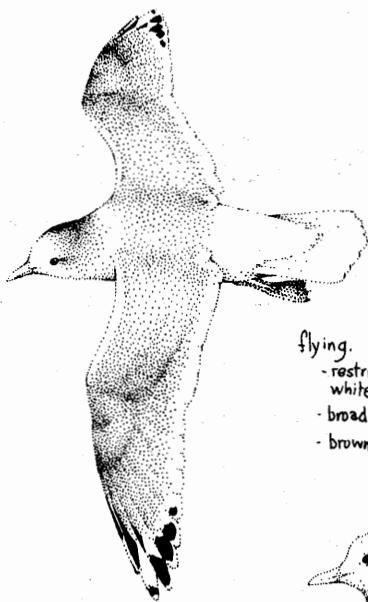
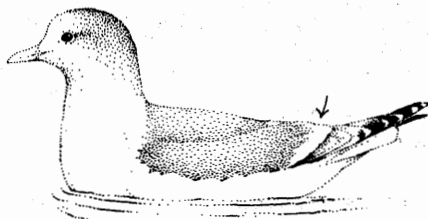




flying.

- restricted black, extensive white in wing tip pattern.
- broad white trailing edge to wing
- brownish partial hood, dark eyes.



sitting on water.

- showed conspicuous white secondary patch.

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Figure 1. Mew Gull at R. H. Saunders Generating Station near Massena, St. Lawrence Co., New York. Sketches by the author.

First record of Mew Gull (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) in New York State

IAN L. JONES

On 4 October 1986, Mark Gawn, Robert A. Bracken, Brian Penny and myself were birding at the R.H. Saunders Generating Station on the St. Lawrence River, near Massena, St. Lawrence Co., in extreme northern New York State. Soon after arriving at the site, we spotted an unusual looking gull among hundreds of Ring-billed (*Larus delawarensis*), Bonaparte's (*L. philadelphia*) and other gulls feeding in the fast water below the dam. The bird had an unmarked greenish-yellow bill, a somewhat darker mantle, more extensive white in the wingtips and slightly smaller size relative to nearby Ring-billed Gulls. Within seconds, we had identified the bird as an adult winter-plumaged Mew Gull (*L. canus* ssp.) Mark Gawn and myself have had extensive experience with this species in North America, and have both seen the species in Europe as well. We carefully studied the bird for over an hour, frequently from less than 30 meters distance and made detailed field notes on the spot. The following description was obtained.

General

The bird was observed as it foraged in the fast water immediately below the power dam. Normally it circled about about 10 meters above the water, but occasionally swooped down to the surface to grab small fishes. This provided us with excellent views of the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the flying bird, from our observation point on the parapet of the dam. The bird was later observed resting on the water in close company with Ring-billed Gulls. At first sight the bird was clearly a medium-sized adult gull (*Larus* sp.): it had mostly pure white underparts, rump, tail (no sign of dark markings in tail feathers), and underwings, a bluish gray mantle and upper-wing surfaces with restricted black and white patterns on the dorsal surface of the wing tips.

Bill

The bill looked rather small and short compared with that of Ring-Billed Gulls, and was entirely pale greenish yellow in color, unmarked by any dark pigmentation. The bill shape was also distinctive: the culmen appeared to be nearly smoothly curved from the base of the bill to the tip, and there was no sign of any angular gonys or 'keel' on the lower mandible.

Head

The bird's head appeared relatively smaller, more rounded, and the forehead steeper compared to those of nearby Ring-billed Gulls. The nape,

the sides of the neck and the top and sides of the back half of the head were densely but diffusely spotted with brown. This spotting formed a brownish hood similar to those of adult winter plumage Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), and was much darker and more conspicuous than the dark streaking on the heads of nearby Ring-Billed Gulls. The bird's eyes were dark, appearing blackish or very dark brown in color, and looked large. In the same lighting conditions we could easily see the light colored irises of nearby Ring-billeds.

Body

The bird's breast, belly, the remainder of its underparts, the entire tail and its rump were unmarked white. Its legs and feet (including the webbing) were dull, pale greenish-yellow or yellowish-green in color.

