

Slaty-backed Gull in Sullivan County, February 2002

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The closing of municipal landfills in recent years has resulted in a paucity of wintering gulls in many places where they had earlier been common, but the importation of trash into an expanding landfill in Monticello, Sullivan County, has brought a greater variety and increasing numbers of gulls to this rural county about 100 miles north of New York City.

An adult Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) was found in two locations on three dates in February 2002 in Sullivan County. This native of north-eastern Eurasia and northern Japan is considered rare along the Bering coast of Alaska, and there have been a few scattered records in the lower 48 states since the first one was found in St. Louis, Mo., along the Mississippi River in late 1983 (Goetz et al.1986). There is one previous New York State record, that of a bird in the Niagara Falls region, 24 Nov through 29 Dec 1992 (accepted by NYSARC 1994) and subsequently reported in *Kingbird* (Brock 1994, 82-86).

The gull was found at Monticello, NY by VMF on 4 Feb, relocated at the same location by JHH on 8 Feb, and then relocated again on 20 Feb at Neversink Reservoir by VMF, JHH, and PAB, as well as Renee Davis and Marge Gorton. Each sighting is here described.

4 Feb, VMF: The gull was observed for about 30 minutes near noon on Monday 4 Feb as it sat or stood on the ice at Kiamesha Lake in the village of Monticello. As I scanned the flock of 150 or so gulls, my eye was caught by a gull with a dark mantle. The light was excellent, and the gull was on the near side of the flock. They were all loafing on the ice or in the small amount of open water, perhaps 200 yards from my viewing position on the shore behind a local water bottling plant. The dark mantle color was intermediate between the gray of the Herring Gulls and the black of a few adult Great Black-backed Gulls, both nearby. My first thought was Lesser Black-backed, but I quickly dismissed that because my bird was too large, the size of nearby Herring Gulls... and then it stood up. I was interested before, but on seeing the legs, I became really interested. The legs were red, a kind of brick red, opaque, and in the direct light, very different from the paler and almost translucent pinkish legs of nearby Herring Gulls. The gull was in adult

plumage, the bill light with a red spot, and there were dusky streaks on the head, mostly on the back of it. There was a dark smudge around the eye. The broad white trailing edge of the secondaries contrasted with the dark mantle and black primary tips.

I had been away for a few weeks and this was my first birding since returning, and my car was not properly equipped. I did not have a telephone, my copy of Sibley or Grant, or my camera. I did have my Swarovski spotting scope, and had wonderful views of the bird with it. I had the National Geographic 3rd edition, and I studied the bird through my scope with that book in hand, eliminating species after species. Lesser Black-backed was too small, and leg color was way off. The leg color of the adult Thayer's gull shown was good, but my bird's mantle was much darker. The mantle color of the Western Gull was right, but my bird's legs were redder, and its head was streaked. I did not look at the picture of a winter adult *vegae* Herring Gull until later, but in retrospect the mantle of that bird is not dark enough, or the legs red enough. Because of its range and rarity, I was hesitant to identify the bird as a Slaty-backed Gull, but could find no other species that fit.

While studying this bird my attention was diverted by the arrival of a Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*) which landed close by, only the second record for Sullivan County. I had found the other one on a Christmas Count 10 years ago on the same lake. After watching that gull for about five minutes, I knew I had to get to a phone to summon other birders. Renee Davis and I returned within about an hour, and the Black-headed Gull was still there, but the Slaty-backed Gull was not.

8 Feb, JHH: At Kiamesha Lake on 8 Feb I relocated the gull that had first been discovered by VMF on 4 Feb. The viewing conditions were excellent, the temperature was in the mid-forties and it was a bright sunny day, and I was watching from the same location as described above. I located the bird bathing at 12:50 PM and it continued to bathe for about ten minutes. The first thing I noticed was that the mantle was dark, considerably darker than the nearby Herring Gulls, but not quite as dark as the adult Great Black-backed Gull nearby. The gull had extensive dark streaks on the back of head and nape. I called VMF on my cell phone and described the bird in detail. As we spoke it finished bathing and hopped out on the ice, and I was able to see that it had bright deep red legs. It then sat next to an adult Herring Gull, accentuating the difference in mantle color, and showing the bird to be the same size as the Herring Gull. It had a yellow bill with a red gonys spot. The bird continued to preen for about five minutes, then took off by itself. As it gained altitude, it widened its circle, coming closer to me. At the closest point on the second circle, it banked, affording me an excellent look at it

from underneath. I was able to see dark gray under primaries and triangular-shaped lighter wing lining. I noted a broad white trailing edge to the wings and a thinner white leading edge on the wing.

