

Great Black-backed Gull
14 Jul 1982
West Okoboji Lake, Dickinson Co., IA
*D. Harr, *L. Hinshaw

Record Number: 82-23
Classification: A-P

DOCUMENTATIONS

Douglas C. Harr
Linda Hinshaw

PHOTOGRAPH

Doug Harr, P-0088 (IBL 52:127)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: 52:90

Photograph: IBL 52:127 (P-0088)

Harr, D. C. 1982. Great Black-backed Gull in the Iowa Lakes
Region. IBL 52:127-128

Records Committee: IBL 53:35

VOTE: 1-II, 5-III, 1-IV

Nothing in the description rules out Western gull except the partly subjective designation of great size (but even the great black-backed is not 'slightly smaller than a bald eagle. Also no size comparison except with mallard.

Good description of bird.

Good description

At this date possibilities considered would be California (not likely) or western gull (date very unlikely). Also possible hybrids eg GBB x herring. Descriptions appear to eliminate these possibilities.

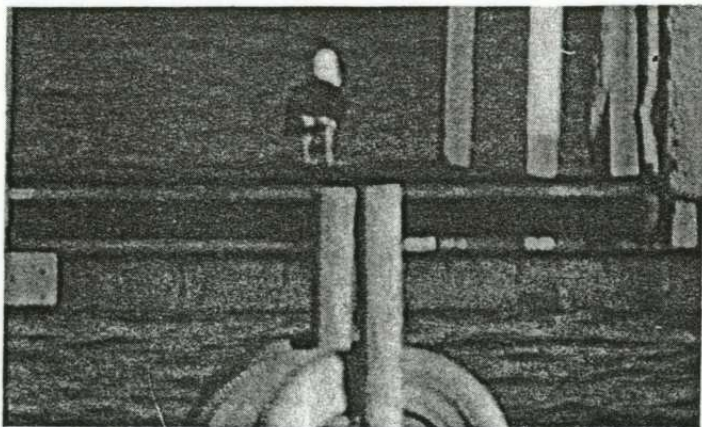
REVOTE (at meeting, 20 November 1982 after viewing photos): 6-I-P, 1-III

provide details of identification observed for all sightings; (4) ELP -- early, late, and peak dates; (5) PK -- peak dates and numbers; (6) T/M -- total individuals seen per month; (7) T/C -- total individuals seen per county; (8) LOC -- report only if away from local range; and (9) UNU -- report only if unusual dates, numbers, or locations. I am working on a list that will define usual and unusual dates. Now would be a good time to send me your ideas and suggestions for improving the reporting process.

General Notes

Great Black-backed Gull in the Iowa Lakes Region — On the evening of 14 July, 1982, members of the Northern Iowa Prairie Lakes Audubon Society had gathered for a picnic and birding field trip near Spirit Lake, when member Linda Hinshaw and her husband, Bob, arrived late. The reason for their lateness was that they thought they had identified a Great Black-backed Gull on the north end of West Okoboji Lake, and they wanted further verification. I and six other members accompanied the Hinshaws to the home of Earl Rose, retired Chief of Game and Fish for the Iowa Conservation Commission, who had first reported the presence on an unusually large, black and white gull on his dock to the Hinshaws. After about 5 minutes we spotted the bird perched on a dock several hundred yards to the east.

The bird's size, estimated at about 30 inches from bill to tail, and distinctive, almost coal-black back immediately identified it from all other common local gulls and left no doubt that it was, indeed, a Great Black-backed Gull. Its feet were rather fleshy colored, and when startled into flight, white trailing wing edges were prominently displayed, as well as small white tip patches just proximal to the wing tips. The bird was observed for about 35 minutes by a total of seven Audubon members and Mr. and Mrs. Rose. Photos were taken of the bird on the dock and in flight. These have been submitted to the IOU records committee, which has already accepted and verified this sighting as only the second for this species within the State of Iowa.



Great Black-backed Gull
Photo by Doug Herr

This same gull was sighted several times over the ensuing two weeks on West Okoboji Lake, and later on Center Lake. This sighting and others around the Iowa Lakes Region in recent years, make Dickinson County and surrounding areas one of the best potential birding regions in Iowa. The area's wealth of large lakes, natural marshes, remnant prairies, numerous glaciated pasturelands, croplands, and small woodlands offer some of the state's most diverse habitat within one county. Active birders should make it a point to make careful observations in the Lakes Region; there may be many fascinating and unusual species yet to be discovered. Douglas C. Harr, Box 65, Larchwood, Iowa 51241

Swamp Sparrow Nesting in Iowa — The status of the Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) as a nesting species in Iowa has been poorly documented. Anderson (1907) and DuMont (1933) list the Swamp Sparrow as a common migrant. Bennett (1934) reports twelve nests from Clay Co. in 1934, and lists the species as a common summer resident in Clay, Emmet, Palo Alto, and Dickinson Counties. Brown (1971) records Swamp Sparrows nesting at Little Wall Lake (Hamilton Co.), Dunbar Slough (Greene Co.), Zirbel Slough (Cerro Gordo Co.), and in the Ruthven area (Palo Alto Co.). In 1980 a nest was found in a brome grass (*Bromus inermis*) field in Cerro Gordo County (unpublished nest record). No detailed description of a Swamp Sparrow nest in Iowa has yet appeared in the literature.

