

Laughing Gull
27 Aug 1989
IPL Ponds, Pottawattamie Co., IA
B. Padelford
IBL 60:14, 61:85, Kent 1991

Record Number: 89-36
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Babs Padelford/Loren Padelford

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 60:14
Records Committee: IBL 61:85
Kent, T. H. 1991. Laughing Gulls in Des Moines County. IBL
61:29-32.

VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D: Good description by documenters.

A-D: Excellent description of diagnostic features, including feather scalloping, full terminal band on tail, size comparison with Ring-bills.

A-D: I would like to know whether the black terminal tail band was completely across the tail or not, but the description seems sufficient enough anyway.

A-D: I would like to discuss these [Laughing Gull] records in July at our annual meeting. I have seen free flying/nesting Laughing Gulls in the aviary and outside the aviary at the Henry Dourly Zoo in Omaha, NE. I have no doubt that the three sightings here are Laughing Gulls but I would like to discuss the possible origin of these birds. Are there breeding populations (wild) elsewhere close to Iowa?

A-D: Good descriptions.

A-D: Good description of a juvenile.

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FRONT COVER: Ivory Gull, Red Rock Dam, Monroe County, 27 December 1990. Photo by Tim Schantz.

INSIDE BACK COVER: Editorial Staff, Subscription/Membership Information, Instructions to Authors, Officers, Board of Directors, Standing Committees.

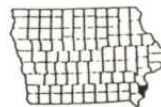
BACK COVER: Meeting Dates, Report Deadlines, Birdline, Materials Available.

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LAUGHING GULLS IN DES MOINES COUNTY

THOMAS H. KENT

On 9 September 1989, Dick Tetrault and I took his speed boat to the access on the Mississippi River 2 miles south and 5 miles east of Kingston in Des Moines County to look for a Royal Tern that had been reported there. This location is 6 miles above Lock and Dam 18, which is north of Burlington.



When we arrived, Louise Augustine of Chillicothe, Illinois, was there looking for the tern. We invited her to join us in the boat to look for the bird.

Between 9:30 and 11:15 a.m., we had several chances to study two Laughing gulls, one a juvenile and the other a one-year-old bird. They were first seen separately on sand bars on the Iowa side. Later they were together on the Illinois side. We approached to within about 40 yards in the boat and used 10 power binoculars.

The juvenile bird was on the water with Ring-billed Gulls. I recognized it immediately by its overall tan-brown color and from my recent experience with similar birds at Red Rock Reservoir and in North Carolina in late August. The bird was smaller than the Ring-billed Gulls (about 2/3). It had an overall tan-brown color with the light feather edging on the scapulars and wing coverts providing a scaly appearance. The forehead was lighter brown. The bill was dark, thinner, and of more uniform thickness than a ring-bill's bill, and slightly decurved at the tip. There were thin white upper and eye crescents. In flight I noted the white base to the tail (dark brown distally), thin white tip to the tail, white under tail with black outer tips, dark outer wing tips with tan brown inner wing and back, and thin white trailing edge to the wing.

The one-year-old bird was seen on a sand bar with Ring-billed Gulls and Caspian, Black, Forster's, and Common terns. It was smaller than the ring-bills and larger than the small terns. The shape and size were similar to the juvenile bird. I noted the thin black bill that drooped slightly at the tip. The head was shades of gray with more gray below and behind the eye. It did not have the sharp white and black appearance of a Franklin's Gull. The upper and lower eye rings appeared to meet posteriorly but not anteriorly. The underparts were very light gray with a grayer appearance to the sides of the lower neck and upper breast. The legs were dark. The back and wing coverts were medium gray, much darker than any ring-billed. In flight the wing tips were quite dark, and the rest of the wing and back were medium gray. The trailing edge of the upper wing was white. The tail was white with a full black subterminal band about 1 cm wide.

Later in the morning we observed the same two birds together on a sand bar about one mile down river on the Illinois side. The two were similar in size and shape, and we saw the same features described above at close range.

