

Thayer's Gull  
7 Nov 1981  
Coralville Res., Johnson Co., IA  
\*T. Kent  
P-0171, IBL 51:115, 52:43

Record Number: 81-14  
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Thomas H. Kent

PHOTOGRAPHS

T. H. Kent, P-0171

LETTERS

Bruce Peterjohn to Thomas Kent, 22 Dec 1981

Terence R. Wahl to Michael C. Newlon, 31 July 1982, with  
comments from Dennis R. Paulson

Paul Lehman with note by Jon Dunn, 7 September 1982

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 51:115, table of contents [article deleted]

Records Committee: 52:43

VOTE: 2 I-P, 2 IV, 2 V, 1 abstain

IV, Suggest we defer action on these until we know what we are  
talking about.

V, Seems subject to doubt based on Peterjohn's points,  
especially first point.

I-P, Peterjohn fails to take into account two points when  
reviewing 7 Nov. bird. Variable plumage of Thayer's (some are  
rather dark individuals) and light angles which creat shadows.  
How can Peterjohn feel confident when he refers only to the  
extreme light Thayer's presented in Birding?

V, I suggest Peterjohn is correct in this case, although  
immature Herring Gulls in my experience have more dark areas in  
the primaries. Thayer's primary area appears totally translucent  
in flight.

81-14

#2

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081  
Dec. 22, 1981

Dr. Thomas Kent  
211 Richards St.  
Iowa City, IA 52240

Dear Tom:

I have several comments with regards to the Western Tanager and Thayer's Gull sightings in your fall report. My comments are brief (due to other time constraints) but I hope clearly discuss these sightings.

Enclosed is an article on tanagers with wing bars (presence of wing bars does not eliminate Scarlet Tanager). Note that Myers described the head, back and rump as uniformly olive-green while Moore stated that the head and rump were slightly lighter than the back. Myers description fits a Scarlet Tanager while Moore's description is closer to a Western Tanager. (My experience with fall Western Tanager is that males have an obvious "saddle" effect, quite unlike a Scarlet Tanager and would have been noticed by Myers if he examined the bird closely and the bird was a male as they claim.) Since neither observer described the underwing coverts or the edgings of the lesser coverts (and their upperpart descriptions apparently conflict), their descriptions do not satisfactorily eliminate a young Scarlet Tanager with wing bars.

After carefully reviewing your photographs, my reaction is that the gull was a female Herring Gull. This identification is based on 3 main characteristics:

1. The wing tips in flight are too dark and contrast too much with the wing coverts to be a Thayer's Gull. While there are different lighting conditions on the 2 photographed birds, I really don't see any difference between them with respect to this field mark. On a typical Thayer's Gull, the wing tips are virtually the same color as the wing coverts without the distinct contrast (see *Birding*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (Dec. 1980), p. 199 for a typical Thayer's Gull).
2. Note the undersides of the outer primaries are dark (nor translucent). On a Thayer's Gull, these feathers should be as translucent as the rest of the underwing (see the excellent photo on p. 205 of the *Birding* article). Notice that the undersides of the wingtips are the same for both birds (hence, they are probably the same species).
3. Female Herring Gulls have more rounded heads and smaller, slimmer bills than males (and can be very similar in appearance to a Thayer's Gull). The photographed bird has this appearance.

Without a doubt, both of these identifications are very difficult. I hope you realize my comments on these birds are offered in a purely constructive manner to aid in future identification of these species and are not meant to cast aspersions on the abilities of the observers. Let me know if I can provide further on any identification problem.

Sincerely,

Bruce Peterson

81-14

31 July 1982

Dr. Michael C. Newlon  
408 Wales St.  
Iowa City IA 52240

Dear Mike,

At long last, here are the gull record photos and descriptions. On first looking over some photos I was almost convinced some were Thayer's, only to be "unconvinced" when I looked at another photo of the same bird from another angle (dorsal, ventral, etc.). I have been extremely busy this summer and the whole pile got buried then for some time. When I found it again (with some horror and shame) I hurriedly passed it on to Dennis Paulson, whom I respect as the best in the Northwest at this kind of thing.

As you can see from his comments, Dennis went at it and started his comments without all his references handy, so the summary of this review/judgment is in the postscript(!). I have gone over the records again after Dennis returned them to me and concur with his judgment. I can take no "credit" for the review, however: Dennis did the work.

