

**BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*)
AT JONES BEACH, NASSAU COUNTY
31 JAN-1 FEB 1999; FIRST RECORD FOR NEW YORK STATE**

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On Sunday, 31 Jan 1999, we were following our typical birding route along the beaches and inlets of Jones Beach, Nassau County. We arrived late in the day and were anxious to check a few productive spots before dusk. Our initial destination, Zach's Bay, was almost birdless and so we decided instead to look through the gulls that usually hang around Parking Field 6, just east of the Jones Beach water tower. As we walked onto the boardwalk, Guthrie made a quick scan of the 50 or so gulls roosting in a tight knot on the sand between us and the ocean. The majority were Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) with a few Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*) mixed in. Within a few seconds, Guthrie said he thought had a 'Lesser' meaning Lesser Black-backed Gull, (*L. fuscus graellsii*). I set my telescope down and soon had the bird in view at the left hand edge of the flock. Our immediate impression was that it looked small - only a little larger than an adult Ring-billed Gull standing next to it. Maybe it was just the angle or did we have something really interesting? We were both aware of the recent reports of a Black-tailed Gull (*L. crassirostris*) from Manasquan Inlet in neighboring New Jersey and this exciting possibility quickly came to mind. Could this be a Black-tailed Gull?

To get a better look, we stepped off the boardwalk and climbed up a bank of sand trapped against a snow fence. The bird was less than 30 meters from us. Through the scope at ~ 30x, the shape and patterning of the bill was very striking. This was no Lesser Black-backed Gull! The yellow bill was too narrow and elongated and tipped with broad smudge of red transected by a broad subterminal black band. The iris was a striking lemon yellow and we could easily make out a blood red orbital ring. The mantle was a uniform slate gray, lacking the bluish wash typical of the *graellsii* race of Lesser Black-backed Gull, and the legs were dull

lemon yellow. We knew immediately that we were indeed looking at an adult Black-tailed Gull (*L. crassirostris*). This better view confirmed the small size - just a little bigger than the adjacent Ring-billed Gulls, but with a noticeably longer primary projection.

Although sure of the identification, we had yet to see the broad tail band for which this species is named. As Guthrie stood poised with his camera mounted on a tripod, Wilson took a few paces forward causing the nearest Ring-billed Gulls to stand up and shuffle back a few paces. The Black-tailed Gull did the same thing, briefly flexing its wings, showing the striking pattern of the spread tail, long and immaculate snow white upper tail coverts contrasting with a broad black band. The bird quickly settled again, lying down and closing its eyes. We gave each other a silent thumbs up and then used my cellular phone to alert Tony Lauro and Patricia Lindsay, who we knew were in the general area.

The Black-tailed Gull seemed relatively undisturbed by our presence as we stood a few meters away, quietly taking pictures and looking carefully at its plumage. This was clearly an adult bird. The dark gray mantle lacked any traces of brown mottling and contrasted with the black outermost primaries, which were freshly molted, complete with relatively unfrayed white feather tips. The head and nape were immaculate white, lacking any of the brown flecking (especially on the nape) that is typical of basic plumage.

After 10 or 15 minutes, a number of Ring-billed Gulls took off suddenly and flew towards the busy parking lot. Many people provide scraps of food here and the gulls are always alert to scavenging opportunities. The Black-tailed Gull woke and followed, flying briefly over the concession building and then swinging back into the midst of the roosting flock. During this brief flight, we were able to get better looks at the tail. The black rectrices (tail feathers) were tipped with white and framed by the white uppertail coverts and an entirely white outermost rectrix on each side. [Subsequent examination of the photographs revealed the white bases to the tail feathers.] Broad white tips to the secondaries and inner primaries formed a prominent trailing edge to the wing. In flight, the Black-tailed Gull looked decidedly longer winged than Ring-billed Gull, with a more buoyant flight style.

Later the gull took off again, this time spooked by beachgoers on the ocean side, and headed west, directly into the fast setting sun. We managed to keep track with binoculars, following it further down the beach, where it landed amidst another large roost of gulls near the West Bathhouse building. In the ten or fifteen minutes it took us to drive down to the second roost, it had broken up, with the birds moving offshore for the night. In the gloom, we could make out hundreds of birds on the water some 500 meters offshore but it was just too dark to identify them.

Happily, the bird was rediscovered at first light the following morning (1 Feb 1999), this time in Parking Field 6 itself, where it was watched and enjoyed by many local birders throughout the day. Again, the bird consorted with Ring-billed Gulls, even accepting donations of bread from grateful birders. Other than one unconfirmed report from the early morning, the Black-tailed Gull was not seen the following day or during the following weeks.