Juvenile Laughing Gulls are distinctive. I was able to pick the younger bird out quickly. When we first saw the one-year-old bird, we considered both Franklin's and Laughing gulls. A juvenile or first-winter Franklin's would not have uniform gray in the wing coverts. A first-summer or second-winter Franklin's Gull would not have a full tail band. The bill shape also favors Laughing Gull. The bird appeared to be in second-winter plumage, except for the tail band which fits better with first-summer plumage. I was impressed with the soft grayness of the bird and its similarity to the birds that I had photographed in North Carolina two weeks earlier.

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Laughing Gull was very rare at inland Midwestern locations until the 1960s, but has been on the increase since then. In Ohio, Laughing Gull is a rare spring and casual fall visitor along Lake Erie (Peterjohn 1989). A few summer on Lake Erie, and one female laid eggs. In Michigan, it is considered regular in spring and irregular in summer and fall (Payne 1983). It is listed as very rare in northern, and accidental in central Indiana (Keller et al. 1986). In Illinois, it is a rare spring and fall migrant with some summering in north and central Illinois (Bohlen 1989). In 1982, the Wisconsin Records Committee discarded most of the state's old records of Laughing Gulls because of identification problems (W. S. O. Records Committee 1984), but the pattern of records since then is similar to other Great Lakes states. In Minnesota, it is considered casual based on seven May to August records, five of which are from the Duluth area (Janssen 1987). There are very few records from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. Laughing Gulls are listed as casual in Missouri (Easterla et al. 1986).

The pattern of occurrence of Laughing Gulls in the Midwest can be summarized as follows: In spring a few adults regularly migrate up the Mississippi River with most ending up on the Great Lakes; some of these are seen in summer. A few second-year birds have been described in spring and summer. Fewer Laughing Gulls are seen in fall than spring; some fall birds may be adults that migrated north in spring, but the presence of juveniles suggests that there is some northward post-breeding migration. Juveniles have been noted in August in Illinois (Bohlen 1989), and juvenile and first-winter birds have been noted in late summer and fall in Kentucky (Monroe, et al. 1988).

Adult Laughing Gulls may be confused with second summer Franklin's Gulls (Goetz 1983, W. S. O. Records Committee 1984), mainly because they may lack the white bar that separates the gray of the proximal wing from the black-and-white wing tip. Juvenile Laughing Gulls are quite distinctive because of their overall brown color, white at the base of the tail and trailing edge of the wing, and black primaries and secondary bar. Second-year Laughing Gulls are not well illustrated in standard sources; identification must be based on overall size, shape, and bill differences from Franklin's Gull and detailed descriptions of plumages such as those in Grant (1986). It is worth noting that Franklin's Gull always has white outer tail feathers, never a complete tail band as seen on the second-year Laughing Gull in Des Moines County. As Peterjohn points out, second-year Laughing Gulls have variably grayish heads and lack the half-hooded appearance of Franklin's Gull (Kent 1988).

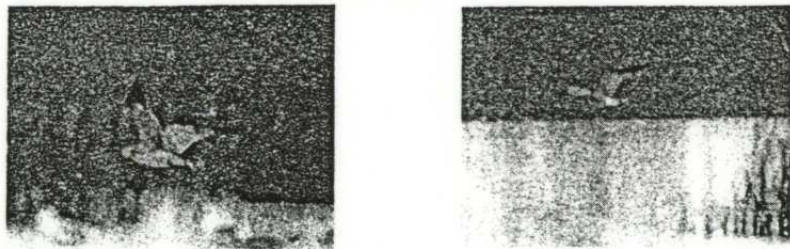


Figure 1. Two views of juvenile Laughing Gull in Des Moines County on 9 September 1989. The overall light brown gull has all black primaries and primary coverts (outer wing), barely visible black tail band and secondary bar, and white rump and trailing edge to secondaries.

Based on occurrence in surrounding states, Iowa should have some Laughing Gull records. It is interesting that DuMont (1933) dismissed early references to this species by Anderson (1907) on the basis of the possibility of confusion with first-year Franklin's Gull, and Stiles (1941) recognized that the large (almost as large as a Ring-billed Gull) black-headed gull that he saw at Lake Manawa on 25 March 1941 might not be accepted as a first state record for the same reason and because he did not collect it. A record from Coralville Reservoir on 26 March 1977 (Halmi 1977) was initially accepted (Dinsmore et al. 1984), but later not accepted based on the possible confusion with first-spring Franklin's Gull (Kent 1986). Both of these birds would have been early for Laughing Gull, which is usually found in the Midwest from late April to October, but has been recorded from February to December. Three other recent Iowa reports of Laughing Gull have not been accepted because they might have been first-summer Franklin's Gulls (Silcock and Kent 1984, Kent 1988). There are two Illinois Laughing Gull records that could also have been in Iowa: an adult at New Boston seen by Bohlen on 19 May 1971 (Bohlen 1978) and four adults and an immature at Nauvoo on 12 June 1971 (Kleen and Bush 1971).

