

Little Gull Record Number: 88-26
27 Oct 1988 Classification: A-D
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA
*S. Dinsmore, *Johnson
also 1 Nov; IBL 59:14, 77; 65:83, Dinsmore 1997

DOCUMENTATIONS

Steve Dinsmore, 27 Oct
Ann Johnson, 1 Nov

LETTER

Stephen J. Dinsmore to Records Committee [Aug 1994]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 59:14
Records Committee: IBL 59:77; 65:83
Dinsmore, S. J. 1997. Little Gull at Saylorville Reservoir. IBL 67:66-67.
VOTE: 4-A-D, 2-NA, 1-abstain

NA. The first documentation does not adequately eliminate Ross' Gull which in first winter plumage would have the black "W" wing pattern, no dark crown, and be more nearly the size of a Bonaparte's Gull than a Little Gull. Ross' and Bonaparte's 13.5"L and 33" wingspan whereas Little Gull is 11"L and 24" wingspan. The second documentation is not nearly as convincing, because of very brief look. Therefore, the gull could not be relocated to correct any misconception that might have occurred.

A-D. Wing pattern appears diagnostic. Not unexpected, although first state record.

NA. For acceptance as a new state record of a species I think all conclusive diagnostic field marks should be seen to be beyond doubt on a sighting such as this. Lack of note of dusky cap which is evident on this species leaves me suspicious and therefore beyond doubt on this one. Black and brown at 200 to 400 yards look very close and the fact that Little Gull had been concluded before a good sighting had been made is risky.

A-D. Description by both observers adequate for elimination of other possibilities--esp. Bonaparte's and Kittiwake. Good size comparisons available with Bonaparte's.

REVOTE: 1-A-D, 5-NA, 1-abstain

NA. I am willing to change to a more conservative view on this record. Probably is better to have more conclusive view and description for first state record.

NA. Same.

NA. I'm not worried about Ross' Gull--observer would have seen wedge-shaped tail and this species is highly unlikely at this time of year. I'm not too worried that the size at 200 yards was described as similar to Bonaparte's. Of more concern is the ability to see lack of white in primaries and lack of dark trailing edge to wing. Identification hinges on these two negative findings. Agree that a sight record of a new species for the state should be based on close look and visualization of all features. I think it was a Little Gull, but we should be conservative.

NA. Lack of description of top of head really hurts this record. At least they were honest. Johnson did not eliminate Kittiwake or Ross' as opposed to one vote which said other possibilities eliminated. Ross' Gull not mentioned by Dinsmore though it could be a possibility. Diagnostic pattern of top of head would have clinched this one.

NA. Reluctant change--does indeed fail to eliminate Ross' Gull. Neither observer noted dark cap. No 1 doc does say "squared off tail" however, but observation very brief. Legitimate questions raised on ID are against acceptance as first state record; long overdue, however.

SENT TO: Steve Dinsmore, 4024 Arkansas Dr., Ames, IA 50010
Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211 [5/30/89].

REVOTE (by mail September 1994): 5 A-D, 1 NA, 1 does not meet criteria for rereview

NA, Dark crown may be hard to see at a distance, but observer states that he saw dark spot behind eye and short bill at same distance. Observer states in his recent comments that tail was not wedge-shaped like Ross Gull, but in my very limited experience, this is not as easy to determine as

field guides would lead one to believe. No. 2 observer states squared-off tail but in a very brief view at some distance. Grant in his description of Ross' Gull states "the end of the tail is wedge-shaped (though this may be difficult to discern at long range)." (emphasis mine). Wing tips "blunter than wingtips of Bonaparte's" would also be blunter than the wings of Ross Gull. I believe I must agree with original committee that while suggestive, there is some doubt.

A-D, Tying all ends together, I think this was unquestionably a Little Gull. Dinsmore eliminated all but Ross' Gull, perhaps understandably due to its extreme rarity. Johnson observed the squared tail, eliminating that species. The leap of faith here: did both observers see the same bird? That the observations were only 5 days apart and at the same location suggests convincingly that they did.

A-D, Size comparison alone says this must be a Little Gull or a Ross' Gull the only gulls that would consistently look smaller than all 200 Bonaparte's present. The lack of a window at the wing bend eliminates Bonaparte's also. The detailed description of the tail leads me to believe that if the tail was wedge-shaped it definitely would have been noticed during these rather lengthy and multiple observations, therefore eliminating Ross'. Although I do not necessarily disagree with the records committee's initial conservative votes, I think this record needs to be updated to A-D.