On 10 May 1982 I examined a Swamp Sparrow nest at Dewey's Pasture GMA, Clay County, Iowa. The nest contained four eggs. The eggs, which were pale blue and heavily mottled with brown, ranged in size from 19.0-19.7mm X 14.1-15.0 millimeters. Incubation had recently been initiated, and no embryo development was evident. A Swamp Sparrow was in attendance when the nest was found. The nest was constructed on the ground, and covered with a canopy of residual *Carex* sp., with bits of grass and cattail (*Typha glauca*) woven in. The nest was constructed of *Carex* sp. and cattail; lined with a fine grass, probably bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), and with hair. The nest had a depth of 45mm, an outside diameter of 78mm, and an inside diameter of 65 millimeters. The nest was located about 10 m from standing water, and about 1.5 m from a stand of cattail. The dominant vegetation at the site was bluegrass. Other species present include cattail, smartweed (*Polygonum* sp.), and horsetail (*Equisetum* sp.).

This nest, and those few records from the literature indicate that the Swamp Sparrow is at least a casual nester in the state. Additional reports are needed to determine its abundance and distribution as an Iowa nesting species.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr. James J. Dinsmore for his assistance in the preparation of this note.

Literature Cited

- Anderson, R.M. 1907. The Birds of Iowa. Proc. Davenport Academy of Sciences, 11:125-147.
 Bennett, L. J. 1934. Notes on Nesting Waterfowl and Other Marsh Nesting Birds in Northwest Iowa. Oologist, 51:101-104.
 Brown, W.H. 1971. An Annotated List of the Birds of Iowa. Iowa State University Journal of Science, 45:387-469.
 DuMont, P.A. 1933. A Revised List of the Birds of Iowa. University of Iowa Studies in Natural History, 15(5): 171 pp.
 Rex R. Johnson, Department of Animal Ecology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: Great Black-backed Gull

DATE SEEN: 14 July 1982

SITE OF OBSERVATION: West Okoboji Lake, Dickinson Co., IA

OBSERVERS: D. Harr, L. Hinshaw

DATE OF REVIEW: November 1982

METHOD OF REVIEW: Discussion followed by secret ballot

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: I-P

COMMENTS: Based on the photographic evidence, the committee accepted this record as a Class I-P sighting, a valid record backed by tangible evidence-

The opinions expressed here are based on the information available to the Committee and should not necessarily preclude an alternate interpretation by those who observed the bird firsthand.

Any action may be re-reviewed upon submission of additional evidence.

Explanation of Classification:

- I = labeled, diagnostic specimen, photograph, or recording available for review by the Committee
- II = acceptable sight record documented independently by 3 or more observers
- III = acceptable sight record documented by 1 or 2 observers
- IV = probably correct record, but not beyond doubt
- V = record with insufficient evidence to judge
- VI = probably incorrect identification, escapee, or otherwise unacceptable record

Classification is based on the highest category agreed upon by six of seven committee members.

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Great Black-backed Gull 2. Number: 1
3. Location West Okoboji Lake (n. shore), Dickinson Co., Iowa
4. Date: July 14, 1982 5. Time Bird seen: 7:40 PM to 8:15 PM (CDT)

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): 2-2 1/2 ft. in length, with at least a 5 ft. wingspan in flight. Charcoal to black back with snow white head & undersides. In flight white trailing edges noted on wings, also white wing tips and small white patches on black just proximal to wingtips. Bill large, yellow, with red spot near tip. Feet fleshy colored. Unmistakably recognizable!

7. Description of voice, if heard: N/A

8. Description of behavior: Sitting on ends of docks (flying from dock to dock) and floating out on lake. Seemed shy of people along shore but unafraid of nearby waterskiers on main lake.

