

California Gull  
6 Dec 1993  
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA  
\*Pinkston, \*S. Dinsmore  
IBL 64:48, 68, Pinkston 1994

Record Number: 93-31  
Classification: A-D

#### DOCUMENTATION

Randy Pinkston (6 Dec), 526 Reno, Iowa City 52245 (7/26/94)  
Stephen J. Dinsmore (19 Dec), 2600 Glen Burnie, Raleigh, NC 27607 (7/26/94)

#### REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 64:48  
Records Committee: IBL 64:68  
Pinkston, R. 1994. First-winter California Gull at Saylorville Reservoir. Iowa Bird Life 64:114.

#### VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D, I accept S Dinsmore document but with Pinkston document if he was not sure I would not accept. Probably the same gull.

A-D, OK to lump two reports.

A-D, All possible field marks seem to have been noted by both observers!

A-D, OK to lump. Steve was aware of the presence of the bird found by Pinkston, looked for it, and found it. The bird -- presumably the same one -- was also reported from the Saylorville CBC.

A-D, 1st winter. Yes, lump together.

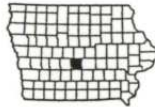
A-D, Appears to be the same bird.

A-D, Both sightings describe birds so similar that I believe these can be considered the same individual for purposes of this review.

## FIRST-WINTER CALIFORNIA GULL AT SAYLORVILLE RESERVOIR

RANDY PINKSTON

In the early afternoon on 6 December 1993, I was scanning through a distant flock of Ring-billed Gulls above the Saylorville Reservoir dam, Polk County. I was using my Zeiss 10 x 40 binocular and a Bausch & Lomb 30x telescope. My attention was drawn to a dark brown immature gull on the near side of the flock. On the water it seemed no larger than nearby Ring-billed Gulls. Its bill was distinctly bicolored: pinkish at the base, black at the tip. The pale bill base blended with whitish feathering at the front of the face. The remainder of the head and back were a rich chocolate-brown, indeed the darkest parts of the bird except for the black flight feathers and tail. I noticed a dark smudge around the eye at some angles. A pale patch was noted on the nape when it lowered its bill or when the wind blew from behind. The tertials were distinctly bicolored: basal two-thirds solid dark brown, distal third whitish. The wing coverts were paler than the rest of the upperparts and mottled with brown bars parallel to the feather shafts. The underparts were also a paler mottled brown.



In flight, the gull was easily picked out among others by its overall dark brown appearance. Its size was intermediate between Ring-billed and Herring gulls. Proportionately, its body was more slender and its wings longer when compared to Herring Gull. The underwing was entirely dark. The upperwing displayed two dark bars across the secondaries and greater wing coverts.

In comparison to several first-winter Herring Gulls observed that day, this gull's smaller size, darker head and neck relative to the underparts, and bicolored bill were consistent distinguishing characters. I suspected it might be a California Gull, and I reported it to the Iowa Bird Line.

Thirteen days later on the Saylorville Reservoir Christmas Bird Count, Stephen J. Dinsmore identified a first-winter California Gull (presumably the same individual) at Lakeview Recreation Area. Steve's description matches mine, and he noted the following additional distinguishing characters compared to nearby Herring Gulls: lack of a pale "window" at the base of the primaries, a slender bill with no pronounced gonys, and wing coverts "neatly" barred with dark brown. Steve also noted a dark eye, pink legs, and noticeably pale rump and vent.

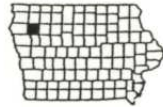
This is the fifth accepted record of California Gull for Iowa, and the second record for Saylorville Reservoir. The first state record was an adult at Credit Island in Scott County on 23-24 November 1989 (Petersen, *Iowa Bird Life* 61:121-122, 1991). The second and third state records occurred in fall 1990. An adult, possibly two, were observed at Saylorville Reservoir in September-October (Dinsmore, *Iowa Bird Life* 62:24-25, 1992), and a first-winter bird was present at Coralville Reservoir, Johnson County, on 27-28 October that year (Kent, *Iowa Bird Life* 61:123-124, 1991). The fourth Iowa record was an adult at Carter Lake, Pottawattamie County, on 21-23 November 1993 (Bray, *Iowa Bird Life* 64:82-83, 1994).

