

Laughing Gull  
24 Apr 1993  
s. of Saylorville, Polk Co., IA  
\*Bery Engebretsen  
IBL 63:75, 64:69

Record Number: 93-11  
Classification: NA

#### DOCUMENTATION

Bery Engebretsen, 12825 NW 127th Ct., Des Moines 50325 [2/23/94, 7/25/94]

#### LETTERS

Bery Engebretsen to Tom [Kent], 3 March 1994

Thomas H. Kent to Bery Engebretsen, 8 March 1994

T. Kent [to Records Committee], 29 March 1994, including two articles and separate review for second round.

#### REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 63:75

Records Committee: IBL 64:69

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

A-D, This documentation would have been improved by details of general size and shape of bird compared to Franklin's, description of shape of hood, eye ring, and bill. Length of observation would have made this possible, I believe.

A-D, A close view revealed enough to eliminate Franklin's and other hooded gulls. A size comparison with nearby Franklin's would have helped.

A-D, Direct comparison with Franklin's Gull helpful in providing adequate details for an unusual spring record.

NA, We don't have a complete description of this bird. The only field marks that I get are that the bill was larger than Franklin's and the wing lacked white area between tip and mantle. The latter can occur in first-summer Franklin's and the former is subjective (i.e., no quantitation). Laughing Gull should be larger, longer, and have more extensive hood. Probably correct but should have complete description.

NA, Based on the documentation this bird could be a Franklin's with an abnormal bill and could still be in molt on the head (ie. smaller eye ring, less conspicuous). The only field mark mentioned that could make this a Laughing is the all white upper tail. With such a close look and with several Franklin's close by a much more comprehensive explanation of the differences between the two species should have been made. What did the wing tips look like when sitting on the ground? Describe adult plumage, there is no description here at all! How was the bill larger in comparison to the nearby Franklin's? Describe the size and shape of the eyering. Need size comparison, wing comparison between this bird and other birds nearby. This description does not completely rule out the possibility that this might have been a Franklin's Gull.

REVOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

A-D, I believe that the documentor actually saw a laughing gull. There is enough problems with gull identification without a conjecting abnormal bills and incomplete plumages! I accept.

A-D, As other committee members and myself have commented, this documentation is lacking in details that could have been easily provided given the length of sighting, and nearby Franklin's Gulls for comparison. However, observer states that the bird was in adult plumage, making the lack of white in the wing tips significant. This along with the description of tail, bill size, and eye-ring seems convincing to me.

A-D, NA voters are correct that this description leaves much to be desired, but the information provided is conclusive. One NA voter states that absence of white in the wing can occur in 1st summer Franklin's. This is true, but the bird was described as an adult, which presumes the presence of a hood. I liked the comment about the possibility of the abnormal bill. If we begin considering the possibility of previously unreported abnormalities, we can turn down every record in this batch. The Laughing has a noticeably larger bill than Franklin's as observed in side-by-side comparison, not exactly a subjective observation. Finally, the observer cites 10 years experience with this

species in Florida.

A-D, I voted Ad on this record because to me, a good studied close look, even though much seen detail was omitted, is better than a detailed documentation of every character of a bird seen from 500 yds for less than a minute and no comparison. I think the direct comparison of the size of the bill (larger) and eye crescents (more conspicuous) is diagnostic and eliminates all other regular North American black hooded gulls. According to "Vertebrates of the U.S." there is no overlap in culmen length between Franklin's (largest 34.5mm) and Laughing Gulls (smallest 37mm). The other characters noted black wing tips, white dorsal tail, and black legs help to eliminate other hooded gulls and support Laughing Gull.

A-D, First of all, we have an observer very familiar with this species from his experience in Florida. Although the details of the documentation may leave something to be desired, some important points must be considered in analyzing the record. Molt sequences put the Franklin's Gull in summer plumage by February while the Laughing Gull molts into summer plumage from February to April. The date of this observation, along with the reference to adult plumage, indicates an adult summer bird. The black wing tips, small eye ring and larger bill -- all in direct comparison to nearby Franklin's -- support Laughing Gull. The April date would also be more supportive of remaining black area on the red bill for a not quite completely molted Laughing Gull.