Yours truly,



Terence R. Wahl

81-14

COMMENTS ABOUT IOWA THAYER'S GULL RECORDS

(also, underwing coverts may be too dark for Thayer's)

#1 - this description for the most part seems fine for a first-winter Thayer's, but at the same time it is not too discrepant for a first-winter Herring, that very variable species. The bill and head configuration certainly are fine for Thayer's, but it may be that some smallest Herrings could overlap this. I don't know what to make of the white trailing edge of the tail as a field mark; skins in the Burke Museum don't show this any better developed for Thayer's than for Herring, in fact it is not prominent usually. I don't think a paler feather edge would develop from feather wear, as the description implied for a Herring Gull, if anything just the reverse--pale edges wear off with time. The flight shots, which I am not sure represent either one or two individuals, to me show too much dark color under the outer primaries for Thayer's. Most (all?) Thayer's show uniformly gray under the primaries, not any darker on the outer ones than the inner ones, and the shot of the bottom bird on the page with 3 pictures shows clearly darker outer primaries, as does the bird on the other page (bearing in mind that backlighted feathers may look different). We have two Thayer's wings available in the collection here, and both of them are uniformly pale, the outer primaries exactly like the inners. I don't really know the extent of the variation possible, but I do know that underwings of Herring and even Western can look fairly pale with backlighting. Unfortunately I have no comparable photographs of first-year Herrings in flight, and it's too bad that the observers didn't try to get such pictures for their own comparison. Thus this bird (these birds) could well be Thayer's, but the descriptions and photos don't totally confirm the identification, in my opinion.

#2 - this bird again looks superficially like a good Thayer's, the head/bill shape and size identical to birds I have photographed. Note that Thayer's can have a head just as flat as that of any other gull at times--this difference is overemphasized in the literature and doubtless will go on confusing people. I am disturbed that I cannot get any sign of the paler underwing tips of Thayer's from the photos, nor does the description mention them, although it does mention paler proximal primaries (see above comments). Again, identification rests on bill size, which of course overlaps considerably in Herring/Thayer's. This bird has even less credibility than the preceding one as a Thayer's.

#3 - with no photographic documentation it becomes even more difficult to assess records such as this. The lack of "actual" Herring Gulls to compare with these birds is of course critical, and I would have liked to have seen definite differences described in underwing color/shade between the two seen under similar conditions in flight. The fact that they were 175-250 yards away certainly precludes good study. I don't see that anything discussed here clearly points to these birds being Thayer's.

#4 - again, the description matches Thayer's well enough, but I don't think it is outside the known variation of Herring, which certainly can have an entirely black bill in winter (I assume all or most of such birds I have seen in Massachusetts in November were Herrings...) as well as a variety of types of scapular edging. Again, observation in flight would have been most definitive, although not if in isolation away from known Herring Gulls. I really think that lighting on wings can be tricky, and with lots of Herring and even more Thayer's to look at here in Washington, I am confused by some individual birds. Again, probably a Thayer's but not for sure.

#5 - this is an excellent description and seems as much like a first-year Thayer's as any of those I read. I wish it had been photographically documented. Note that it matches the description of bird #1, however, and the photos of that bird aren't quite enough to convince me of Thayer's because more dark color is present under the wing than is usual. Excuse me, I just found the photographs of it. They are not at all compelling, the top one unfortunately having the underwing blurred; again, they could be a Thayer's, but they also might not.

#6 - (I suppose there is an error in the date here, listed as Dec. 1982); again, this description sounds like Thayer's Gull in wing coloration, especially the contrast between upper and under surface, although again I would have liked a detailed description of how the Herring Gulls looked under these conditions. It sounds as if the observer had abundant opportunities to compare the birds, nevertheless, and again this sighting has a good chance of being a Thayer's. Again, it is unfortunate there is no photographic record of it.

SUMMARY: On first glance at descriptions and photos, I was convinced that Thayer's Gulls were being observed in Iowa, even if all the records were not equally convincing. On detailed examination of the same material, I am left a bit more dubious, because of comments above. Nevertheless, it seems hard to believe that the observers aren't seeing smaller, smaller-billed, lighter underwinged birds with their Herring Gulls, and they may all be Thayer's. Collecting one would be a very good idea at this point, just to confirm in the hand what people are seeing in the field at different distances and under different lighting conditions. The two species do overlap in virtually all characteristics in first-year plumage, and identification rests on a constellation of characters.