Mantle and wings

The back (mantle), upper-wing coverts and much of the upper surface of the flight feathers were pearly blue-gray, a shade darker than that of Ring-billed Gulls (based on direct comparisons sitting and flying). The upper-wing surfaces resembled a Ring-billed Gull's, except for the following: All the secondaries and inner primaries were broadly tipped with white, giving the wings conspicuous white trailing edges, wider and more contrasting than those of the Ring-Billed Gulls present. This produced a large white patch on the folded flight feathers when the bird was resting on the water. The wing tip pattern (flying bird) showed restricted black areas and extensive white areas relative to Ring-billed Gulls. The outermost primary appeared not to be fully grown (see illustrations), evidence of recent moult. The outermost fully grown primary had a large white area near the tip. Black spots near the tips of the rest of the outer primaries formed an irregular black sub-apical bar across the trailing edge of the wing tip. White areas in these feathers formed an irregular white bar across the wing tip, separating the black bar from the gray of the remainder of the primaries, and recalling that of Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*). The wing tip pattern closely resembled that illustrated for Mew Gull in the National Geographic Field Guide (National Geographic Society 1987). In flight the bird had a somewhat rounded winged look, likely accentuated by the half grown outermost primary. Compared with Ring-billed Gulls the bird also had a rather weak flight style, with more rapid and shallow wingbeats. When resting on the water the bird appeared rather long winged, with the folded primaries extending well beyond the tail.

Size

The bird appeared just slightly smaller than Ring-billed Gulls, based on extensive direct comparisons.

Based on this description it is possible to eliminate several similar gull species. Ring-billed Gull is eliminated by the bird's small unmarked

gull species. Ring-billed Gull is eliminated by the bird's small unmarked yellowish bill, dark eye, extensive white wing tip pattern, darker mantle and broader white trailing edges to the wings. Ring-billed Gulls have ringed or dark-tipped bills, light irides, restricted white in the wing tip pattern, a lighter mantle and narrow white trailing edges of the wings. Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is eliminated by the bird's mottled brownish hood, extensive white in the wing tip pattern, and pale yellowish-green legs. Black-legged Kittiwakes (adult winter) have a smooth grayish partial hood, mostly black wing tips, a lighter mantle and black legs and feet. Herring, California (*L. californicus*) and other large gulls are eliminated by our bird's small size and the unique combination of the characters mentioned above. This leaves only Mew Gull, of which our bird was a typical adult in winter plumage. Based on the above description it is also possible to speculate about the bird's subspecific status. A vagrant Mew Gull in northern New York could originate in western North America (*L. c. brachyrhynchus*) or in western Europe (*L. c. canus*). Fortunately, the North American and Palearctic subspecies are readily identified in the field by the extent and pattern of the wing tip. North American birds have more extensive white in the wing-tip, including the effect of the Franklin's Gull-like white bar, which is lacking in European birds (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Grant 1986). Thus it appears our sighting was of the North American race of Mew Gull (*L. c. brachyrhynchus*). This record represents the first for New York State, and about the sixth for the Province of Ontario (James *et al.* 1976, Wormington 1987), since it was also seen on the Ontario side of the St. Lawrence River. The bird was studied the day following our sighting (5 October) by 18 observers from Ottawa and Toronto, Ontario.

The R.H. Saunders power dam is an area of considerable ornithological interest, well worth a visit by any birder visiting northern New York State. In recent years the site has been regularly checked by eastern Ontario birders, with exciting results. Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabine's Gull (*L. sabini*) and Franklin's Gull appear to be regular autumn visitors and pelagic vagrants such as Northern Gannet (22-30 November 1986, Weir 1987) and Razorbill (27 November 1987, Weir 1988) have also turned up. The dam attracted a particularly remarkable diversity of gulls on the weekend of 4-5 October 1986, including the Mew Gull, up to 5 Little Gulls (*L. minutus*), 1 Franklin's Gull, 2 Sabine's Gulls, and 1 Black-legged Kittiwake.

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- Dept. of Biology, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6 Canada