

DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

Herring Gull, 2nd winter, 4 January 1991, Red Rock Reservoir, Marion County, Iowa

Observer: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246

Other observers: Jim Fuller, Tim Barksdale

Time: 8:10 to 8:25 a.m.; 12:45 to 1:00 p.m. (approximate)

Habitat: Des Moines River below dam, water mostly open with ice on edges.

Description: I had seen this gull on the 25th of December and 1st of January, but had not seen it well. Tim Barksdale reported that he thought it was a Lesser Black-backed Gull. Jim and I went to see it in the morning and returned afternoon to look at it with Tim. The only other gull present was a Black-legged Kittiwake. We confirmed with Tim that this was the bird he had seen before. The gull was on the ice with mallards and was about the same length, but not a bulky in the body. The bill is black with some yellow at the base, particularly on the upper mandible. It is long and slender, decurved at the tip and without pronounced gonyl angle. White facial feathers come to the base of the upper mandible. The head is elongated and appears flat topped. There is a gray smudge through the eye area and on top of the head. The nape, sides of neck, and breast are much whiter. There is brown flecking on lower nape and sides of breast. The back is light gray--the color of an adult Herring Gull. The wing coverts are brown. The primaries extend about an inch beyond the tail. A broad brown-black tail band occupies the distal third of the tail. There is some barring on the upper and under tail coverts. When the bird raised its wings, there was a window in the primaries and a dark trailing edge to the secondaries. The outer aspect of the wing is dark. These same features (dark outer primaries, light inner primaries, secondary bar) were seen when the bird flew. After noon the bird was closer and in better light. I saw light legs that looked slightly pinkish, but Jim and Tim thought they were on the yellow side. They were not deep yellow like adult Ring-billed or Lesser Black-backed gulls. The bill looked the same as in the morning, and the lack of a bar in the greater coverts was confirmed.

Behavior: crouched and standing on ice; flying.

Conditions: 30 to 100 yards, partly overcast, 20x binocular, and zoom Kowa scope.

Similar species: The color of the back and obvious window in the inner primaries, as well as the rest of the feather tracts, all fit 2nd winter Herring Gull and seem to exclude Lesser Black-backed Gull. The soft parts were somewhat atypical, but I was not bothered much by this because I have seen much variation in Herring Gulls.

Agreement: When we left, Tim was still much more puzzled by this bird than I was.

Previous experience: I have studied many Herring Gulls, but have only seen one adult Lesser Black-backed Gull.

References/time used: Looked at NGS Guide and Grant before, during, and after observation.

Time of notes: dictated immediately after each observation period; typed: 19 days later (dictation paraphrased to shorten, but not altered in content).