

Laughing Gull

7 May 1983

IPL Settling Ponds, Pottawattamie Co., IA

*B. Wilson

IBL 54:39

Record Number: 83-06

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Barbara L. Wilson

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review along with an article: Goetz, R. 1983. Spring identification of: Laughing Gulls and Franklin's Gulls. Illinois Aud. Bull. 204:33-36.)

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 54:39

VOTE: 2-IV, 4-V, 1-abstain

V, Im not convinced--too many plumage abnormalities in gulls.

V, Franklin's on probability.

IV, An unlikely bird in Iowa. Identification should be based on more than just one field mark.

V, bill?

Abstain, I saw a bird fitting the exact same description at same location on April 24, 1983. I too entertained the thought of the bird being a Laughing, but reasoned it to be an aberrant Franklins. Now I am not sure either way.

V, I would like to see (after consulting Grant) more details on extent of hood, ie, was bird adult (if so, would be Laughing) or 1st-2nd summer (if so, far more likely Franklins). Wilson states "It seemed to be in a very neat breeding plumage, not a young bird." Very conservative observer. Later: I spoke to Barb-- she stated that the hood was complete. Later again: I read the Goetz article (Franklins vs Laughing). This age of Franklins may indeed have a complete hood. Hence this bird more likely Franklins.

IV, The bird showed no sign of being immature. In June of this year I saw two Franklin's with the pale gray on primaries 5 & 6 as mentioned in the enclosed article; this was unlike the uniform dark gray of the bird I saw. There is a subapical white spot on 1 or perhaps 2 primaries (4&5?). I think it is equally impossible to eliminate Franklin's or Laughing if young Franklin's can appear adult in all but wing pattern.

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
21 June 1983

Dear Tom:

I'm looking forward to the I.C.U. meeting in October. I'll let you know about my travel plans and provide you with some slides at a later date.

My thoughts on the documentations are as follows:

Mississippi Kite: definitely a Northern Harrier

Black-legged Kittiwake: definitely a first-year Ring-billed Gull!
The absence of head and nape markings, bill color and tail shape eliminate the possibility of a kittiwake.

Laughing Gull: the description does not eliminate a sub-adult Franklin's Gull (which would have a similar wing pattern with no white separating the gray mantle from the black primaries.) Since she did not describe bill and leg color or the black hood in detail, I cannot accurately age this bird (and hence cannot identify it to species). Given its location in extreme western Iowa, I would imagine that a Franklin's would be much more likely.

Black-headed Grosbeak: another problematical grosbeak sighting that does not sit very well with me. The description of the underparts is suggestive of a Black-head but is not detailed enough to be conclusive (the observer should have mentioned the belly and described the streaking pattern in more detail). The white eye line is suggestive of a Rose-breast. In addition, the observer was not familiar with the species and appeared rather indecisive with her own identification. Given these facts, I don't think this written description provides a conclusive basis for identifying this bird to either species.

Whooping Crane: I have a number of problems with this sighting. First, the fact the observer was a non-birder who observed the bird at a distance of 100 yards without binoculars makes me wonder about the accuracy of the description (could he accurately determine bill and leg color at that distance?). Secondly, the crane he described was a first-year bird that should still be accompanying its parents (by the way there were only 2 or 3 young produced last year out of the 70 or so cranes in the Aransas flock). Thirdly, it is rather unlikely that this species would be feeding along the shore of a man-made lake. Lastly, I invariably receive 1 or 2 Whooping Crane reports from somewhere in the Region each year (I also received 1 from Indiana this spring). These reports always come from casual or non-birders in very unlikely locations. While it is conceivable that an occasional crane might stray into extreme western Iowa or Missouri, such a sighting must be thoroughly described by a number of active birders (and hopefully accompanied by photos) before I will accept it.

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Western Grebe: the description is pretty good for a light-phase bird. The best field mark is the head pattern which he described perfectly (white lores and white extending above the eye). The bill color is a little troublesome; light-phased grebes have orange-yellow bills while dark-phase birds have greenish-yellow bills. However, the description of a "bright yellow" bill is closer to a light-phase bird. Another characteristic that is frequently useful is back color. Light-phase birds have a grayish back that is lighter than the nape (as was accurately described for this bird); dark-phase grebes have uniformly black upperparts and nape. The best article describing these color phases is found in Western Birds (1981, Vol. 12 (1), pp. 41-46); I can send you a copy if you're interested.

