

Mew Gull  
19 Dec 1993  
Red Rock Res., Marion Co., IA  
\*Johnson, \*Widner, \*Fuller  
IBL 64:48, 68

Record Number: 93-30  
Classification: A-D

#### DOCUMENTATIONS

Ann Johnson (19 Dec), 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211  
Russ Widner (19 Dec) [8/19/94]  
Jim Fuller (21 Dec), 6 Longview Knoll NE, Iowa City 52240 [8/19/94]

#### REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 64:48  
Records Committee: IBL 64:68  
Johnson, A. 1995. Mew Gull at Red Rock Reservoir. Iowa Bird Life 65:53-54.

#### VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, Good documents on a excellent bird.

A-D, These are very convincing documentations. I am hesitant only because the main differences are all subjective -- smaller more delicate bill, rounder head, less clearcut band on tail. The description of the bill as slender, finer and without thickening fits Common Gull. The bill coloration, variously described as flesh-colored with a dark tip, or gray with a dark tip also indicates Common Gull. Gray legs is also more indicative of Common Gull. The mantle is described as medium gray and one of the documentations states that the color was darker than Ring-bills nearby. The head was reported to have diffuse mottling rather than streaks as would a Ring-bill. Wing pattern adequate although mention of the color of the carpal bar, and secondaries would have been helpful. I hardly feel qualified to comment on the subspecies, but the description of rump and tail do seem to favor *L. c. canus*.

NA, The reported small size and short appearance are distractors from an otherwise good description of *Canus Canus*. Ring-billed Gulls and Mew Gulls overlap in size, and I'm not aware that Mew Gulls are short legged for their size. I get the impression implied and stated that this gull was obviously smaller than any of the Ring-billed present. Franklin's Gull is smaller than Mew Gull, and as far as I can see is not eliminated by the other reported characters as bill size and shape, sub-terminal tail band, long wings, graceful flight, and wing pattern and coloration. I'm going to vote NA pending further review.

A-D, 1st winter Mew Gull.

REVOTE (at meeting, 14 Aug 1994): 7 A-D

## OBSERVERS

Pam Allen (PA), West Des Moines; Reid Allen (RA), West Des Moines; Eloise Armstrong (EIA), Booneville; Eugene Armstrong (EuA), Booneville; Brian Blevins (BBI), Davenport; Gordon Brown (GBr), Ankeny; Robert Cecil (RCe), Des Moines; Ray Cummins (RCu), Centerville; Jeff Dankert (JDa), LaCrosse, WI; James J. Dinsmore (JJD), Ames; Stephen J. Dinsmore (SJD), Ames; Dan C. Dorrance (DCD), Davenport; Chris Edwards (CEd), North Liberty Bery Engebretsen (BE), Johnston; Peter Ernzen (PE), Ida Grove; Carolyn J. Fischer (CJF), Mason City Larry Fisher (LFi), Davenport; Jim Fuller (JF), Iowa City; Rita Goranson (RGo), Mason City; Doug Harr (DHa), Larchwood; Dennis Henrickson (DHe), Estherville; Nelson Hoskins (NHo), Ottumwa; Art R. Huser (ARH), South Sioux City, NE; Bill F. Huser (BFH), South, Sioux City, NE; Ann Johnson (AJJo), Norwalk; Tom Johnson (TJo), Mystic; Matthew C. Kenne (MCK), Algona; Thomas H. Kent (THK), Iowa City; Fred Leshar (FLe), LaCrosse, WI; Babs Padelford (BP), Bellevue, NE; Loren Padelford (LP), Bellevue, NE; Marietta Petersen (MPe), Walnut; Mary Lou Petersen (MLP), Davenport; Peter C. Petersen (PCP), Davenport; Diane C. Porter (DCP), Fairfield; Beth Proescholdt (BPr), Liscomb; Mark Proescholdt (MPr), Liscomb; James Quinlivan (JQ), Wapello; Tim Schantz (TSc), Otley; Lee Schoenewe (LSc), Spencer; W. Ross Silcock (WRS), Tabor; Jim Sinclair (JSi), Indianola; Dale Stone (DSt), Lake City; John Van Dyk (JV), Sioux Center; Hank Zaletel (HZ), Nevada.

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## PURPLE GALLINULE IN BREMER COUNTY

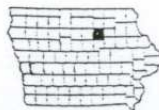
TOM STONE

On 24 May 1994, I was birding at Sweet Marsh in Bremer County. At 8:30 a.m., as I was walking a dike on the southern side of the marsh, a chicken-sized bird flushed from the side of the dike and landed in the water about 100 feet away. While the bird was in the air, my first thought was Common Moorhen.

