

SUBSPECIES OF ICELAND GULL IN NEW YORK STATE

Willie D'Anna

2257 Cayuga Drive Extension

Niagara Falls NY 14304-4522

ABSTRACT — Literature on the two subspecies of Iceland Gull in New York State has been reviewed. The difficulties of differentiating *Larus glaucoides kumlieni* from *L. glaucoides glaucoides* are detailed. It is concluded that virtually every field mark known for identifying *glaucoides* can sometimes be matched, or at least closely approached, by *kumlieni*. It would either take a specimen of *glaucoides* or a classic adult, carefully studied under good field conditions, preferably with photographs, to support its occurrence in New York State.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, *Kingbird* Region 10 Editors Schiff and Wollin made a request for "...written details on observations of Iceland Gulls with pure white primaries", noting that the subspecies *Larus glaucoides kumlieni* is the only form recorded in New York to date. They noted "an increasing number of reports of Iceland Gulls with "all white" wings, presumably of the nominate subspecies *glaucoides*." They also stated that "either birders are now more alert or a change in the relative abundance of these two is occurring here." (Schiff and Wollin 1996)

I applaud these Editors for alerting birders to the possibility of the nominate subspecies of Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*) occurring in New York State and also for their request for written details. However, I am concerned that birders may oversimplify an extremely difficult field identification challenge. Therefore, it is the intent of this paper to clarify the status of the two subspecies in the state and to discuss how to differentiate between them in the field.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are currently two subspecies of Iceland Gull recognized by the American Ornithologist's Union (1973), "'Kumlien's" Iceland" Gull (*L. g. kumlieni*) and the nominate subspecies (*L. g. glaucoides*). The breeding range of *kumlieni* is restricted to northeastern Canada while *glaucoides* breeds largely on Greenland. Zimmer (1990) states (p 129) that "most (if not all) Iceland Gulls likely to be seen in North America are of the subspecies *kumlieni*". Zimmer (1991) says that the status of *glaucoides* as a visitor to North America is supported by only a few specimens, mostly from northeastern Canada, and that some of these are disputed. Though Godfrey (1986) called *glaucoides* a non-breeding visitor to southeastern Canada, both he and Pittaway (1992)

considered the nominate subspecies to be extremely rare. Pittaway (1992), referring to Godfrey as an internationally recognized taxonomist and leading authority on the Iceland Gull, stated that Godfrey had confirmed an adult specimen of *glaucoides* from Ontario. In addition, referring to another Ontario specimen, Pittaway quoted Godfrey as stating that it was "almost certainly" of the nominate subspecies.

Bull (1974) is ambiguous about the status of Iceland Gull in New York State. He states that both subspecies are found in New York and that "*kumlieni* appears to be the prevailing form." However, he gives no evidence that *glaucoides* has occurred and also states that the five specimens which he examined all pertained to *kumlieni*. Beardslee and Mitchell (1965), referring to the Niagara Frontier region of western New York, called *glaucoides* an uncommon to rare winter visitant and *kumlieni* an irregular very rare visitant. Andrlé (1977), referring to the same region, noted that both subspecies had occurred and that adults of *kumlieni* are seen more often than adults of *glaucoides*.

From this review of the literature, we find a conflict regarding the status of the two subspecies of Iceland Gull. One set of references considers *kumlieni* the expected subspecies in North America and *glaucoides*, at best, as extremely rare. The three older references for New York State suggest that both subspecies are at least somewhat regular.

I believe that the information given in the references for New York is incorrect and that there has been a misconception regarding the status of the two subspecies. This apparent misconception is not unique to New York. Pittaway (1992) pointed out that Ontario birders have believed that *glaucoides* is the expected subspecies for a long time. This belief may have resulted, in part, from the difficulty of viewing gray in the wingtips of many *kumlieni*, especially with the lesser quality optics of the past. Also, some immatures of *kumlieni*, which are more frequent than adults in western New York and southern Ontario, lack gray markings in the wingtips and these may have been assumed to be *glaucoides*. In addition the extreme variability of *kumlieni*, which will be discussed, may not have been fully appreciated in the past. The late Harold Axtell, an excellent field observer who studied gulls on the Niagara River at great length, believed that the "Kumlien's" subspecies was the only one that occurred in the Niagara Frontier region, (personal communication). My own observations on the Niagara River over the last 14 years agree with Axtell's. Although *glaucoides* could have been more frequent in the past before my field studies, Axtell was a contemporary of Beardslee and Mitchell and he did not note that such was the case.

