

Lesser Black-backed Gull

5 Oct 1989

Red Rock Res., Marion Co., IA

Johnson, Sinclair, Cummins, J. Fuller  
to 27 Oct; IBL 60:11, 15, 61:85

Record Number: 89-48

Classification: A-D

## DOCUMENTATIONS

Ann Johnson, 5, 23 Oct

David Youngblut, 7, 8 Oct

Ray Cummins, 15 Oct

Jim Fuller, 27 Oct

## REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 60:11, 15

Records Committee: IBL 61:85

VOTE: 1 A-P, 5 A-D, 1 abstain

A-P: Acceptable - seen by several people.

A-D: This was a very interesting record and it gave me a lot of trouble. To help me analyze it, I made up a sort of chart to summarize the basic key points as described by Johnson, Fuller, and Cummins. The description by Sinclair was very brief and I didn't consider it heavily. The descriptions below are not verbatim quotes from each documenter, they are a quick summary: Bill: described by all three as being black; Johnson said it was heavy (perhaps compared to Ring-bills) and the other two said it was smaller than Herrings. Legs: Described as pale flesh; light gray and shorter than Herrings; and grayish pink, less pink than Herrings. Size: described as smaller, slimmer than Herrings; between Herring and Ring-bill size; and smaller, shorter than Herring with smaller, rounder head. Head: Here there was some differences in perception--Johnson said the head, neck and breast were white with brown streaks. She also mentioned a smudge around the eye. Cummins said the breast and head were basically uniform gray but that the head was lighter around the forehead and chin. Fuller didn't specifically describe the head.

Mantle: variously described as scaly (dark brown with edges), checkered, with darker primaries while sitting; black brown scales with thick white edges; and contrasty with white feather edging. This is pretty consistent. Tail: described as having a terminal tail band with white rump showing some light bars; one inch black band and striped below; and wide terminal dark band with a blotchy rump with dark on light. Wings: Described by one in flight as all dark primaries and secondaries contrasting with scaly mantle; by another as upperwing showed black on primaries, primary coverts, and alula; by the third as all dark primaries upper and secondaries and greater coverts were dark. This little summary showed me that the three main documenters were very consistent in their observations except for the description of the head and neck by Johnson and Cummins. The all dark bill, scaly or distinctly edged back feathers, all dark primaries, and distinct dark tail band all combine to convincingly describe a juvenile (perhaps going into first winter) Lesser Black-backed Gull. Most of my information came from Grant's Gulls, 2nd edition. Page 90-91 of this book gives a point by point



comparison of juvenile Lesser Black-backed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls. The present bird fits very well on every key point. The fun came when I then looked at the photograph from Doug Rose, taken at the same location but more than two weeks after the last written documentation. It is a bird similar to the one described except it clearly shows a bird with some gray feathers in the mantle and what appears to be an all light bill! If this is also a Lesser Black-backed Gull it is certainly a different individual because it would have to be at least a second-winter bird because of the gray in the mantle and the light bill. I would suggest that this photo should probably be recirculated as a separate record.

A-D: Convincing descriptions. Excellent analysis by Johnson.

Abstain: From the description I don't think Sinclair was looking at the same bird Johnson, Fuller, and Cummins documented. The pictures by D. Rose are also not that of the Lesser Black-backed Gull. I see only Herrings and Ring-billeds.

A-D: Combination of slightly smaller size and stature, darkness throughout primaries, dark secondaries, dark secondary covert bar, all black bill, lighter rump/upper tail and dark ear/eye patch seems to rule out everything else. Photos not diagnostic.

A-D: Most of the documentations were excellent with great amount of details. Doug Rose's flight photo was good to see.

A-D: Key features were noted, although not well seen in photos. Photos do indicate very contrasty white rump vs. tail band however. Only bothersome feature in photos is prominent window on inner primaries, suggestive of Herring Gull, but Lesser Black-backed has this but less obviously; light may have exaggerated lightness of window. Key written description was double dark band (secondaries + coverts) at inner trailing edges of wings. Bray, Padelford, and I looked for this bird for several hours and did not find it. However descriptions and photos are convincing to me.



DOCUMENTATION FORM  
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

89-48

Species: Lesser Black-backed Gull- First Winter

Location: Below Red Rock Dam, near Pella, Marion Co., IA

Habitat: River with numerous sand and gravel bars

Date(s): 10/5/89; 10/23/89

Time: 3:10 pm to 4:00 pm  
4:15 pm to 4:40 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: none on 10/5; Marlys Huff on 10/23

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 behavior and voice.