POSTSCRIPT: All of the above was written with one big disadvantage--I did not have accessible my photographs of Thayer's and Herring Gulls. Subsequently I have gone through American Birds issue by issue for the last ten years to look for photos of Thayer's. Looking at all these photos has convinced me, contrary to previous comments, that probably none of the above records are Thayer's! I advise the observers to look at the following photographs in that journal:

AB 26: 445--this "Iceland Gull" was subsequently reidentified as a Thayer's (which I had thought it was on seeing the photo), and it shows what I mean about the underwing.

AB 31: 318--this bird shows the rather uniform dorsal aspect of the wings, much less contrasty than the photos of Iowa #1, and also the pale underwing tip, without the dark tip/pale window effect described for the Iowa birds.

AB 34: 266--these two birds show the rather pale wingtips (left bird is undoubtedly the spring one, rather worn) and the lack of very contrasty sections of the wings.

AB 29: 51--again, the overall pale appearance is apparent. As has been stressed by some authors, this species is at least as similar to Kumlien's as to Herring, perhaps more so in some ways. Note also that none of the birds in these photos is particularly pale-headed, a feature I found a bit odd on one or more of the Iowa photos--and of course in the West we often use the pale-headed effect on some young Herrings to distinguish them from Westerns.

I hope these comments are taken as constructive ones and especially that recourse to the AB photos cited here will be of great value to Iowa observers. There is little doubt that Thayer's Gull should/does occur in Iowa, but I don't believe its presence has been documented there yet.

*Dennis Paulson*

Dennis R. Paulson  
Burke Museum  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195

P.O. Box 1061  
Goleta, Calif.  
93116

7 Sept. 1982

Comments on Several Iowa Records of Thayer's Gull

Before giving my thoughts on each of the individual Thayer's Gull records, I would like to make a few comments on my article which appeared in Birding 12(6). The artist's plate (p. 200) was never seen by me before the article was published. While it is "O.K.", I'm not crazy about the bill shape shown and the primaries on the first-year bird are too dark; this may have partly resulted in the mis-identifications I believe were made in the Iowa birds. Several of the black and white photos in the Birding article were also reproduced too darkly. The cover photo of that issue (in color) shows the primary color much more accurately.

I believe each of the records of Iowa Thayer's Gulls sent to me is either definitely or probably of Herring Gulls. None are definitely Thayer's. Certainly all the photos that accompany several of them are of Herrings. A real problem I see with each is that the written details for each sound possible for Thayer's, but that the photos of the same individuals show them clearly to be Herrings and, in part, conflict with the written details. Those without photos are more difficult to evaluate. In every case, female Herrings may well have been involved; this sex averages smaller and rounder headed than the male, giving it more of a "Thayer's" look.

Record #1 (2 at Lake Manawa, 19 March 1981):

The photos show a bird that, at rest, appears too dark overall for a Thayer's in March (too gray and smudgey, not paler brown and more flecked); the pale-headed look to the bird is better for Herring; and the primaries definitely appear too dark and lack pale edges to the tips of the primaries (in other words, the primaries seem fine for Herring). In flight, both the uppersurface and under-surface of the primaries are much too dark. See the flight photo of a Thayer's from underneath on page 205 of the Birding article; the outer primaries are as pale as the inner primaries and secondaries. The Lake Manawa birds look very much like Herring Gulls.

Record #2 (2 at Coralville Res., 7 November 1981):

The photos show one major problem with the birds being Thayer's: the primaries are too dark and lack the pale edges to the primary tips (a bird in November is in fresh plumage and shows these pale tips). They appear to be Herrings. The small head and smaller billed look can be attributed to the birds probably being females.

Record #3 (3 at Coralville Res., 8 November 1981):

Why aren't two of these the same as in "Record #2"? (which I believe to be Herrings). Not enough specifics in written details; description could fit either Herring or Thayer's.

Record #4 (1 at Lake Manawa, 5 December 1981):

"Chocolate" brown primaries sound too dark for Thayer's. Other marks mentioned could fit a Thayer's, also a female Herring. Not seeing coloration of the primaries (above and below) in flight an important omission.