NA, A-D voters seem to have doubts too.

NA, Size comparison to Franklin's not given, how was bill longer, what was its shape. Adult plumage not fully described. This description has to stand up under scrutiny in the future (many years in the future.) Is this description really comprehensive enough to do this? Nothing in the A-D reviews helps to answer these concerns.

REVOTE: 4 A-D, 3 NA

A-D, I voted to accept first round and see no reason to change.

NA, I was prepared to argue in favor of this record until the latest issue of Birding appeared, detailing the possibility of confusion between Laughing and Franklin's Gull in apparent adult plumage. I encourage the observer to review the article.

A-D, The longer bill as compared directly to several Franklin Gulls eliminates Laughing Gull, because there is no overlap in bill length. The other factors even to the NA's favor Laughing Gull over Franklin's.

A-D, Additional comments will be helpful for evaluation in future years.

NA, see my letter.

NA, I have had a very difficult time with this record and feel that with the documentation and with the additional information supplied by Engebretsen we do not have enough information to conclude that this is a Laughing Gull. Information from the secretary and comparison based on the article by R. Goetz only makes the review only that much harder. I do have the feeling that this might be a Laughing Gull but there is enough doubt in my mind that I have to say NA at this time. I understand how Engebretsen might be disappointed or angry at the records committee for their review on this record but we have to be able to draw our own conclusions on records and not be influenced by the possibility of having someone get mad and dislike us for our reviews.

3-29-94

From: T. Kest

Enclosed is my second review of the  
Laughing Gull from 24 Apr 1993 (#93-11).

I send this to you for two reasons

- (1) You may not have access to the two references
- (2) It may obviate the need for a third review.

Under the guidelines of the committee, members  
are free to interchange views after the first  
review. Although what I am doing seems  
to be without precedent, it seems reasonable  
to me under our guidelines.

Tom.

Second Review of Record #93-11, Page 1/1  
 Laughing Gull, 24 Apr 1993, Saylorville Res., Bery Engebretsen

The problem with this bird involves separating an alternate-plumage adult Laughing Gull from a first-alternate (first-summer, first-nuptial) Franklin's Gull. In Wisconsin, most of the old records were discarded because of this problem (W.S.O. Records Committee 1984). Of particular interest were "...four birds at Madison in June 1964, including one fully hooded individual, had Laughing-like wing patterns but proved to be Franklin's when one was collected."

Goetz (1983) states the problem in more detail, "...a first nuptial Franklin's Gull may bear a striking resemblance to an adult or subadult (second nuptial) Laughing Gull. This plumage of Franklin's Gull, acquired in an apparent complete molt from January through May ... includes a uniform gray mantle, complete lack of white in the primaries, and sometimes a full black hood.

Engebretsen identified the bird in question as an adult based on the complete hood and white tail, but these can be features of a first-alternate Franklin's. Although a first-alternate Franklin's Gull may have an incomplete hood and partial tail band, it does not have to; therefore, the only way to age such a gull is to first determine that it is a Franklin's based on structural features and then look at the immaturity of the upper wing surface. Thus, we cannot assume that the bird in question was an adult. We can assume that it was in alternate plumage because of the complete hood.

Engebretsen's data only touches upon some of the features used to make the distinction between first-alternate Franklin's and adult-alternate Laughing. Below, I outline the features used by Goetz.

#### Size and structural differences (independent of age)

##### 1. Body size and shape:

Franklin's: smaller than Ring-billed, shorter legs, small head, compact.

Laughing: approaches Ring-billed in length, slimmer, relatively long neck, legs nearly as long as Ring-billed.

Saylorville bird: no information

##### 2. Bill size and shape:

Franklin's: decidedly shorter than Ring-billed, stout, lacks droop

Laughing: may be as long as Ring-billed, frequently bulbous tip, definite droop at tip

Saylorville bird: larger bill compared to Franklin's; later "longer".

