

Great Black-backed Gull  
7 Feb 1991  
Keokuk, Lee Co., IA  
\*S. Dinsmore, \*Ann Johnson  
IBL 61:57, 62:71, Kent 1992

Record Number: 91-18  
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Stephen J. Dinsmore, 7, 8 Feb, 4024 Arkansas Dr., Ames, IA  
50010

Ann Johnson, 7 Feb, 532 120th St., Norwalk, IA 50211

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:57

Records Committee: IBL 62:71

Kent, T. H. 1992. Second-year Great Black-backed Gull on the  
Mississippi River. IBL 62:89-90.

VOTE: 7-A-D

A-D, good, excellent details.

A-D, Good descriptions.

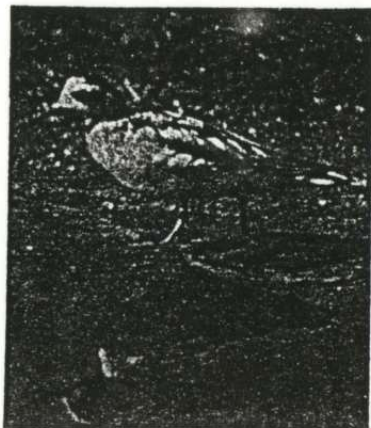
A-D, Excellent descriptions are consistent with published  
information. Huge size alone eliminates other gulls, and black  
mantle clinches it.

A-D, As described this gull is just too large to be anything but  
a Glaucous or Greater Black-backed Gull. The distinctly black  
mantle eliminates Glaucous Gull. I tend to agree with Johnson's  
thinking on the age of this bird, it is probably a 2nd winter  
bird which has mostly changed to a 2nd summer mantle color.

A-D, see attached note.

A-D, Johnson may have misjudged the age of this bird by not  
giving much weight to the darkness of the mantle and upper wings.  
Light could just as easily have had an effect on the bill color  
and tail band. Overall both descriptions conclusive for Great  
Black-backed Gull (probably in 3rd winter plumage). Both  
documentations fairly consistent and point to being the same bird  
observed separately by independent observers.

A-D, Good documentations with good details.



Red Phalarope, Saylorville Reservoir,  
28 Sep 1991. Photo by Tim Schantz



Red Phalarope, Saylorville Reservoir,  
28 Sep 1991. Photo by Tim Schantz

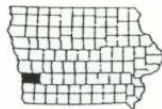
tail. It had a very noticeable light-grayish back. Its relatively short bill was very thick, stout, and black. It had a very black crown and a strong black bar through and behind the eye. In flight, it had a very distinctive wingstripe. This bird appeared to be almost into its basic plumage. The bird was running along the shore, later flew around, landed in the water off shore by a fishing boat, stayed there for a while, and then was gone. Based on its plumage differences, it was probably a different bird from the two reported earlier in the fall.

P. O. Box 65, Liscomb, IA 50148

#### TRICOLORED HERON IN POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY

JANET G. GREER

On 4 May 1991, Marge and Dutch Graf, Mary Jo Harlow, and I were participating in the Audubon Society of Omaha spring count. Upon our arrival at the Iowa Power and Light settling basins at 11:30 a.m., I noticed a medium-sized heron in the water near the rushes bordering the shore. It shortly flew away from the car, and I noted a stark white chin, slate-blue primaries and secondaries, and a rusty wash to the mantle and wing coverts. These characteristics convinced me that this bird was a Tricolored Heron.



The heron landed on the far shore of the settling basin and turned to face us. The entire belly and the upper part of the legs were stark white. The white extended up the flanks to the bend of the folded wings. As noted above, the chin was white in contrast to the dark of the entire face and crown. The long thin neck was mottled with rusty and white feathers. In addition, there were long rusty feathers on the breast. At the closest observation (75 feet), the distal one-fourth of both the upper and lower

mandibles appeared to be a different color than the base of the bill. The straight bill appeared long in proportion to the size of the bird. The legs, feet, and bill were a dark slate color. The bird appeared smaller than a Great Blue Heron, also present, although the two species were never side by side. At this time, the heron flew out of our range of vision.

