

Iceland Gull  
31 Dec 1991  
Lock and Dam 14, Scott Co., IA  
\*T. Kent, \*J. Fuller  
IBL 62:55, 71, Kent 1992

Record Number: 91-47  
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS:

Thomas H. Kent, 31 Dec 1991  
Jim Fuller, 2 Jan 1992

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 62:55  
Records Committee: IBL 62:71  
Kent, T. H. 1992. Iceland Gulls in Iowa. IBL 62:95-98.

VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D, The white primaries, 1" primary extension, all black bill, and overall light color are convincing multiple supporting characteristics. Thayer's Gull is eliminated by the white primaries and lack of a secondary band. Gloucous Gull by size, smaller than 90% of the Herring Gulls and primary extension.

A-D, Excellent detailed descriptions for an immature Iceland Gull.

A-D, Good, thorough details and discussion provided for a 1st winter Iceland Gull.

During the identification process, other small doves of comparable size were ruled out. The Ruddy Ground-Dove does not have scaling anywhere on its body. The Inca Dove is scaled, but has a longer tail, an entirely black bill, a light belly with black stripes, and lacks the black areas on the wing.

Although not always easy to find, the dove did remain in the same area for about two weeks, allowing a large number of birders to view this first state record. The last sighting was on 2 November during an early season blizzard.

A Common Ground-Dove was recorded at Waconda Country Club in Des Moines on 10 June 1922 (C. H. Pangburn, *The Ground Dove in central Iowa*, *Auk* 39:566, 1922). The author, who claimed to be familiar with this species, speculated that it might be an escaped cage bird. Because of this and lack of description, the bird was not accepted to the state list.

In recent years, a pattern of vagrancy for this species has become apparent (Figure 2). The monthly distribution of sightings is as follows: March (1), May (2), June (1), July (1), August (3), September (4), October (14), November (10), and December (7).



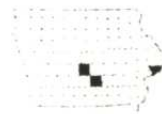
Figure 2. Breeding range (dark area) and recent vagrant records of Common Ground-Dove by state. The numbers indicate the number of records for each state.

The Cedar Rapids bird, officially Iowa's first, fits the vagrancy pattern of this species well for both date and location. It is interesting that another bird of this species showed up at Whitefish Point in northern Michigan on 21 October 1991 (*American Birds* 46:93), just two days after the Iowa bird was first sighted.

6 Longview Knoll NE, Iowa City, IA 52240

## ICELAND GULLS IN IOWA

THOMAS H. KENT



A first-winter/first-summer Iceland Gull at Red Rock Reservoir from 13 to 16 March 1991 provided Iowa's first accepted record of this species. Previous reports of this species had occurred over the years, but the sightings were brief or not recorded in sufficient detail to be sure of the identification, or may have been in Illinois. Here I report on the spring 1991 record and four more records from the winter of 1991-1992.

On 13 March 1991, Tim Schantz found a white-winged gull below the dam at Red Rock Reservoir in Marion County. The bird was intermediate in size between Ring-billed and Herring gulls, but closer to the latter. On the standing bird, he noted gleaming white primaries that protruded about one inch beyond the tail. In flight, the flight feathers were all white from above and below. The rest of the bird was a mottled or indistinctly flecked off white or very light gray-brown. A mottled tail band was noted. The bill was mostly dark with a light base, the eye dark, and the legs pink. Nine other observers documented this bird over the next three days, and I took photos (Figure 1a and 1b).

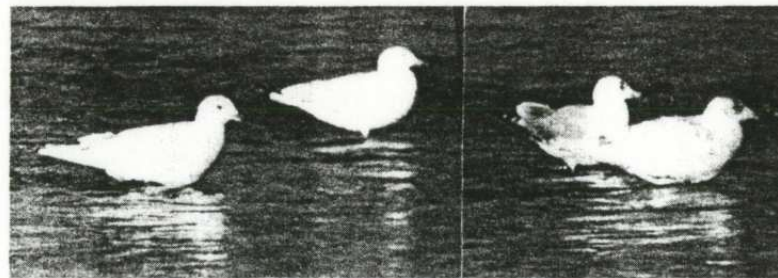


Figure 1a, 1b. Iceland Gull at Red Rock Reservoir, 14 March 1991. Note the more rounded head shape in 1a.

The following details are added from a composite of the other observers. The bill was shorter and thinner than that of Herring Gulls with a smoothly curved distal culmen and minimal gonyl prominence. There was more light color in the lower mandible than the upper, and the demarcation with the black distal part of the bill was indistinct. Some described the head as rounded, others thought it was not. There was a smudge around the eye and some streaking on top of the head. The upper back and upper breast, neck, and parts of the head lacked mottling and appeared white. One observer noted some pale brown on the outer side of the shaft of the distal four or five primaries. The mottled tail band was just slightly darker than the rest of the bird and occupied the distal half of the tail except for a paler, thin terminal band.

Several of the documentors were uncertain of the identification because of the white headed appearance (suggesting Herring Gull), tail band (more typical of Thayer's Gull), and head shape (better for Herring or Thayer's). The possibilities of leucistic Herring Gull or a hybrid were suggested. The documentations and

LH-1b



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.

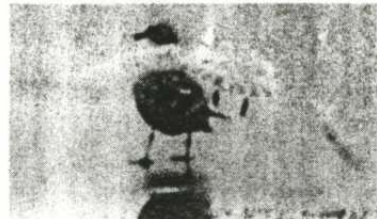


Figure 3. Note the minimal brown edging in the distal tailfeathers of this flying first-winter Iceland Gull at Lock and Dam 14 on 4 January 1992.

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

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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

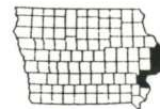
Zimmer, K.J. 1991. Plumage variation in "Kumlien's" Iceland Gull. *Birding* 23:254-269.

