

TWO “SHORT-BILLED” MEW GULLS, *Larus canus brachyrhynchus*, IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK—THE FIRST FOR LONG ISLAND AND COASTAL NEW YORK

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Since moving to Bay Ridge Brooklyn in August 2009, I have spent countless hours checking out the winter gull flocks that congregate along the Belt Parkway between the Verrazano Bridge and the Caesar's Bay Shopping Center approximately two miles south of the bridge. I also frequent the Veterans Memorial Pier and Owl's Head Wastewater treatment plant at the base of Bay Ridge Avenue. This is about 2.25 miles north of the Verrazano Bridge. In the course of these efforts, I have been fortunate enough to discover four Mew Gulls (*Larus canus*) in this area, from 29 December 2009 to February 2015. The first two were attributable to the nominate European race *L. c. canus*, as have been all prior records of the species from coastal New York State. The most recent two were attributable to the western North American race *L. c. brachyrhynchus*, representing the first and second records of this taxon for Long Island and adjacent coastal New York State. This is the story of the latter two.

The Belt Parkway borders the Narrows and Gravesend Bay (officially Lower New York Bay). Between the Belt and the bay there is a bike/walking path. Three different parking lots allow for viewing the bridge or accessing the bike path and waterfront. One is just north of the bridge and although there are usually some Ring-bills hanging out there, I find the majority of gulls tend to congregate around the two parking lots south of the bridge, waiting no doubt for a car to pull up, driven by a hominid in possession of day old carbs.

My usual route is to enter the Belt at the 4th Avenue entrance nearest my home and stop at the first parking lot along the Belt just south of the bridge. The largest congregation of gulls along the Belt is usually here. Often 700+ Ring-billed Gulls fill the open field between the parking lot and Gravesend Bay. The sheer numbers are always a draw, but I have never found a Common/Mew gull in this flock. After this stop I normally continue east to the second parking lot, which is just north of the Caesar's Bay Shopping Center and the Bensonhurst Park baseball fields. The ballfields are the location of my first Common Gull discovery, in December 2009.

On Jan 21, 2015 I followed this pattern and as usual found nothing unusual in the large flock adjacent to the first parking lot. I continued on to the second lot where there is often someone—yes, a hominid—feeding the gulls and pigeons. On this day there was someone feeding further south along the bike pathway that ends at Caesar's Bay and I proceeded to walk in that direction. Before I could actually start down the path, though—it took me some time to get

my winter gear on—I saw the person that was feeding the gulls (and pigeons) had finished. There were a fair number of birds still swirling around, but many of them had started flying back toward me and began to settle down on the exposed rocks that line the seawall that separates Gravesend Bay from the bike path. Almost all of the gulls were adult Ring-bills with a few second winter and even fewer first winter birds mixed in. One bird jumped out at me as it flew down to the rocks as being much browner overall and smaller than the other gulls in the flock. I initially thought it was going to be a juvenile/first winter Ring-billed or even an extremely small first winter Herring. When the bird landed a bit to the north of the parking lot and I got my bins on it, my heart leapt into my throat as I realized this looked nothing like any Herring or Ring-billed I had ever seen.

Its tiny dove-like head and large beady eye gave it a gentler expression than the fierce countenance of a Ring-billed. The bill was much thinner and colored differently as well, with the basal half being a distinctive blue-green color and end of the bill being black. The gonydeal angle was not as pronounced as in Ring-billed Gull. The legs were a mixture of dull pink and the same blue-green of the bill, with the pink concentrated in the lower legs and feet and becoming more blue-green above the knee joint. The mantle and scapulars were a mixture of medium brown juvenile feathers with white edges and newer adult like gray feathers. The lesser and median coverts were also medium brown with white edging, with the bases of the lower row of median coverts fading to white. Something that stood out was the washed out greater coverts which formed an obvious whitish rectangular on the standing bird from both the left and right side. The tertials were a darker brown with the upper feathers also faded. The primaries were a dark brown though not black and were tipped in white, though that seemed to my eye to be an effect of wear as well. The base color of the head was whitish but finely streaked with brown, with the heaviest streaking on the top of the head and around the eye.

The throat, chest and stomach of the bird were a marbled medium brown and white, a very distinctive pattern that I didn't really recall seeing on any other gulls. I kept referring to it as a "turbulence pattern" as it reminded me of something I vaguely recall seeing in a documentary about tornadoes or hurricanes. The lower belly had a small white patch that contrasted with the rest of the underside, but this was only really visible in flight. The tail was whitish with medium brown barring and a fairly wide dark brown tail band. The under tail was also white with brown barring. This pattern to the upper tail is one of the best distinguishing marks between a first winter *L. brachyrhynchus* and *L. canus*, although I did not know this at the time.

The bird initially perched on the rocks for a couple of minutes but then flew up and sat on the railing alongside Ring-billeds (including right next to a first winter Ring-bill) and all of the above mentioned field marks made the bird stand out as something decidedly different. I was photographing the entire time, but at some point I called Doug Gochfeld and described the bird as best I could. I

honestly can't say I was positive what I was looking at at the time as I hadn't seen a Common/Mew Gull in this plumage before, but when I sent a text message with a photo to Doug his response was "I'm chasing—looks like maybe a western Mew."