While scoping a number of ring-billed gulls sitting on a gravel bar below the dam, I noticed a couple of larger brownish gulls which I assumed to be herrings. On closer inspection, one proved to be a second-winter herring gull. That bird had flown to another sandbar, but the other remained for quite some time with the ring-bills. It's back looked much scallier than the previous large gull which led me to the following observations:

"This gull is considerably larger than the ring-billed standing beside it. It has a dark eye, a rather heavy, all black bill, and pale flesh colored legs. The head is obviously white underneath but has a considerable amount of light brown streaking. There is a slightly darker smudge from in front of the eye extending back to the auricular. The neck and breast are similar to the head in that they are white underneath but covered with brown streaks. The belly is even whiter with less brown mottling. There are a few dark blotches on the breast which look more like the bird's been rubbing bellies with a rusty can than any particular feather pattern. The mantle, scapulars and wing coverts are extremely scaly. The feathers are almost chocolate brown, very dark, with a lot of white edging. It has much of the checkering look of a great black-backed. What I think are the secondaries are pretty much all dark brown but are tipped with a bit of white. The primaries are so dark they look almost black. The primaries are extending back beyond the tail, making most of the tail difficult to see. I can see a terminal tail band, however, which is about the same color as the primaries, and just a bit of white tail is showing. It appears to have some brown barring. As the bird moves around, the sides and undertail coverts are more visible. They are pretty much white with some light brown barring."

I also was able to observe the bird in flight on two rather brief occasions. The rounded tail and rump were white with some light brown barring. The dark terminal band was not particularly clean cut but distinct. In flight the bird gave an overall impression of a dark gull with white head and tail. The all dark primaries and secondaries and their respective coverts contrasted with the dark/light scaliness of the mantle, scapulars and remaining coverts. The white edging to the secondaries, visible on the sitting bird, were not distinctive in flight.

On 23 October I again observed what was probably the same gull. At this time several more herrings had moved into the area which helped with a good size comparison. The lesser black-backed was a smaller, slimmer, almost lighter bird. The dark flight feathers were again seen to confirm identification.



Similar species and how eliminated:

89-48

Great Black-backed Gull- The bird was not large enough nor was the bill as massive. The great black-backed should also show a whiter head and lighter inner primaries and the back would be more of a checkerboard than the scaliness of this bird.  
Herring Gull- Because of variability, eliminating the herring was more problematic. Size was not particularly helpful initially in that this bird was near the second-year herring gull for such a brief time that I really couldn't make comparison. The variable sizes of ring-bills were of no help because next to some it looked huge and next to others it was only some larger. Some subtle differences were helpful in making this bird "look different" but I don't believe they could be considered sufficient. The checkered, scaly look was more pronounced than most juvenile herrings. The wings seemed long as they extended beyond the tail. The bill was entirely black and the tail band more distinct than most juvenile herrings. The color distinction between the head/tail and body from a distance were also helpful. The clincher, however, was during flight when no "windows" were visible on the inner primaries and the dark secondary coverts created a wide, dark trailing edge to the wing. These flight indicators, as well as size differential, were confirmed on the 23 October sighting.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: The bird was an estimated 150 - 200 yards away, a bit further than that in flight. The sky was totally overcast. Optical equipment consisted of 7x26 binoculars for observation during flight and a scope at 30x-50x while the bird was sitting.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Thirty years birding experience. This was first juvenile lesser black-backed but have had experience with both herring and great black-backed.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Description was dictated at time of observation with National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America available for reference at that time. Audubon Master Guide and Harrison's Seabirds were consulted prior to finishing this documentation.

How long before field notes made? during observation How long before this form completed? 4 hours after initial observation; updated after second observation

What species? Lesser Black-backed Gull How many? 1Location? below Red RockType of habitat? rocky island in D.M. RiverWhen? date(s): 10/7 & 8, 1989 time: 7:15 am to 9 amWho? your name and address: Jim Sinclair, 810 North B St., Indianapolis, IN 46204others with you: David Young, blut

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

medium in size between Ring-bills and Herring Gulls with which the bird was associating  
 Slim necked and small headed compared to first year Herring Gulls  
 light head with no discernable pattern  
 Medium gray back with prominent pale feather edgings  
 Pink legs, dark bill

Similar species and how eliminated:

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, explain: I have reservations about virtually every gull I look at.Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:  
distance 40 to 75 yds 8.5 x 44 Binocs Discover scope mediocre lighting conditionsPrevious experience with species and similar ones: none with Lesser Bl-backed - familiar with Gr-Bl-backed and Herring Gulls

References and persons consulted before writing description:

How long before field notes made? 15 min. this form completed? 2 months

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



DOCUMENTATION FORM  
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

What Species? Lesser Black-backed Gull (Juvenile) How Many? 1

Location? Lake Redrock Dam Marion Co.

Type of Habitat? below spillway

When? date(s): October 15th, 1989 time: 9:00am to 9:30am

Who? your name and address: Ray Cummins Centerville, Iowa

Others with you: Pete Wickhem, John Daniel, and Ken Lowder

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 picked this gull out of a group of Ringed-billed Gulls and a juvenile Herring Gull because the bill was black, slightly shorter, slender, and more uniform than the adjacent Herring Gull. The gonyx mark was lacking compared to the Herring Gull. The Herring Gull bill was all dark, but only black on the distal 1/4th, the rest was dark with a fleshy overtone.

The size of the gull was between the size of the Herring Gull and Ring-billed Gull. The breast was uniformly gray slightly lighter than the juvenile Herring Gull. The scapulars, wing coverts, and mantle appeared scaled with dark black-brown scales with fairly thick white edges. Primaries and tail were black, not pure black, but black compared to the back.