##### 3. Flight characteristics:

Franklin's: wing shape like Ring-billed, short tail, quicker wing beats

Laughing: long narrow wings, long tail

Saylorville bird: no data

#### Plumage differences (age dependent)

##### 1. Underwing pattern:

Franklin's: dark tip contrasts with white of rest of underwing (first-alternate to adult)

Laughing: Undersurface of all primaries sooty to brown in all plumages

Saylorville bird: no data

##### 2. Upperwing pattern:

Franklin's: prominent white tips on all primaries which may be worn off by early May, narrow pale gray line on 5th and 6th primaries

Laughing: never has white tipped outer primaries, small apical spot on 9th primary.

Saylorville bird: no white on black wing tips

##### 3. Tail pattern:

Franklin's: pale gray central tail feathers on first-alternate and adult; first-alternate occasionally has subterminal band

Laughing: white, second-alternate also white but occasionally with subterminal band

Saylorville bird: pure white

Second Review of Record #93-11, Page 2/2  
 Laughing Gull, 24 Apr 1993, Saylorville Res., Bery Engebretsen

4. White eye crescents:

Franklin's: wider

Laughing: narrower

Saylorville bird: smaller, less conspicuous than adjacent Franklin's

5. Breast color:

Franklin's: pink tint, frequently by first summer

Laughing: may have faint pink-blue tinge

Saylorville bird: neck, breast, belly pure white

Other feature.

1. Bill color -- seems to be variable and not a diagnostic feature.

Discussion: The Saylorville bird has four features that favor alternate adult Laughing Gull over first-alternate Franklin's Gull (bill larger/longer, smaller eye crescents, white tail, white underparts) and no features that favor Franklin's. The bill in itself could be nearly diagnostic if well seen and described (much longer than Franklin's and drooping). The drooping feature is easy to see, and I do not know why it was not seen here. Gulls of the same species notoriously have a wide range in bill sizes, so "larger" or "longer" need to be quantified relative to the bill of another species or some body feature.

The small eye crescent may be the strongest feature of this bird's description, but will it stand alone?

A pure white tail is enough to exclude Franklin's IF one can be sure that the subtle central gray feathers of the Franklin's can be seen. I may have seen the central gray on Franklin's, but, if so, I have no recollection of it. If the observer had seen the central gray on the adjacent or flying Franklin's and seen the bird in question equally well, I might be convinced. My own experience, admittedly inadequate, makes me wary of trusting my own judgement on this field mark.

A pure white belly favors Laughing, but I'm not sure that all Franklin's, especially first-alternate either have or have a detectable lack of pink on the belly.

As pointed out above, the lack of white in the upper wing tip is a feature in common between first-alternate Franklin's and adult alternate Laughing. I think it would be wise to look for structural features first and plumages features second. In this case we are not told of overall size, leg length, wing shape, etc.

My intuition tells me that the bird in question was probably an adult Laughing Gull. My objective assessment tells me that it is far from being adequately substantiated and not up to the standards that we should accept for this very difficult identification problem. This problem is a relatively frequent one; in fact, I know of two other instances of this problem that occurred in the spring of 1993 but were not reported (both seen by members of the Records Committee).

References:

Goetz, R. 1983. Spring identification of Laughing Gulls and Franklin's Gulls. Illinois Audubon Bull. 204:33-37.

W.S.O. Records Committee. 1984. Status and identification of Laughing Gulls in Wisconsin. Passenger Pigeon 46:134-136.

## Status and Identification of Laughing Gulls in Wisconsin

By W.S.O. Records Committee

The status of the Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla* Linnaeus) in Wisconsin has been in confusion for many years. In Cook's *Birds of Michigan* (1893), Ludwig Kumlien was quoted as rating this gull "fairly common" in Wisconsin, but Kumlien and Hollister (1903) later disavowed such a statement as an "absurdity" and added that "very few have had the opportunity for observing the gulls on Lake Michigan that we have had, and we have never seen a specimen of *Larus atricilla* here."

