

# IOWA ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION and MINNESOTA ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION

Species: Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)

Observer: Peder H. Svingen

Date and location: 16 July 2005 at Spirit L., Dickinson Co.

Reason observation is unusual: Casual status. Unusual date.

**B**etween 6:00 and 6:15 A.M. on 16 July 2005, while looking for a Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) that had been reported on a line of rocks that formerly supported a foot-bridge south of the fishing pier at the north end of Spirit Lake, Dickinson County, Iowa, Anthony Hertzell and I found an adult Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*). The gull alternately perched on the rocks and foraged in flight along them as southerly winds pushed water across the lake and up against the rocks. Unfortunately, it could not tolerate the simultaneous presence of three kids fishing at the east end of these rocks and a boat with two fisherman that worked its way back and forth from one end of the rocks to the other.

When the gull was flushed by the fisherman in their boat, it circled above the trees with Franklin's (*L. pipixcan*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) and slowly drifted west towards Little Spirit Lake. It came very close to the Minnesota/Iowa state line before it disappeared from sight; the next morning, it was seen and photographed by Denny & Barb Martin in Minnesota waters at Little Spirit Lake.

If accepted by the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, this would represent the 12<sup>th</sup> state record. One or more Black-headed Gulls has been reported at this location almost annually since about 1994 — mostly in the fall after mid-September (Svingen 2002). There have been several spring records on both sides of the border and at least two summer records in Iowa: an adult feeding a recently fledged juvenile at Kettleton W.P.A., Dickinson County, Summer 1994 (Dinsmore 1996) and possibly the same adult at Jemmerson Slough, Dickinson County, 23 June – 9 July 1996 (Kent and Dinsmore 1996). One of the 1994 adults was also seen on the Minnesota side of the border by Steve Dinsmore, Anthony Hertzell and others 2–14 August 1994 (Hertzell 1995), but the only previous “summer” record for Minnesota — also a first state record — was furnished by an adult at North Heron Lake 28 May–16 July 1986 (Janssen 1986).

## Description of the Bird

*Size:* In flight, the Black-headed Gull's wingspan was slightly greater than the Franklin's Gulls' wingspan, but no other gulls were nearby for size comparison when it perched on the rocks.

*Behavior:* Perched on rocks for brief periods of time; mostly seen in flight as it foraged by dipping to the surface of the frothing water where the waves encountered the rocks.

*Bare parts:* Dark red, slightly drooping bill. Eye color could not be detected. Legs and feet dark red.

*Head and neck:* Dark brown (blackish) hood abruptly “cut off” near the top of its hind nape. Head and neck otherwise white.

*Mantle shade:* Gray mantle — estimated to be about the same shade as that of *delawarensis* and obviously lighter than *pipixcan*.

*Wings:* At rest and in flight, it looked long-winged. At rest, its crossed wing-tips extended well beyond the tail tip. In flight, its wingspan was slightly greater than that of *pipixcan*. The folded wing-tips were black with white apical spots. In flight, it showed a white wedge along the leading edge of its outer wing on both wing surfaces. Its underwing showed dark gray/blackish inner primaries contrasting with light gray wing linings and the aforementioned whitish wedge on the leading edge of its outer wing.

*Rump and tail:* Its rump, tail, and tail-coverts were white.

*Underparts:* Its underparts were entirely white.

*Species similar to this bird and how eliminated:* Bonaparte's Gull (*L. philadelphia*) is smaller than a Franklin's Gull and does not show a dark underwing.

*Your experience with this and similar species:* I have seen one or more Black-headed Gulls in Jackson County almost annually since 1998. Familiar with all ages of the Bonaparte's Gull from conducting fall surveys on Lakes Winnibigoshish and Mille Lacs.

*Other observers:* Anthony Hertzell. Also seen by Ed Thelen later that same weekend and at Little Spirit Lake by Denny & Barb Martin on the 17<sup>th</sup>.

*Were you aware at the time of the observation that the record was unusual?* Yes.

*Applicable statements:* Field notes were taken during the observation. Field guides were neither used nor needed for identification.

*Light and distance:* Looking south to southwest under broken overcast skies, and towards the west as it disappeared from sight. Distance estimated at about 250 yards.

*Length of observation:* 15 minutes between 0600 and 0615.

*Optics used:* Swarovski 10x42 binoculars and Leica Televid APO 77mm spotting scope at 20–60x.

#### References

- Dinsmore, Steven J. 1996. Probable breeding of Black-headed Gulls in northwestern Iowa. *Iowa Bird Life* 66:27–29.
- Hertzell, Anthony X. 1995. Common Black-headed Gull along the Minnesota-Iowa border. *Loon* 67:54–56
- Janssen, Robert B. 1986. Minnesota's first Common Black-headed Gull. *Loon* 58:104–107.
- Kaufman, Kenn. 1993. Identifying the Common Black-headed Gull. *American Birds* 47:1156–1159.
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- Nikula, Blair. 1993. A closer look: Common Black-headed Gull. *Birding* 25:54–60.
- Svingen, Peder H. 2002. Records of the Black-headed Gull along the Minnesota-Iowa border. *Loon* 74:176–179.

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