

COMMON AND UNCOMMON GULLS IN JONES INLET:
THE BIRDING MUST BE BAD WHEN YOU START LOOKING
AT GULLS

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ABSTRACT — In the area of Jones Inlet, a natural opening between the barrier beaches on western Long Island, stabilized with rock jetties, we observed during the fall and winter of 1994-95, eleven species of gulls plus two unusual individuals which may possibly include Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*) as one of the parents. Identification methods are detailed and possible hybrids seen are noted and discussed. Gulls observed were: Laughing Gull (*L. atricilla*), Little Gull (*L. minutus*), Common Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*), Bonaparte's Gull (*L. philadelphia*), Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*), Iceland Gull (*L. glaucoides*), Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*), Glaucous Gull (*L. hyperboreus*), Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*) and Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*).

The title tells it all. For want of more interesting things to look at during the fall/winter of 1994-1995, we started to carefully study the large groups of gulls which congregate on the parking lots and ocean beaches on both sides of Jones Inlet. Hopefully, we were looking for a repeat of last year's spectacular gull influx that resulted from the dredging operation at Point Lookout. The areas birded were (1) the parking lots at the Pt. Lookout Town Beach (both hard top and shell) along with the adjacent ocean beach and jetties; (2) the inlet and sand bar at the Pt. Lookout Village Park/Fireman's Field; (3) the island immediately north of the Jones Beach West End Coast Guard Station; (4) Jones Beach West End Parking Lot No. 2 and the neighboring beach and ocean.

The procedure was to find a group of gulls and then peruse them one by one and identify all by species, year and plumage. Any gull not a Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull or Bonaparte's

Gull was immediately brought to the attention of other party members for closer scrutiny. Probably for the first time, we really began to look at the gulls, and, for the first time we began to see them. Gulls come in four year, three year and two year plumages. Thus the above four common species present an astonishing number of combinations. In addition, a small but significant number of the actual plumages we saw did not exactly match any illustrations in the books available to us. This required us to read the text for further enlightenment. At some point you begin to find out that you really knew less than you thought you did. And, of course, to compound the problems, one can not forget that there are hybrids. We looked at and identified 5-10,000 gulls during the period, not all necessarily different birds. You see the same birds over and over from week to week.

Among the gulls being viewed, one looks for a bird paler or darker, larger or smaller, bill smaller, head smaller and rounder, eyes dark against a white head, or legs and feet a different color. Anything that feels not quite right or is different. We learned that this can be birding at its dreariest or most challenging. We failed to identify every bird. We failed to correlate gull concentrations or resting places with the tide (before and after high tide seemed best). We discovered that when the gulls were skittish, any unusual gull being studied always went with the small numbers that flew up and kept going. The ordinary ones circled and came back to roost. All-in-all frustrating, but fun. For further reading, books and articles consulted, in addition to field guides, are listed in the bibliography at the end. What follows is a summary of the gulls seen by us in this limited area during this season. First, we list all the "common" gulls seen and then continue with "questionable" species. We would appreciate any thoughts any one might have on the last two listed below.

- (1) Laughing Gull: seen into early December '94. None wintered in the inlet to our knowledge.
- (2) Little Gull: early January '95 and again through much of March, within the large Bonaparte's flock at the Pt. Lookout inlet site. Both adult and immature birds were present at the same time.
- (3) Common Black-headed Gull: late February and March, same site as above. One of these birds had a pink breast.
- (4) Bonaparte's Gull: the common small wintering gull.

- (5) Ring-billed Gull: the common medium sized gull.
- (6) Herring Gull: the common full sized gull.
- (7) Iceland Gull: erratic throughout the winter, seen (max. two in one day) on both sides of the inlet, both first and second year birds. This was the commonest of the "rare" gulls.
- (8) Lesser Black-backed Gull: much of October '94 into November, an adult on the West End No. 2 parking lot and the beach.
- (9) Glaucous Gull: late December '94, second year gull on the sand bar at the Pt. Lookout inlet site. An Iceland Gull was also there at the same time.
- (10) Great Black-backed Gull: the common large gull.
- (11) Ross' Gull: it showed up for the second year in a row in the Bonaparte's Gull flock March 12, 1995 (found by Bob Kurtz). It was subsequently seen March 13, 18, 29 and April 6, not by us each time.
- (12) Possible Thayer's Gull: Thayer's Gull is intermediate in appearance between "Kumlien's" Gull (*L. glaucoides kumlieni*) which is the North American race of Iceland Gull and Herring Gull, but so are hybrids between the three species. This is a very complex group with taxonomy still unresolved. The immature bird was seen January 22, 1995 feeding in the ocean to the west of the most western jetty at Pt. Lookout. It was flying in a large group of mixed gulls. The bird was Herring Gull or slightly smaller in size by direct close comparison and uniformly dun colored on the mantle, wings, head, rump and tail except for a darker uniform width tail band. From above, the individual feathers of the primaries appeared to be two shades, with the inner web lighter than the outer. Viewed from above the entire bird was a uniform color except for the darker tail band. It appeared too dark for a typical white-winged gull and too light for a first year Herring Gull. This judgment was made by reference too numerous other gulls in close proximity and was not a factor of lighting. From above the primaries were not lighter than the secondaries as one expects from a white-winged gull, nor dark as in a faded first year Herring Gull or as in a Thayer's Gull. None of the white-winged gulls would show

a tail band. The head and bill were not seen well enough to offer any additional help. The bird was tan, not brown, gray or black. A drawing of a second year Thayer's Gull in Grant was similar to this bird. If a hybrid, the lack of dark in the primaries points to a Thayer's Gull rather than Herring Gull as one possible parent; the light color and size to an Iceland Gull as the other. A hybrid, while very rare here, is not an unusual one on the breeding grounds and may result in the future lumping of Iceland Gull with Thayer's Gull. A hybrid gull somewhat similar to this was described in the British magazine, *Birding World*, April 1991. (Note that the literature offers different interpretations of Thayer's Gull.)

- (13) Possible Thayer's Gull or Thayer's Gull x Iceland Gull: this immature bird was on the Pt. Lookout Town parking lot February 16, 1995, a slightly smaller than Herring Gull sized bird with a body paler than a second year Herring Gull. This bird was first noticed because the legs and feet were a brighter pink than the surrounding gulls and the overall color was light brown. It had a smaller rounded head, dark eye, smaller all black bill, pale wings and mantle, with brown (not black) primaries. The base of the bill appeared to be lighter, but careful viewing disclosed that it was due to white feathering at the base of the bill. The tail had a dark brown tail band edged in white. The feathers on the median and greater coverts of the standing bird were edged in white giving a checkered appearance. The shape of the head and bill matched an Iceland Gull. If the primaries had not been seen, the bird could easily have been identified as such. This bird might be a Thayer's Gull because of the leg color in combination with the other field marks. The bird appeared to show characteristics of both a dark "Kumlien's" Gull and a Thayer's Gull. (A Thayer's Gull X "Kumlien's" Gull could not be ruled out.) This bird, if a Thayer's Gull, was completely different in appearance from the one seen on 22 Jan.

In summary, we wish to convey our sense of the challenge in finding anomalies in this large and often overlooked family of birds, and

further, stress the difficulties and complexities of the associated identification problems after one finally succeeds in finding a rarity.

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