However, Kumlien and Hollister did say that a single specimen had been collected at Lake Koshkonong in July 1860 by Thure Kumlien. On the basis of this record the Laughing Gull was listed as "accidental" in the first edition of the checklist of Wisconsin birds (Barger et al. 1942), but Schorger (Kumlien et al. 1951) was unable to find a specimen for the state. The Laughing Gull was confined to the hypothetical list in the second and third editions of the Wisconsin checklist (Barger et al. 1950, 1960) and in Gromme (1963).

Meanwhile, sight records had been reported in 1947 (2), 1948, 1953, 1956, and 1960. Between 1962 and 1966, one or more birds were listed annually from Racine. Several others were suspected in the Green Bay area during those same years. Beginning in 1970, one or more observations were reported every year at various places on Lake Michigan. Even though there was no state specimen, and no known photograph, the frequency of sight records led Barger et al. (1975) to give the Laughing Gull full rather than hypothetical status in the fourth edition of the Wisconsin checklist. Annual reports continued into the 1980s.

However, Soulen (1975) had urged "extreme caution" in identifications because four birds at Madison in June 1964, including one fully hooded individual, had Laughing-like wing patterns but proved to be Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan* Wagler) when one was collected.

In the summer of 1982 Erik A.T. Blom wrote WSO's associate editor and convincingly demonstrated that a gull identified as Laughing at Manitowoc on 19 June 1980 (*Passenger Pigeon* 43:63, 1981) was almost certainly a one-year-old Franklin's that lacked the white "bar" separating black primaries from dark gray wings and mantle. The absence of this white bar is in fact characteristic of one-year-old Franklin's, which may show nearly all other features of adults and be easily confused with Laughing Gulls in hooded sub-adult (two-year-old) or adult (three-year-old and older) plumages, as Soulen had warned. Several of the newer guides to special groups of birds (Roberson 1980, Grant 1982, Harrison 1983) do describe this dark-winged plumage of the Franklin's. It is unfortunate that the most popular field guides have not dealt adequately with such yearling birds.

Blom's letter and similar informal comments from observers in other states prompted the WSO Records Committee to re-examine all documentary evidence of the occurrence of Laughing Gulls in Wisconsin. Descriptions of 12 sightings, 1948-1980, were reviewed. Details were scant or entirely lacking for another 28 reports. In August 1982, the Committee concluded that no written description supplied the details necessary to separate conclusively a Laughing from a one-year-old Franklin's.

Just when it seemed that the Laughing Gull would once again return to Wisconsin's hypothetical list, Sam Robbins learned of photographs of a bird at Green Bay circa 3 August 1965 by Tom Erdman, another at Racine circa 20 May 1966 by Ed Prins, and a third at Milwaukee 10 March - 4 April 1979 by John Idzikowski. On the basis of these three identifiable photos, Robbins includes the Laughing Gull as a valid record species in his forthcoming text on Wisconsin birds. In 1984 the Records Committee accepted additional records of a bird at Manitowoc 15-22 May and 20 June-2 July by Charles Sontag and other observers.

Although some -- perhaps many -- of the 40+ earlier sight records were probably correctly identified Laughings, there is now no way to know which individuals might have been misidentified one-year old Franklin's. Further observations of Laughing Gulls -- and further chances for confusion with Franklin's Gulls -- are likely to occur in Wisconsin, especially along the Lake Michigan shore. A lengthy review of the respective colors, patterns, and proportions of each species is not possible here, but the Records Committee recommends that the following points be checked and described for all birds believed to be hooded adult Laughing Gulls.

1. Body length vs all nearby gull species in terms of proportion (e.g., 1-1/4 times as long) rather than merely "larger" or "longer".
2. Bill length, also in proportion to other nearby gulls.
3. Bill shape, especially depth and culmen curvature.
4. Leg length, again in proportional terms.
5. Bill and leg colors.
6. Tail colors and patterns -- central vs outer tail feathers, and, if present, remnants of a tail band.
7. Upperwing patterns -- presence of carpal or secondary bars, and extent of white tips on outer vs. inner primaries.
8. Width and extent of eye crescents, especially at rear of eye.
9. Body profile and wing length ("silhouette") vs. other gulls at rest and in flight.