12 Hillcrest Dr., Salado, TX 76571-9576

## GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN IN CHEROKEE COUNTY

DICK BIERMAN

On 4 January 1994, I was driving into Cherokee from the south on U. S. highway 59. It was mid afternoon on a cold day. As I passed the airport I saw a tan-to-brown, large, chunky, short-tailed bird fly up from the shoulder of the road and land about 100 feet away on top of a pile of pushed-up snow. My initial thought was that it could not be a hen pheasant because of the plumpness of the bird and the short tail. A Gray Partridge was eliminated as this bird was much too large.



I pulled into an area where I could get a good look at the bird from about 50 feet away. Using my 7x35 binoculars that I had in my vehicle, I was able to see a heavily barred breast, a yellowish-orange comb over the eye, and feathered tarsi. I took a couple of pictures of the bird and decided to flush it to get a better look at the tail. When the bird flushed, it fanned its tail as it landed about another 50 feet away and showed a dark-brown color on the upper side of the tail. Having seen numerous Sharp-tailed Grouse while on many deer hunts in Wyoming, I was certain that I had a prairie chicken in front of me, but which one?

After consulting several bird guides, I was convinced that I had a male Greater Prairie-Chicken. The Lesser Prairie-Chicken is paler in color and not as boldly marked. The feathers were in excellent condition and showed no wear on the tail or wings. Also, there were no bands on either leg. This further convinced me that I had a wild bird, not an escaped or released bird. I contacted the only exotic animal owners in the area, and they said that they had never had any prairie chickens in their possession.

Over the next few weeks several birders were able to see, photograph, and confirm my sighting. I last saw the bird on 5 April in very suitable habitat four miles south of Cherokee. I also have had a recent report of it being sighted seven miles south of Cherokee on 5 August.

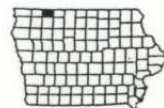
This was my first sighting of this species, the first recent sighting for Cherokee County, and one of only ten or so for the state since 1960.

901 Harris, Cherokee, IA 51012-1546

## GYRFALCON IN NORTHWESTERN IOWA

ROSS SILCOCK

The Gyrfalcon is one of Iowa's rarest birds, and so a sighting of one at Kettleson Hogsback Waterfowl Production Area in Dickinson County on 25 September 1993 generated considerable excitement amongst those observers lucky enough to be present.



Around 3:30 p.m. on a clear, sunny day, a group of I.O.U. birders including Eugene and Eloise Armstrong, John Cecil, Jane Clark, Maridel Jackson, Tim Schantz, Jim Sinclair, and I happened to congregate at the Kettleson Hogsback ponds. To improve our viewing conditions, we were at the northwestern corner of the area, on the gravel road. Soon, Tim Schantz noticed a falcon flying into the area from the southwest. His first thought was that it was a Peregrine Falcon, but it soon

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DOCUMENTATION OF POSSIBLE CALIFORNIA GULL (First-winter)

Date: December 6, 1993

Time: 12:30-3:30 p.m.

