

California Gull

6 Sep 1996

Spirit L., Dickinson Co., IA

\*Jim Bangma/Ann Johnson

IBL 67:22, 82; Bangma and Johnson 1997

Record Number: 96-59

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave., 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:22

Records Committee: IBL 67:82

Bangma, J., and A. Johnson. 1987. California Gull in Dickinson County. IBL 67:128-130.

VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D, This bird is an interesting study since the literature refers to California Gull as looking short-legged while the observers perceived it to be longer-legged. The study of museum skins tends to bear out this perception. From what I can find in Harrison and Grant, the short-legged appearance is probably an illusion created by the long wings of a California extending well beyond the tail nearly touching the ground. Because of extreme molt, this bird did not create that illusion. The only other gull that may show the darker gray mantle of this bird would be Thayer's. The underwing of Thayer's, however, would show contrast, as the primaries would be nearly white.

A-D, The descriptive details on this ragged gull that is apparently molting from 1st-summer to 2nd-winter are very detailed. Ken Brock's comment: "California Gull:- No! Of course both of these [96-59 and 96-60] might well have been identified correctly, but the documentations were not convincing. Description of the Palo Alto County bird is simply too brief. Description of the Spirit Lake gull does not rule out second-year Lesser Black-backed Gull, indeed the statement 'Mantle... significantly dark than the mantles of nearby Ring-bills,' suggests Lesser Black-backed. California Gulls are typically only slightly darker than Ring-billeds, whereas, *graellsii*, is significantly darker." In contrast to Brock, I would consider the difference between 'significantly' and 'slightly' darker to be more likely a matter of word choice rather than to an objective description of the bird. The bill and tail fit California Gull much better than they do Lesser Black-backed Gull.

A-D, Description notes several features which in combination eliminate other possibilities.

Ann M. Johnson (AMJ), Norwalk; Jack Jones (JJo), Sioux City; Matthew C. Kenne (MCK), Algona; Thomas H. Kent (THK), Iowa City; Darwin Koenig (DK), Paullina; Sharon R. Laub (SRL), Rippey; Paul Martsching (PM), Ames; Pete Melde (PMe), Marshalltown; William Norris (WN), Ames; Babs K. Padelford (BKP), Bellevue, NE; Loren J. Padelford (LJP), Bellevue, NE; Beth Proescholdt (BPr), Liscomb; Mark Proescholdt (MPr), Liscomb; Russ Reisz (RRe), Missouri Valley; Lee A. Schoenewe (LAS), Spencer; Jane Schuster (JSc), Huxley; Jim Sinclair (JSi), Indianola; John Snyder (JSn), Ames; Ed Thelen (ETh), Spirit Lake; Rob Thelen (RTh), Carroll; Dennis Thompson (DT), Johnston; Marie Tiemann (MT), Shenandoah; John Van Dyk (JV), Sioux Center; Connie VanErsvelde (CV), Grinnell; Robert VanErsvelde (RV), Grinnell; Phil J. Walsh (PJW), Des Moines; Hank Zaletel (HZ), Nevada

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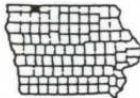


Louisiana Waterthrush captured in mist net near Castanea, Monona County, 31 May 1997. Photograph by Don Poggensee.

✓ CALIFORNIA GULL IN DICKINSON COUNTY

JIM BANGMA AND ANN JOHNSON

On 6 September 1996 we were birding our way through northern Iowa on the way to the I.O.U. meeting. Around 11:00 a.m. we stopped at Spirit Lake to look at a group of Black and Forster's terns and Ring-billed Gulls resting on the rock jetty at the north end of the lake. Our attention was drawn to a medium brown gull which perched on top of a rock for the entire time, allowing direct comparison with nearby ring-bills.



The body of the bird was slightly larger than the nearby ring-bills. However, it stood much taller, apparently due to longer legs. We estimated the tarsus to be well over 1.5 times the length of the culmen, while we estimated the nearby ring-bills to have tarsi under that figure. The rear end of the bird looked extremely short, almost truncated. When the bird spread its wings, we observed that this was due to extensive molt. The four outermost primaries were only partially grown.

The overall color of the head and neck was medium brown, with a darker area extending from the eye back onto the ear coverts. The whitish color of the foreneck

extended onto the side neck and wrapped up behind the ear coverts. The foreneck and upper breast were whitish with mottled brown. The lower breast and belly were brown, mottled with white. The mantle and scapulars were clear gray, significantly darker than the mantles of the nearby ring-bills.