When it landed, I realized it was a Purple Gallinule, a bird that I was familiar with in Florida. With good lighting, I was able to see blue-purple underparts and head, a red bill with yellow tip, pale blue frontal shield, brown back, long yellow legs, and white undertail. One behavioral characteristic was the continual flicking of its tail. There was ample lighting with partly cloudy skies, and I studied the bird for about 20 minutes. I then drove to George Wyth State Park to contact Tim Gedler, assistant ranger. Soon after that, I reported the sighting to the Iowa Birdline. Many observers were able to see the bird through 14 June, even though it became more secretive and difficult to find.

The normal breeding range of Purple Gallinule is the Gulf Coast and lower Atlantic states. It has a tendency to wander northward, most often during the spring. Since 1960, there were five previous records of single birds in Iowa, all of which were first sighted in May. These records included near Cone Marsh, Louisa County in 1964, Promise City, Wayne County in 1975, Ames in 1978, near Amana in 1983, and near Burlington in 1988 (see Haldy, *Iowa Bird Life* 53:57-58; 1983, Cecil, *Iowa Bird Life* 58:115, 1988).

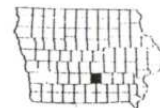
1400 Wren Road, Waterloo, Iowa, 50701



## MEW GULL AT RED ROCK RESERVOIR

ANN JOHNSON

On Sunday, 19 December 1993 Russ Widner, Roy Godwin, and I were censusing the south part of Red Rock Reservoir for the annual Christmas Bird Count. While scoping a group of approximately 30 gulls at rest on the old beach at the Whitebreast Recreation Area, I noted one sleeping gull that was about 80% as large as the numerous Ring-billed Gulls. Based on information in Grant (1986), we eventually identified the bird as a first-winter Mew Gull.



The bird's head was tucked in a sleeping position, but the light body mottled with gray and the pinkish-gray legs were noticeable. The mantle and scapulars were mottled medium gray, similar to Ring-billed Gull, and the wing coverts appeared scaly gray-brown, darker than the first-year ring-bills. When the bird awoke, we compared it to the nearby Ring-billed Gulls and rejected identification as a small individual of that species. The head was rounder and smaller. The bill was slimmer and more delicate, lacking an obvious gonys. The bill was primarily black with perhaps the basal third light gray. The eye was black and prominent, the small head making the eye appear large. The nape was very dusky, the crown a bit lighter, and the aricular area was white mottled with diffuse gray. The cheek, chin, and throat were white. The breast was mottled pale gray over white. The primaries were darker than the gray mottling on the head and breast.

After the bird had preened for awhile, it took flight and circled two or three times about 100 yards in front of us before flying out of sight. The bird appeared long-winged and graceful. Its coloration was similar to first-winter Ring-billed Gulls. The outer primaries and secondaries were dark gray to black, both on the upper- and underwing. The contrast with the rest of the wing was greater on the underwing where the coverts were primarily white and only lightly mottled. The dark color on the upper wing graduated to the lighter mottled gray, more scaly at the bend of the wing. In flight the white head contrasted sharply with the gray on the upper back and on the flanks. The breast and belly appeared only lightly mottled. The tail and rump were white with a small amount of light gray markings. A conspicuous wide tail band was dark gray to black but was not quite complete. The outer feather or two, along with a narrow terminal band, appeared white.

Structurally the bird appeared to be a Mew Gull, but its coloration was confusing. The Mew Gull group consists of three subspecies seen in the United States: Mew Gull (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) of the West Coast; Common Gull (*Larus canus canus*) of Europe which is seen occasionally on the East Coast; and Kamchatka Gull (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) of northeastern Siberia, seen rarely in western Alaska (Tove 1993). A fourth subspecies (*Larus canus heinei*), which is darker mantled than the others, is found in central Russia and western and central Siberia (Grant 1986). Table 1 compares characteristics of the more familiar Ring-billed Gull and the three United States subspecies of *Larus canus* in first-winter plumage (adapted from Grant 1986 and Tove 1993).

