

Laughing Gull  
29 Jun 1987  
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA  
\*Dennis Thompson  
IBL 57:120, 58:75

Record Number: 87-16  
Classification: NA

## DOCUMENTATION

Dennis Thompson

## LETTERS

Bruce Peterjohn to James Dinsmore, 24 Aug 1987  
[Tom Kent] to Bruce Peterjohn, 28 Nov 1987  
Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 5 Dec 1987

## REFERENCE

Field Reports: IBL 57:120  
Records Committee: IBL 58:75

VOTE: 3-III, 2-IV, 1-V, 1-VI

V. If this were a Laughing Gull and the underparts, throat, and neck were white and the mantle all gray, the bird would have to be at least Second Summer in age. If so, all features of the description are indeed consistent with Laughing Gull. The long drooping bill and pot-bellied appearance are very good as is the lack of white in the wingtips. Several things prevent me voting this as a convincingly documented record. First, this was a five minute observation with notes not taken for 24 hours after consulting a number of references. The observer said that Seabirds was consulted to determine the age, but the age was not described in the documentation. This is very tempting, but I still have some doubts.

VI. Bird seen for 5 minutes at 50 yards. Head fits first summer Franklin's, but eye ring not mentioned. Bill sounds like adult Laughing. How long is long? Wing and tail fit first summer Franklin's. Body shape sounds like Laughing, but subjective. Pure white tail with incomplete hood does not fit any age Laughing Gull. Best fit is 1st summer Franklin's, there are some inconsistencies.

III. Pretty good description and Franklin's Gull comparison. Head pattern does not quite fit but rest of description is pretty convincing. It is evident from the description that the observer has experience with both species.

IV. A very interesting description that almost has me convinced except for these questions in my mind. (1) First statement says "black-head gull"--then a statement indicates "posterior half of head was black--rest white." Was bird in molt or what? Draw me a picture. (2) Statement says, "bill long, droopy"--how long? and what is droopy? (3) Why was no mention made of presence or lack of white mirror at base of black on primaries?

III. Observer conveys a good feel for "jizz" of Laughing Gull, a factor completely lacking in 87-15 above.

IV. See 87-15. Discussion of shape more impressive here, but plumage details lacking. Tail said to be "pure white," bill "long." However only "posterior half" of head black, which fits 1st summer Franklin's better than Laughing in any plumage. I

could be convinced that this was a Laughing Gull. If so, however, 87-15 probably was also. Timing of record greatly favors Franklin's.

III. I am not pleased to find myself voting in favor of a Laughing gull. Plumage pattern could be either species, but long, droopy, red bill is just what one would look for to distinguish Laughing from certain Franklin's gulls. Bleh!



105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081  
24 Aug. 1987

James Dinsmore  
Dept. of Animal Ecology  
124 Science II  
Iowa State University  
Ames, IA 50011

Dear Jim,

Many thanks for promptly sending the Iowa summer report as well as the supplemental information. Your promptness and thoroughness makes my task much easier.

With regards to the rarities cited in your report, my thoughts are as follows:

**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck:** An intriguing record. Certainly common in captivity and most previous extralimital records are thought to be escapes. However, this species is increasing and expanding its range and is certainly a candidate for vagrancy. At present, I intend to treat it as a conjectural record, realizing that future sightings may eventually indicate it was actually a legitimate vagrant.

**Prairie Falcon:** Intuitively, this sighting does not sit well with me. His description sounds fairly good, but I am troubled by the bird's "buffy breast". I have never seen a Prairie Falcon that appeared to have buffy underparts. I wonder if he wasn't looking at juvenile Swainson's Hawks or perhaps even Red-taileds. Given the known breeding range of Prairie Falcons, I can't accept this records without better details.

**Laughing Gulls:** Both records are definitely second-year Franklin's Gulls.

**Rufous Hummingbird:** This sighting will not be included unless I receive some substantiating details. Could easily be last year's bird returning to the same feeder, but I need some details.

**Steller's Jay:** Not the most detailed description but the documentation leaves little doubt that the bird was correctly identified. Given the time of year, it must have escaped or been turned loose. I intend to treat it as a conjectural sighting.

Hope you have another eventful fall migration in Iowa. The birding has been rather routine here with no unusual rarities. This weekend's cold front was accompanied by the first wave of passerines with at least 19 species of warblers along Lake Erie yesterday.

Sincerely,

*Bume*

copy

28 NOV 1987

Bruce Peter John  
105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081

Dear Bruce,

I understand that Dennis Thompson was quite upset when the IOU Records Committee did not accept his Laughing Gull sighting at Saylorville Res. on 29 June 1987. In your letter to Jim Dinsmore of 24 Aug you state, "Both records are definitely second-year Franklin's Gulls."

Could you provide us with your reasoning so that we can use your experience to explain to Dennis why he was incorrect in his identification. I enclose a copy of the documentation and a copy of the comments from our Records Committee review.

