

Lesser Black-backed Gull  
17 May 1985  
IPL Ponds, Pottawattamie Co., IA  
\*Rick Wright  
IBL 55:64; 56:44

Record Number: 85-06  
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Rick Wright

LETTERS

Rick Wright to T. H. Kent, 25 July 1985  
Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 8 Aug 1985  
Rick Wright to Tom Kent, 17 Dec 1985

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 55:64  
Records Committee: IBL 56:44

VOTE: 6-III, 1-IV

Observer noted key features. Seems very late, even for Herring Gull.

IV, Sounds good, but very brief observation to judge bill size, etc.

III, Well done description in spite of very, very brief observation time.

III, Leg coloration and mantle color are convincing marks for Lesser-blacked.

III, Convincing description. Rick is a very careful and knowledgeable birder.

III, I hate gulls. If he really saw what he says he saw, it sounds like a Lesser Black-backed Gull, and he's aware of the problem of suggestability. Rick is one of the few people who could look for all of the necessary field marks on a gull in a little over 3 seconds. He's one of the few people capable of realizing he should look for them in a little over 3 seconds.

REVOTE (at meeting, 5 Oct 1985, with letters from Peterjohn and Wright): Vote 4-IV, 3-V.

1150 Westwood Ln, #33  
Omaha, Nebraska 68144

85-06

T.H. Kent  
211 Richards St.  
Iowa City, IA 52240

July 25, 1985

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your questions about my May 17 Lesser Black-backed Gull sighting. Most of the vagueness you note is a product of the very brief look I had, but I can try to clear up the ambiguities I introduced in my description.

The herring gulls were a third-year(-type) and a probable adult. The ring-bills were first-summers and adults. I mentioned in my first note as a measure of the quality of the light that, comparing those two species, the gray mantles of the herring gulls were noticeably slightly darker than those of the ringers.

Both, of course, were lighter than the bird in question, but that bird was not in those few seconds in a scope field with the other gulls, making more precise comparison impossible. As a result, I can't say for sure whether the mantle coloration was faintly darker or lighter than that of Franklin's gull.

Neither can I add much about the wing pattern. I do remember feeling that the wing-tip was surprisingly dark (and not, interestingly, that the mantle was particularly light). I think now that the white mirrors may somehow have heightened this contrast.

I wouldn't call the leg color as I remember it "greenish" at all; it was quite a clear yellow. That I noted the feet at all could mean that they were brighter than the ring-bills', but that is sheerest hindsight.

Like Bruce Peterjohn, I considered California gull when I saw this bird, but, unfamiliar as I am with that species (I last saw it over five years ago), I still think that what I saw eliminates it as a possibility. A California gull could, I suppose, seem misleadingly dark with only pale-mantled gulls for comparison, but the presence of Franklin's gulls let me fix the bird in question more accurately at the very dark end of the scale: it would be a slaty California indeed that I would describe as Franklin's-like. The bird's legs may have been too bright for California, too; I remember the species as rather drab-footed. And a California might have shown two bill-spots rather than the single red one of this bird.

I wish I had more to say, but the sighting was just too short. I look forward to reading the Committee's evaluation and hope too to get a chance to meet you.

Yours,

*Rick Wright*  
Rick Wright

P.S.: My address after September 10 is  
102 Lawrence Apts., West Drive,  
Princeton, NJ 08540.



105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081  
8 Aug. 1985

85-06

Dear Tom,

In my haste to get caught up with my correspondence before leaving for Arizona, I obviously did not discuss my concerns with the spring "Lesser Black-backed Gull" sighting as thoroughly as I should have. There were two described field marks that preclude its identity as a Lesser Black-backed:

Mantle Color--his description was "back dark slate, about the color of a Franklin's Gull" is perfect for a California Gull! Lesser Black-backed have mantles that would appear noticeably darker than a Franklin's.

Underwing--he stated "In flight, did not seem to have a dark trailing edge to the underwing." which is acceptable for a California but not for a Lesser Black-backed. Lesser Black-backed have sooty gray trailing borders to the underwing which are very distinctive in flight.

The described bill characteristics are problematical at best. Certainly a California Gull should have a black spot which was not observed. However, he described the bill as "long but rather peg-like, not deep". This shape suggests a California which has a relatively long and slender bill that is rather distinctive (at least to me). The bills of Lesser Black-backed do not strike me as particularly long. Tarsi color is also not definitive. Adult Californias generally have greenish legs but some appear to be more yellowish. Two additional field marks would have been very instructive, wing-tip pattern (which they admittedly did not observe) and iris color. Lastly, the date is very late for an adult Lesser Black-backed (which are mostly November-March along the Great Lakes) but not that unusual for a California Gull which is a fairly late migrant. In summary, I do not feel that the bird can be positively identified from the provided description. Certain characteristics favor California Gull, others are problematical and several were not observed at all. In any event, its identity as a Lesser Black-backed Gull is not justified on the basis of their written description.

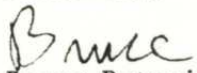
I am certainly cognizant of the difficulties involved with learning gull identification while residing in Iowa. With the exception of the Thayer's/Iceland complex which requires comparative experience, all other gulls can be correctly identified by competent observers if they can thoroughly study the bird at rest and in flight and carefully describe all characteristics. Inexperienced observers should begin gull identification by becoming intimately familiar with the common species and the extent of their variability. For example, there is no difference in mantle color between Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. However, varying light conditions may cause individuals to have different mantle colors. In fact, Herrings can appear to almost become black-backed under some conditions! Whenever I read that observers noted differences in mantle colors between these species, that tells me they are not familiar with them and need to learn more about their variability before they can accurately distinguish differences between them and unfamiliar, unusual gulls.

