



Figure 1. Slaty-backed Gull, third from left, with Herring Gull at Niagara Falls, Ontario/New York, 4 December 1992. Photograph by Robert W. Brock.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES 59: SLATY-BACKED GULL

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The Niagara Frontier is widely known as an outstanding place to view and study gulls. During the fall and winter, this area is one of the best in the world, sixteen species and one additional subspecies of gull having been recorded (Andrle 1977). That number jumped substantially in late November 1992 with the discovery of two new species: an adult California Gull (*Larus californicus*) and an adult Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) in winter plumage. The former is native to western North America and is not quite as unexpected a discovery as is the latter, which is native to northeastern coastal Siberia.

The Slaty-backed Gull was first positively identified on 24 November 1992 by Rod and Marlene Planck (Paxton, Boyle and Cutler 1993). The first sighting was on a landfill just northwest of Niagara Falls, Ontario. It was subsequently spotted in several areas on or near the Niagara River above and downstream from the Falls. The bird developed a travel pattern which many mornings placed it on the seawall just downstream of the water control weir above the upper rapids at Niagara Falls, Ontario. It was at this location that Robert Andrle, Robert Brock and James Gregory sighted the bird at 8:45 AM on 4 December 1992. At a distance of between 75 and 100 meters and in relatively good light, the bird was studied carefully with telescopes and photographed with a Pentax PZl camera and a 600mm lens with 2X converter (Fig. 1). The bird was studied at rest, while preening, and ultimately as it lifted in flight and proceeded out over the river heading upstream toward the American shore in the direction of the north Grand Island bridge. Verification reports were submitted to the Buffalo Ornithological Society. The above sighting was later confirmed by two Ontario birders, Rohan and Marina van Twest, who were present at the same time and submitted a verifying writeup to the New York State Avian Records Committee. This report, which has been accepted by the Committee, indicates that the bird did fly over the international boundary into New York State, documenting it as the first record for the state. The gull was later observed at the Adam Beck power station in Ontario by Doug McRae, Lisa Enright, Don Sutherland and Jul Wojnowski on 16

December and also was seen to fly over the Robert Moses Power Plant parking area in New York State. A report was submitted by McRae to the NYSARC further documenting the first appearance of a Slaty-backed Gull in New York. The gull was spotted again on 20 December 1992 by Richard Byron, Barbara Byron and Dick Collins during the Christmas Bird Count conducted by the Buffalo Ornithological Society. During this sighting, the gull again flew over the international boundary into New York State and was seen flying in the area of Three Sisters Islands and Goat Island. A report was submitted to NYSARC. The last recorded date for this bird was 29 December 1992 (Bain 1993).

Identification of the Slaty-backed Gull requires great care due to its general similarity to other gulls in the area, especially the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) and the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*). The color of the mantle of the Slaty-backed Gull was a dark gray with a value somewhere between the black of *L. marinus* and the dark gray of *L. fuscus*, but given the variability of the latter two gulls, this is not definitive. The head coloration was also suggestive. This Slaty-backed Gull had a slightly streaked, white head with a dark area around a light eye. In comparison, *L. marinus* nearly always has a clean white head and the head of *L. fuscus* usually is heavily streaked in winter. Slaty-backed Gull is slightly larger in size than *L. fuscus* and considerably smaller than *L. marinus*, but this can be a difficult comparison if all of these species are not seen close together. This Slaty-backed Gull was compared to nearby Herring Gulls, which were close in size, thus ruling out *L. marinus*. The most definitive field marks are the coloration of the legs and feet and the wing pattern. The Slaty-backed Gull had deep red-pink legs, compared to the flesh color of *L. marinus* and the yellow of *L. fuscus*. The wing pattern, although difficult to examine when the bird was not in flight, was very distinct and diagnostic. Viewing was possible when the bird moved its wings during preening and when it flew. All of the primaries were white tipped. The first primary had a large white mirror and the second primary had a smaller mirror. Primaries three, four and five had black outer webs and black across both webs subterminally, and the sixth primary had a partial black subterminal mark. There was an area of white on the inner webs between the subterminal black and the dark gray of the wing which formed a white crescent shape between the two dark colors of the wing tip. It appeared as an extension of the broad white trailing edge to

the secondaries and the inner primaries. The underwing had a pattern similar to that of *L. marinus* but was distinctly gray, not black, under the primaries and secondaries. The wide white trailing edge to the secondaries was clearly noticeable when the bird was standing or sitting with wings folded.

The Slaty-backed Gull breeds on the western coast of the Bering Sea from the Gulf of Anadyr through Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands to Sakhalin and Japan. It winters as far south as Japan and the eastern coast of China (A.O.U. 1983). It has been recorded in the Pribolof and Aleutian Islands and on the coast of mainland Alaska (Terres 1980). Peterson (1990) notes it as casual in British Columbia and accidental in Missouri. The most recent prior U.S. sighting was at Brownsville, Texas in February 1992 (Lasley and Sexton 1992). The Niagara discovery was the first sighting east of the Mississippi River (Paxton *et al.* 1993). The uniqueness of this sighting was tempered somewhat by the discovery of another Slaty-backed Gull at Eastlake, Ohio on 28-29 December 1992 and at Lorain, Ohio on 8 February 1993 (Brock 1993). Further afield, reports of six Slaty-backed Gull, only two of which were acceptably documented, came from Sauvie, Oregon on 27 December 1992 (Tweit and Johnson 1993). These reports suggest that an exceptional incursion of the species into North America occurred that winter.

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