Our fall has been warm and a bit slow, except for a Groove-billed Ani that was very cooperative for three weeks. The gulls are still not down in big numbers. For the third year in a row I took a pre-Thanksgiving tour of NW Iowa, but didn't find much unusual except for the lack of 1000s of horned larks, longspurs, and snow buntings we had the last two years when it was cold and snowy.

Editing the journal has curtailed my birding a lot. I did get to Colorado this summer for a few days; otherwise, I haven't been on any big trips since California in 1985 and Alaska in 1986.

I hope all is going well with you.

With best regards,



105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081  
5 Dec. 1987

Tom Kent  
211 Richards St.  
Iowa City, IA 52240

Dear Tom,

Sorry to hear that your birding has been somewhat curtailed during the past year but I can certainly sympathize with your situation. I have undertaken the task of writing a book on the birds of Ohio and most of my spare time will be devoted to that endeavor (at least until July or August).

With regards to Dennis Thompson's gull sighting (29 June 1987 at Saylorville Reservoir), adults of both Franklin's and Laughing Gulls would still have complete black hoods during late June. The description of a partial hood ("posterior half of head was black, rest white") indicates a bird in second summer plumage (they attain their adult plumage by their third year).

His description of the partial hood was perfect for a second summer Franklin's Gull. Laughing Gulls have a more variable head pattern in this plumage. Most have no black at all, rather a poorly defined grayish-brown collar of variable width across the back of the head. A minority will have some black feathers mixed with the gray collar. A few will even have fairly extensive black heads, but white feathers are scattered throughout and give a decided mottled appearance to the head rather than a clear cut partial hood (see plate #119 in the first edition of Grant's gull identification book for such a dark headed Laughing Gull or plate #155 in the second edition). Thompson's description of a clear cut partial hood just does not fit any second summer Laughing Gull I have seen.

The described wing pattern could fit either species. While some second summer Franklin's will have a few white terminal "mirrors" on the primaries, many do not and have entirely black primaries similar to a Laughing Gull.

His description of size and shape was based totally on subjective characteristics (and he did not state which other species were present for direct comparison). Additionally, both species are somewhat variable with regards to these characteristics and a male Franklin's can closely approach a female Laughing Gull in bill features, overall size and shape (see measurements in Grant's book for example).

In conclusion, his description did not satisfactorily eliminate Franklin's Gull and the most important characteristic (head pattern) was more consistent with Franklin's than Laughing Gull.

Tom Kent  
5 Dec. 1987  
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Hope this discussion is useful. The birding has been fairly dull in Ohio this fall as well. We had two male Rufous Hummingbirds and a fairly good flight of Sabine's Gulls and Red Phalaropes along Lake Erie. Otherwise, its been rather routine. By the way, I wonder where all the gulls are. The numbers along Lake Erie have been dismal all fall, even Ring-billeds which are normally incredibly abundant at this time of the year.

Sincerely,

  
Bruce Peterjohn



BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Laughing Gull 2. Number: 1  
 3. Location New Beach (sw of marina) Saylorville Lake Polk Co Ia  
 4. Date: 6/29/87 5. Time Bird seen: 6:30 to 6:35

6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field):

Black-headed gull. A little smaller than a ring-bill (direct comparison). Posterior half of head ~~was~~ black, rest white. Mantle and wings dark gray; underparts throat + neck white. Bill long, droopy + dark red. Legs dark. Bird was standing with a flock of ring-bills when I first observed it. No white was noted in the wings at rest. Posture was very "upright". Neck + legs appeared long, giving it a pot-bellied appearance

7. Description of voice, if heard: - back →

8. Description of behavior: First observed standing with 12 ring-bills. Flushed, it landed by itself 20 yds away. Flushed again, it flew over a dune, out of sight.

9. Habitat - general:  
 specific: Sandy beach.

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
Franklin's gull - bird had a completely different build. I had the advantage of a direct comparison with ring-billed. This bird was smaller, but still →

11. Distance (how measured)? 50 yds. (Guesstimate) 12. Optical equipment: 7X35 binocs

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):  
Good light, Sun behind me.

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: Very familiar with Franklin's. Laughing observed in Texas this March; Florida 2 yrs. ago.

15. Other observers: \_\_\_\_\_  
 16. Did the others agree with your identification? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: \_\_\_\_\_

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Consulted National Geographic + Harrison's "Seabirds" to determine age of bird. Recognized as laughing gull at first sight.

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 24 hrs.

Dennis Thompson Address: 2014 44th  
 Signature  
 Date: 6/30/87 City, State: Des Moines Iowa

6. (cont.) In flight, the tail was pure white. The wings were gray, with black tips. Definite white trailing edge. One small white spot on the secondaries just above the white trailing edge, almost creating a small bar. Underwing was light, with a darker tip.

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10. (cont.) larger than a Franklin's. I would say it was half-way between a Ring-bill + Franklin's in size. White was almost non-existent in the wings, <sup>ps</sup> both at rest + in flight. The most obvious difference was the structure of the bird. As soon as I saw it, I knew it wasn't a Franklin's. The long neck, size, long legs, long bill; + "pot-bellied" look caught my eye immediately. I guess another way to describe it was upright-looking.