

Mew Gull 1
13 Oct 1990
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA
K. Lowder
IBL 61:16, 20, 62:22

Record Number: 90-32
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Ken Lowder

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:16, 20
Records Committee: 62:22

VOTE: 2 A-D, 5 NA

A-D: A hard bird to accept but document seems to be okay.

NA: I know from personal experience that when one looks at a group of gulls, the main objective is usually to try and see if one or more looks a little different from the rest. Apparently this bird looked a little smaller than the rest of the Ring-bills. According to Harrison (SEABIRDS p. 335-337), Ring-bills vary in length from 18-21 inches with a wingspan of 47 1/2 to 50 inches. Mew (Common) Gull is not much different being 16-18 inches long with a wingspan of 47-48 inches. Gulls are very variable in size (males and females, etc.). The description given here is only "slightly smaller". There are structural differences beyond just the raw size but there is not enough detail given to evaluate this. In fact, Harrison says (p. 144) that the Mew Gull has a "crown more rounded than [Ring-billed Gull], imparting a more gentle expression...". This contradicts the description of this bird which had a "crown noticeably flatter than RB Gull". Harrison also says (p.144) that L.c. brachyrynchus is "darker mantled than ... [Ring-billed Gull]. This doesn't fit the description given. From looking at Grant (GULLS A GUIDE TO IDENTIFICATION) and Harrison, all the other features described will fit Ring-billed Gull. See especially the photos of second-winter Ring-bills on p.232 of Grant (2nd edition). I appreciate the effort put into this observation and documentation and hope the observer will keep contributing.

NA: Size may suggest Mew Gull but I believe there is considerable overlap between this species and Ring-billed Gull so that this characteristic is not reliable. Bill coloration as described also favors Mew Gull if the bill was seen well (which I assume it was given the length of sighting, distance, and equipment used). However, the relatively smaller, more slender bill SHAPE that tapers toward the tip with no expansion (Harrison SEABIRDS) which is also a good field mark for Mew Gull was not described. Flatter crown is a field mark that suggests Ring-billed as Mew Gull should have a round, pigeon-headed look. In addition, the mantle on Mew Gull should be a shade darker than Ring-billed rather than the same color as observer states. The partial tail band is also a characteristic shared by second-winter Ring-billed Gull. Both Ring-billed and Mew Gulls could possibly have primaries that show no white spots when perched. If this bird had flown or preened (which I assume it did not), the two spots in the primaries might have differentiated it

from Ring-billed. While all the field guides state that Ring-billed Gulls have yellow legs, I know from sad personal experience that they can have very dullish-appearing legs at times. While there are some points to this documentation that suggest Mew Gull such as eye and bill color and small size, I don't feel that Ring-billed Gull has been adequately eliminated.

NA: First, this was a thoroughly described bird - a good documentation. Unfortunately, however, we are dealing here with an extremely rare mid-continent visitor and a very common, somewhat variable species. The key field marks used to separate the two basically boils down to iris color, leg color, and wingtips. According to Grant (Gulls, A guide to Identification), all of these marks could also apply to Ring-billed Gulls. The absence of white in the wingtips is probably more consistent in Ring-bills than in Mew (second winter). The light iris in the subject bird is a stronger mark, but again according to Grant (p. 67), the iris is USUALLY pale, presumably not always pale. Legs (see same page) are sometimes gray. In view of these factors, and considering the rarity of Mew Gulls in the Midwest, we should take the conservative tact on this bird.

NA: In my view this documentation does not eliminate first and/or second year Ring-billed Gulls. The author cites several characteristics to eliminate Ring-billed Gull 1) dark eyes, 2) gray legs, 3) flat head shape, 4) no white in primaries. All the above characteristics are also characteristics of second year Ring-billed Gull. The mantle color of Mew Gull would also appear darker in a side by side comparison. Another key field mark, bill shape, was not mentioned even though this bird was viewed from 40 yards for over an hour.

NA: As described this appears more likely to be a Ring-billed Gull. Ring-billed Gulls are highly variable and could fit these characteristics. According to Grant, SOME second year Ring-billed Gulls have a pale iris, have only one small mirror, if any; and most 2nd year Ring-bill's have prominent traces of a tail band. Mew (Common) should have a noticeably smaller bill, rounded head (not flattened) with a "gentle" expression. This was not noted as such. If this is a *L. canus brachyrynchus* then mantle and upper surface of wings should be a darker shade of gray than *L. delawarensis*. Documenter says they were the same shade of color. Lack of white spots or mirrors more closely follows Ring-billed than Mew. Size difference does not help any here either. Ring-billed Gull cannot be ruled out by this description.

A-D: A few comments on Ring-billed and Mew Gulls: A 2nd year Ring-billed can have a partial tail band (SEABIRDS p. 336-7 and Natl. Geo. guide p.160). Both 2nd year Ring-billed and Mew Gulls would have some white in primaries if the wings weren't folded. *L.c. brachyrynchus* subspecies of Mew Gull should have a darker saddle than the adjacent Ring-billed Gulls which were described as the same color as the bird observed. But while I have a few questions on this bird from the documentation, the details in favor of a Mew Gull are a smaller size with a dark eye, the bill having a black tip, and gray legs. At this time I will vote to accept this as A-D.

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

90-32

What species? Mew Gull (Larus canus) How many? 1
Location? Sandpiper Res. Area, Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co., IA.
Type of Habitat? Sand spit
When? date(s): 10-13-80 time: 2:15 to 3:30 p.m.
Who? your name and address: Ken Lowder, RR 2, Box 54, Iowa City
Others with you: Peter Wickham; John Daniel both of Cedar Rapids
Others before or after you: Unknown

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.

Size: Slightly smaller than Ring-Billed Gull. Comparison was easy as bird was standing next to several RB gulls.
Bill - Black tip - Dull yellow base - lighter than RB gulls
Eye - Dark - larger than RB gull
Head - Color white with brownish streaks on crown and back of head and neck; crown was noticeably flatter than RB Gull
Back - Uniformly gray - same shade as RB Gull
Wings - Same shade of gray as back. When perched with wings folded, ~~the~~ wing tips were entirely black. No white spots in primaries at all.

Underparts - White - Unmarked
Legs - Gray and obviously different from yellow legs of nearby RB Gulls.
Similar species; how eliminated: (over)
Ring-billed Gull - light iris; yellow legs; head stage; white in (second winter) primaries

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? No.
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions; give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.
Excellent light - looking West, sun was in the south
Estimated 40 yards. Kowa TSN-4, zooms to 60x. Barch; Lamb
Discoverer IS-box. Swift Telemax 45x.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:
Lowder had seen Mew Gull on several visits to S. California in winter and KL was first to spot the bird.

References and persons consulted before writing description:
Gulls, A Guide to Identification, P.J. Grant. Seabirds, Harrison, NGS, Birds of N. Amer. (while watching) Iowa Birds, Kent, et al.

How long before field notes made? bird this form completed? hr.

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

Tail: White with ~~faint~~ a few darker subterminal marks like a partial tail band.

We believe the bird was subspecies *L. c. brachyrhynchus* because of the presence of the aforementioned partial tail band. We further believe the bird to be in second winter plumage.

90-32

Bird was seen accompanied by 200 Ring billed Gulls, Bonaparte's and Frankling Gulls.