We drove around the basins and relocated the heron standing on the fly-ash flat where we observed its behavior for almost an hour. The bird struggled to pick up a straight stick more than six feet long and carried it around over a large area of the fly ash. Several times the stick was dropped and picked up again. On several occasions, the heron approached a dead bush and shook it vigorously with its bill. After this, the bird would gently pick at the bush, thrusting its head at it. Often the heron stopped to scratch itself about the shoulders and neck with its foot. The bird was always active but it never approached the shore or resumed fishing while we watched.

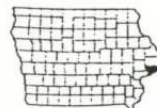
We left the settling ponds to inform other birders about this bird but it was not relocated that afternoon nor on subsequent days. This is the second record of the Tricolored Heron for Iowa and the first from the Missouri River Valley. The first was at Cone Marsh on 29 April 1989 (Kent, T. H., *Iowa Bird Life* 61:1-4, 1991).

341 Steven Circle, Council Bluffs, IA 51503

#### SECOND-YEAR GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

THOMAS H. KENT

On 14 January 1991, Jim Fuller found a dark-mantled gull on the Mississippi River in Bettendorf/Moline waters and reported it on the Birdline as a possible Lesser Black-backed Gull. On 15 January, Dick Tetrault and I found a dark-mantled gull there. Compared to Herring Gulls in the same field of view it was 30% larger, much darker backed, longer and thicker billed, longer legged making the bird stand taller, thicker legged (twice as thick as Herrings), and longer winged in flight. It had a long-necked, slender-headed, long-billed appearance. The bill was straight and mostly black with poorly demarcated light areas in the proximal one-third. The head and neck were white with dark eye, slight streak through the eye, and touch of gray on the posterior crown. The under parts were unstreaked white. The legs were a slightly darker pink than those of Herring Gulls. On the standing bird, the wings and back appeared rather uniform black-brown with indistinct feather edging. The primaries and tail band were black. The tertials and posterior scapulars were light gray, producing marks on the standing bird. In flight, the base of the tail was white and a terminal black band, which was indistinct proximally and thicker centrally, occupied about one-fourth of the tail. The outer primaries and their coverts were black, and I did not see any mirrors. The inner primaries, secondaries, coverts, and back were dark brown with thin feather edging. The trailing edge of the wing was pale. The underwing appeared medium neutral gray.



On 17 January, Jim Fuller saw the bird at closer range and recorded basically the same features. Other observers on the 15th and 16th recorded a gull with similar features but smaller in size. These observers came to different conclusions on the bird's identity; Western and Lesser Black-backed gull. On 7 and 8 February, Steve

91-18

Dinsmore and Ann Johnson described a similar dark-mantled gull at Keokuk and concluded that it was a Great Black-backed Gull.

In analyzing these various sightings, all agree that the bird was dark-mantled, meaning that the bird could be Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Slaty-backed, Western, or Yellow-footed gull. The next consideration is whether they represent one or more birds. All of the descriptions indicate a second-winter bird. First-winter birds of these species have a checkered or brownish plumage, secondary bar, no gray/black in the mantle, all black bill, and extensive tail band. Third-winter birds have a minimal tail band, developing mirrors, much less dark in the bill tip, and upper wing or back similar to an adult. Further, this second-winter gull did not look like any of the pictures or drawing in the field guides or reference books. It is a individual with its own features. There are a number of points of similarity in the six documentations: dark tip and light base to bill, white head with light streaking/smudging around eye, black wing tips without mirror, back-scapulars-inner wings brown-black with edging, no secondary bar, no distinctive features on underwing, black tail band, and pink legs (pinkish-yellow in one documentation).

I concluded that all of the sightings were of a second-winter Great Black-backed Gull. The unusual age (only third-year would be less likely) and similar odd features noted in the documentations make it unlikely that more than one bird was observed. It is not uncommon for immature gulls to have very individualistic features, especially when molting. If only one bird were present, how could two of six observers judge the size differently. Peter Grant and Killian Mullarney ("The New Approach to Identification", Peter Grant: Ashford, England, 1989) suggest some answers, which may or may not apply to this situation. They note that the perception of size is usually based on the identification that is made, "It's a Barred Warbler, so it's Barred Warbler sized". If a bird is misidentified, it will automatically look "the right size". Another source of error is that binoculars and telescopes make the farther of two objects look larger than it really is in comparison to the nearer object. Even when gulls are sitting together, judging size is very difficult and not very reliable.