IDENTIFICATION AND DISCUSSION

Identification of adult or near adult Black-tailed Gull is relatively straightforward. The presence of crisp white tips to the outermost primaries, slate gray, rather than brown, wing coverts and lack of head streaking indicated that the Jones Beach bird was a full adult recently molted into alternate plumage (Ujihara and Ujihara, 1992; MacTavish, 1998; Lethaby and Bangma 1998). The three most likely confusion species are Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*), Band-tailed Gull (*L. belcheri*) and Olrog's Gull (*L. atlanticus*). Adult Band-tailed Gull in alternate plumage bears the closest resemblance, having an unmarked white head, striking yellow legs and rather similar patterning on the tail and bill. This species can be quickly excluded however, because it has a darkly pigmented eye at all ages, a much darker mantle color (nearly jet black) and lacks white primary tips. Olrog's Gull is very similar to Band-tailed Gull and the two were once lumped as a single species. Olrog's Gull is even heavier than Band-tailed Gull, with a more massive bill (Enticott and Tipling, 1997; Lethaby and Bangma 1999). Second alternate (and sometimes third basic) Lesser Black-backed Gull have a similar mantle color and can show a prominent tail band, but this is rarely as extensive or neatly-defined as that of Black-tailed Gull. In addition, a Lesser Black-backed Gull would appear significantly larger relative to Ring-billed Gull, with a shorter bill and deeper gonydeal angle.

Traditionally known as "Japanese Gull", Black-tailed Gull breeds in coastal habitats bordering the Sea of Japan. In winter, birds spread out over a long arch from Sakhalin Island in Russia through the Japanese Archipelago and Korean Peninsula, reaching as far south as Hong Kong (Brazil, 1990; Viney et al. 1996; Enticott and Tipling, 1997). Although an Asiatic species with a fairly restricted distribution, there is a rapidly growing number of records from the east coast of North America. Beginning with an adult in Maryland in 1984, there have been other well-documented sightings from Virginia, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland (reviewed in Lethaby and Bangma, 1998). As far as we are aware this is the first record of Black-tailed Gull in New York State.

Initial reports outside of Alaska were met with skepticism and assumed to be ship-assisted. The ever growing number of records, involving birds of different ages, argues instead for natural vagrancy. We would suggest that birds enter North America through southern Alaska by following the almost continuous chain of islands that rim the North Pacific. Some birds appear to continue down the west coast of Canada and the United States, even reaching Mexico and Belize (one record each), while others take an overland route to reach the Atlantic coast - a hypothesis supported by the discovery of an adult in southern Manitoba in June 1987 (Knapton, 1990; Holder, 1992). In its normal range, Black-tailed Gull shows a strong preference for marine habitats and may cross the continent rapidly, preferring not to linger in freshwater areas.

The recent occurrence of at least two different birds in New Jersey (two separate individuals at Cape May Point and later one individual at Manasquan Inlet) had primed us to the possibility that the species could wander north into New York State. It is interesting to ponder on how many Black-tailed Gulls might have been present along the Atlantic seaboard and Gulf Coast during the winter of 1998 and 1999. A reasonable estimate seems to be a minimum of three. In addition to the New Jersey birds, two adults were seen simultaneously on the eastern shore of Virginia, with one remaining at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel through the rest of the winter. Based on the dates and detailed plumage descriptions, the New Jersey and Virginia sightings may involve the same individuals. A little over a week after the New York sighting, another - clearly different - bird, this time in third-basic plumage, was found in Brownsville, Texas on 11 Feb 1999 - ironically by a group of birders visiting from New York!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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[Editors Note: Pending acceptance by the New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC), this sighting constitutes the first state record as noted in the title. This will bring the NYS checklist to 455 species.]

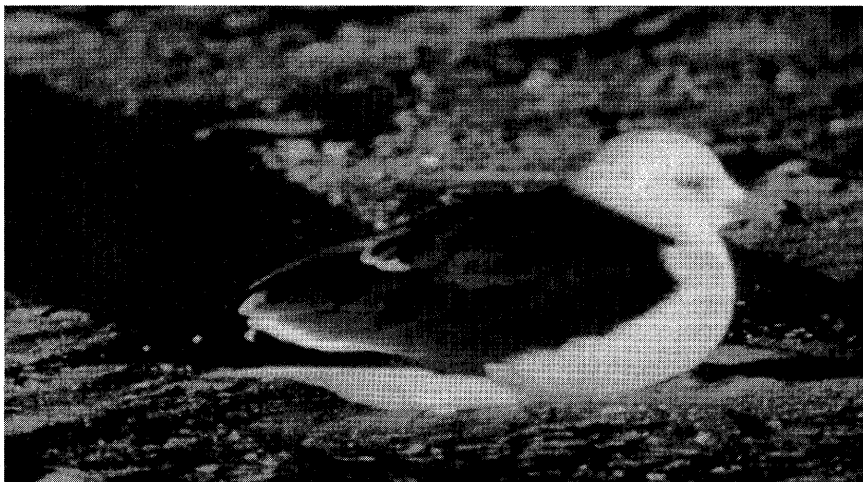


Figure 1. Adult Black-tailed Gull at Jones Beach, Nassau Co., New York, 28 Feb 1999. Showing the characteristic pale-yellow iris and striking bill pattern. The solid gray upperparts (lighter in life), immaculate white head, and noticeable white tips to the folded primaries, indicate an adult in alternate plumage. Photograph by Andrew Guthrie.



Figure 2. Black-tailed Gull at Jones Beach, Nassau Co., New York, 28 Feb 1999. In flight, showing the striking black tail band framed by white outer retrices, white tips to the tail feathers, and the clean white uppertail coverts. In life, the black outermost primaries contrasted with the gray wings and mantle. Photograph by Andrew Guthrie.