Harrison (1983) and Grant (1982) give complete descriptions of field characteristics of adult and sub-adult plumages of Laughing and Franklin's gulls.

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### Color Marked Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin

By Don G. Follen, Sr.

On the onset of the annual statewide Sandhill Crane Count in Wisconsin I became involved as a field observer and counter. This was due to my long term interest in these large marsh and prairie birds. As a coordinator-helper for Wood County in 1984, I became aware of some color coded Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). These birds were in south central Wood County and were reported by brothers John and Mike Villars, both superintendents of adjoining cranberry marshes, at our precount meeting the night of April 4, 1984. I had read the accounts of Bent (1926) on Sandhill Crane distribution and Walkinshaw (1960) of the probable likelihood of Wisconsin birds wintering in Florida. Williams and Phillips (1972) alluded to the same with color marking techniques and banding verifying the same. Three color marked and banded cranes were observed in Wisconsin during 1968, 69 and 1970 in the southeasterly central part of the state. Since I was unaware of any further active crane research I felt a need for further investigation of the origin of the local color marked birds.

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First contact with DNR nongame species personnel revealed no information as to the possible origin of the color marking. A call to the International Crane Foundation revealed only the information that they must be getting marked in Florida, Minnesota or at Jasper Pulaski National Wildlife Refuge in NW Indiana. Contacts with Minnesota and Indiana revealed no crane investigations at that time, but the latter suggested I contact Mr. Stephen Nesbitt at the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Division at Gainesville, Florida on the subject.

A rapid response from Mr. Nesbitt informed us that because of the locations of the mentioned color bands, more than likely we were observing Florida wintering cranes on Wisconsin breeding grounds. This would corroborate the suspicions of Bent and Walkinshaw and enhance the work already done by Williams and Phillips (Op. Cit.) and Nesbitt and Williams (1979).

Mr. Nesbitt also indicated the importance to the decoding of the proper sequence of all bands on banded and color marked birds. This tells the identity of the birds even at a distance. We observed these birds for most of the summer. One coded pair mated and produced one young. Two other marked cranes had paired with unmarked birds resulting in a mixed pair with one young and the other pair not seen with any young.

Regardless of how John and Mike Villars or myself viewed and described the birds we never did come up with a compatible combination as recorded by Nesbitt et al in Florida. By late summer we could no longer keep track of the birds due to other obligations.

During the migration of Sandhill Cranes from Florida to Wisconsin and vice versa many observations are made along the way with the majority from Jasper-Pulaski NWR in Indiana. Figure 1 shows the route generally taken as is presently known for Wisconsin breeding cranes wintering in Florida. Present evidence indicates that cranes summering in N. Michigan, N. Wisconsin, Minnesota and Manitoba, winter mainly in south central Florida, while cranes from central Michigan and central Wisconsin winter mainly in north and central Florida.



Figure 1: Greater Sandhill Crane migration routes to and from wintering grounds in Florida.

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## Spring Identification of:

LAUGHING GULLS and  
FRANKLIN'S GULLS

by RON GOETZ

## INTRODUCTION

The Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) has proven to be a rare visitor to Illinois, with some increase in occurrences during the last several years. However, a large portion of the records occur late April through July, so the Illinois observer should be aware of the fact that a first nuptial Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*) may bear a striking resemblance to an adult or sub-adult (second nuptial) Laughing Gull. This plumage of Franklin's Gull, acquired in an apparently complete molt January through May, is neither mentioned nor illustrated in any of the field guides and includes a uniform gray mantle, complete lack of white in the primaries, and sometimes a full black hood. Nevertheless, these birds are differentiable from Laughing Gulls under good conditions. Listed here are some of the field marks which an observer confronted with a dark-headed, dark-primaried gull should take note.

