

ILLINOIS

DOCUMENTATION FORM FOR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS
SUBMITTED TO ILLINOIS ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE (I.O.R.C.)
This form submitted as supporting documentation of (check all that apply):

I.O.R.C. RECORD NUMBER
1997-003

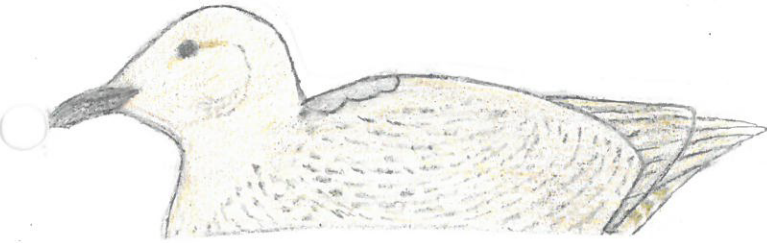
- Unusual species; Unusual date; Unusual number;
- Unusual plumage; Unusual breeding record; Christmas Count record; Spring Count record;
- Breeding Census record; Other: _____

1. Species: Glaucous-winged Gull (Larus glaucescens)
2. Number of birds: 1 Age/sex/plumage: 1st winter-showing 2nd year characteristics
3. Date(s): February 7, 1997
4. Location (incl. County): Mel Price Lock & Dam (Madison County)
5. Observers: Dan Kassebaum Phone: [REDACTED]
Your name: _____ Mailing address: [REDACTED]

Others agreeing with identification: Jack Van Benthuyssen, Jim Ziebol, Phoebe Snetsinger
Bill Rowe, Keith McMullen

Observers NOT agreeing with identification: _____

6. Physical description (size, shape, proportions, details of both color and pattern on the head, back, breast, undertail, wings, and tail; coloration of bill, eye, legs and feet) of details actually seen in the field:



Size: When sitting on the water, appeared to be slightly smaller than 3 adult Herring Gulls which were also on the water and very nearby. On the average, herring gulls are slightly smaller than most Glaucous-wings, but a female glaucous-wing may measure smaller than a herring gull male. Typically the range for glaucous-wing

is 23-27 inches and herring gull is 22-26 inches (Terres). The bird was also seen on the water and nearly side by side with a 1st winter Iceland Gull. In this situation the bird appeared obviously larger and especially as the birds faced away much broader across the back than the Iceland Gull. (Terres) lists Iceland Gull as 23-26 inches. The overlap in sizes certainly confuses the issue but the posture of the glaucous-wing on the water during the first observation with the herring gulls was quite interesting. As I viewed the bird my first impression was immediately of a glaucous-wing. I had briefly observed what I thought was a glaucous-wing some two weeks earlier but I did not get a satisfactory look. Jack also had a similar experience which we had discussed at length. Jack rediscovered the bird on the 6th, so on the seventh, obviously any light gull was going to be closely scrutinized. Jim Ziebol was also present on the seventh and almost simultaneously we pointed out the bird (without the aid of optics) but immediately I noticed the 'small' size of the bird. I certainly expected an obviously larger bird somewhat more like a Glaucous gull. All other aspects seemed 'right' but as we called out field marks and gained confidence we were indeed looking at a glaucous-wing we noticed a somewhat odd posture that may account for the 'small' appearance. The bird sat very low in the water, lower than the herring gulls which seemed to riding high on the water, also it had a forward tip like a jaeger breast low and tail high. I have no idea if this was a unique case or if this posture is 'normal' for such a heavy chested bird. The bird also viewed at length, and side by side with both herring and an Iceland gull as the birds flew. In the air no difference in size could be detected with the herring gulls. National Geo. lists both birds with a 58 inch wing span. Also, in the air the glaucous-wing was obviously larger than the Iceland gull which also certainly agrees with National Geographic (58 inches compared to 54 inches).

