

Iceland Gull
29 Feb 1992
Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co., IA
*Kent, *Cecil
IBL 62:55, 63:69, Kent 1992, P-0336

Record Number: 92-05
Classification: A-P

DOCUMENTATIONS

Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246
Bob Cecil, 1315 41st St., Des Moines, IA 50311

PHOTOGRAPHS

T. H. Kent, P-0336

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 62:55
Kent, T. H. 1992. Iceland Gulls in Iowa. IBL 62:95-98.
Records Committee: IBL 63:69

VOTE: 1 A-P, 6 A-D

A-D, Consistent with 1st winter Iceland Gull except for leg color noted by Cecil and reported by Myer. I could not find any reference indicating leg color other than pink on 1st winter Iceland. I don't know if this is a result of a poor view (also noted by Cecil), lighting, aberrant pigmentation, or misidentification. However, I am inclined to concur with the identification -- all other features of plumage and size support Iceland and eliminate other possibilities.

A-D, Good details provided for 1st winter Iceland Gull.

REVOTE: 5 A-P, 2 A-D

A-D, Surprisingly, these pictures with larger images of the bird in question give me the most trouble. Observers state the bill was small and black but the bird in the photograph looks to have a fairly large bill with a swollen tip, and is light with a dark tip. This coloration does not eliminate Iceland Gull but does suggest Glaucous Gull. Observers say there were no Herring Gulls in the vicinity but what was the other gull? It looks very dark to be a first-winter Ring-billed Gull. (I showed this picture to another birder who half-jokingly suggested it was a documentation of the first Heerman's Gull for Iowa!) Wings shown in flight are long and slender, and head appears rounded which supports identification of Iceland Gull. I don't feel the photos alone are diagnostic for Iceland Gull.

A-P, Lightening in primaries and pale brown mantle are diagnostic. Legs appear pink, which was my only problem with the written documentation.

A-P, The bill color seems to be light at the base with a dark tip more like a 2nd yr Iceland Gull. I think this can be accounted for by the late date for this photo.

A-P, Photos show a bicolored bill, light tan coloration overall, very light tail with no discernable band and white primaries, making this a 1st year Iceland Gull.

A-D, The photos were good, and it certainly is a "white-winged" gull. I wish the bill color was much more definitive for me to vote A-P. The bill color almost looks like it was pink with a black tip.

REVOTE: 6 A-P, 1 A-D

A-P, All the field marks listed by APs could equally apply to Glaucous Gull. Size is the determinant factor, and I find this most difficult to judge from this photo. Since, however, the photograph is backed by excellent documentations, I will go with the majority opinion on this one.

A-D, The photos look like a Glaucous Gull and a Herring Gull as possibilities to me. I don't feel that a Glaucous Gull is eliminated as a possibility from the two photos submitted. The documentations point clearly to Iceland Gull. But the photos are not diagnostic to me and do not eliminate Glaucous Gull from consideration. I feel that the comments of the three A-P reviewers on the second round could apply quite well to a Glaucous Gull photo.

photographs were reviewed by Kevin J. Zimmer, the author of a recent article on Iceland Gull with many excellent photographs (Zimmer 1991), who provided explanations for some of the troublesome features. He noted that head shape depended on posture (Figure 1a vs. 1b), and in some photos the shape was within the range of Iceland Gull. He also pointed out, "The individual variation in incredible, and I've seen many an unquestioned Iceland Gull (presumably males) that were as flat-crowned and large-billed as adjacent Herrings, while others look more like doves." Zimmer suggested that the white appearance of the upper body and neck were due to molting of these feathers to first-summer plumage. The tail band was not a problem at all, because Zimmer's article illustrates that many Iceland Gulls have a light tail band. According to Zimmer, "Points against Thayer's Gull include overall paleness, whiteness of the folded primaries, uniform checkering of the tertials [solid brown in Thayer's], absence of secondary bar, paleness of spread wing tip, and amount of contrast at the base of the bill." A leucistic Herring Gull would be expected to have some features other than the white head and neck to suggest that species. To identify a hybrid, one would have to find features of each parent -- a difficult task. The proposed lumping of Iceland and Thayer's gulls into one species would make the possibility of Iceland-Thayer's hybrid moot.