Location: Saylorville Reservoir dam, Polk County, Iowa

Description (see attached drawings made in the field immediately following the observation): I initially spotted the gull at the periphery of a large congregation of Ring-billed Gulls above the dam, over 200 meters away. Its overall darker appearance, suggesting a first-winter "four-year gull", caught my eye yet it was no larger than the Ring-billed Gulls. Later I judged its size to be intermediate between Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. It also had a sharply demarcated bill, pale at the base with a black tip. The pale bill base seemed to blend into pale feathering at the front of the face. The remainder of the head and back was a rich chocolate-brown, indeed the darkest parts of the bird except for the flight feathers and tail. An even darker smudge was noted around the eye at some angles. A pale area was noted on the nape as it dipped its bill or when the wind blew from behind. The head and bill shape appeared "dove-like" at some angles, but the forehead appeared to slope gradually into a long bill (like a Canvasback) at other angles. This was difficult to judge at 250 meters as the bird bobbed up and down on the waves. The basal 2/3 of the tertials were dark brown, and the distal third was pale whitish. This formed a very distinct pale patch on the dorsum. The primaries and tail appeared entirely black. The folded wing coverts and secondaries were distinctly paler than the remainder of the upperparts, and mottled with brown, forming bars parallel to the feather shafts. The underparts were mottled brownish, again paler than the head and back. I did not see the rump or tail coverts well enough to comment.

The bird soon took off and flew over the dam approximately 100 meters away. It was easily picked out among the other gulls by its overall sooty appearance, making it by far the darkest gull in the air. Its underwing was entirely brownish, darkening to black at the outer primaries. I could not see the upperwing as it flew over. After consulting Kaufman's Advanced Birding at home, I do feel that the bird was more slender-bodied and longer-winged than Herring Gull. It flew downstream below the dam where I located it in flight, again by its dark sooty appearance. Again, I felt that it was only slightly larger than the Ring-billed Gulls. I noted a dark bar across the secondaries but I was not convinced at this time that there was a second bar above it. I lost the bird as it flew toward the dam.

Between 3:00 and 3:30 p.m., I watched a dozen first-winter Herring Gulls fly over the dam. They all seemed larger than this bird had appeared, and paler, particularly on the head and chest. Some had dirty pale bases to their bills, but none were sharply demarcated. At about 3:30 p.m., a very dark sooty gull flew over me at the dam. I believe this was the gull I had observed earlier but I can't be certain. It appeared smaller than the Herrings' which had just passed over, and this time I saw a second dark bar across the greater wing coverts. It continued northward out of sight along the western lakeshore.

(over)

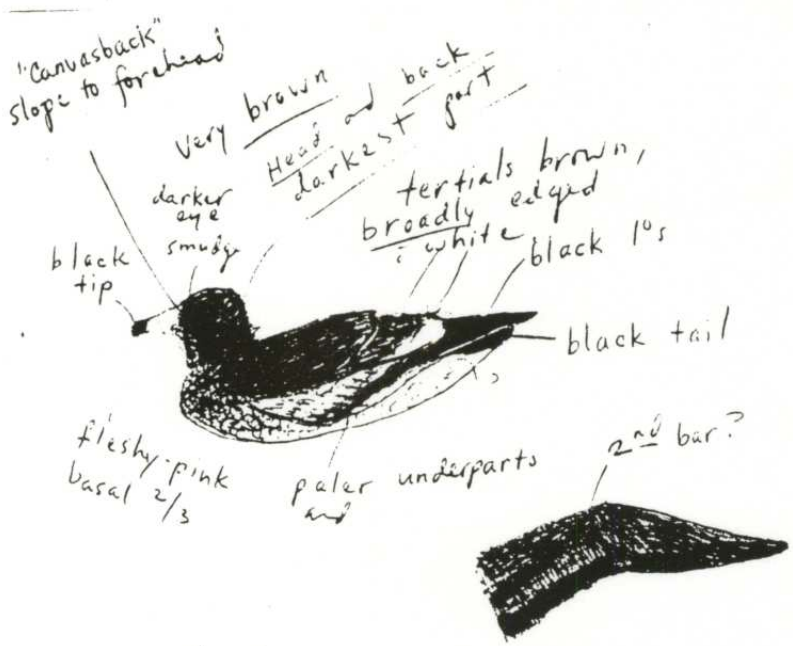
possible California Gull, Saylorville Res., 12/6/93, page 2

Conditions: Mostly heavy overcast, occasionally partly cloudy.  
Cold, strong northwest wind. Bausch & Lomb 30x telescope and Zeiss 10x40 binocular.