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6. Physical description (continued) Shape/Proportions: A 'big' gull, most noticeable as the bird flew. Very broad-winged at the base with a flight manner somewhat different than the similar herring gulls. 'Shallow' wingbeats in an effortless style as if the bird flew merely on casual flicks of its wing tips soaring in broad arcing circles without any quick or abrupt movements. Also, as the bird again landed to sit on the water, casually glided low over the water and smoothly continued its behavior of floating along with the pack ice. The face and the bill were closely viewed and compared to herring gulls and an Iceland gull. Obviously bigger headed than the Iceland with a flat crown and a heavier bill. Not so obvious compared to the herring gulls. Both had flat crowns and heavy bills, but the one difference was the gonydeal angle of the bill of the glaucous-wing. Definitely more pronounced on the glaucous-wing (compared to 3 adult herring gulls) but the culmen was not grossly curved as in some photos (such as the adult in Terres) but very similar if not the same as the herring gulls. Dave Johnson's photo from page 49 of Meadowlark (4:2) is nearly identical to the bird I viewed, except for the light tip to the bill. The bill observations are very subjective. Others who viewed the bird after it had been hotlined reported the very curved bill. But I believe in many cases when birds are hotlined, the others are less concerned with scrutinizing the bird and 'see' what they expect to see. I studied and compared and squinted and hoped I could positively say the culmen was obviously and grossly curved down but always it appeared much like the other herring gulls. I do not know how much curvature averages between males and females (I believe this bird to be a female) but I could not detect a difference. Fortunately the bill was 'big' unlike an Iceland or Thayer's gull and also fortunately the gonys were more pronounced than the herring gulls giving the lower mandible a bulge that the herring gulls did not have. As a comparison, in reference to Dave Johnson's photo, the culmen of the glaucous-wing and that of the herring gull in the background to the left, appear very much the same to me. Not unlike what I viewed in this case. As our observation continued and as we relied on reference for guidance, matters such as wing extension and the 'small' eye effect were looked for. Wing extension can be measured somewhat objectively and the primaries did not extend well beyond the tail but rather fit nicely right over the top of the tail with at most a slight projection of at least the outer primary. The small eye effect is obvious in Dave Johnson's photo and we too noted that characteristic but we were looking for it and that may somehow influence things (I wish I had noted it before I referred to the field guide). As noted before, the bird appeared broad-winged in flight. This I believe, is due in part to the tertials which also seemed more prominent on the folded wing compared to the herring gulls. This is consistent with the photo from Meadowlark and much discussed in the MacMillen field guide (a British publication) this character should not be apparent on Iceland gulls and although not discussed in that book, but also probably not on the similar Thayer's Gull. At this point shape and size should eliminate both Iceland and Thayer's Gull.

Color:(bill)mostly black except for a slight lighter area at the base. I could not satisfy myself on the cause of the lighter coloration. The lighter color was not pinkish but more bone colored or even slightly olive/mustard it may have even been a combination of bare parts and feathering giving the lighter effect. The tip of the bill was dark. I have noted, especially on Great Black-backed Gulls in 1st winter the bone colored tip of the bill. I expected to see this feature but it was not apparent to me. The (eye) was all dark. The (legs) were not noted. The bird was viewed mostly on the water and when it did fly I never saw the legs or feet. I assume they were dark.