The three juveniles and one second-year bird seen in the fall of 1989 provide the first accepted records for Iowa. The other juveniles were first seen at Red Rock Reservoir on 19 August 1989 and at IPL Ponds on 27 August 1989 (Bendorf 1989). I thought that the occurrence of three juvenile Laughing Gulls in Iowa could be due to a weather pattern and would be reflected by similar occurrence throughout the Midwest; however, the seasonal reports in American Birds for the fall of 1989 do not indicate increased numbers, and the regional editors do not even indicate whether the few birds seen were juveniles or adults.

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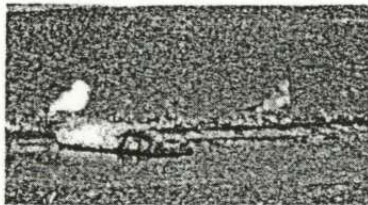


Figure 2. Two views of juvenile Laughing Gull at Red Rock Reservoir on 23 August 1989. The standing bird is smaller, slimmer, and smaller headed than the nearby Ring-billed Gull. The bird in flight shows the light brown inner wing and back, the dark outer wing and subterminal tail band, and the white rump and trailing edge to the wing.

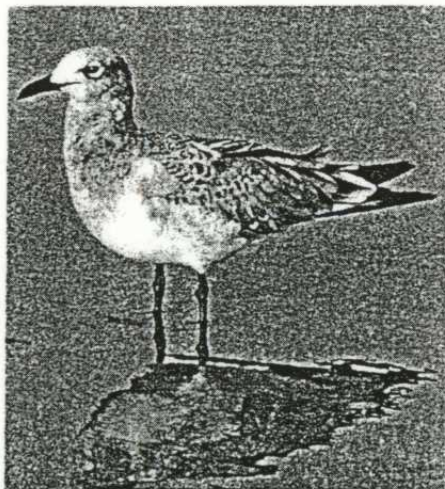


Figure 3. Two views of juvenile Laughing Gulls taken in North Carolina on 27 August 1989 illustrate the features of the same-aged birds in better detail.

CATALOG OF BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD HOSTS FROM IOWA--AN UPDATE

PETER E. LOWTHER

Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) are conspicuous components of Iowa's breeding bird populations. On average, Breeding Bird Surveys in Iowa count 20.5 cowbirds (out of 905 individuals of 78 passerine species; Robbins et al. 1986). Cowbirds are brood parasites; they lay their eggs in the nests of other species. Cowbird breeding behavior, therefore, affects many of the passerine species that nest in Iowa. The total impact of brood parasitism on these bird populations depends both on host abundance and cowbirds' host preferences.

My earlier paper on cowbird hosts in Iowa (Lowther 1985) provided a list of 60 species that have been recorded as hosts of the Brown-headed Cowbird in Iowa. That list was based on the compilations by Herbert Friedmann (Friedmann 1963, Friedmann et al. 1977) as a primary summary of much of the literature, searches through publications of Iowa ornithology, and from data available in the collections of several museums. I provide here an update and summary of this information to give more current understanding to cowbird-host interactions within the state. Friedmann and Kiff (1985), published after my earlier Iowa list, is the most recent general catalog of cowbird hosts and lists 220 species as having been parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds. Of these, 144 species have been recorded as actually rearing cowbird young.

Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data provide indices of species' abundances (note cautions in Bystrak 1981) that suggest which hosts are important to cowbirds in Iowa. If species that are regularly and commonly parasitized are subjectively classified as "good" hosts, then Iowa has 31 "good" host species with 440 counted per BBS route. Seven species make up 85% of these "good" hosts (Dinsmore 1981, Robbins et al. 1986): Red-winged Blackbird, 173.5 birds/BBS route; Western Meadowlark, 69.0; Dickcissel, 62.1; Common Yellowthroat, 25.0; Vesper Sparrow, 17.3; Song Sparrow, 13.5; and Eastern Meadowlark, 14.8.