These notes do not comprise a thorough description of the plumages involved; for a more complete discussion, see Grant (1982), or the classic work by Dwight (1925). The following was prepared using these as basic references, supplemented by the author's field experience, several inspections of specimens at the Field Museum of Natural History, and frequent discussions with Paul Clyne. The notation for plumages follows Dwight; Grant refers to what is here called the (nth) nuptial plumage as the (nth) summer plumage.

I. SIZE AND STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES provide the most uniformly available evidence for the identification of these birds, but it must be remembered that these are *relative* differences. Before invoking such characters in identifying an unusual gull, the observer should be thoroughly familiar with the structural features of the more common species and should make explicit comparisons with known species whenever possible. Moreover, there is a wide range of variation possible within a given species. In addition to the general phenomenon of "individual variation", both overall size and bill structure in larids generally vary with age and sex, while flight characteristics may be radically altered by differences in molt, feather-wear, and—most importantly—wind conditions. The following notes are intended only as a description of general trends; no attempt is made to catalog deviations from these trends. In lieu of such a compilation, this author can only recommend careful observation, systematic comparison, extensive field experience, and a healthy skepticism.

1. Body size and shape. Laughing Gull typically approaches Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) in overall length, but is slimmer, with a relatively long neck; its legs are nearly as long as in Ring-billed. On the other hand, Franklin's Gull is visibly smaller than Ring-billed Gull, with distinctly shorter legs, shorter neck and a smaller head, producing a more compact silhouette.

2. Bill size and shape. The bill of the Laughing Gull may be as long as that of the Ring-billed Gull, and frequently has a noticeably bulbous tip with a definite droop terminally. The bill of Franklin's Gull is decidedly shorter than that of the Ring-billed Gull and, although rather stout, lacks the heavy droop of most Laughing Gulls. The difference in bill structure is illustrated fairly well in **A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS** (Peterson, 1980).

The bill is arguably the most important field mark for sitting birds: many Laughing Gulls and a few Franklin's Gulls show characteristics sufficiently extreme—long and drooping, or decidedly short, respectively—to allow identification "at a glance." Moreover, the majority of individuals, if not all, can be identified in the field given a careful study of the bill (preferably with direct comparison to, say, Ring-billed Gulls.)

3. Flight characteristic. Compared to Ring-billed Gulls, Laughing Gulls show strikingly long, narrow wings and a long tail relative to its body size. Franklin's Gulls approach the wing-body proportions of Ring-billed Gulls, but have a very short tail. The lesser bulk of Franklin's Gulls is also usually evidenced by a quicker wingbeat and more delicate flight than Ring-billed Gulls.

II. PLUMAGE DIFFERENCES include a few diagnostics variously useful in the field, as well as several markings useful for corroboration.

1. Underwing pattern. This author's cursory search of the literature has not turned up an explicit reference to the value of the patterning of the



underside of the primaries as a field mark, although it would seem to be simultaneously the mark most visible on birds in flight and the least prone to observer-subjective confusion (equivalently, the least relative). The Laughing Gull, in all plumages, shows the entire undersurface of the primaries dark—sooty brown (first year) to smoky fuscous (adult) on the inner primaries, darkening to blackish on the outer primaries. A remarkably different effect is given by the neat blackish tips on the underwings of first nuptial Franklin's Gulls. The blackish area covers more than half of only the outer three primaries, and is reduced to subterminal bands on the 5th and 6th. The dark tip contrasts cleanly with the remainder of the underwing.

2. Upperwing pattern. In fresh plumage, first nuptial Franklin's Gulls can be safely separated from Laughing Gulls by the rather prominent white tips on all the primaries. Unfortunately, these tips may be entirely worn off by late May. Laughing Gulls never have a white-tipped outer primary, but adults in fresh plumage (as late as March) may have a small white apical spot on the 2nd primary, contrary to the description in Grant (1982).

The black pattern on the upperwing of first nuptial Franklin's Gulls is otherwise fairly similar to that of adult Laughing Gulls, except for a tendency to show, on the 5th and 6th primaries, a narrow pale gray line separating the black subterminal band from the dark neutral gray proximal portions of these feathers. This line may appear translucent from below, lending the impression of a wash-out, incomplete version of the adult pattern (Paul Clyne, pers. comm.).