A-D, In addition to the above comments [see 86-21 relating to rereview process], Steve's recent experience with Little Gull provides a new perspective on interpretation of the "lack of the dark crown" and size differential. This makes an even stronger case for rereview. My comments are naturally biased and should be taken as such. Although both documents could have been articulated better, especially by eliminating similar species, diagnostic features were described by two independent observers at two different dates. Although the second sighting was less than a minute in duration, the details corroborated and even enhanced the original document. When identifying gulls, the first step is to place the bird in some general size category. To eliminate this record, I start with the premise that a gull described as proximate in size to a Bonaparte's could be one of four arctic species -- Little, Ross', Sabine's, or Bonaparte's. When I observed all four species together in one pond at Churchill, it was quite apparent that all were similar in size and other characteristics were needed for identification, even at 200 feet. A Black-legged Kittiwake flying with Bonaparte's Gulls would be conspicuous by its larger size, a similar differential to Ring-billed and Herring, and consequently was eliminated by Dinsmore. Sabine's triangular wing pattern is strikingly different and not even under consideration. Ross' is eliminated by the "squared-off tail". We finally consider similarities (of which there are many) and differences (of which there are few) of juvenile Bonaparte's and Little Gulls in flight. The lack of white windows and dark trailing edge to the wing, necessarily described in negative terms when comparing to the numerous Bonaparte's, are the defining differences in the two species. Dinsmore's mention of blunter wings adds credibility and support. I have no other experience with juvenile Little Gull to relate to the ease or difficulty of seeing the dusky cap on a flying bird. I can, however, recall instances of observing Bonaparte's Gulls which appeared to have a darker cap and were subsequently identified by wing pattern. While it may have been appropriate at the time, I believe a high standard of evidence was in place in evaluating this record. Were the documents perfect? No. Were the defining details for identification present? Yes.

A-D, No new evidence is presented, other than, perhaps, that the bird was mostly seen in flight. Dinsmore adds some additional information on interpretation of evidence, and refutes comments that this could be a Ross's Gull. My concern about this bird was that it might be a Bonaparte's Gull. I thought the distance was great. My first and only Little Gull was seen under similar circumstances, but the bird sat on a spit and preened so that I could see the dark cap. From reading the documentation, I could not tell whether or not the bird was seen sitting, and I now assume from the comment that it was seen sitting but not well. I can appreciate that the cap would be hard to see in flight. I think it was a close call -- I wish the bird were closer and I wish the dark cap had been seen. In 1988, I was more dubious than I am now. I do, however, strongly disagree with the statement, "This record was apparently rejected because the species had not been previously recorded in Iowa, and not on the basis of the details provided."

does not meet criteria for rereview, New evidence was not submitted. I also do not see a new

interpretation of the evidence as stated in the documentation. Dinsmore also did not say that his documentation was incorrect as it was forwarded to the records committee. Therefore I do not believe this record should be rereviewed.

A-D, This request for reconsideration meets the criterion "new interpretation of the evidence", as discussed above for Rec #86-21. The documentations, when interpreted as above for Rec #86-21 provide documentation of identification as Little Gull. Common Black-headed Gull, which also has dark underwings, is eliminated by the description as is Ross' Gull, which has gray underwings in immature plumages, and is eliminated by the description of a "squared off" tail (Johnson).

Subsequent records establish a pattern of occurrence which this observation fits.

REVOTE (by mail, October 1994): 7 A-D

A-D, AD's have convinced that both observers saw a square tail rather than wedge-shaped. This was my major objection to accepting this record.

A-D, The single NA voter does not offer enough of an argument to induce me to change my vote.

A-D, The lack of a white window at the wing bend seems particularly diagnostic to me.

A-D, The recent Little Gull at Big Creek Lake has given me added perspective on this record. While the gray cap is visible much of the time when the bird is sitting, there are times when the posture of the bird makes this a difficult field mark. Size differential with Bonaparte's is not evident when in flight. Identification hinges on wing pattern which fits for Little Gull.

A-D, No additional comments to add. NA and "not review" votes are making a close judgment and I have gone both ways on this record.

A-D, Ross' Gull apparently eliminated by squared off tail on a "very brief" observation. Dark pattern on top of head not described by either observer is really troubling but this time around seems beyond reasonable doubt. Maybe we should get mock-ups of several gull species and see if these marks can be seen well enough from 200-400 yards away. We may be surprised what we can or cannot see at these distances in varying light conditions!

A-D, Nothing presented to change my previous comments.