6. Physical description (continued) Color: The most conclusive feature of this report are the plumage characteristics. Overall a uniformly light tawny brown gull. Very much like the dark extreme of a 1st winter Iceland. Always lighter and readily separable from any 1st year herring gull which always averaged darker with very dark contrasting primaries. Once observed the gull was easily refound as the flock of birds repositioned when flushed by an eagle or a barge. Even as the bird floated down the river in very close proximity to the dark extreme 1st winter Iceland gull and as the distance grew and the birds weaved in and out of a larger group of gulls, the two could be separated by head shape, bill size, and the concolor primaries of the glaucous-wing compared to the frosty primaries of the Iceland. As the bird sat on the water, it could be studied in great detail under very favorable conditions with good optics, good reference and very close views, so close as to see the subtle dark centers to the feathers. Although this gave the bird a slight marbled appearance it was uniform throughout but most noticeable on the wing coverts. I can't comment on the exact shape or pattern of the dark feather centers except that it was uniform and did not produce a 'contrast'. The tertials and the rest of the secondaries did not contrast with any of the wing coverts and most importantly, the primaries were essentially the same color as the tertials and the secondaries. Overall a concolor wing pattern as well as an essentially concolor bird. Two slight areas of contrast were the thin dark eye line that followed the contour of the auricular area, and the few gray scapular feathers that were beginning to molt in. This is interesting in regard to the second year bird picture in the National Geographic field guide. All other aspects appear much like the 1st year bird except for the gray 'saddle'. I think this is a 1st year bird beginning to develop some second year characteristics (also note the slight light base to the bill) being so late in the winter, this is probably normal and consistent with 'normal' molt progressions. Fortunately after long and exhaustive views of the bird on the water, it casually began to fly, staying fairly close, gliding in wide circles giving good views in good light of both sides of the wing. From the top side, the few gray scapulars did not produce a saddle effect. I concentrated on wings. The secondaries did not contrast with the wing coverts and there was no sign of a dark trailing edge so obvious on 1st year Thayer's gulls. The primaries did not contrast with the secondaries or any of the wing coverts. The tips were closely studied and they were not even slightly dark tipped. The tail was also studied and it did not produce more than a slight tail band, very comparable to that of a 1st year Iceland gull. I did not note a lighter upper tail area in spite of the literature. Certainly nothing like that of a 1st year herring gull. From the lower side the flight feathers looked uniformly gray. Even in favorable positions and contours, the bird did not show any frosty translucence. This was observed on the nearby Iceland gull. Again from the lower side no dark trailing edge, no dark or even slight suggestion or hint of contrast to the wing tips. In speaking with Myrna Deaton after my 1st possible encounter with this bird in January she mentioned several points, but the point not mentioned in my reference material was of the barring to the undertail coverts. I remembered this and it was observed. The colored drawing that is included is merely a rough impression of the bird I observed. It was included on my original hand written notes and was clipped to be included here. The proportions and colorization are approximate and are not intended to be measured and compared objectively to known measurements.

Species: Glaucous-winged Gull Date seen: Feb. 7, 1997 Observer: D. Kassebaum

- 7. Description of behavior:** The gull, in amongst large chunks of ice, allowed itself to drift with the current of the river towards the dam. As the ice piled in behind the dam, the disturbance would flush the gull and it would fly north towards the bridge. The gull would again land and sit on the water very near the bank and start the process over again.
- 8. Description of vocalizations:** (none heard) The gull was regularly seen using the east bank of the river in a similar fashion. Also I am told the gull would perch on the wall of the lock.
- 9. Description of immediate and surrounding habitat(s):** At the time, the frozen river was melting and huge piles of ice were accumulating behind the lock & dam. This provided a large roosting area for the 10,000(+) gulls using the site. An annual occurrence.

10. Viewing conditions:
Optical equipment (type, power): Pentax 10x40 binoculars, Kowa TSN-2 scope
Distance / how measured? 50 feet (estimate)

Time(s) of observation: late morning **Total time of observation:** 1 hour(+)

Weather (including larger weather patterns where relevant) / sky conditions / relative position of sun:
Cold, but warm enough for the river to melt. Perfect viewing conditions. Overcast without backlighting or glare. No fog or precipitation. The wind was not a factor. The gull could easily be followed using the Alton Barge road.

11. Previous experience with this and similar species:
No previous experience with glaucous-wing. I am very familiar with the 'winter' gulls of Illinois (Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's, Lesser & Great Black-back) and of course Herring and Ring-bill. I am also aware of the wide range of immature and intermediate plumages one would expect. Conveniently all 7 species were present for direct comparisons.