In the next three paragraphs, I describe three different Iceland Gulls, two in first-winter and one in second-winter plumages. Presumably these were the same birds seen by many observers in Bettendorf and Davenport in January and early February 1992.

On 31 December 1991, I went to Lock and Dam 14 in Scott County in an attempt to add some species to my last-day-of-the-year list. From the lock area, I found a very pale gull flying below the dam. On the flying bird, I noted the following: slightly smaller than Herring Gulls; overall off-white on the wings, body, and tail; light brown, poorly demarcated, subterminal tail band about one-fourth the length of the tail; and all-dark bill. The tail band was similar to that on the Iceland Gull photographed in Scott County on 8 February by Tim Schantz (Figure 2). The underwing was all light, with the flight feathers lighter than the coverts. The upper wing was very uniform and without a hint of a secondary bar. I concluded that it was a first-winter bird because of the uniform coloration without gray on the back or wings and that it was not a Glaucous Gull because of the overall size and all black bill. I was less secure in excluding Thayer's Gull because of the tail band and slight brownish edge to the upper side of the outer two or three primaries that I detected using a telescope. Eventually the bird landed on a pillar and later a Herring Gull landed beside it. Compared to the Herring, the bird was 10% smaller; had a smaller, more rounded head with shorter neck; had a bill three-fourths as long; and had a primary extension of about 1 inch and equal to that of the Herring Gull. On the standing bird, the primaries were light colored and the wing and tail coverts appeared finely vermiculated. Based on the wing tip and faintness of the tail band, I argued against Thayer's Gull. Shortly thereafter, at Lock and Dam 15, I viewed a first-winter Thayer's Gull that was quite different in that it was overall darker, had dark wing tips, and had a much darker and more prominent tail band. I saw the Iceland Gull again on 1 January 1992, still flying below the dam, and it was seen the next day by Jim Fuller, who said that it was easy to pick out because of its "ghostly" appearance. Neither of us saw the leg color well. The eye was dark.

I returned to Lock and Dam 14 on 4 January and found two Iceland Gulls that appeared to be different birds from the one seen on 31 December and 1-2 January. The first was a first-year white-winged gull that I saw around a small area of open water in the backwater, rather than flying below the dam and sitting on pillars as had occurred on the previous days. As I moved up taking photographs, the bird flew away. I did not detect any tail band, but one of my photographs (Figure 3) later showed a faint, broken, narrow, light brown, subterminal tail band. I had noted the overall similarity of size and shape (compared to Herring Gulls) to the bird seen three days before, and also noted pink legs, projecting crossed primaries, and indistinct lightness in the base of the bill. One or more first-winter Iceland Gulls were seen farther south in Scott County from Lock and Dam 15 to Bettendorf/Moline by many observers at least to 9 February.



Figure 2. Iceland Gull in Scott County, 8 February 1992. Note the definite light brown tail band. Photograph by Tim Schantz.

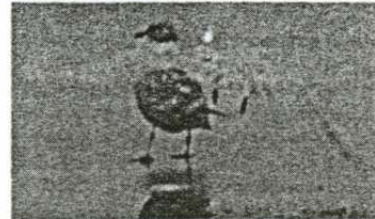


Figure 3. Note the minimal brown edging in the distal tailfeathers of this flying first-winter Iceland Gull at Lock and Dam 14 on 4 January 1992.