211 Richards Street, Iowa City, IA 52246

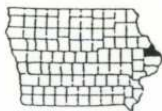
## LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL AT SABULA

JIM AND KAROLE FULLER

On 10 March 1991, while on a weekend outing along the Mississippi River, we were looking over a group of about 200 gulls standing on ice of a partially frozen backwater/harbor at Sabula in Jackson County. A dark mantled adult gull stood out from the rest of the gulls which all had gray upperparts. We obtained excellent looks with the KOWA TSN-4 telescope at about 150 yards with the midafternoon sun at our backs, and identified the bird as an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull in breeding plumage.

The dark bird was slightly larger (maybe 10-15%) than any of the Ring-billed Gulls, and about the same amount smaller than the Herring Gulls. At one time, this bird was in the middle, with a bird of each of the other species on either side five feet away.

The mantle was dark gray (not jet black). The bill was yellow, with a red spot on the lower mandible a third of the way from the tip, and otherwise was proportionately



similar to the bill of the other two species. The head, neck, and underparts were snow white, lacking the neck streaking that winter adults normally exhibit, which may be explained by the late winter date. The legs were bright yellow, like that of the ring-bills. We never did see the bird fly and didn't think to flush it.

All other dark-mantled gulls have pink legs, except Yellow-footed Gull, which has never been seen away from extreme southwest California, and should be noticeably larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull. The European race of Herring Gull has yellow legs, but is larger and gray-mantled.

The first acceptable record for Lesser Black-backed Gull in Iowa was 1-5 December 1984 in Marion County below the Red Rock Reservoir dam (Kent, T. H., and J. Bowles, *Iowa Bird Life* 55:21-22, 1985). There have been more than a dozen sightings since, and with the exception of one May record, all occurred during the late fall and winter.

6 Longview Knoll, NE., Iowa City, IA 52240

## I.O.U. BUSINESS

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Mount Ayr, 11 April 1992, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

Hilda A. Sickels, Secretary

Members present: Ann Barker (presiding), Bob Cecil, Diane Porter, Mark Proescholdt, Rick Hollis, Hilda Sickels.

Others present: Tom Kent, Francis Moore, Jim Fuller, Jim Scheib, Ann Johnson, Beth Brown.

The minutes of the 7 December 1991 board meeting were approved as distributed with one correction (motion by Porter, seconded by Cecil).

#### Reports

Treasurer: Allen distributed a complete financial statement for 1991 including a balance sheet, a statement of support, revenues, expenses, and membership information. Membership increased as a result of responses to the bird feeder survey (1300 participants). New checklists have been printed. It was moved (Sickels, seconded by Hollis) that checklists sell for 20 cents each or 6 for \$1. Motion carried. Tee shirts with the IOU logo have been reordered. It was moved (Cecil, seconded by Hollis) to sell them for \$10. Motion carried.

Records: Annual reports through 1990 have been published in *Iowa Bird Life*. Nearly all 1991 records have been reviewed. The committee is doing a commendable job.

Membership: The committee has considered ways to encourage new members. Suggestions from board members included offering beginning birding workshops and childrens programs. Bob Cecil is arranging a session on fundamentals of birding for the fall meeting.

Publications: The committee will meet at the spring meeting. The annual report for *Iowa Bird Life* was distributed. Journal expenses for 1991 were very close to budget.

Library-Historical: No report.

Big Day: Ray Cummins has sent out forms for 1992 participants.

Breeding Bird Atlas: Cecil reported that species accounts are being compiled. When map production is completed, the book will be ready for final processing. The committee is looking for ways to subsidize publication costs. Projected price of the book without support is \$60. The board encouraged the committee to continue to explore fundraising ideas.

Education: Hollis indicated that the booklet on birds will be ready for printing by late summer.

Spring Bird Count: No progress report has been submitted from the committee since it was formed in September. The Board reiterated its concern about publication space and costs, compilation time, and the lack of a plan for the project. At the Board's suggestion, the President will dissolve the present committee. A new committee will be appointed to formulate a specific plan for a spring bird count including methods for submitting reports and compiling and publishing the results. Cost estimates should be included in the plan. The North American Migration Count proposal was discussed briefly but no immediate interest in it was evident.