Record #5 (1 at Coralville Res., 6 December 1981):

Photo of bird in flight (taking off) shows underwings to be much too dark for Thayer's. Overall coloration of bird also appears to be too dark. Appears to be a Herring Gull.

Record #6 (1 at Saylorville Dam, 10-17 Dec. "1982" (sic)):

Plumage "grayish-brown" fits Herring better; Thayer's more of a tan-brown. Pink at base of bill not typical for a Thayer's in December (but fine for Herring). Again, not really enough in description to be certain; were absolutely all the primaries from underneath a "ghost-gray"? (should really have been whitish). I believe there isn't enough in this description to be positive of an identification.

Hope these comments have been of some help.

Sorry to be only "negative" on all of the records, but they were either clearly of Herring Gulls or lacked sufficient details and could either have involved Herring or Thayer's. I am sure that Thayer's occurs in Iowa somewhat regularly, however.

Sincerely,

*Paul Lehman*

Paul Lehman

P.S. If you have any further questions, feel free to ask.

P.S.S. I'm sorry that I don't now have the time to respond in detail, but all of the photos I examined here are unequivocally Herring Gulls. I can give a detailed response in November if you want to send them back. JD

(from Dunn)

What species? Thayer's Gull How many? 2 #2Location? Coralville Res. Dam, west overlook, Johnson Co. IowaType of habitat? Reservoir, just above dam, in water and on swimming beachWhen? date(s): 7 Nov 1981, ? 8 Nov 1981 time: 9:25 to 9:50 AM, also 11:00-11:20 and 7:30-8:30 on 8 NovWho? your name and address: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City IA 52240others with you: Carl Bendorf late AM on 7 Nov, Mike Newlon, m. obs on 8 Novothers before or after you: none that I know of

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, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

"Among 230 Ring-billed Gulls were two larger brown gulls and one adult Herring Gull. The brown gulls were distinctly larger than the ring-bills and slightly smaller than the Herring Gull (in the same field). Bill thinner than Herring's, straight and all black. There was an indistinct darker patch behind the eye. Feathers extended further over the upper than the lower mandible. The birds were overall light, rather uniform brown except for darker but not black wing tips. There was light white edging to the wing coverts giving a patterned appearance. The proximal primaries were lighter from below (window effect) in flight (seen once). The tail had a broad brown band over the distal 1/2 of the tail and lighter brown rump. The flanks appeared slightly barred. The legs and feet were pink. The wings from above were relatively uniform brown but darker at the tips." These notes were made toward the end of the first observation period with out consulting any references and I was alone. They were expanded to make sentences but not otherwise altered. Most of these findings were confirmed by Carl Bendorf later on 7 Nov. We also noted white edging to the tertials and possibly slight edging on the primaries. The next morning there were three brown gulls on the beach. The bill and head shape again seemed to be that of Thayer's Gull (uniform thin black bill with only slightest suggestion of gonygeal buldge and straight forehead with rounded small head). The overall lightness of the bird was not as evident as described the day before and views in flight were not as good. Later on the morning of 8 Nov there were about five first year Herring Gulls which were seen at a distance on water and close up flying over the top of the dam. Their tail bands and wing tips were black-brown and more contrasting with the rest of the wing and tail. On 10 Nov at 8 AM there were about five first year Herrings and two adults. The immatures were quite dark brown and had large bills with thick bulging and sharp curve at the end of the upper mandible.

Similar species and how eliminated: Photographs taken at the first encounter with a Celestron 750 mm lens demonstrate the size difference, the bill and head shape difference, the lighter overall color, and the window in the wing. An adult Herring was in the photo with the Thayer's on 7 Nov and imm Herring were photographed on 10 Nov. Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? for comparison.

Mike Newlon was unsure on Sunday and I couldn't tell if others had confirmed the findings.

If yes, explain: My doubts were raised on Sunday (8 Nov) although the head and bill findings were the same. But there were 3 birds. The photos however confirm my initial findings. Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment. Sunny, early AM light with sun at about right angle to right. 50-300 yards (est).

8x binoculars, 20x scope, 15x lens on camera.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Seen once in western Iowa in March 1981.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

none until later

How long before field notes made? immediately this form completed? 24 hrs, 5 days

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240