Head was same uniform color as breast, but turned white around the forehead and chin. The eye was black and iris was dark as was the adjacent Herring Gull.

The legs were a nondescript light gray color. The Lesser Black-backed Gull had shorter legs than the Herring Gull, and you could not see any leg above the knee.

In flight the upper wing was black over the primaries, primary coverts, and alula. The secondaries were also black and the greater coverts created a second lighter black line above the secondaries. The shoulders were medium brown. The tail showed a one inch black band on top and was black and white striped below. The Herring Gull in flight showed a light area on the inner primaries, whereas the Lesser Black-backed Gull showed uniform black through out the primaries.

Similar species: how eliminated: Herring Gull eliminated above. Other Gulls except Thayer's, California, and Iceland eliminated by size. Iceland would be much lighter than this gull. Darker Thayer's would not show the contrast between shoulder and primaries and would not have black secondaries and greater coverts. California would not have all black bill and would have blackish legs.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about the identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment. Excellent light with sun at back from an estimated 40yds setting and as close as 30 yds flying. Equipment was a 20x spotting scope and 10x binoculars.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: none with Lesser Black-backed.

Reference and persons consulted before writing description: NGS was used during observation to insure all field marks were sighted.



What species? LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL How many? 1Location? BELOW THE DAM-RED ROCK RESERVOIRType of habitat? RIVER AND RESERVOIRWhen? date(s): 27 OCTOBER, 1989 time: 2:25 PM to 3:00 PMWho? your name and address: JIM FULLER, 6 LONGVIEW KNOLL, RR#6, IOWA CITY, IA, 52240

others with you: \_\_\_\_\_

others (before) or after you: ANN JOHNSON

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.

I HAD BEEN TO THIS LOCATION TWICE BEFORE LOOKING FOR THIS BIRD, AND EXAMINED EVERY FIRST WINTER HERRING GULL IN THE AREA. WHEN I ARRIVED THIS TIME, IT WAS FINALLY PRESENT SITTING WITH 4 OTHER FIRST WINTER HERRING GULLS (LATER A 5TH ONE JOINED THEM). THEY WERE STANDING ON A GRAVEL BAR IN THE RIVER ABOUT ONE HUNDRED YARDS AWAY. IT IS EASIEST TO COMPARE THIS BIRD TO THE FIRST WINTER HERRING GULL. IT WAS SMALLER IN GENERAL SIZE, SHORTER IN STATURE, HAD A SMALLER HEAD (WHICH WAS MORE ROUND) AND HAD A SMALLER BILL (WHICH WAS ALSO LESS ANGULAR). IT HAD MORE CONTRAST ON THE BACK WITH WHITE FEATHER EDGINGS COMPARED TO THE GENERALLY BROWNISH HERRING GULLS. IN FACT THE WHOLE COLORING WAS MORE BLACK-BROWN AND WHITE THAN THE BROWNISH HERRING GULL. THE LEGS WERE GRAYISH-PINK, BUT WERE MORE GRAYISH WHILE THE HERRING GULL'S LEGS WERE MORE PINKISH. THIS BIRD'S SMALLER BILL WAS ENTIRELY BLACK, WHILE THE HERRINGS ALL HAD SOME LIGHTER COLORING AT THE BASE. THE EYE WAS DARK. AFTER A HALF HOUR, THE BIRD FLEW AROUND OVERHEAD FOR LESS THAN A MINUTE, AND THEN DISAPPEARED OVER THE DAM. IT HAD ALL DARK PRIMARIES, ON THE UPPER WING, WHILE THE INNER 2 OR 3 PRIMARIES OF THE HERRING GULL WERE LIGHT. BOTH THE SECONDARIES AND THE GREATER COVERTS WERE DARK (ALTHOUGH THE COVERTS WERE A LITTLE LIGHTER) WHILE ON THE HERRING ONLY THE

Similar species and how eliminated:

FIRST WINTER HERRING GULL COMPARED IN DESCRIPTION (BACK PAGE)  
GREATER BLACK-BACKED IS MUCH TOO LARGE, AND HAS ONLY THE DARK SECONDARIES ON THE TRAILING EDGE.  
LIKEWISE CALIFORNIA GULL HAS ONLY SECONDARIES DARK AND A TWO-TONED BILL

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:  
SUNNY - LOOKING TOWARD EAST. DISTANCE ABOUT 100 YARDS  
SWIFT 5.5X44 BINOCULARS AND 26-60X TSN-4 KOWA SCOPE

Previous experience with species and similar ones: FIRST WINTER NEVER SEEN BEFORE

References and persons consulted before writing description:

NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC GUIDE AND HARRISON'S "SEABIRDS"How long before field notes made? IMMEDIATE this form completed? 6 HOURS

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

SECONDARIES WERE DARK. THERE WAS A WIDE TERMINAL  
DARK TAIL BAND AND THE RUMP WAS BLOTCHY WITH  
DARK ON LIGHT, BUT WAS GENERALLY LIGHTER THAN THE  
RUMP OF ANY HERRING GULL.

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