Tom Kent  
8 Aug. 1985  
page 2

Lastly, observers should learn when they have observed a bird well enough to be positive about its identification and when they haven't. From my experience, I have probably learned more from the "ones that got away" and went unreported than from those I conclusively identified. One of the most important lessons a birder must learn is self-restraint when identifying rarities. That lesson saves them a lot of embarrassment and hard feelings when sightings are reviewed by records committees. I hope to have adequately answered your questions and comments. If not, we can continue this discussion in San Diego.

My plans for s. California in September are flexible. If there is nothing to chase, I may go to the Salton Sea on Sept. 5 and bird the San Diego area Sept. 6. In any case, I'd like to get together and do some birding on the 6th. If you've made any motel reservations, let me know where they are (I haven't made any and probably won't). If not, there is always a chance I could meet your plane if I'm in the area but it is probably best to make other arrangements. We probably should just decide on a place in the San Diego area and a time on Friday morning where we can meet. Since you and Carl have definite objectives, I'll let you set the place and time and I'll meet you there. If you have any suggestions, just let me know.

I'm looking forward to birding in S. California with you. The se. Arizona trip was fantastic! The highlights included N. Jacana, Flame-colored Tanager, Plain-capped Starthroat, Berylline's and White-eared Hummingbirds, Buff-collared Nightjar plus the usual se. Arizona specialties. Birding in Ohio has been very routine with the expected shorebirds along Lake Erie but nothing particularly exceptional.

Sincerely,  
  
Bruce Peterjohn



December 17, 1985  
Princeton, New Jersey

Dear Tom,

I hope that I am not presumptuous in thanking you and the other members of the IOU Records Committee for your thoughtful evaluation of my sight record of Larus sp., IPL Settling Ponds, May 17, 1985. Convinced as I am of the probable correctness of the identification as fuscus ssp., still I believe your conclusion the only acceptable one based on the description I was able to provide after a frustratingly brief view.

I was puzzled, however, to read that my description of the upperparts coloration was more suggestive of California gull. Though that species is certainly among the plausible alternative identifications, I would point out that Grant considers the mantle of Franklin's gull "very dark, close to that of... L. fuscus graellsii." (Gulls, p. 64) Of course, this can't make up for the brevity of the observation or --perhaps even more troubling--the apparent lack of a dark trailing edge to the underwing.

Again, my best thanks to all of you for your comments on this sighting. Merry Christmas, and good birding!

Yours,  
*Rick*

Rick Wright

85-06

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation  
by the Records Committee  
of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: Lesser Black-backed Gull

DATE SEEN: 17 May 1985

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Pottawattamie County

OBSERVERS: Rick Wright

DATE OF REVIEW: October 1985

METHOD OF REVIEW: Committee discussion

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: V

COMMENTS: The main concern of the Committee with this record was the brevity of the observation, and inability to judge the mantle color of the bird from the description given. If the mantle was indeed close in color to nearby Franklin's Gulls (as stated), Lesser Black-backed Gull would seem unlikely, as its mantle is somewhat darker than Franklin's. The possibility was raised, based on date and mantle color (similar to Franklin's) of the bird being a California Gull. However the details provided could not conclusively identify the bird as a California.

Note that the Committee could not rule out the possibility that the bird was indeed a Lesser Black-backed Gull.

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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.



SPECIES: Lesser Black-backed Gull, Larus fuscus

DATE: May 17, 1985. TIME: App. 1:30 pm

LOCALITY: IPPD Settling Ponds, Pottawatomie Co., Iowa

OBSERVERS: Rick Wright, Ken and Marie Strom

EQUIPMENT: 8.5x binoculars, 22x scope

LIGHT: Strong, from behind. Not so much glare as to render imperceptible the difference in mantle colors of the herring and ring-billed gulls also present.

EXPERIENCE: None on the part of any observer

Present on the ash of the Settling Ponds were about 30 ring-billed gulls, two herring gulls, and about ten Franklin's gulls. The different mantle colorations of the herring and ring-billed gulls were distinguishable. The bird in question flew in from the south, perched on the ash for less than three seconds, and took off for the north. Total time of observation was probably less than 30 seconds, including time during which the bird was too distant for any identification beyond genus. I was able to look at the bird at 22x while it was on the ground, and noted the following salient characters:

- Size approximately that of herring gull.
- Head and underparts white, no marking visible.
- Bill yellow, with red spot on gonys; long but rather peg-like, not deep. Never suggested the heaviness of great black-backed, for example.
- Tarsi yellow.
- Back dark slate, about the color of Franklin's gulls'. Large and conspicuous tertial crescent when perched. Perched and in flight, wing-tips obviously darker than rest of upperparts; I was not able to make out the pattern of mirrors. In flight, did not seem to have a dark trailing edge to the underwing.

I had no time to note any other details. The presence of other gull species convinced me that I had accurately judged the mantle color of this bird; I was able to compare it with 3 other species, as well as Caspian terns. The size and bill size rule out great Black-backed, the only dark-backed gull with which I am familiar. Although western gull would show a similar upper-wing pattern, I suspect that it too would appear heavy-billed (and would not have yellow feet). Yellow-footed gull is also large and deep-billed, and is probably less likely than lesser black-backed in Iowa.

A word on suggestibility: I understand that lesser black-back was just recorded for the first time in Iowa this winter. Sometimes that can spark a few spurious reports of a species. I had the bird on my mind from 19 months in Massachusetts, not from a brief reading of IBL; the Stroms didn't even know what a lesser black-back was. So I don't think it can be

said (though it probably will be once or twice!) that any of us was looking for the species.

Please contact me if I can make anything clearer,

Rick Wright  
11530 Westwood Lane, #33  
Omaha, NE 68144  
(402) 333-4877