9. Habitat - general: Habitat was open water and private docks on West Okoboji Lake
specific:

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Herring Gull--smaller, without black back
Lesser Black-backed Gull--smaller, has yellow legs

11. Distance (how measured)? seen on docks at 150' (est) & seen on open lake at 300 yards (est.) 12. Optical equipment: 7x50 Bushnell Binoculars & 60 x Redfield spotting scope

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): Light good, from west, with bird generally south & southeast of viewing location
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: Have not seen species previously. Very familiar with Herring Gulls.

15. Other observers: Mr & Mrs. E.T. Rose, Mr & Mrs. Robert Hinshaw, Gwen Hedin, Curt Hedin, Loraine Wallace, Pearl Osher, Lavonne Foote, Nina Loehr
16. Did the others agree with your identification? Yes.

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Mr. & Mrs. Robert Hinshaw had seen & ID'd bird about 6:30PM, independently, before notifying others listed.

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description: Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern NA (new edition); Birds of North America (Robbins, et al.); Aud. Encyclopedia of N. Am. Birds. These did not influence ID--bird was recognized immediately as Great Black-backed. Books were used only to confirm all minor field marks after initial ID.

How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? Notes taken for this description DURING the sighting.

Signature: Douglas C. Herr Address: Box 65

Date: July 15, 1982 City, State: Larchwood, Iowa 51241

A couple of long-distance photos were taken but are not yet processed.

2nd Documentation from Linda Hinshaw
Great Black-backed Gull 82-23

Documentation Form for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

What species? Greater Black-Backed Gull How many? 1
Location? N. end of West Okoboji Lake in an area called Triboji
Beach on the end of the dock of Earl Rose $\frac{1}{2}$ block
east of Lee's Resort. Saw same bird fly out into the
water.

Type of habitat? Large fresh water "blue lake" with
sandy shore. Shoreline all developed in housing
& resorts.

When? July 14, 1982 time 6:30 P.M. ^{to 6:50 P.M.} again at 7:30 P.M. & 8:15 P.M.

Who? Linda Hinshaw, ^{1 P.M.} Box 5650, Spirit Lake, Iowa 51360
others with you: 6:30 ^{to} 6:50 P.M. - Bob Hinshaw, Earl Rose, &
Mrs. Earl Rose. 7:30 P.M. to 8:15 P.M. accompanied group
of Audubon members to view again. They all saw
and confirmed identity as Great Black Backed Gull

Describe the bird: The first time I observed the bird
very closely. It was on the end of a dock & I was up on
shore a short distance. At first glance it looked
like a Bald Eagle because of its great size & stark
black & white contrast, but very quickly it was obvious
that it was a large gull of some kind. There was a
pair of Mallards resting on the dock 1 foot in front
of the gull. With this for comparison I would
estimate the bird slightly smaller than a Bald
Eagle but much larger than a ~~the~~ Herring Gull.
He stood still giving me a side profile. The legs
were flesh colored. Bill was heavy, yellow with

a red spot almost to the point on the lower half of the beak. The back + wings very black. When I saw it fly ^{at} the second viewing I could easily see that all underparts were snowy ~~with~~ white + that on ~~the~~ top side of the wing the bottom edge was white + on the end (tip) of the wing was 2 white spots. The rest of the top of the wings were black. The white on the head extended in front down the entire underpart + down the back + sides just to the shoulder where the color changed to black. The black extended down the back to the top of the rump so that with the wings spread the black went from wing to wing across the back almost in a straight line. The rump + tail were pure white. The eye was yellow - I didn't hear it call. It walked around in one spot a little + its actions + manner were just like a Herring Gull. It took off in flight heavily + gracefully + flew (not high) out into the water. The second observation was of the bird in flight + swimming. Viewing conditions were perfect both times with perfect lighting.

Similar species eliminated - It was too large to be a ~~Lesser~~ Lesser Black Backed Gull + legs were flesh colored, not yellow. Also much too large to be the Western Gull listed in the Golden Field Guide - "Birds of North America."

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

Viewing conditions: lighting - excellent, skies - a few cloud wisps with the sun to our right & not too bright but perfect, wind 5-10 M.P.H. Temp. 75°, distance 1st time - 100 feet 2nd time at varying distances of 100 to 300 yards. Estimated distances. Optical equipment - Bushnell binoculars 7 to 21^{power} & Redfield 15 to 60^{power} telescope. 90% of all viewing done at 60 power with the Redfield. At second viewing other Audubon members had their own binoculars but all viewed at 60 power through the Redfield.

Previous experience with the species & similar ones: No experience with this species, but various common gulls like Herring & Ring-billed are common here. So I'm familiar with gull behavior. How long before field notes made? 1 hr.

this form completed 2 hrs.

Field guides used for identification: "A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies" by Roger T. Peterson & "Birds of North America" (a Golden Field Guide) by Robbins, Bruen & Jew.