On 4 January, after flushing the first-year Iceland Gull, I moved up to look at the gull flock resting on the ice of the backwater. I was surprised to find two white-winged gulls. The second bird had a uniform light-gray back and scapulars and a bill that was dark at the tip and light at the base. In flight, the light gray of the back and scapulars contrasted with the off-white of the upper wing surface. I also noticed a light, smudgy, gray-brown, subterminal tail band that occupied about one-fourth of the tail. Otherwise, this second-year Iceland Gull was similar in size, shape, and proportions to the first-winter bird. I did not see this bird again, but others reported a second-year bird downstream, and Tanya Bray (personal communication) saw a second-year bird on 3 February at Bettendorf/Moline.

On 29 February 1992, Bob and John Cecil and I were driving by the marina at Saylorville Reservoir when Bob saw a white-winged gull on the shoreline. We had heard of a Glaucous Gull being seen earlier in the day, but this bird was not much larger than the Ring-billed Gulls it was with and the bill appeared to be of uniform thickness and all dark. It was slightly longer and distinctly bulkier bodied than the Ring-billed Gulls. Overall it was very light brown with white primaries extending beyond the tail. Bob noted faint scaling on the wings and barring on the tail coverts. We left briefly to get Bob Myers and Maridel Jackson. Cecil and Myers thought the legs had a yellowish cast, but I judged them to be pinkish. I climbed down the bank to photograph the bird (Figure 4) and it eventually flew, revealing all light wing surfaces above and below. Cecil noted that the wings were broader than those of Ring-billed Gulls. I did not hear of any further reports of this bird.

How could I see five and photograph four Iceland Gulls in Iowa in less than one year's time? Did this same phenomenon occur in nearby states? Iceland Gulls

were reported in small numbers along all of the Great Lakes in the winter of 1991-92 (*American Birds* Regional Reports).

Having minimal experience with Iceland Gull prior to these sightings, I was under the impression from reading that identification might be difficult. The recent article by Zimmer was very timely and helpful with some difficult field marks. Zimmer emphasizes the extremely variable tail band in first- and second-year birds. The illustrations are helpful in translating concepts, such as rounded head and long primary extension, into real situations; however, these marks are still not easy to interpret. When comparing my photographs of the March 1991 bird at Red Rock Reservoir with Zimmer's photos, I was unsure whether the head



Figure 4. First-winter Iceland Gull at Saylorville Reservoir on 29 February 1992.

shape fit or not, but Zimmer, with his experience, thought they did. In looking at the isolated Iceland Gull on the pillar at Lock and Dam 14, I could not decide about head and bill shape until a Herring Gull landed next to the bird in question; only then did these field marks become obvious by comparison. With each succeeding sighting, the identification became easier and more obvious. I was also impressed that these birds were cooperative and seen by many observers; whereas, past reports of this species were fleeting and not described in detail.

Both Thayer's and Iceland gulls nest in the eastern nearctic region, and undoubtedly there is some interbreeding. Most Thayer's Gull migrate to the West Coast, but some, especially first-year birds, migrate/winter across the entire United States. Most Iceland Gulls migrate to Europe or the East Coast of North America, but a few of any age occur on the Great Lakes each year, and there are rare scattered individual records farther west.

These observations of the Iceland Gull may soon be moot. It is rumored that Iceland and Thayer's gulls are about to be deemed one species. The Kumlien's subspecies of Iceland Gull is very similar to adult Thayer's Gull, presenting a significant identification problem, particularly in Eastern United States. In Iowa, first-year birds may be more likely and are more easily separated.

What will these "new" birds be called. We may have to speak of "Thayer's-type first-winter Iceland Gulls" or just call them all Iceland Gulls and lose all the valuable information we are getting from the careful documentations by many Iowa observers. I hope we will still consider each gull individually, judging its age and describing each of its feathers and soft parts. Let the species fall where they may!

LITERATURE CITED

Zimmer, K.J. 1991. Plumage variation in "Kumlien's" Iceland Gull. *Birding* 23:254-269.