For the next 15 minutes or so the bird meandered to the north along the seawall, flying short distances before settling back on the rocks. At one point it regurgitated an unidentifiable morsel and then proceeded to eat it again, actively defending itself from the Ring-bills that tried to steal it from him. Just as Doug was arriving, the gulls picked up and starting heading en masse back south toward Caesar's Bay. I was initially concerned the bird might continue on to the south but it very cooperatively chose to alight on top of Toys-R-Us where Doug quickly spotted it, and the requisite high fives were shared.

The bird continued being cooperative by flying around and landing on the railing within 30 feet or so of us and we both were able to get great photo documentation. It then flew to the north over the Belt Parkway and dropped down out of sight, a maneuver that it would repeat on multiple occasions over the next two months. I went looking for it while Doug waited for Shai Mitra to arrive, but I could not relocate it on any roofs or the small bit of Bensonhurst Park that is north of there. I went home at that point, but the bird did return to Caesar's Bay where Shai and Doug got looks at it again. Unfortunately this initial period would be one of the few times one could label the bird as cooperative.

Although it was seen a few times—albeit briefly—over the next couple of days, its appearances got further and further apart as January rolled into February and March. Despite searching for it 25 or 30 times over that period, I only saw it four more times: in the early morning of 22 January, with a small group that included Bobby Rossetti and Peter Post; mid-morning of 25 January, roosting on the ball fields; and mid-afternoon on 1 February, when it stayed around for about 20 minutes and I was able to get some additional photos. My last sighting was on 19 February, when it was roosting among Ring-bills on the tide exposed rocks just north of the BJ's Wholesale Club that is 300-400 yards south of Caesar's Bay. After five minutes it picked up and flew—you guessed it—north and over the Belt Parkway.

I also searched some of the other known areas in Brooklyn for roosting Ring-bills (Coney Island, Floyd Bennett boat launch, etc.) but never came across the bird anywhere else.

The second Mew gull was found on the Veterans Memorial Pier in the late morning of 9 February, and was observed for exactly 10 minutes, from 11:18-11:28, according to my time stamped photos. On cold blustery days I often find that gulls like to hunker down on the pier, the strong wind being somewhat broken up by the fence/railing that runs along the sides and end of the pier and the few metal benches on the pier itself. Whenever I am driving past and I see more than a few gulls on the pier I park and check them out. This is how I found

the second Common Gull in January 2014 and I have found a couple of different Black-headed Gulls here as well.

On this day there were several hundred gulls on the pier. They tend to cluster in 2 to 3 groups and are often hidden behind the benches so you can't just set your scope down and scan the whole pier at once. I was actually working my way past the first group of gulls when I spotted a first winter Bonaparte's in the second group of gulls ahead of me (I saw its legs first). At that point I could see the rest of the birds on the pier ahead of me well enough to see that there was nothing else unusual and I turned back to head toward home.

I scanned the first group naked-eye again to make sure I hadn't overlooked anything. I had. Not 20 feet away, sitting near but somewhat separate from the other gulls (which were all Ring-bills), was a very small, dark gray-mantled gull that had a thin reedy blue-gray bill with a dark tip. Its head, hind neck and sides of the neck were streaked brown with the heaviest streaking centered around its large black beady eye. The visible median and greater coverts were a browner gray than the mantle and appeared to be older than the mantle feathers, with the median coverts in particular being well worn. There were prominent tertial and scapular crescents present, and a wide secondary skirt visible on the folded wings. The primaries were almost blackish with gray bases visible. A large white mirror was visible on the underside of P-10. The underside of the bird was mostly white with just a few random brown streaks, mostly in the chest and vent. When the bird stood up at one point I could see the legs were mostly blue-green with just a little yellowish in some spots. The webs of the feet were a pretty bright pink. This time I was pretty sure what I was looking at; despite the plumage being different, the size and jizz of the bird reminded me of the earlier Mew and not of the two Commons.

After about eight minutes, during which I had got the word out, the entire group lifted off the pier. The strong north east winds quickly blew the bird over the water and although a lot of the Ring-bills returned to the pier, the Mew just kept flying—or being blown—toward Staten Island where I lost sight of it. I initially was just photographing the bird as it flew away, so any additional field marks were not really noted in the field, but studied in the photos later. Again the wide secondary skirt stood out, as did a large mirror on P10 and a smaller one on P9. There were brownish black markings in the median and lesser primary coverts, and there were remnants of a tail band.

The overall size and jizz, the tiny bill with the lack of a well defined dark mark (a Z or ring), the presence of white tongues in P8-5, a dark terminal band on P4, the smudginess of the brown in the head and neck (versus fine streaking in Common), the partial tail band and the overall more immature appearance of the bird all point to *L. brachyrhynchus* for this bird as well.

Despite searching for it a few times over the next week and at the same time still looking for the original Mew just south of there, this individual never returned. The same cannot be said for me, as I will be returning to these locations again and again.



Shane Blodgett found two Mew Gulls along the Brooklyn waterfront this winter. Unlike his previous Brooklyn discoveries of Mew Gulls, which pertained to the nominate, European subspecies *canus*, these two were of the western North American subspecies *brachyrhynchus*, the first for Region 10. Above: a first-winter bird at Gravesend Bay, Kings, 21 Jan 2015, © Doug Gochfeld . Opposite: a second-winter bird at Veterans Memorial Pier, Kings, 9 Feb 2015, © Shane Blodgett. See pp. 96-99.