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## COMPARISON OF SIX DARK MANTLED GULL OBSERVATIONS, T. H. KENT

Dark-mantled gulls were seen independently and documented by six observers at Bettendorf/Davenport from 14 to 17 January and at Keokuk on 7-8 February 1991. The Bettendorf/Davenport bird(s) was/were identified as Great Black-backed Gull by two observers (#91-15: Fuller, Kent), as Western Gull (#91-16: Petersen), and as Lesser Black-backed Gull (#91-17: Armstrong). The Keokuk bird was identified as Great Black-backed Gull by two observers (#91-18: Dinsmore, Johnson). The first question to be answered is whether there were 1, 2, 3, or 4 birds present. The second question relates to the age/plumage of the bird(s). The third question relates to the species identification(s).

Below I abstract the descriptions of the various parts of the bird(s) from the six documentations. After that I give my analysis of the three questions.

## Time and conditions

Fuller: 14 Jan and 17 Jan 7:41-7:48 and 11:05-11:40 a.m.; 70 and 125 yards; overcast; 30 Herring Gulls in area.

Kent: 15 Jan 7:20-7:55 a.m.; 100-150 yards; heavy overcast; 175 Herring Gulls and 5 Ring-billed Gulls in area.

Petersen: 15 Jan 9:35-9:45, 10:35-11:00, and 12:42-12:52; 16 Jan 9:25-9:55; 90 meters; bright overcast; with Herring Gulls.

Armstrong: 16 Jan 3:00-3:20; 300-400 yards; cloudy to dull sun; Ring-billed on left and Herring on right.

Dinsmore: 7 Feb 1:10-3:40; 8 Feb 1:32-2:20; 200-300 yards, sun behind; with Herring Gulls.

Johnson: 7 Feb 4:00-4:15; 200 yards; foggy and overcast; with Herring and Ring-billed Gulls.

## Size

Fuller: The general size was notably greater than the nearby herring gulls—an estimated quarter greater.

Kent: On multiple observations with Herring Gulls, the bird was about 30% larger.

Petersen: Herring sized gull, perhaps very slightly larger but more heavily bodied and billed which may have given the impression that it was larger. Length probably same as Herring which were with the bird.

Armstrong: Slightly smaller than Herring, larger than ring billed.

Dinsmore: The bird was distinctly much larger than nearby Herring Gulls with proportionately larger head as well. It was hard to estimate, but the bird appeared about half again as large as a Herring Gull.

Johnson: The most noticeable feature was its size. It towered over Ring-billeds and was obviously larger than Herrings. The bird not only stood taller but was remarkable in its bulk, especially the larger head and shoulders.

## Bill

Fuller: The bill looked larger and out of place with the size of the head as compared to the Herrings. It was black in the end half, but with a tiny light tip, and had a flesh colored basal half. The upper mandible had a little more extensive flesh color toward the tip than did the lower mandible. It was very thick through the gonys area.

Kent: The bill was considerably longer and somewhat thicker. The bill was long, straight, and mostly black; the proximal one-third was lighter but not sharply demarcated.

Petersen: Bill pale, horn colored at base, dark at distal end except very small white only at tip....bill wider to end than at base noted at final observation.

Armstrong: outer 1/3 black; inner 2/3 dull yellow. Extreme tip of bill white. Gony angle—little if and very slight.

Dinsmore: The bill was massive and thick. The bill was dull pink, with what appeared to be a dark band just proximal to the tip. The bill showed a very prominent gonys.

Johnson: The bill look all dark.

## Head/neck/eye

Fuller: Head ... all white, but top of head, back of neck....had dark streaking typical of winter plumaged gulls. The eye appeared dark, and had a slight smudge around it.

Kent: The bird had a long-necked, slender-headed, long-billed look. The head was white with a dark eye and slight streak through the eye and touch of gray on the posterior crown. The neck was white and I did not appreciate any streaking.

Petersen: Head white with grey flecking especially behind eye. Head seemed rather domed.

Armstrong: head all white with grey mottling, darker elongated eye patch. Light smudge extends back from eye. Neck white.

Dinsmore: The head was very white, with a few small black/brown flecks on the nape. Eye color not seen. The bird had a flat-headed look.

Johnson: ...the white head stood out. No dusky streaking was noted on the head. The eye was also dark.