The second nuptial Laughing Gull may be told from the other plumages considered here by the more extensive black on the primaries and primary coverts. The outer four primaries are entirely black, with extensive black on the fifth; adult Laughing Gulls and first nuptial Franklin's Gulls have extensive black areas only on the outer three or four, and only the outer two are wholly dark.

3. Tail pattern. The adult Franklin's Gull is the only adult gull in the world with a neutral gray to pale neutral gray tail centrally, bordered laterally by 2 or 3 white outer rectrices on each side, terminally by whitish fringe, and proximally by the white upper tail coverts. The tail of the first nuptial Franklin's Gull is similar to that of the adult's, except for the occasional presence of a partial, dark subterminal band. A more typical larid, the Laughing Gull has a pure white tail in the adult; in the second nuptial, it is also white, possibly gray at the base only, and sometimes with a broken subterminal grayish or blackish band.

Only one of the standard field guides correctly illustrates the tail of the adult Franklin's Gull, the AUDUBON WATER BIRD GUIDE (Pough, 1951). As might be imagined, it is generally quite difficult to obtain good views of this diagnostic in the field; except under special circumstances, it should probably be thought of as a secondary field mark.

4. White Eye crescents. Both the supra- and subocular crescents of Franklin's Gulls are significantly wider than those of Laughing Gulls. With practice, this difference is noticeable even from a fair distance, and can provide useful supporting evidence.

5. Breast color. Although the author's information is limited, it seems that the "exquisite peach-blossom tint" (Chapman, 1966) frequently present on the breast of first nuptial Franklin's Gulls (and always on nuptial adults) exceeds any pinkish blush which may be present in nuptial Laughing Gulls.

SUMMARY. Any dark-primaried, dark-headed gull in Illinois should be the subject of careful scrutiny. A comparison with Ring-billed Gulls, the species most likely to be present during the warmer months, can provide suggestive or diagnostic evidence for identification in any lighting. Bill shape and size; overall size; and leg, wing and tail length should all be carefully noted: Laughing Gulls have larger relative dimensions than Franklin's Gulls in each of these categories.

Plumage differences vary substantially in their visibility and diagnostic value. The underwing pattern, uniform sooty primaries in Laughing Gulls, neat dark wing tips in Franklin's Gulls, allows easy identification of overhead flybys. The centrally gray tail of Franklin's is diagnostic if visible. Neat white tips on the outer two primaries are similarly indicative of Franklin's Gulls, but will be substantially worn off, perhaps wholly so, by mid-May.

Birds showing signs of immaturity—partial hood, partial tail band or partial subterminal bar across the secondaries—will usually be either first nuptial Franklin's or second nuptial Laughing Gulls. A tentative identification of such birds may be based then on the extent of black on the upper surface of the primaries—much greater in Laughing Gulls. However, as gulls are known to age non-uniformly, additional evidence should be gathered to corroborate any such identification.

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3/3/94

93-11

Dear Tom,  
I would like the record committee to re-consider the Laughing Gull report of April 24, 1993 (Record # 93-11) I would like to respond to the comments of the two "NA" reviewers.

NA #1 The bill was clearly longer in side by side comparison with Franklin's, standing all around it. I don't see how this can be anything but "subjective" without having the bird in hand and a calipers to measure.

This reviewer says that the all black tips could appear in a "first summer Franklin's." Perhaps I don't understand what "first summer" means, but this was an April sighting. Perhaps I should have used the term "breaking" plumage, rather than "adult," but the bill was not all red. The pure white tail should also rule out the "first summer" concern.

NA #2 This reviewer asks, "what did the wing tips look like sitting on the ground?" The wing tips of the primary feathers are visible in flight & sitting gulls. I stated that there was no white in the wing tips, so this obviously applies to both the in-flight and sitting views.