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

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## DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

*Species:* Iceland Gull *Number:* 1 first-winter

*Location:* Lock and Dam 14, Scott Co., IA

*Date:* 31 December 1991, 1 January 1992 *Time:* 1:15-1:35 p.m. (31st) and 8:55-10:20 (1st)

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

*Others before/with/after:* joined by Pete Wickham and John Daniel on the 1st.

*Habitat and circumstances:* Mississippi River

*Description of bird:* I noted a very pale gull flying with Herring Gulls just over the lock and below the dam.

The bird was easily picked out and was in flight more than standing. In flight it appeared slightly smaller than most Herring Gulls. When seen standing on top of the cement pillars of the dam next to an adult Herring Gull it appeared slightly smaller, perhaps 10% overall. The head was smaller and neck shorter than the Herring's, and the bill was three-fourths as long as the Herring's. The bill was all black, of rather uniform thickness and rounded downward at the tip. The overall color was very light milky-brown. All parts of the bird were the same tone except for tail band, outer two or three primaries from above, and underwing. From some angles there was a very faint darker wash around the dark eye. The upper wing appeared very uniform except at some angles the inner primaries area was slightly lighter, and when seen sailing as viewed through a telescope, the outer two or three primaries had a slightly browner outer web. There was no hint of a secondary bar. From below the primaries and secondaries were translucent white. The underwing coverts were darker than the overall color of the bird. The tail was concolor with the body except for a poorly demarcated subterminal band that was about one-fourth the length of the tail. The band was a very light brown with irregular margins. On the standing bird, the primaries gave the appearance of a white-winged gull, but the primaries and tertials were a very pale brown and slightly darker than the wing coverts. The primaries extended about 1 inch beyond the tail. A nearby Herring Gull had a similar projection. The coverts on the standing bird were finely barred or vermiculated. Barring was also noted in flight on the upper and under tail coverts. The head and body were more uniform. The legs were not seen in bright light, but were not yellow and did not appear different from Herring Gull leg color.

*Similar species:* At first I thought the bird might be a Glaucous Gull, but the all black bill quickly excluded that possibility. Later I confirmed that the bird was smaller than Herrings and had a bill that was too small and too short for a Glaucous. I believe that the tail band also argues against Glaucous. I next considered Thayer's Gull, but decided that the tail band was not extensive enough, that there was no secondary bar, that the wing tips were too light (both in flight and on the standing bird), and that the tertials were not dark enough on the standing bird. All of the findings were a good fit for first-winter Iceland Gull.

*Any one have reservations?:* No.

*Light:* There was a heavy overcast both days, but this provided a nice light for viewing. *Distance:* 50 to 200 yards (estimated from width of lock). *Optics:* 10x binocular, 20x scope.

*Previous experience:* I saw an adult in California and a first-winter bird molting to first summer in Iowa. I had been studying Kevin Zimmer's article in *Birding* recently in the process of reviewing the Iowa record.

*References before/after viewing:* I looked at Zimmer's article overnight, but did not look at any other sources.

*Time of notes:* 10 minutes after first sighting. *Final typing:* 8 hours after last sighting.

DOCUMENTATION OF RARE BIRD SIGHTING

SPECIES: Iceland Gull (First Winter)

LOCATION: Mississippi River, Lock & Dam #14 (Scott County).

DATE: January 2, 1992 from 2:55-3:10 and 3:30-3:45PM.

OBSERVER: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll, Iowa City, Iowa, 52240.

OTHER OBSERVERS: None with me. Tom Kent on 12/31 and 1/1. Chuck Fuller, Bill Dawes, John Rutenbeck (Burlington) on 1/4.

BACKGROUND: Tom Kent reported seeing an Iceland Gull at this location on the previous two days. As I approached the side of the dam, the first bird that stood out among the many flying gulls was the bird that will be described.

DESCRIPTION: This bird had an almost ghostly appearance as it flew back and forth below the dam. At first glance and without optics it appeared almost entirely white. I only saw the bird flying. At no time did it perch on the dam or rest on nearby backwater ice.

General size appeared to be about the same as the numerous Herring Gulls flying in the vicinity. The bird was much lighter than any other gull that was in the area, and could be picked out immediately, even at relatively great distances. With binoculars or scope, the general appearance was of a light tannish-white bird.

The upper and underwings were similar. The primaries were lighter (whiter) and contrasted to some extent with the secondaries and coverts, which were more tannish-white. The light brown seemed to be more streaky on the head, neck, breast, and belly, while on the back it was more checked. There was a faint tan tailband, maybe a third of the tail width. The eye appeared to be dark, and the bill also appeared to be all dark. I was never able to see the legs. No vocalization was heard. Feeding behavior was unusual in that this bird always stayed very close to the dam, while the other gulls often drifted downstream.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Glaucous Gull is generally larger with a two-toned bill. Thayer's Gull is generally darker, especially the primaries, and has a generally wider and darker brown tail band..



**VIEWING CONDITIONS and OPTICS:** It was mid to late afternoon on an overcast, slightly foggy day. The sun was not a factor. The bird was viewed at distances of 50-500 yards with both Swift Audubon 8.5 X 44 binoculars and KOWA TSN4 telescope with 20-60X zoom lens, with the 20X used all the time.

**PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE:** I studied what I thought was an Iceland Gull (first year) at Red Rock Reservoir in March, 1991. I also saw a first year Iceland at the Superior, Wisconsin landfill in December, 1988.

**FIELD NOTES and REFERENCES:** Field notes were made in the car immediately after viewing the bird, and this form was typed on 1/6/92. The National Geographic guide and Harrison's Seabirds were consulted at the car after the sighting.

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