## Mantle/upper wing

Fuller: Obvious dark back and upper wing. The back and folded wing were a blackish-dark brown color, with white feather edging. It was not a solid and shiny black or dark gray of adult mantled gulls. The wing tip was darker. In flight,... its wing span was greater. In flight, the upperwing was a dull brown-black color with darker wing tips.

Kent: On the standing bird, the wings and back appear a rather uniform black-brown with perhaps slight feather edging. The primaries appeared dark black. The edge of the tertials and posterior scapulars were light gray producing marks on the standing bird. In flight, the outer primaries and their coverts were black without terminal white or any mirror evident to me. The inner primaries, secondaries, their coverts, and the back all appeared uniform dark brown-black, perhaps with some thin feather edging and a pale trailing edge to the wing.

Petersen: Mantle and wings -- primaries nearly black at tips. no white. could say extremely dark grey brown, back while at rest noticeably darker than Herrings. each feather edged with buff, white trailing edge of wing fairly wide and uniform.

Armstrong: Mantle -- brown. upper wing coverts -- dark grey and brown with white mottling. outer wing tips -- dull black. trailing edge of wing -- white.

Dinsmore: The mantle was black, clearly several shades darker than the mantle of a Herring or Ring-billed Gull. The wings were also black, except for some dark brown patches in the primary and secondary coverts. The wing tip was a shade darker than the rest of the wing. There were no white mirrors on any of the primaries -- in fact, the wing tip was really solid black.

Johnson: The mantle was considerably darker than the other gulls which made the white head stand out. When the bird spread its wings, the upper parts looked extremely black with the exception of a narrow edge of the trailing white on the secondaries.

## Tail

Fuller: The black terminal band on the tail was obvious in flight, and it was offset by a white rump, and the band occupied about a third of the tail length.

Kent: The ... tail band appeared dark black. The tail band occupied one-fourth of the tail end was not sharply demarcated proximally. It was wider centrally as seen in flight. The base of the tail was white.

Petersen: tail broadly black at end, white at base -- very clear demarcation.

Armstrong: rump -- white. subtail band -- black. terminal band -- white.

Dinsmore: The tail was white also, with a broad black terminal band. The black terminal band occupies roughly the distal one fourth of the tail.

Johnson: The white tail had a black, fairly wide, subterminal band which extended nearly to the outer tail feathers.

## Underparts

Fuller: ... breast and belly were white ... but ... breast and belly close to wings hard dark streaking, typical of winter plumaged gulls.

Kent: The underparts appeared white, and I did not appreciate any streaking.

Petersen: white below on body with some grey flecking on sides.

Armstrong: not described.

Dinsmore: The underparts were white with a few dark brown spots on the sides of the breast.  
Johnson: not described.

Underwing

Fuller: The underwing was a uniform light gray.  
Kent: The underwing appeared all medium neutral gray.  
Petersen: not described.  
Armstrong: not described.  
Dinsmore: In flight, the underwing appeared dark gray, unlike the white underwing of a Herring Gull.  
Johnson: not described.

Legs

Fuller: The legs were quite thick and a pinkish-gray color (not quite as pink as the herring gulls).  
Kent: The legs were longer (so that the bird appeared taller); the legs appeared about twice as thick.  
The legs were dark pink, slightly darker than a nearby Herring Gull.  
Petersen: Legs pinkish brown.  
Armstrong: dull light yellow to pinkish.  
Dinsmore: The legs were dull pink.  
Johnson: Leg color was not discerned because of light and distance.

The number of birds present can be evaluated on the basis of probability and similarities/differences in the descriptions. One gull could easily account for all of sightings because four sightings were in the same area over a four-day period and two sightings were down river from this site about three weeks later. Gulls normally move down river at this time of year. Dark-mantled gulls are rare in Iowa and almost if not all sightings have been of single birds. Thus the probability of seeing one bird is much greater than two, which is much greater than three, which is much greater than four. The Bettendorf bird(s) (assuming Armstrong's sighting was in Bettendorf rather than Davenport as stated) was/were seen at eight different times over four days by four observers. If two (or three) birds were present, the probability of each observer seeing only one of them and Petersen seeing the same one four times is very remote.

If it is assumed that two or three birds of different species but of the same age (see below) were present, the probability for this event would be very low, particularly for second-year birds, an uncommon age (only third-year birds are rarer). If all the birds had an odd plumage variation (see below), the odds would be even less.