ANOTHER MEW GULL AT SAYLORVILLE RESERVOIR

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE

On 29 November 1996, I observed an adult Mew Gull above the dam of Saylorville Reservoir in Polk County. I watched the bird from 4:03 to 4:41 p.m. as it rested on the ice with Ring-billed and Herring gulls. I was watching the gulls coming in to roost for the evening when I noticed a darker-mantled gull resting with several Ring-billed Gulls. The bird was preening, and I had to watch it for several minutes to be sure the dark-mantled appearance was not due to lighting. The bird was essentially the same size as a Ring-billed Gull, although it appeared slimmer. The mantle and upperwings were a shade darker gray, roughly the shade of those of a California Gull. The head was white with some light brown streaking on the nape and a few gray/brown flecks on the forehead. The eye was dark and stood out on the pale face. The bill was shorter and thinner than that of a Ring-billed Gull and was entirely yellow. The bill also had a more pointed appearance than the bill of a Ring-billed Gull. The small bill, seemingly large eye, and rounded head shape gave the bird a dainty appearance. The underparts and tail were white. Since the bird perched throughout the observation, the only glimpse I had of the wingtip was when the bird preened. When perched, the primaries were black with small white spots at the tips. On the spread wing, there was a large subterminal mirror on the outer primary (P10) and a slightly smaller subterminal mirror on the next primary (P9). The next several primaries had smaller white terminal spots and a small amount of black color separating the white from the dark gray upperwing. There was a broad white trailing edge to the upperwing. The underwing pattern was not studied. The wing, tail, and bill patterns indicate the bird was an adult in basic (third-basic) plumage. The lack of a subterminal ring on the bill and amount of white on the upperwing indicate the bird was of the expected North American race *Larus canus brachyrhynchus*.

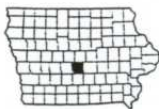
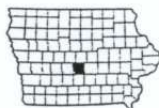
This is the fifth record of a Mew Gull in Iowa. Previous records were summarized by Dinsmore (*Iowa Bird Life* 65: 103-104, 1995) and included two first-basic, one second-basic, and one adult-basic bird. All of the Iowa records have occurred from late November through late December.

4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames, IA 50014

LITTLE GULL AT SAYLORVILLE RESERVOIR

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE

On 27 October 1988 I was birding the north end of Saylorville Reservoir in Polk County. At 3:30 p.m. I noticed a "different" gull feeding with several hundred Bonaparte's Gulls off Jester Park. At first I thought it was a Black-legged Kittiwake because of the black wing bar. However, the bird was much too small for a kittiwake. The bird was actively foraging over a large area of the lake and was difficult to approach. Finally, at about 4:15 p.m., I got within 200 yards of the bird. The bird was roughly the size of a Bonaparte's Gull. There was a prominent black bar across the back of each wing, extending from the base to the bend in the wing, then outwards to include the outer primaries. The rest of the upperwing and



88-26

mantle were white. The tail was square-tipped and white with a narrow black terminal band. The underwing and underparts were white. The head was white with a black spot behind the eye. The bill was short, slender, and dark. Leg color was not seen. Later, I noted that, in flight, the bird lacked the white "window" on the inner primaries and the dark trailing edge to the wing, features that all of the immature Bonaparte's Gulls had. Nowhere in my notes did I describe a dark cap on this bird. I don't recall seeing one, but that may have been because I saw the bird mostly in flight. Based on these features, I concluded the bird was a Little Gull in first-basic plumage. The wing pattern eliminated first-basic Bonaparte's Gull. First-basic Ross's Gull, not considered seriously at the time of the sighting, was eliminated by tail shape.

This bird was seen again on 1 November 1988 by Ann Johnson of Norwalk. This represents the first record of a Little Gull for Iowa. There have been four subsequent records of Little Gulls in Iowa. Those records are from April (2), October (2), and November (1).

4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames, IA 50014

WILSON'S PHALAROPE NEST IN BOONE COUNTY

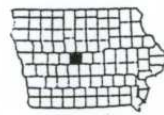
JAMES J. DINSMORE AND WILLIAM SCHUSTER

On 31 May 1996, while surveying wetland birds at the Harrier Marsh complex south of Ogden in Boone County, we flushed a male Wilson's Phalarope from a nest. The nest was on top of a small mound of vegetation amongst some short vegetation along a small marsh in the center portion of the complex. The nest contained four heavily marked dark brown eggs. We quickly left the nest and watched the male as it circled over the area and eventually landed near the nest. On our next visit to the area on 4 June, we could find no sign of the nest or the phalarope. On 8 June, Dinsmore searched the area thoroughly but could not find any sign of the nest nor was the adult seen. We assume that the eggs were taken by a predator.