12. Reasons for eliminating other similar species and/or hybrids:
(see attached sheet)

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13. Were photos obtained? yes **By whom?** Bill Rowe **Attached?** no

14. Books & illustrations consulted, and advice received. How did these influence this description?
Grant (very helpful in that it stressed size variation between the sexes and the exact field marks for comparison with similar species) Stokes western field guide (terrible photo-unlike this bird) Meadowlark(4:2)(very helpful-photo nearly identical to the gull I observed) National Geographic field guide (showed interesting mantle of second year bird-somewhat similar to this bird) MacMillen field guide(British)(to check for odd possibilities)

15. How long after observation were field notes recorded? Field notes recorded on the spot, sketch and more detailed notes completed within an hour of the observation.

16. How long after observation was this form completed? This form completed on Feb 25 following an extensive research period.

17. Additional remarks: All descriptions from this report are transferred from my rough notes and are not altered in a way that is inconsistent with my original observations. Comments from my research are included to support the observation and stress the importance of certain key characteristics. Hopefully Bill Rowe has already forwarded a copy of his photographs. Bill is on the Missouri record committee. If necessary his home phone number is (314)965-5508

Date _____

12. Elimination of other species:

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(Herring Gull) All first winter herring gulls should have several areas of strong contrast; a dark terminal tail band, primaries darker than the secondaries, secondaries darker than wing coverts, a light wedge seen on the wing where the primaries and secondaries meet, an obscure pinkish base to the bill. This bird had none of these features, the concolor wings as well as the lack of tail band eliminates all normal Herring gulls. The more pronounced gonys, the broad based wings, and lack of wing extension should eliminate any aberrant plumaged herring gulls.

(Thayer's Gull) Thayer's Gull in first winter should also show various areas of contrast. In flight the secondaries show an obvious dark trailing edge and the wing tips are lightly dark tipped above. The flight feathers from below are quite 'silvery' and contrast with the wing linings. On a perched bird, the primaries should be darker than the secondaries. The base of the bill by mid February should show pink, and the bill is smaller. Thayer's Gull should have narrow based wings and long primary extension.

(Iceland Gull) Iceland Gull is noticeably smaller with narrow based wings and long primary projection. The head is quite rounded with a smaller bill. The primaries are lighter than the wing coverts and are translucent when seen from below. These two species were seen side by side, the glaucous-wing was obviously larger with a larger bill and a flat crown.

(Glaucous Gull) A first winter glaucous gull is almost white with an obvious two toned bill. A glaucous gull shows strong translucence when in flight and is a bigger bird. This was not a white bird and it had an almost all dark bill.

(Glaucous-wing/Western hybrid) By lack of dark primaries and the lack of any obvious tail banding.

(Western/Slaty-backed/Great Black-back, Lesser Black-back) This was a light bird without any dark contrast. All the dark winged gulls show contrasting primaries in first winter.

(Hybrids) Any hybrid combination that is going to produce a concolor wing pattern should have to include either an Iceland or a Glaucous Gull. The most other likely parent would be a herring gull. Even a herring/thayer's combination should produce wings darker than those observed. A glaucous/herring hybrid could produce a large concolored wing bird but remember the bird observed was slightly smaller or the same size as a herring gull. A glaucous gull has an obvious two toned bill and most first year herring gulls show a pink base to the bill. A combination of these traits would not produce an almost all dark bill with a slight lightness to the base of the bill. An Iceland/herring hybrid could produce a bird close to the one observed, but it would have longer wing extension and narrow based wings compared to the glaucous-wing. The bill would probably be smaller without pronounced gonys. Thayer's/Iceland gull hybrid could produce a concolor bird but again it would have long primary projection and narrow based wings.

The recent sightings of glaucous-wing gull are hard to explain. I doubt that they could have been overlooked for so long. With the way gull populations are expanding I think that they will continue to be seen in Illinois. These birds are probably not coming from California but instead northern Alaska. Herring Gulls may be sharing a breeding colony and the birds are migrating with the herring gulls to the midwest instead of wintering on the Pacific coast with the rest of the North American population.