The points of similarity in the descriptions include the following: dark tip and light base to bill (except all dark to Johnson), white head with light streaking/smudging around eye, black wing tips without mirror or no mention of mirror, back-scapulars-inner wing dark with at least some brown, mantle (back and scapulars) similar to inner wing or not described as strikingly different, white trailing edge to secondaries/tertiaries present or not described, no secondary bar mentioned by anyone, underwing uniform gray or not described, black terminal or subterminal tail band, pink legs (pinkish-yellow by Armstrong, not seen by Johnson).

The main point of difference is for size of #81-16 (Herring Gull size or slightly larger) and #91-17 (slightly smaller than Herring Gull). The sizes fit the species identified. The viewing distance was greatest for #91-17 (300-400 yards). Other points of difference are relatively minor variations in description of the various parts. Critical, but difficult to judge from the descriptions, is the darkness of the inner wing and mantle on #91-16 and #91-17. The width of the tail band and color of the underwing is also lacking in these two documentations.

81-19

The second question relates the age of the bird(s). First-winter birds of all three species have a checkered or brownish plumage, secondary bar, no gray/black in mantle, all black bill, and extensive tail band. Third-winter birds have minimal tail band, developing mirrors, much less dark at bill tip, and upper wing and mantle much like an adult. Therefore, the bird(s) described have to be second-winter. The extensive darkness in the upper wing and mantle is more extensively developed than that described and illustrate for a second-winter gull of any of the species. So this may be an unusual (aberrant) feature, making it more likely that only one bird was present.

The third question relates to the species identifications. Based on the descriptions, records #91-15 and #91-18 appear diagnostic of Great Black-backed Gull based on size, plumage characteristics, and likelihood at these locations at this time of year. The similarities in plumage and time and locations make it extremely likely that they were the same bird, beyond reasonable doubt in my mind.

The major difference in records #91-16 and #91-17 is the size of the bird(s) as judged by two experienced observers. If it were not for this difference, the plumage characteristics and probability of occurrence would make these records easily acceptable to me as Great Black-backed Gull. There are only two possible explanations for this discrepancy. Either the observers misjudged the size of the gull(s) or they were indeed different species. The viewing distance could have been a factor for #91-17 (300-400 yards); however, some of the details seen (light tip to bill, gray on face, leg color) suggest that the viewing distance may have been closer.

Could record #91-16 be of a Western Gull? The probability of this species occurring in Iowa is exceedingly small. It almost never strays from the Pacific Coast. Grant says, "Acqisition of clear blackish-grey on mantle and scapulars in second-winter plumage, forming obvious dark saddle on most individulas, makes identification straight forward." My own photos of second-winter Western Gull show a striking difference between the dark mantle and wing tip as compared to the much lighter inner wing and the presence of a secondary bar. My photo of a first-winter Western Gull shows a more uniform dark upper wing and back, but there is much more dark in the tail and on the body at this age.

Could record #91-17 be of a Lesser Black-backed Gull? The streaking on the head and hind neck is described by Grant as extensive, compared to faint in the Great Black-backed Gull. I don't have enough experience to make this judgement and the photos in Grant don't help me. I get the impression that the second-winter Lesser Black-backed Gull is more likely to show contrast between mantle and inner wing and to have a prominent secondary bar than Great Black-backed Gull, and that the Great Black-backed is more likely to have a very dark inner wing, but the gull books don't really discuss variation enough to be sure. I'm not sure whether the "dark grey and brown" of the upperwing is too dark for a Lesser Black-backed or not. I would like to have more experience with the variation in immature gulls of these species. Because of the many plumage similarities, I think it very unlikely that this bird was a different individual from records #91-15 and #91-16.

8-1-19  
9-18

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species: Great Black-backed Gull

Number: 1 3rd-winter

Date: 7-8 Feb 1991

Time: 1:10-3:40 p.m. on 7 Feb and 1:32-2:20 p.m. on 8 Feb

Location: Lock 19, Keokuk, Lee Co.