Gulls of this species group seen in the central part of the country have been identified as Mew Gulls. Although I have found no precedent for this, we identified the Red Rock bird as the European subspecies (i.e., the Common Gull). The gull we observed was aged as first winter by the scaly gray-brown wing coverts. There are some differences in bill color, but without comparative experience, this field mark was not particularly useful. It appears that the two most useful characteristics are the

rump/tail color and the underwing pattern. Kamchatka Gull, a highly unlikely occurrence in Iowa, could be eliminated by the Red Rock bird's light underwings and mantle more nearly the color of Ring-billed Gull. First-winter Mew Gulls are primarily brown and would appear darker than our bird, particularly on the head, belly, rump, tail, and underwing. The similarity of the Red Rock bird to Ring-billed Gull, especially the whiter rump and tail and light underwings suggest that this was the European subspecies.

**Table 1.** Comparison of first winter plumages of Ring-billed Gull and three subspecies of Mew Gull.

| Body Area  | Ring-billed                       | Mew                                    | Common   | Kamchatka                                       |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Mantle     | medium gray                       | brown to gray; darker than Ring-billed | darker than Ring-billed; lighter than Mew            | dark gray                                       |
| Head       | streaked and mottled              | heavy brown wash; streaky              | sharply defined streaks; crown, nape whiter than Mew | heavily streaked                                |
| Rump       | brown spots                       | heavily barred                         | bold white; some-times faint markings                | coverts mottled                                 |
| Tail       | white with broad tailband         | solid brown with some light mottling   | white with dark tail-band; outer rectrices white     | incomplete tailband                             |
| Underparts | fairly white; some mottling       | extensive brown mottling               | mostly white; some mottling on breast and flanks     | whiter than Mew Gull                            |
| Underwing  | whitish with some darker mottling | brownish                               | white with limited mottling                          | dark brown to brownish gray; mottled with white |
| Bill       | variably bi-colored               | dark with lighter base                 | bi-colored; close to Ring-billed                     | sharply bi-colored                              |

Recent gull records for Iowa have shown that vagrant birds have come this way from both east and west. California and Slaty-backed gulls have certainly come from the West. Great and Lesser Black-backed, Little, and Common Black-headed gulls are seen with regularity on the East Coast. Consequently, a species such as the Mew Gull, which has several recognizable subspecies, should be scrutinized for clues to its origin.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Grant, P. J. 1986. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. Buteo Books, Vermillion, South Dakota. 352 Pp.

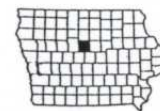
Tove, M. H. 1993. Field Separation of Ring-billed, Mew, Common, and Kamchatka Gulls. *Birding* 25:386-401

532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

## FIRST SUMMER RECORD OF A PACIFIC/ARCTIC LOON FOR IOWA

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE

On 13 July 1994, I was birding Anderson Lake, east of Jewell, Hamilton County. At 5:25 p.m., I noticed a loon swimming near the south end of the marsh. I was surprised to see a loon here since the marsh has an average depth of less than 2 feet. With the bird in view in my spotting scope, I noted the dark back, contrasting lighter nape, seemingly small, straight bill, and distinct neck pattern, and identified it as a Pacific/Arctic Loon in basic plumage.



I studied the bird in great detail from distances as close as 75 meters until 8:15 p.m. There were no other birds for direct size comparisons, though the bird was clearly much larger than several nearby Wood Ducks. The shape and posture were those of a loon, with a long neck and slim body that rode low to the water. I noted that the bird appeared stockier and thicker-necked than a Common Loon. The back, upperwings, and tail were black, with no light spotting or pale edgings to the feathers. The bill was dark, straight, and short. The length of the bill was about equal to the length of the head from the base of the bill to the posterior edge of the crown. The bird had a dark mask that included the eye, with the dark color extending across the forehead. The cheek and auricular area were white. The chin, throat, and foreneck were also white. When the bird was preening, a faint chinstrap was visible, but was broken on the throat. Remnants of the chinstrap were most evident on the bird's left side. A thin black line extended from the shoulder to a point just below and behind the eye. The rear portion of the crown and nape were an off-white color, not as white as the foreneck. The three-toned neck pattern was distinctive. Several times, when the bird preened, a few thin black stripes were visible on the lower foreneck, and extended vertically from the water line to the shoulder. The underparts were white, as seen when the bird rolled over to preen. On several occasions, the bird flapped its wings. I noted that the upperwings were black, except for a small white patch at the base of the inner primaries, similar in size and shape to the patch on the wing of an immature Golden Eagle. The primaries were very worn, indicating that the bird may have been close to beginning the wing molt. The bird lacked the paler tips to the scapulars and wing coverts of a first-summer bird. Based on these features, I concluded the bird was an adult in basic plumage.