Eastern Wood Pewee: very marginal description (so marginal that I probably won't include it in my report). I have problems with any pewee described as a black and white bird (the upperparts certainly aren't black and the underparts aren't uniformly white). In addition, Empidonax flycatchers frequently lack eye rings. Given this brief and inaccurate description and the observers apparent inexperience, I would have to describe this sighting as questionable at best.

Gray-cheeked Thrush: another questionable sighting. The rusty tail of a Hermit can be rather difficult to view (especially for young birds in poor light). They also failed to mention the gray cheek patch. Given their inexperience, this sighting would best be treated as Catharus sp.

Several miscellaneous comments on some observations:

Yellow Rails: while the descriptions seem to come out of a field guide, from my experience, Yellow Rails look nothing like those pictured in the books. For example, they are not yellow at all but have cream-colored underparts and tan or buffy upperparts with rather indistinct dark streaks. If Iowa observers are seeing yellow-colored rails, I do not know what they are looking at.

Long-billed Dowitcher: basic plumaged long-bills cannot be identified by bill length and wing covert edgings!!!! I would suggest Mike Newlon read Pitelka's excellent monograph on the genus Limnodromus (1948, U. California Publ. Zool. 50: 1-108). before he attempts further identifications of dowitchers. While fall juveniles and breeding plumaged adults can be safely identified with caution (don't use the misinformation in the field guides), winter plumaged birds in migration cause real problems. I don't know of any proven field identification techniques for these dowitchers. (This letter is too long already, I will defer further discussion until October). Many birders are having similar problems. This spring, one state in the Region reported more long-bills than short-bills which is preposterous.

Godwits: I totally agree with your comment on godwit identification. Any May sighting of 46 godwits in this Region must certainly be Hudsonians.

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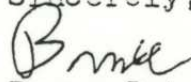
I have several requests:

1. Can you send me a better copy (or the original) of the Chestnut-collared Longspur documentation? I can't read the copy you sent me.
2. Can you send me a photo of the Vermilion Flycatcher? While a Vermilion Flycatcher should be unmistakable, there was a partially melanistic Scarlet Tanager in New York this spring that had a plumage pattern identical to a Vermilion Flycatcher (and was originally identified as one until someone familiar with both species saw the bird).

I will return both the photo and original ^{longspur documentation} promptly. I will feel more comfortable including both sightings in my spring report if I can study the available evidence in better detail.

I hope this information is useful to you. (I also hope it makes sense; it is getting quite late and I should have gone to bed long ago). Let me know if I can provide further assistance.

Sincerely,



Bruce Peterjohn

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

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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 underside 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.

LITERATURE CITED:

- Chapman, F.M. 1966 (first published, 1895). *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*. Dover Publications.
- Dwight, D.J. 1925. *The Gulls of the World*. Bulletin of the National Museum.
- Grant, P.J. 1982. *Gulls, A Guide to Identification*. Buteo Books.
- Peterson, R.T. 1980. *A Field Guide to the Birds*, 4th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Pough, R.H. 1951. *Audubon Water Bird Guide*. Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Documentation

Laughing Gull - 1

Lower Power + light Settling Pond

May 7, 1983

Description: Size, color, + pattern of a Franklin's Gull. (White gull with gray mantle + black hood. White around eyes.)

Primary tips dark, with no white separating them from the ~~the~~ mantle.



Rosy breast not noticed.

Behavior: flew about, landed, swam.

Similar species: Differs from ~~the~~ Franklin's Gull only in lack of white line between black primaries + gray mantle.

I saw one Franklin's this spring with a very narrow white band in the primaries. If this isn't a Laughing Gull, it's an aberrant Franklin's. It seemed to be in a very neat breeding plumage, not a young bird.

Viewing conditions: Windy, gray. Bird SW of us, though it didn't matter what direction as the overcast was very heavy. 8x binoculars. Bird halfway across north settling pond from us. Afternoon. 2 min. or so.

Other observers: Seen with Babs + Loren Padelford + Tampa Bray. At the time we agreed it was an aberrant Franklin's Gull, + even joked about an Omaha birder who would instantly call it Laughing. Well.....

Notes: I took a careful look at the wing pattern to write it down later, but didn't write it until evening - but before I looked in a book. We had a good look at it.

Barbara L Wilson
Rt 1 Box 41
Hastings, La. 51540