Observer(s): Stephen J. Dinsmore 4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames, IA

Other observer(s): none

Description of bird(s): I was scanning through the hundreds of gulls that were resting on the ice above the lock when I came across a larger gull with a distinct black mantle resting about 50 feet from the other gulls. The bird was distinctly much larger than nearby Herring Gulls, with a proportionately larger head as well. It was hard to estimate, but the bird appeared almost half again as large as a Herring Gull. The mantle was black, clearly several shades darker than the mantle of a Herring or Ring-billed Gull. The wings were also black, except for some dark brown patches on the primary and secondary coverts. The wingtip was a shade darker than the rest of the wing. There were no white mirrors on any of the primaries-in fact, the wingtip was really solid black. In flight, the underwing appeared dark gray, unlike the white underwing of a Herring Gull. The underparts were white with a few dark brown spots on the sides of the breast. The tail was white also, with a broad black terminal band. The black terminal band occupied roughly the distal one fourth of the tail. The legs were dull pink. The head was very white, with a few small black/brown flecks on the nape. Eye color not seen. The bird had a flat-headed look. The bill was massive and thick. The bill was dull pink, with what appeared to be a dark band just prior to the tip. The bill showed a very pronounced gonys.

I had quite a time trying to figure out the age of this bird. The bird was obviously not a first-year bird because of the dark mantle. At the same time, the bill pattern eliminated an adult bird. I concluded that the bird was in third-winter plumage. The mantle was too dark for a second-winter bird, but just right for third-winter. Third-winter birds also show the bicolored bill like this bird. The dark tail band was a bit more prominent than I would have expected on a third-winter bird, but Grant notes this feature may vary in third-winter birds.



Similar species and how eliminated: The black mantle really eliminates most other gulls. Western Gull, a remote possibility, is smaller and has a slightly paler mantle.

Optical equipment and viewing conditions: Viewing conditions were very good with the sun mostly behind me. Estimated viewing distance was 200-300 yards. I used a Bushnell 20-45x spotting scope.

References consulted: NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America and Grant Gulls: A guide to identification

Previous experience with species: I have seen several Great Black-backed Gulls in Iowa, and I am very familiar with the species from Massachusetts.

How long before field notes written? written during observation

How long before this form completed? 3 days

Description of bird(s): I was scanning through the hundreds of gulls that I had quite a time trying to figure out the age of this bird. The bird was obviously not a first-year bird because of the dark mantle. At the same time, the bill pattern eliminated an adult bird. I concluded that the bird was in third-winter plumage. The mantle was too dark for a second-winter bird, but just right for third-winter. Third-winter birds also show the bicolored bill like this bird. The dark tail band was a bit more prominent than I would have expected on a third-winter bird, but Grant notes this feature may vary in third-winter birds.

DOCUMENTATION FORM  
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Great Black-backed Gull - second winter

Location: Lock & Dam 19, Keokuk, Lee Co., IA

Habitat: On ice above open water

Date: 7 February 1991 Time: Approx. 4:00 to 4:15 pm

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

Other observers: Beth Brown, Osceola

Description of bird: This gull was sitting on the ice above the dam with a number of Herring and Ring-billed gulls. The most notable feature was its size. It towered over the Ring-billeds and was obviously larger than the Herrings. The gull not only stood taller but was remarkable in its bulk, especially the large head and shoulders. The mantle was considerably darker than the other gulls which made the white head stand out. No dusky streaking was noted on the head. The bill looked all dark. The eye was also dark. The white tail had a black, fairly wide, subterminal band which extended nearly to the outer tail feathers. Leg color was not discernible because of light and distance. When the bird spread its wings, the upper parts looked entirely black with the exception of a narrow edge of trailing white on the secondaries.

Similar species and how eliminated: The combination of size, dark mantle and wings, and lack of translucency, windows, and mirrors on the dark wings make the identification of Great Black-backed Gull fairly straightforward. Other dark mantled gulls would have looked, at best, similar in size to the Herrings. Fog and distance made observation difficult, but we judged the age to be second winter based on the primarily black bill and the extensive black tail band. The uniformity of the back and wings could have been due to light and distance or the bird may have been heading toward second summer plumage.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? No

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): Observed at an estimated 200 yards through scopes at 30x-40x. Lighting was not good as the day was foggy and overcast. The Kowa gathered a reasonable amount of light but not enough to discern finer points of identification.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Great Black-backed Gulls have been observed by both of us on the East Coast.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Description dictated prior to consulting references. NGS Birds of North America, Harrison's Seabirds and Grant's Gulls were consulted prior to completing documentation.

How long before field notes made? Dictated immediately after observation How long before this form completed? One week