (Harrison, Seabirds p. 341).

Western Gull: This was our most serious consideration and we set out to find the bird on the 31st with this possibility in mind. (American Birds Sept. 82 p. 899 has an article by Charles Duncan on Western Gull in Alabama and Florida which would be useful in dealing with possible out-of-range Westerns.)

The dark mantle color and pale yellow eye (definitely established Dec. 26) made the southern race (*wymani*) the likelier candidate, but the head of this race is virtually unstreaked in winter. (McCaskie, Western Birds Vol. 14, No. 2, 1983, p. 89, 94; Harrison, p. 342, Pl. 57).

Northern birds with the lighter mantle that show dense head streaking are considered nominate Western x Glaucous-winged hybrids. (McCaskie p. 89; Harrison Pl. 57).

The very heavy head streaking of our bird really seemed inconsistent with any 'pure' Western Gull.

6.
Kelp Gull (Southern Black-backed Gull) (Larus dominicanus).
Legs are greenish-yellow (Harrison) and personal experience in Peru.

Yellow-footed Gull was also excluded on the basis of leg color.

Dark races of Herring Gull: Harrison (Seabirds, p. 338) gives a description of the dark-backed races of Herring Gull:

L. a. heuglini is said to be the "darkest of any race, approaching palest examples of Lesser Black-backed Gull (L. f. graellsii)". Grant (Gulls, A Guide to Identification, p. 84) gives the same information. Since our bird had a mantle darker than a Lesser Black-back, this would apparently exclude any race of Herring. L. a. heuglini also has yellow legs.

L. a. taimyrensis, the next darkest race, has winter head only faintly streaked.

Geographically the most serious consideration would be L. a. vagae, the Siberian race of Herring Gull. This is lighter-mantled than the above two races, but certainly darker than L. a. smithsonianus (Harrison; Grant). It is "still much lighter-mantled than Slaty-backed" (Roberson, p. 192. Harrison p. 344). I had field experience with this race on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, June '81, and also feel that it did not match the very dark slate-gray tones of Slaty-backed.

Hybrids: Rudden's initial comments about the bird (Dec. 20) mentioned the possibility of hybrid, since the bird did not seem to fit any dark-mantled gull with which he was familiar.

American Birds Nov. 79 p. 838 has an article by Roger Foxall describing presumed hybrids of Herring and Great Black-backed. We read this hoping to find the solution to our dilemma, only to find that the typical case has a lighter mantle than a Lesser Black-back, very little or no head streaking and very pale legs. Other possible hybrid combinations could certainly not be ruled out, and we felt we might have to settle on an undescribed or unknown hybrid as a solution.

We had considered Slaty-backed as a very remote possibility, simply because the bird by Dec. 30 seemed to be nothing else, so we knew what to look for in the wing patterning. When we finally saw this feature convincingly, it very obviously excluded all the above species and races on this point alone. The wing patterning is what sold us all immediately on the identification of the bird as a Slaty-backed Gull, and then of course size and mantle color fit also, as did the bright pink legs. The head streaking was at least not inconsistent with what we knew, and later information from Thede Tobish via Larry Balch seems to confirm that also. We hope to check specimens of winter adults (if there are any) in the Chicago collection soon.

Addendum:

On Jan. 2 Larry Peavler showed us two photos of a "mystery" gull (adult) taken by Tom Heatley at Sault Ste. Marie in Nov. 79. Both underwing and upperwing show strong similarities to our bird. The underwing shot is best, and clearly shows a row of white spots coming in from the wide white trailing edge of the wing, though apparently one primary less in extent than on our bird. This bird is also heavily streaked on head and neck, extending to the upper breast.

The gull was originally identified as a Western, then when that was discounted, hybrid was suggested. The matter apparently got no further, and the gull was never identified. Ron Goetz, Bill Rudden, Dick Anderson and I examined the photo in light of our own observations and feel that this photo is very probably a Slaty-backed Gull.

Literature:

Books

- National Geographic Society Field Guide to Birds of North America
- Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, Vol. 2
- Armstrong, Robert. A Guide to the Birds of Alaska (1980)
- Harrison, Peter. Seabirds
- Roberson, Don. Rare Birds of the West Coast
- A Field guide to the Birds of Japan (Wild Bird Soc. of Japan)
- Pough, Richard. Audubon Western Bird Guide
- Grant, P. J. Gulls, A Guide to Identification

Articles

- Balch, Larry. Identification and Status of Asian Species in Alaska. Birding, Feb. 1980, p. 18
- Binford, Laurence. Lesser Black-backed Gull in California with Notes on Field Identification. Western Birds, Vol. 9 No. 4, 1978. pp. 145-149.
- Foxall, Roger. Presumed Hybrids of the Herring Gull and the Great Black-backed Gull. American Birds, Nov. 1979. p. 838.
- McCaskie, Guy. Another Look at the Western and Yellow-footed Gulls. Western Birds, Vol. 14 No. 2, 1983. p. 88, 89, 95.

Phoebe Inetinger