Similar Species: I am uncomfortable committing to California Gull given the brief and distant view I had, and my limited past experience with the species. My fear is that this was just a small Herring Gull. Herring can be quite variable in overall size, bill size, and in terms of color and shade of the first-winter plumage. Supposedly 10-15% of first-winter Herrings' can have a "dipped-in-ink" bill in the fall (Harrison 1983 or Grant 1986?).

Previous Experience: A first-winter California Gull was studied from Babcock Access Road on 28 October 1990. I observed many California Gulls in California in 1979, but I paid little or no attention to immatures at that time.

--Randy Pinkston  
526 Reno Street  
Iowa City, IA  
52245-3039  
Ph.(319)351-0592



In flight, entire bird seemed a rich chocolate brown. No paleness to head & neck as in Herrings.

Tail in flight entirely dark brown to black.

## DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species: California Gull  
 Number: 1 first-winter bird  
 Location: Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co, IA-Lakeview Recreation Area  
 Habitat: swimming near jetty of large reservoir  
 Date: 19 December 1993  
 Time: 4:20-4:45 p.m.  
 Observer: Stephen J. Dinsmore 2600 Glen Burnie Raleigh, N.C. 27607  
 Others who saw bird: Randall Pinkston (earlier-I assume it was same bird), Susan Grove

Description of bird(s): I was looking over several hundred gulls resting on the jetty at Lakeview Rec. Area when I noticed a very brown, immature gull floating on the water. It was quickly apparent the bird was different from the numerous first-winter Herring Gulls present. This bird had a distinct bicolored bill, was slightly smaller and slimmer, seemed much browner, and lacked the pale "window" at the base of the primaries. After a couple of minutes I concluded the bird was a first-winter California Gull.

The bird rested on the water during the observation, except for several short flights when the gulls were spooked. I jotted down the following field marks with the bird under observation. Size about midway between a Ring-billed and a Herring Gull with a very slender appearance. Most of body heavily mottled with brown, especially the breast and upperparts. There was a paler area around the base of the bill and a darker brown area that included each eye. At rest, the primaries were darker than the rest of the wing. Overall appearance generally browner than a first-winter Herring Gull, many of which were available for close comparison. Bill was sharply two-toned: distal half dark, proximal half pinkish. The bill was quite slender with no pronounced gonyes, unlike the heavier bills of nearby Herring Gulls. Eye appeared dark. The legs were seen only when the bird was flying and appeared pink. In flight, the paler vent and lower belly were also visible, though they were still mottled with brown (especially the belly). Wing pattern studied well when the bird was in flight. Primaries and primary coverts black. Secondaries also black, creating a distinct dark bar along the trailing edge of the wing. No pale "window" evident at the base of the primaries. Secondary coverts barred with dark brown, giving the bird a very "neat" appearance when compared to first-winter Herring Gulls. Rump noticeably pale with dark barring. Underwing appeared uniformly brown. Retrices black. In flight, the mantle appeared slightly paler than the upperwings, though it was still uniformly dark brown.

Similar species and how eliminated: The size, bicolored bill, and lack of a pale "window" on the upperwing are diagnostic for California Gull. The possibility of an aberrant Herring Gull was considered unlikely.

Viewing conditions and equipment: Viewing conditions were excellent with mostly clear skies and the sun behind us. Estimated viewing distance was 75-100 meters. I used Leica 10x42 binoculars and a Kowa 20-60x spotting scope.

Previous experience with species: I am familiar with this species from the Great Plains states. I saw numerous California Gulls in western Nebraska just prior to this sighting.

References consulted: NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America  
 Grant, P.J. 1986. Gulls: A guide to identification.

How long before field notes made: written with bird under observation  
 How long before this form completed: completed 5 January 1994