I described what I think is sufficient detail to distinguish an adult laughing from Franklin's gull:

that is, a white dorsal ~~tail~~<sup>tail</sup>, no white in the wing tips and a larger bill in side by side comparison

On re-reading my documentation, however, I realize that I failed to document the basic bird itself, which I will now do. This seemed such an easy call in the field that all I had to do in my mind was note the differences, the ~~same~~ basic similarities were obvious.

The bird had a full black hood, with bill + eye-ring as previously described. The neck, breast, belly + tail were pure white. The mantle, scapulars, shoulder were dark gray. In flight, the wing tips were black, both above + below, extensive, and (as reported) without dorsal white. It was this characteristic that allowed me to first spot the bird, in flight, amongst a large flock of Franklin's.

My apologies for sloppy documentation. But I hope this information will adequately document a species that I think is occurring in the "casual" (not accidental) category in Iowa.

Thanks for re-considering.

Gary Engelson

March 8, 1994

Bery Engebretsen  
12825 NW 127th St.  
Des Moines, IA 50325

Dear Bery,

Thanks for your reply and request relating to the Laughing Gull. We appreciate feedback. I will recirculate the record with your letter. Don't expect a reply before summer.

Let me respond now to a few points you made.

Bill length can be made more objective without measurement. The best information would be a percentage comparison with another species; e.g., 25% longer than adjacent Franklin's Gull. If a bird is alone, the length reference can be to another part of the bird; e.g., 75% of the distance from the base of the bill to the back of the head.

First summer refers to a plumage not a time of year. This is why most prefer the term basic rather than winter plumage and alternate rather than summer or breeding plumage. Adult Franklin's Gulls molt to summer (alternate) plumage in December! I'll have to research when the molt to first-summer (first-alternate) plumage occurs. The plumage in the year of birth is juvenile; this is followed by first-basic (first winter) and then first-alternate (first summer).

Yes, you should give a full description of the bird. Reviewers have a difficult time and are likely to be somewhat skeptical when only some of the data is given.

Laughing Gull may be changed to casual when we revise the state list this year. Right now it will depend on a vote of the committee, but if one is seen in 1994, it will become casual. This does not mean that documentation will not be required, and that we will not continue to review all records of this species. Laughing Gull has been a notoriously difficult species for records committees in the Midwest. At one time, Wisconsin threw out all their old records and started over.

Do you recall clearly the bill length in relation to the Franklin's Gulls? Did the tip droop? This additional information would be helpful, but only if you have a clear recollection.

Sincerely,

Thomas H. Kent, Secretary  
IOU Records Committee  
211 Richards Street  
Iowa City, IA 52246

DOCUMENTATION FORM  
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

93-11

What species? Laughing Gull How many? 1

Location? South of Saylorsville

Type of Habitat? Flooded bean field (Des Moines River bottom land)

When? date(s): 4/24/93 time: 09:20 to 09:40

Who? your name and address: Berry Enga-Buctsen, 12825 NW 127<sup>th</sup> Ct, DSM, 50325

Others with you: no one

Others before or after you: ?? Armstrongs, next day

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, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Bird flew & sat on ground. Appeared injured with dangling leg. First noted in flight = no white on <sup>black</sup> wing tips. In adult plumage. On ground, pure white of dorsal tail stood out. (Bird had to stand on one leg, occasionally spreading tail for balance). Larger bill, compared to adjacent Franklin's, was not pure red, partially black. Eye ring smaller, less conspicuous, again, than adjacent Franklin's. Legs black.

Similar species; how eliminated: Bird flew & sat on ground next to Franklin's Gulls, and Bonaparte's gulls. Did not have white wedge of Bonaparte's, black-headed or Sabine's Gull's. The other black-headed gull, the Little Gull, has no black at all on wing tips. See above for comparison to Franklin's.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? NA  
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Bird was to west, good overcast light. About 50 yds 10x50 Binox.  
10-30x Scope

Previous experience with species and similar ones: 10 yrs in S. Florida; one previous IA record accepted (of a juvenile)

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Nat. Geographic

How long before field notes made? the on a spot this form completed? 2 mo, from field notes

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).