RESULTS

NEST CARD RECORDS

Iowa Nest Card program data currently provide 414 records of parasitized nests (up from the 152 nest records available to me in 1985). Ten species have more than 10 records of parasitized nests from Iowa: Red-winged Blackbird, 167; Northern Cardinal, 47; Indigo Bunting, 30; Vesper Sparrow, 19; Dickcissel, 18; Rose-breasted Grosbeak, 16; Field Sparrow, 16; Common Yellowthroat, 12; Western Meadowlark, 12; and Grasshopper Sparrow, 11. Five of these species are common also on BBS routes, another indication that common species are commonly parasitized.

NEWLY REPORTED HOSTS

Four species, listed below, have moved from my appendix list (of species which have been recorded as cowbird hosts elsewhere, but have not yet been recorded as cowbird hosts in Iowa) to the list of recorded hosts:

Babs & Loren Padelford
1405 Little John Rd.
Bellevue, NE 68005

Documentation for Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*)

Location of Sighting: Iowa Power & Light Settling Pond,
south pond, Pottawattamie Co.

Date of Sighting: August 27, 1989

Time of Sighting: 10:15 - 11:05 a.m.

Description of Bird: A slender brownish gull was sitting at the edge of the water with about 20 Ring-billed Gulls. Overall it was smaller and did not stand as tall as the Ring-billed Gulls. It was much larger than Forster's Terns in direct comparison. There were no Franklin's Gulls present for size comparison. From approximately 100 yards the bird did not appear to be mottled. It was a more uniform, overall brown color than the three juvenile Ring-billed Gulls present. When we moved closer, to approximately 50 yards, we could see some mottling on the mantle & scapulars from the pale edging of the feathers. The area around the bill, forehead and top of the head was a dingy white. The side of the head, hindneck, foreneck, upper breast and back were all a uniform brownish-gray color. The belly was a dingy white. The eye was dark. The bill was entirely black, long, slender and slightly decurved. The length was about 3/4 of the length of the head. In proportion, the bill was more slender than the bill of the Ring-billed Gulls & longer. Legs were a dark gray color. The primaries and secondaries were black with no white except for a narrow white trailing edge on the secondaries. When the bird was sitting the wings extended approximately 2-3 inches beyond tail. The tail was white with a black terminal band that looked approximately 1 1/2 inches wide.

Elimination of similar species: At rest, the bird had a very slender and streamlined appearance, not stocky like that of a Franklin's Gull. The head had no trace of a dark hood. The head was the same color as the rest of the body except for lighter areas around bill, on forehead and top of the head. The bill seemed longer and more curved than a Franklin's, but difficult to say with no Franklin's for comparison.

Behavior: The bird was standing most of the time on the shore with Ring-billed Gulls. For a few minutes it slept with its head tucked under the wing. It flew a short distance and landed back in the same general area. For several minutes it appeared to be foraging at the water's edge & picked up sticks and dropped them. During this time it was chased by a Ring-billed Gull which appeared to be

curious about what the gull was finding.

Weather conditions: Thunder storms with hail had hit the area the night before. There were many more shorebirds, terns and gulls using the ponds than there had been the day before. While we observed the bird, it was cloudy.

Other observers: None that we know of. We left the area to call other birders, but when we returned an hour later the Laughing Gull had left.

Equipment Used: Bushnell Spacemaster 25 X Spotting Scope
Binoculars: 8X24 Pentax; 6X25 Bushnell Custom Compact

Experience with Laughing & Franklin's Gulls: Observers are familiar with both species having seen Franklin's in migration in Neb. & Iowa for 19 years, and having seen Laughing Gulls at least once a year for the past 19 years in Florida and Texas.

Books Used: In the field, National Geographic, 1st edition, was used. Later, Gulls, A Guide to Identification by P.J. Grant; Seabirds by Peter Harrison; and Audubon Master Guide.

This documentation is being written 8/27 from notes taken in the field with the bird in view.

Babs Padelford

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