The median coverts (and possibly the lesser coverts as well) were nearly white, standing out in striking contrast to the mantle and greater coverts. The greater coverts were medium brown, appearing very worn. The tertials appeared extremely worn, with an irregular pale fringe. There was virtually no extension of the primaries beyond the tertials. When the wings were spread (outermost long primary considered P10) P1-P6 appeared uniform medium to dark brown, P7-P10 were half grown and appeared black or very dark brown. A number of the secondaries were missing, and those that remained were extremely worn, but appeared similar in color to P1-P6. On the spread upperwing, the faded whitish appearance of the median coverts contrasted with the darker flight feathers and greater coverts. The underwing appeared relatively uniform medium brown, without any significant contrast.

The tail was in extensive molt, but the feathers that were present had a broad dark terminal band. The extent of mottling or lack thereof on the base of the tail and tail coverts could not be judged accurately.

The eye was dark brown. The bill was a dull fleshy gray, with a prominent black tip. The black was clear cut and did not run in along the cutting edge of the mandible. The black extended slightly farther back on the lower mandible. The extreme tip of the upper mandible was white or pale. The bill was substantially larger than that of the ring-bills, and was rather straight without noticeable widening or a prominent gonydeal angle. The legs were a fleshy color, much paler than the pink of juvenal/first-year ring-bills nearby.

We ruled out similar species in the following way: Ring-billed is ruled out by the solid gray mantle combined with the extensive molt of the flight feathers. Ring-bills and similar three-year gulls obtain the gray mantle during a post-juvenal molt. When flight feathers are molted after one year, the body of a ring-bill would be much whiter. Also, the mantle was a much darker shade of gray than any ring-bill present. Additionally, Ring-billed Gull's bill is proportionally smaller, thinner, and more curved.

Herring Gull would be larger. The mantle of a Herring Gull would be paler gray, nearly the same shade as that of the ring-bills. The bill would be proportionally heavier with a more marked gonydeal angle. Herring Gulls may show a black tipped bill, but the black normally blends into the pink of the base or runs in along the cutting edges of the bill. The bill and legs would be brighter pink. Other similarly sized extralimitals can be ruled out by the mantle color as well as bill pattern and shape.

A striking feature of this bird was its leg length. We were aware that Grant (Gulls, a Guide to Identification, T. & A. D. Poyser, 1982) and others mention the shorter legs of California Gull, and the species is frequently described as dragging its wings on the ground. In an effort to better understand this, Bangma examined specimens of Herring, Ring-billed and California gulls at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and measured the tarsus and culmen on a representative selection of specimens. He found that the median ratio of the tarsus:culmen on these was as follows: California Gull--1.63:1, range 1.41 to 1.86, n = 28; Herring Gull--1.42:1, range 1.23 to 1.62, n = 18; Ring-billed Gull--1.49:1, range 1.24 to 1.64, n = 16). Our field estimate of leg length is not inconsistent with the identification of California Gull.

After submission of this report to the Iowa Records Committee, Bangma had opportunity to directly compare Ring-billed and California gulls. Not only did this bear out the tarsus/culmen length mentioned above, but he noted that the wing projection overlapped as well. Also, in the course of feeding a mixed group of gulls, he noted that the ring-bills in that group dragged their wings on the pavement more frequently than the Californias. While this may only apply to some feeding behavior, it certainly does bring the conventional wisdom into question.

One of the most striking things about the bird was the nearly white median wing coverts. We initially thought the bird had molted these feathers, displaying the white bases of underlying feathers. Under closer examination we felt that the feathers were in fact present, but were extremely faded. Later that day, we examined photographs in Grant (1982) and found a similar appearance in photos 476 and 479. In fact, we were struck by the overall similarity of #479 to our bird, allowing for the progression of molt.

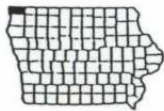
We thank the staff of the American Museum of Natural History, and in particular Helen Hays and Joe DiCostanzo, for their help in allowing access to the gull collection.

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### CHESTNUT-COLLARED LONGSPUR IN LYON COUNTY

DENNIS HENRICKSON

Chestnut-collared Longspurs nest in southeastern South Dakota and extreme western Minnesota. They can be expected in western Iowa during migration. When an April snow brought large flocks of Lapland Longspurs to the Gruver area, I thought it time to check out northwestern Iowa for Chestnut-collared Longspurs.



Early on the morning of 11 April 1997, I set out, getting to Larchwood at 8:45 a.m. Taking highway K16 out of town, I encountered several large flocks of longspurs but could find no Chestnut-collared Longspurs among them. Turning around at the Minnesota border, I back tracked two miles and turned west on a gravel road. I had gone about three miles when it happened. A lone bird was on the side of the road about 40 feet ahead of me. I stopped and with my 7 x 40 binoculars, viewed the bird through the front windshield. Binoculars can spook birds and, after a few seconds, the bird flew away. It was a male in breeding plumage. I did get a good look at the ventral part of the bird as it was facing me. The large black ventral area was framed in white, and the throat appeared light. As it flew, the black triangle in the tail pattern was obvious. I tried for 15 to 20 minutes to relocate the bird without success. Then I wrote down my observations.