IDENTIFICATION

The difficulties of identifying the nominate subspecies of Iceland Gull cannot be overstated and it should only be attempted with extreme caution. As is well known, *glaucoides* has all white wingtips while *kumlieni* has gray markings on the wingtips. However, the gray markings on *kumlieni* not only vary in darkness but also in extent. In fact this variation is extreme, contrary to Grant (1986). Some individuals of *kumlieni* may even have all white wingtips (Zimmer 1991)! Several times on the Niagara River, birds believed to be nominate subspecies Iceland Gulls, based upon wingtips that appeared to be all white, have been pointed out to me. When finally given a sufficient view, however, I have always found at least a trace of gray in the wingtips. To discern the gray, it sometimes requires an unusually close view or a good quality high power telescope, with the wingtips seen while fully spread. This is not to suggest that an Iceland Gull with all white wingtips has never been found on the Niagara River, only that it requires a great look and considerable effort to confirm that feature. And, even if one has been found, it is not necessarily *glaucoides*.

Immaculate white wingtips are not the only field mark to look for when studying a prospective *glaucoides*. Compared with *kumlieni*, *glaucoides* is smaller, smaller-billed, paler mantled (similar to Glaucous Gull, *L. hyperboreus*), has clear yellow eyes, and on a winter adult, pale spotting if present, is confined to the head and nape (Pittaway 1992, Godfrey 1986). It is again worth noting the great variability of "Kumlien's" Iceland" Gull. Not only can the gray in the wingtips of *kumlieni* vary from approaching those of a Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*) in extent to completely unmarked white (thus matching *glaucoides*) but the eyes can vary from dark to light (the latter predominates). On winter adults the head, neck, and breast streaking may be extensive, producing a hooded look, or, rarely, these areas may be entirely unmarked (thus like *glaucoides*). The "Kumlien's" mantle shade of gray is usually very slightly paler than that of a Herring Gull (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*) but as with every other feature this, too, is variable. To add to the challenge, perceptions of mantle color are often not straightforward but are dependent upon light and background conditions. Finally, as with the other large gulls, there is marked sexual dimorphism. Thus, while many *kumlieni* are the same size as a Herring Gull, some females can be strikingly small, both in overall size and in bill structure, thus approaching *glaucoides*.

Currently, it is not known with certainty whether the extreme variability of *kumlieni* as just described is a natural occurrence within that subspecies, or if it is due to interbreeding with *glaucoides* and Thayer's Gull, or both. Knudson found widespread interbreeding between "Kumlien's" and Thayer's gulls on Baffin Island in the Canadian arctic (Godfrey 1986). Snell (unpublished) and

Zimmer (1991) noted clinal variation in pigmentation from the darkest and westerly Thayer's Gull, to the more central *kumlieni*, to the palest and easterly *glaucoides*. That is, there appears to be no clean break in the characters used to distinguish these three types in the field. This clinal variation rather strongly suggests interbreeding not only between Thayer's and "Kumlien's" gulls, but also between *kumlieni* and *glaucoides*. Despite the complexity of the situation, the end-points of this cline, represented by a typical or "classic" Thayer's Gull and *glaucoides*, should be recognizable in the field.

CONCLUSION

For the birder looking for the nominate subspecies of Iceland Gull, beware! Virtually every field mark known for identifying *glaucoides* can sometimes be matched, or at least closely approached, by *kumlieni*. It would either take a specimen of *glaucoides* or a classic adult, carefully studied under good field conditions, preferably with photographs, to support its occurrence in New York State.

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