The gull then flew to the southwest, directly toward the Sullivan County Landfill, but I was unable to relocate it there. Now convinced that we had a Slaty-backed Gull, I posted it on the internet, and several people came to search during the next 11 days. None were successful, though several Iceland Gulls and Glaucous Gulls were found..

20 Feb, VMF, JHH, PAB, et al.: Intrigued by our descriptions, PAB arranged to meet us on 20 Feb to search for the gull. We checked Kiamesha Lake and resting flocks of gulls at Woodbourne, and then went to a New York City Reservoir, Neversink, where gulls were known to sometimes spend the night. We relocated the Slaty-backed Gull at Neversink Reservoir at about 10:30 AM, and it remained in view until approximately 12:30 PM. We passed by again at about 1 PM and the bird was still sleeping on the ice in the same location.

It was a fairly warm day, with cloudy skies, and occasionally a few light sprinkles, and breezy. We watched the gull at an angle from above, standing in a parking lot along the road which crosses the reservoir dam, from three to five hundred yards from the bird, using binoculars or any of four scopes (Swarovski and Kowa). JHH used a JVC video camera to video the bird through a Kowa 824 with a fluorite lens at 60X, a task made difficult because of the breeze.



Slaty-backed Gull 20 Feb 2002
Neversink Reservoir
Sullivan Co.
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The flock of about 100 to 150 gulls included numerous Herring Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls and the eighth larid species in the county for the month, a second-winter Lesser Black-backed Gull.

The Slaty-backed Gull exhibited various behaviors throughout the period of observation. After bathing, it hopped up on the ice and began to preen. It walked around, appeared to bite and chew on the snowy portion of the ice for several minutes, and for a period slept with head tucked. After about an hour the bird took off with the other gulls, joining a kettle and circling several times before again landing on the ice. We were able to follow it as it flew and circled several times, and had good views in flight from both above and below.

When it landed in the flock again, it could easily be relocated because of the distinctly dark mantle, which was evenly colored. The size was close to that of a Herring Gull, but we had the impression that it was a heavier gull. Since we were viewing the gull from a high vantage point, we could often see the feet, and the red webs and toes were very striking against the white ice. The bill was yellow, and the culmen straight, with an abrupt droop, and a red gonydeal spot in the angle, that angle being less pronounced than that of a Great Black-backed Gull bill. The head and nape were heavily streaked with dark brownish streaks, darkest on the nape. The dark smudge unevenly encircling the light eye was darker than the head streaking. The breast and underparts were white, as was the tail. The black of the outer primary tips was darker than the dark gray of the back, and the tertial crescent was very broad.

We were able to follow the bird in flight through both binoculars and spotting scopes. The very wide white trailing edge of the wing was conspicuous in flight, and there was also a narrow white leading edge. The primaries of the underwing were dark gray in flight but not as dark as the mantle. We were able to observe the "pearl string," white spots on the innermost of the outer primaries connection to the trailing edge of the primaries and secondaries, most frequently seen on the upswing of its wingbeat, between the gray of the under primaries and the black of the primary tips. At least one mirror was present on the outermost primaries.

Although the distance was not nearly as close as during the sightings at Kiamesha Lake, the Slaty-backed Gull remained at Neversink Reservoir the better part of the day and was watched at leisure by people who know what to look for and were more prepared. PAB, who was familiar with the species from Alaska, had a 50x fluorite eyepiece on his Kowa 823 scope. In addition to the usual gull references, he brought excellent Slaty-backed Gull photographs with him. He phoned other birders from the site, and several others (John Fritz, Shai Mitra, Mary and John Yrizarry) arrived later in the afternoon and concurred in

the identification. Unfortunately, birders arriving the next day were unable to relocate the bird.

The key identification points for Slaty-backed Gull as described in Goetz et al.(1986) and Gustafson and Peterjohn (1994) were present. We considered, and rejected, the possibility of a Herring x Great Black-backed hybrid as described by Andrlé (1972) and Foxall (1979). Andrlé published a black-and-white photo of two hybrids whose mantles do not appear to be quite as dark as that of the gull we observed. Also, both he and Foxall describe the hybrid's leg color as "whitish tinged flesh," not red as in our gull. Neither mentions a dark smudge around the eye or a broad white trailing edge of the wing, two prominent features the gull herein described.

All other gulls we considered lack the combination of characters which we believe confirms this gull as Slaty-backed: dark slate-gray mantle; broad white trailing edge to the wing; red legs; dark brownish streaking on the head, mostly on the nape; uneven smudge around the eye; under side of primaries dark silver gray; a few white spots between dark grey of primaries and black wingtips. Our first two sightings of the Slaty-backed Gull were tantalizing but inconclusive, and they stimulated us to be more prepared for the third observation, which confirmed the identification.

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