On 19 June 1996, Dinsmore flushed a female Wilson's Phalarope from a recently seeded grassy field about 150 yards to the northwest of where the earlier nest was found. From about 7:15 to 7:45 a.m., the female circled over him, calling, and circled low over one section of the field. Dinsmore carefully searched this area but was not able to locate a nest although almost certainly, one was present. Presumably this female was the mate of the male seen earlier.

Although the Wilson's Phalarope was once a common nesting species of Iowa's wetlands, there have been few nesting records in recent years. The only recent specific nesting reports we are aware of were all in northern Iowa (*Birds in Iowa*, Kent and Dinsmore, 1996). This is the first confirmed report of nesting in central Iowa although this species undoubtedly nested in the area prior to settlement.

4024 Arkansas Dr., Ames, IA 50014 and 204 Oak Blvd., #107, Huxley, IA 50124



To: Members of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union Records Committee

From: Stephen J. Dinsmore
4024 Arkansas Dr.
Ames, IA 50014

I respectfully request that the Records Committee reevaluate the following four records in light of some clarifications of the original information. The records are:

1. (California Gull 7 Dec 1986 Saylorville Res., Polk Co.)
- 2. (Little Gull 27 Oct, 1 Nov 1988 Saylorville Res., Polk Co.)
3. (Little Gull 8 Oct 1989 Saylorville Res., Polk Co.)
4. (Red Phalarope 4 Aug 1991 Saylorville Res., Polk Co.)

Literature Cited

- Dinsmore, S. J. 1992. A second Red Phalarope at Saylorville Reservoir. *Iowa Bird Life* 62: 86-87.
- Dinsmore, S. J., P. Allen, and R. Allen. 1990. Little Gull at Saylorville Reservoir. *Iowa Bird Life* 60: 77.
- Grant, P. J. 1986. *Gulls: A guide to identification*. Buteo Books, Vermilion, South Dakota. 352 pages.
- Kent, T. H. 1989. Report of the Records Committee for 1988. *Iowa Bird Life* 59: 75-77.
- Kent, T. H., and R. K. Myers. 1987. Report of the Records Committee for 1986. *Iowa Bird Life* 57: 77-78.
- National Geographic Society. 1987. *Field guide to the birds of North America*. 2nd ed. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

A first-winter Little Gull at Saylorville Reservoir on 27 October 1988 (also seen 1 November 1988 by A. Johnson). This record was apparently rejected because the species had not been previously recorded in Iowa, and not on the basis of the details provided. The annual report of the Records Committee for 1988 includes the following comment on this record, "A fall immature gull (IBL 59:14) the size of a Bonaparte's Gull seen at 200 yards had features suggestive of this species, but lacked the characteristic dark crown." (Kent 1989). The absence of a dark crown caused a stir among committee members. Apparently, they misinterpreted my documentation, which read, "Nowhere in my notes did I write that I saw a darker cap on the bird's head. I do not remember seeing one, but that may have been because I mostly saw the bird in flight." Evidently, the committee interpreted that to mean that the bird did not have a dark crown. What I meant was that I didn't note the dark crown, though it could have been present. I have had considerable experience with Little Gulls in the last three years (I've seen more than one hundred in North Carolina, many of them first-winter birds), and I can attest to the fact that the dark cap is not easily visible in flight. The obvious question is whether the dark crown is necessary to identify a first-winter Little Gull. Is this the only field mark that can be used to separate Little Gull from other small gull species? Definitely not. The size and upperwing pattern are distinctive. The only other gulls with a similar upperwing pattern are first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake and Ross' Gull, both of which are easily eliminated by size and the presence of a black collar (kittiwake) and tail shape (Ross' Gull). The committee was apparently concerned about confusion with first-winter Ross' Gull. However, the documentation by Johnson notes that the bird had a "squared off tail". I also noted "tail white with a narrow black terminal band", a feature confirmed by Johnson. The bird had a square-tipped tail with a narrow, black terminal band. This is not a description that fits Ross' Gull. After the fact, I recall that the tail was not wedge-shaped, though I didn't explicitly state that in my documentation. At the time of the sighting, Ross' Gull was nearly unknown as a vagrant in the Midwest, and I therefore did not consider it a possibility. The size of the bird also caused concern. I noted that the bird was "roughly the size of a Bonaparte's Gull". I think the small size difference between these two species [wing 246-271 mm for Bonaparte's and 210-230 mm for Little (Grant 1986): overall lengths of 11" for Little and 13.5" for Bonaparte's (NGS Guide)] makes size an unreliable field mark at the distance the bird was observed. Note that the measure of overall length figure is biased because Little Gulls are proportionately shorter-billed than Bonaparte's Gulls. Lastly, I note that Little Gulls are regular and expected vagrants to the Midwest. The above record occurred at an expected date and location. I feel that if this record had represented something other than the first state record, it would have been accepted without reservation.