Identification of basic-plumaged loons can be very difficult. I carefully considered the possibility that the bird was another species of loon, especially the more likely Common Loon. However, the bird was clearly a Pacific or Arctic Loon, but which one? Unfortunately, separation of these two species in basic plumage is difficult, if not impossible. Based on specimen records from the interior United States, Pacific Loon is the most likely species.

The bird remained through at least 17 September, and was seen by numerous birders. Pacific Loons are considered casual in Iowa (Kent and Bendorf 1991), with about 23 records through 1994. The majority of the records have been in the last ten

93-30

**DOCUMENTATION FORM**  
**Unusual Bird Sightings in Iowa**

**Species:** Mew (Common) Gull (*Larus calus calus*)

**Location:** Whitebreast Recreation Area, Red Rock Reservoir, Marion Co., IA

**Habitat:** Sandy area at edge of open water

**Date:** 19 December 1993

**Time:** 10:30 to 10:40

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

**Other Observers:** Russ Widner, Roy Godwin

**Description of bird:** This bird was standing with a small congregation of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls and appeared to be a **shorter, more diminutive** version of a first-winter Ring-billed Gull. The outstanding feature, which first drew my attention, was its **small stature and delicate build** as it stood directly beside an adult Ring-billed Gull. Most notable was its **rounded head and delicate bill** which gave it the appearance of a hooded gull. The bill was finer without the thickness or obvious gonys of the other gulls present. **The bill was primarily black with light gray at the base.** **The eye was black and prominent**, the small head making the eye appear large. **The nape and crown were very dusky** and the rest of the head was mottled with diffuse gray, particularly behind the eye. The cheek, chin and throat were white. **The mantle and scapulars were medium gray**, perhaps a bit mottled but the wind was having some effect on the feathers. **The wing coverts appeared scaly brownish-gray.** **The breast was mottled gray** over white. **The legs appeared pale pinkish-gray**, more toward the gray side. The primaries extended well beyond the tail.

After observing the bird preen for several minutes, we watched it take off and fly directly at us. It banked at about 100 yards, flew parallel to us at about eye level, and then turned directly away. The bird appeared **long-winged and graceful**, flying with little effort. **The outer primaries and secondaries were dark gray.** The rest of the **wing was mottled gray**, particularly around the bend of the wing. **The tail and rump were white with some darker markings.** **The conspicuous wide tail band was dark and not quite complete**, the outer feather or two on each side being white. A narrow terminal band was white. As the bird passed close to us, **heavy mottling on the breast and flanks** was evident. I did not see the belly and vent area well, but was impressed with the contrast of the breast and flanks.

**Similar species and how eliminated:** Size eliminated any gull larger than a Ring-billed.

Although structurally the bird more closely represented one of the larger hooded gulls, they were eliminated by the lack of any hood or auricular spot. Furthermore, most hooded gulls with a tail band would also show a strong carpal bar. Laughing Gull could be eliminated by the more diminutive bill and leg color. Although some individuals seem to carry a vestige of their more motley juvenile plumage into first winter, Ring-billed Gull was eliminated by size, head and bill structure, and clear-cut as opposed to more diffuse tail band.

I originally identified this bird as a Mew Gull based on my experience studying structural differences between Ring-billed and Mew gulls on the west coast. I have never seen a first-year Mew Gull, however. In researching the Mew on my return home, I concluded

that the bird in question was not dark enough, nor brown enough, to be of the west coast sub-species. By virtue of its strong similarity to a Ring-billed Gull, this bird was most likely the European sub-species known as the Common Gull. Although according to Grant the bill description comes closer to *L. c. brachyrhynchus*, I assume that this bird's bill coloration was still changing from juvenile plumage. Apparently the Common Gull appears on occasion on the east coast and is therefore probably as likely a vagrant to Iowa as is the western form.

**Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics):** Optics consisted of 7X26 binoculars and spotting scope with 15X60 zoom eyepiece. Sky was sunny with the sun to our backs during most of the observation. The bird was observed at approximately 300 yards.

**Previous experience:** Have seen adult Mew Gulls on the West Coast, as recently as this past October. I have never seen the European sub-species.