211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246

LATE FALL AND WINTER BIRDING ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN EAST-CENTRAL IOWA

PETER C. PETERSEN

The Mississippi River in the Quad-City area has been a great attraction for gulls in recent years during the winter months. In January and February 1992, nine gull species were recorded just in the Quad-Cities. This article describes some of the best locations to check from November to March



for gulls as well as waterfowl and other winter birds. The route starts at Lock 17 and proceeds north to Lock 12 (Figure 1). All along the route, the Mississippi River is a good reference point to help keep you oriented. However, keep in mind that the river does not always flow south. Between Muscatine and Clinton it flows west or southwest, making it easy to get disoriented.

From the Illinois side of the Mississippi, Lock 17 (1) is reached by going north from New Boston on the Great River Road and turning west at the Lock 17 sign about one mile north of New Boston. Lock 17 is not a good concentration point for gulls or diving ducks, but dabbling ducks often linger into late December. They feed in the corn fields and are usually seen late in the day. Bald Eagles are present in good numbers at the lock and west end of Route 17 in New Boston.

On the Iowa side of the Mississippi River, Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge lies adjacent to Lock 17. Access is limited during the waterfowl season in November and December. For access, check with the refuge personnel at the refuge office, R. R. #1, Box 75, Wapello, IA 52653, (phone 319-523-6982).

Lock 16 (2) is reached by going east from IL 92 just on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River bridge at Muscatine. The lock can also be viewed in Iowa from the southern end of Park Street on the east side of Muscatine. Take Route 92 across the river into Muscatine and turn right at the intersection with Routes 22 and 61. In a few blocks this road angles to the left and becomes Park Street. Lock 16 is not a gathering spot for gulls, but often has large numbers of Bald Eagles. A good location for woodland and coniferous species in Muscatine is Greenwood Cemetery (3), 1814 Lucas Street. Stay on Route 61 to where it intersects the Muscatine bypass. Follow the bypass to the west and south. Shortly after it crosses Route 22 it intersects Lucas Street. Proceed into town on Lucas; the cemetery is on the right in about 1.5 miles. Pine Grosbeaks have been found here, and Winter Wrens are often found in the cemetery's ravines.

From Muscatine, proceed toward Davenport on Route 22 which leaves Park at Washington Street. About eight miles east of Muscatine turn left on the county road marked for Wildcat Den State Park (4). At the park, the trail along Pine Creek from the ranger's house to the creek picnic grounds, about one mile long, is usually the most productive. Birds expected in winter include Winter and Carolina wrens, Wild Turkey, and Pileated Woodpecker.

Return to Route 22 and continue toward Davenport. Watch for Bald Eagles along the river to the Davenport city limit at Utah Avenue. Turn right (south) on Utah to South Concord Street and then proceed east along the river and Credit Island Harbor (5), watching for ducks, gulls, and Bald Eagles. To reach Fairmont Cemetery (6), an area similar to Greenwood Cemetery in Muscatine, turn left on Route 61 and proceed to Rockingham Road (Route 22). Turn right (east) and drive toward the city about four blocks to the cemetery. The



Iceland Gull P-0336
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA
29 Feb 1992 T. H. Kent

92-05

Iceland Gull

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Iceland Gull 92-05 P-0336
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA
29 Feb 1992 T. H. Kent

92-05

DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

Species: Iceland Gull; *Number:* 1 1st-year

Location: Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co., IA

Date: 29 February 1992; *Time:* approximately 12:30 to 1:00 p.m.

Name and address: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246.

Others before/with/after: Bob Cecil, John Cecil, and I found bird; Bob Myers and Maridel Jackson were nearby and we showed it to them.

Habitat and circumstances: Near boat marina on shore and swimming with Ring-billed Gulls at wide part of reservoir.

Description of bird: A light, slightly brownish gull with white primaries was spotted from the road. It appeared only slightly longer than Ringed-billed Gulls, but the body was bulkier. We were surprised by how little bigger it was. No Herring Gulls were present for comparison. In flight the bird appeared the same color overall, except perhaps for lighter flight feathers. There was no dark in the wings or on the tail. The bill was of uniform caliber and not thick or bulbous. It appeared all black to me. I did not see the leg color. The eye was dark. The head was elongated but smoothly rounded. The primaries extended beyond the tail and were crossed. I walked down the rock embankment and took three photos.