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species? Little Gull

How Many? 1 first-winter bird

Location? Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co.-near Jester Park

Habitat? flying and feeding over reservoir with other gulls

Date? 27 Oct 1988

Time? 4:22-6:05 p.m.

Observers Name and address: Steve Dinsmore 4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames, IA 50010

Others who saw bird: none that I know of

Description of bird: I arrived at Jester Park around 3:30 p.m. and began looking over the hundreds of gulls that were feeding in the river channel. Among the estimated 2000 Ring-billed and 800 Bonaparte's gulls I noticed a small gull with a very prominent dark bar on each wing. The bird was actively feeding with Bonaparte's Gulls and was working back and forth over a one to two mile section of the river channel.

When I first noticed the bird, I immediately thought of a Black-legged Kittiwake because of the dark bar on each wing. However, it was soon apparent that the bird was much too small to be a kittiwake. I watched the bird for several more minutes, thinking that the bird was probably a first-winter Little Gull, a bird I have seen several times in Massachusetts.

I spent the next 45 min. chasing the gull back and forth along the river channel. Finally, at about 4:15 p.m., I walked out on a mud bar and got within about 200 yards of the bird. At that distance, the black "W" pattern across the back of the wings made the bird relatively easy to pick out of the many Bonaparte's Gulls it was with. I jotted down the following brief notes while I was watching the bird: bird roughly the size of a Bonaparte's Gull; prominent black bar across the back of each wing, extending from the base of the wing to the bend in the wing, and then on to the outer primaries and the tip of the wing; the rest of the wing and mantle white; tail white with a narrow black terminal band; underwing and underparts white; head white with a dark spot behind the eye; bill short, slender, and dark; leg color not seen.

After watching the bird for 15 min. (it flew back down the river out of sight), I returned to my car and drove to the south end of Jester Park, where I located the bird once again. From there, I watched the bird until dark as it fed and flew with Bonaparte's Gulls. I noted that the bird lacked a white "window" on the inner primaries, something that the imm. Bonaparte's Gulls all had. The bird also lacked the dark trailing edge to the wing like that found on a Bonaparte's Gull. Nowhere in my notes did I write that I saw a darker cap on the bird's head. I do not remember seeing one, but that may have been because I mostly saw the bird in flight. The wings did not seem really rounded, although the wingtips seemed blunter than the wingtip of a Bonaparte's Gull. From what I saw, I concluded that I was looking at a 1st-winter Little Gull.

Similar species and how eliminated: The small size, black "W" across

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Little Gull

Location: North end of Saylorville Lake from Jester Park, Polk Co., IA

Habitat: Shallow end of lake with some mud flats

Date(s): 11/1/88 Time: 4:10 pm to 4:10 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: none

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under-tail, legs, feet). Also mention behavior and voice.
I was observing 3-4000 gulls feeding on schools of fish close to the south bank and near my vantage point at Jester Park. The gulls consisted primarily of ring-billed with a number of Bonaparte's and to a lesser extent Franklin's. I was aware that a Little Gull had been seen the previous Thursday but was unable to locate it on Sunday pm. As I scanned the flocks of gulls for unusual patterns, one small gull caught my eye. It was similar to a Bonaparte's: "small, light color with pale gray mantle, dark tail band." The wing pattern was evident with "dark primaries leading to the bend of the elbow" and a "broad dark stripe angling to the back. Trailing edge of wing was white - a strong contrast." Head was not observed before it got lost behind a tree and into the crowd, at which time many of the gulls returned to the mudflats. Unable to locate again.

Similar species and how eliminated:
Small size eliminated most gulls, although I couldn't unequivocally determine if it was smaller than the "normal" small gulls. Squared off tail with black terminal band would make it most similar to Franklin's and Bonaparte's. Franklin's eliminated because of the bird's light mantle and wing pattern. White trailing edge of wing and strong dark "M" wing pattern would seem to eliminate Bonaparte's and suggest immature Little Gull.
Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
Good sunlight, albeit beginning to set, at back. Observed at an estimated 200'-500' through 7 x 26 binoculars. Unable to locate with scope.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:
Life bird. Many years experience with Bonaparte's and Franklin's gulls.

References and persons consulted before writing description:
National Geographic Field Guide; Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America; Audubon Master Guide; and Golden were all consulted prior to observation and immediately after

How long before field notes made? 4 hours How long before this form completed? 4 hours