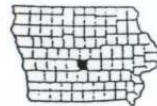
I looked for more Chestnut-collared Longspurs for the next several hours, but I could find only Lapland Longspurs and Horned Larks.

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### BLACK-HEADED GULL AT BIG CREEK LAKE

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE

On 21 November 1994, I saw an adult Black-headed Gull at Big Creek Lake in Polk County. I watched the bird from 7:32-9:30 a.m. and again from 4:07-4:50 p.m. The bird had been reported earlier on 17 November by Ray Cummins. The bird was feeding with about 100 Bonaparte's Gulls opposite the beach area of the lake. It was clearly larger and longer-winged than the Bonaparte's. The most striking feature was the extensive dark color on the underside of the wing. Specifically, the undersides of the outer two primaries were white, with the undersides of the remaining flight feathers blackish, gradually becoming dark gray in the inner secondaries. Another feature noted was the bright red bill, which was slightly longer and thicker than that of a Bonaparte's. The legs were also bright red. The head, underparts, and tail were white except for a small black spot just behind each eye. The upperwing pattern was similar to that of a Bonaparte's, except that the gray color was much paler. This was especially evident when the bird was perched with Bonaparte's Gulls. This individual did not seem quite as large relative to Bonaparte's as other Black-headed Gulls I have seen, but it was still obviously larger. Based on the wing and head patterns, I aged the bird as an adult in basic plumage.



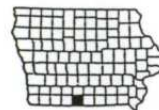
I observed the bird again on 23 November, but not thereafter. The number of Bonaparte's Gulls dropped dramatically after the 23rd, and the Black-headed Gull presumably departed with them. This represents the fourth record of a Black-headed Gull in Iowa. Other records were a basic adult on 2, 4 November 1989 at Saylorville Reservoir, Polk County (S. Dinsmore, *Iowa Bird Life* 63:53-54, 1993), an alternate adult on 2 August 1994 at Spirit Lake, Dickinson County (S. Dinsmore, *Iowa Bird Life* 66:27-29, 1996), and an alternate adult and a juvenile from 2-12 August 1994 at the Kettleon Waterfowl Production Area, Dickinson County (S. Dinsmore, *Iowa Bird Life* 66:27-29, 1996).

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### FIRST RECORD OF A NEOTROPIC CORMORANT FOR IOWA

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE

On 4 May 1996, I arrived at the Little River Recreation Area in Decatur County. At 2:25 p.m., I noticed a flock of about 75 cormorants perched in trees roughly 500 meters distant. I quickly examined each bird, knowing there was a possibility of finding a Neotropic Cormorant. At the great distance, none of the birds really stood out, but I kept coming back to one bird that seemed a bit smaller, slimmer, and longer-tailed. At 2:45 p.m., at a distance of about 200 meters, the bird in question was easily identified as an adult Neotropic Cormorant. The bird was only slightly shorter than a Double-crested, but was proportioned much differently. The tail was about 50% longer, and the bird seemed slimmer-necked and smaller-headed. The bill was slightly shorter, thinner, and darker than that of a Double-crested. The throat patch was also smaller and duller, not bright orange like all nearby Double-crested Cormorants. The body, wings, and tail were a glossy brown/black color, similar to those of a Double-crested. The lower portion of the



96-59

**DOCUMENTATION FORM  
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

**Species:** California Gull

**Location:** Spirit Lake, north end, Dickinson Co., IA

**Habitat:** Lakeshore

**Date:** Sept. 6, 1996 **Time:** 11:00 AM **Length of observation:** 40 minutes

**Observers:**

Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Av 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ, 07010

Ann Johnson, 532 120<sup>th</sup> Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211

**Background:** The observers parked at Mini-Wakan State Park and walked west along the peninsula separating Spirit Lake from the back water to the north. We looked across the inlet to the other peninsula. Black and Forster's Terns were resting on the rock jetty with Ring-billed Gulls. Our attention was drawn to a medium brown gull, approximately the size of the Ring-bills. The bird perched on top of a rock for the entire time, allowing direct comparison with nearby Ring-bills.

**Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics):** Good light, approx off left shoulder, distance approx 100 yards, optics included Zeiss 7x42 and Spacemaster Jr with 20x eyepiece

**Description of bird:**

**Size and shape:** The body of the bird was slightly larger than the nearby Ring-bills. However, it stood much taller, apparently due to longer legs. We estimated the tarsus to be well over 1.5 times the length of the culmen, while we estimated the nearby Ring-bills to have tarsi under that figure. The rear end of the bird looked extremely short, almost truncated. When the bird spread its wings, we observed that this was due to extensive molt, the outermost 4 primaries were only partially grown. A number of tail feathers were also missing as were many of the secondaries.

**Head and neck:** The overall color was medium brown, with a darker area extending from the eye back onto the ear coverts. The whitish color of the foreneck extended onto the side neck and wrapped up behind the ear coverts..

**Underparts:** Foreneck and upper breast whitish, mottled brown. Lower breast and belly brown, mottled with white.

**Mantle and scapulars:** a clear gray, significantly darker than the mantles of the nearby Ring-bills.

**Wings:** The median coverts (and possibly the lesser coverts as well, were nearly white, standing out in striking contrast to the mantle and greater coverts. The greater coverts were medium brown, appearing very worn. The tertials appeared extremely worn, with an irregular pale fringe. There was virtually no visible extension of the primaries beyond the tertials. When the wings were spread P1-6 appeared uniform medium to dark brown, P7-10 were half grown and appeared black or very dark brown (outermost long primary considered P10). A number of the secondaries were missing and those that remained were extremely worn, but appeared similar in

color to P1-6. On the spread upperwing, the faded whitish appearance of the median coverts contrasted with the darker flight feathers and greater coverts. The underwing appeared relatively uniform medium brown, without any significant contrast.

Tail: The tail was in extensive molt, but the remnant feathers had a broad dark terminal band. The extent of mottling or lack thereof on the base of the tail and tail coverts could not be accurately judged.

Soft parts: The eye was dark brown. The bill was a dull fleshy gray, with a prominent black tip. The black was clear cut and did not run in along the cutting edge of the mandible. The black extended slightly farther back on the lower mandible. The extreme tip of the upper mandible or nail was white or pale. The bill was substantially larger than that of the Ring-bills, and was rather straight without noticeable widening or a gonydeal angle. The legs were a fleshy color, much paler than the pink of juvenal/1<sup>st</sup> year Ring-bills nearby.

One of the most striking things about the bird was the nearly white median coverts. We initially thought the bird had molted these feathers, displaying the white bases of underlying feathers. Under closer examination we felt that the feathers were in fact present, but were extremely faded. Later that day, we examined photographs in Grant and found a similar appearance in photos 476 and 479. In fact, we were struck by the overall similarity of #479 to our bird, allowing for the progression of molt.

**Similar species/discussion:** Ring-billed is ruled out by the solid gray mantle combined with the extensive molt of the flight feathers. Ring-bills and similar 3 year gulls obtain the gray mantle during a post-juvinal molt. Flight feathers are not molted at this time. Flight feathers are molted after one year, at which time the body of a Ring-bill would be much whiter. Also, the mantle was a much darker shade of gray than any Ring-bill present. Additionally, Ring-billed Gull's bill is proportionally smaller and thinner, with more curve.

Herring Gull would be larger. The mantle of a Herring Gull would be paler gray, nearly the same shade as that of the Ring-bills. The bill would be proportionally heavier with a more marked gonydeal angle.

Herring Gulls may show a black tipped bill, but the black normally blends into the pink of the base or runs in along the cutting edges of the bill. The bill and legs would be brighter pink.

Other similarly sized extralimitals can be ruled out by the mantle color as well as bill pattern and shape.

A striking feature of this bird was its leg length. In an effort to better understand this, Bangma paid a visit to the American Museum of Natural History and examined specimens of Herring, Ring-billed and California Gulls. Measurements were made of a representative selection of specimens. The following chart shows the results.

Tarsus length/culmen length of a series of gulls.

CAGU	Count		HERG	Count		RBGU	Count	
	28			18			16	
Min	141%		Min	123%		Min	124%	
Median	163%		Median	142%		Median	149%	
Max	186%		Max	162%		Max	164%	

While there is some overlap between these species, it is interesting to note that the breaking point between California Gull and the other two is very near the ratio of 1.5. While not diagnostic by itself, the length of this bird's tarsus relative to the culmen as estimated by us in the field is indicative of California Gull.

**Note:** We would like to express our thanks to the staff of the American Museum of Natural History, in particular Helen Hays and Joe DiConstanza, for their help in allowing access to the gull collection.

**Previous experience:** Both observers have 30+ years birding experience with a special interest in gulls. Bangma has experience with gulls throughout the world, study of specimens and literature in preparation of Larid workshops and rare bird documentations. Most recent experience with CAGU approx 1 year earlier.

**References consulted:**

\_\_\_\_ 1987. Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.

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