Voice: Not heard.

Similar species: The small size, small head and bill, and all dark bill exclude Glaucous Gull. The lack of any dark in the wing or tail exclude Thayer's Gull.

Any one have reservations?: No.

Light: The sun was behind or slightly to the side of the bird, but we were looking down at it at about a 30 degree angle; *Distance:* 30 to 60 yards (guess); *Optics:* 10x binoc, 20x scope, and Bob Myer's Kowa.

Previous experience: This is the 5th Iceland Gull I have seen in Iowa in less than one year. Four were 1st-year birds and 1 a 2nd-year bird. Based on this experience, I identified this bird much more quickly than the previous ones.

References before/after viewing: none.

Time of notes: 6 hours. *Final typing:* 22 hours.

#5
DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

92-05

What species? Iceland Gull (1st winter) How many? 1

Location? Sailorville Res. Polk County, Iowa

Type of Habitat? Reservoir

When? date(s): Feb. 29, 1992 time: 12:30PM to 12:45 PM

Who? your name and address: Bob Cecil 1315 41st St. Des Moines, IA 50311

Others with you: Tom Kent, Bob Myers, Maridel Jackson

Others before or after you: _____

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.

I first noticed an all white(ish) gull on shore with other gulls. As a Glaucous had been reported that morning, I said "here's the Glaucous Gull." Kent and I looked at it some more when he said he thought it must be an Iceland, based upon the size. I agreed that it was not nearly as large as one would expect of a Glaucous, especially since it was among Ring-bills, but did not dwarf them. I began making the following notes:

--Size larger than all Ring-bills present, but not that much, at least in terms of length. I estimated that it was perhaps 3" longer than the largest Ring-bills, but substantially more heavily bodied.

--Legs were difficult to see, but appeared to be yellowish-gray, or yellowish greenish. Bob Myer's also felt they had yellow overtones..

--Body overall was whitish - very pale; the same color overall one would expect from a first winter Glaucous. There was substantial but relatively faint light brown scaling on the wings primarily. Conspicuous light brown barring on the undertail coverts.

--Bill was relatively small and thin, and with no pronounced goneal angle. It was all dark - no noticeable pale at the base.

--The head was slightly flatter than accompanying Ring-bills, but not as flat as I would expect on a Glaucous. This observation was pretty subjective.

(over)

Similar species; how eliminated:

Description and size pretty much eliminates other gulls. Far too small for Glaucous. Far too pale for Thayers.

According to NGS, legs should have been pink, but was unable to check Grant for variations.

Bill shape consistent with Iceland, inconsistent for Glaucous.

Brown barring should preclude leucistic specimen or similar plumage anomalies.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? Not yet.
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.
20x scope, 10x binocs. Closest view about 100'.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Saw similar bird this winter at Davenport.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

How long before field notes made? _____ this form completed? _____

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

How many? _____
Location? _____
Date of sighting? _____

(Description continued)

--In flight the wings were white to the tips. No darkening was observed at the wingtips or in the secondaries (trailing edge). If there was any tail band, it was very indistinct and I didn't see it. I did notice that the wings were much broader than those of accompanying Ring-bills - in flight, they appeared more triangular. I have noticed this same thing on Glaucous gull.

I looked around for Herring gulls in order to compare size, but couldn't find one. My sense was that this bird was smaller than a Herring Gull, although body proportions were similar.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? Not yet.
If yes, explain:
Viewing conditions: five lighted distance (how measured), optical equipment
30x scope, 100 binocs. Closest view about 100'.
Previous experience with species and similar ones: Saw similar bird this winter at Linn County.
References and persons consulted before writing description:
How long before field notes made? _____ this form completed?
Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird List).