**References consulted during observation:** NGS Guide, Grant's Gulls

**References consulted before completing documentation:** NGS Guide, Peterson's Field Guide, Grant's Gulls, Seabirds, conversation with Jim Fuller

**Field notes made:** Immediately after observation

**Documentation completed:** Description completed upon return home; analysis completed five days later

On Sunday, December 19, 1993, while helping with the Red Rock Christmas Count, Ann Johnson, Roy Godwin and I came upon a group of about thirty gulls resting on a sand bar just west of the Whitebreast bathing beach. Most of the gulls appeared to be typical mature Ring-billed Gulls, some standing with heads exposed, some in a sleeping posture with bills and heads partially hidden.

One of the gulls in a sleeping posture was obviously smaller and darker than the rest, however, and captured Ann's attention immediately. This gull was about eighty per cent as large as the Ring-billed Gulls. The exposed back was a mixture of white and moderately dark mottling. The legs were light grey.

When the gull exposed its head and bill, the head appeared rounder and smaller with a shorter and more slender bill than the adjacent Ring-bills. The bill was black at the tip and the black extended more than one-half way to the base which was light grey. The eye appeared dark black. The feathers over the nape were mottled, but the remainder of the head was quite white. In the peched position the wing tips appeared darker grey than the other mottled areas.

After perhaps fifteen minutes of alternately hiding and exposing its head the bird flew in two or three circles in good light perhaps one to two hundred yards from us and then moved west up stream and eventually out of sight. In flight the demarcation between white head feathers and the darker grey feathers over the upper back and flanks was definite. The breast and belly appeared only lightly mottled. The wing tips were very dark but not a solid black, and the dark of the tips gradually faded to the grey mottled color previously described. This color carried down the back to the base of the tail. A dark bar similar in color to the wing tips was present along the secondaries. The secondary bar and the dark wing tips were present on both the upper wing and underwing, but the contrast was somewhat greater on the under wing where the coverts were less mottled than on the upper wing. The base of the tail was also only lightly mottled, but a broad band of darkly mottled feathers formed a broad sub-terminal band with a tiny strip of light grey at each side and terminally.

In flight the wings appeared as long as but slimmer than Ring-billed Gulls, and the bird appeared more bouyant.

Ann had a copy of Grants GULLS A GUIDE TO IDENTIFICATION at hand, and the bird seemed to fit the description and sketches depicting a first-winter *Larus canus*.

## DOCUMENTATION OF RARE BIRD

SPECIES: Mew Gull

LOCATION: Red Rock Reservoir (Marion County)

DATE &amp; TIME: 21 December, 1993 (3:05-3:15 PM)

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

OTHERS: With me was Dick Tetrault, and previous day Ann Johnson

BACKGROUND: A Mew Gull had been reported at this location the previous day on the Red Rock CBC by Ann Johnson. When Dick Tetrault and I arrived shortly after 3PM, we found a group of 40-50 gulls on the old road to the Whitebreast Beach. They were about 200 yards away, but one bird which was different could be seen from this location. We immediately drove much closer (40 yards), and I was using the window scope. The body of the unusual bird was directly behind a Ring-billed Gull, but the head, legs and end of the tail could be seen. It was bitterly cold with a strong northwest wind blowing directly in the window. After about 5 minutes, I stopped to put on a coat and gloves. As I was doing that, the unusual gull flew, and I didn't see it fly, nor did I see it thereafter, despite searching until near dark.

DESCRIPTION: The portions of the bird that I could see from close range were the head and neck, legs, and end of the tail. When viewed from the 200 yard distance and at a different angle, the bird appeared to be slightly smaller with a darker back and folded wing than the adult Ring-billed Gulls beside it, and definitely smaller than the adult Herring Gulls not far away. At 40 yards, the head was relatively small and rounded, when compared to the Ring-billed Gull. The bill was much smaller, and had a flesh colored base, and dark tip. The eye looked quite large, but there was quite a dark smudge around it, especially behind it. The throat was white. The top of the head and nape were streaked, and there was almost a crown-like appearance on top of the head. The legs were gray, unlike the color of any of the other gulls in the group which were adult Ring-billed and Herring, and one first year Herring. The end of the tail was quite dark.

Unfortunately, this was the extent of my observations. I realize this is an incomplete description, and not enough to adequately identify this

bird, but it may be helpful in conjunction with any other documentations that may be received.

**VIEWING CONDITIONS:** Overcast, late in afternoon. Looking to the west and northwest with KOWA TSN-4 telescope at first 200 yards, and then 40 yards.

**PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE:** I have seen Mew Gulls in various plumages numerous times on the west coast.

**REFERENCES and FIELD NOTES:** Field notes were made at the time of sighting. This form was typed on 23 December, 1993.