

FIFTY YEARS AGO IN

The KINGBIRD

Lesser Black-backed Gull at Onondaga Lake, New York: While checking gulls and shorebirds on Onondaga Lake 28 September 1971 I found a distinctly dark-mantled gull swimming with an assemblage of Herring (*Larus argentatus*) and Ring-billed (*Larus delawarensis*) Gulls at the mouth of Nine-mile Creek. Struck by its size, scarcely larger than the Ring-billed Gulls, and by its small-headed, slender-billed appearance, I suspected it to be a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) although its legs were not visible. After following it several minutes, I quickly scanned the rest of the area here, then discovered the bird had left its original position. A quick check showed it to be standing just under knee deep in water in the center of a large group of Ring-billed Gulls. I moved to a closer position to check leg color, then dashed to the nearest public phone to alert other local birders, and returned to the lake and continued studying the bird. F. G. Scheider, C. G. Speis, M. S. Rusk, and J. W. Propst arrived in time to see the bird before it flew off to the southwest. I observed the bird for perhaps 50 minutes under bright overcast skies with a 30X Balscope at ranges up to 50 yards. All observers, of which I was the only one not to have seen the species before, concurred with the identification.

A description, with elaborations from notes made in the field and before consulting field guides, in parentheses, follows:

A dark-mantled gull the size of (an extremely) small Herring Gull by direct comparison, (probably in third alternate plumage). The head, belly and tail were uniform white; (the back of the head was lightly streaked with gray or the feathers were badly ruffled). The mantle was dark slaty gray, appearing uniform except for white tips to the scapulars and secondaries and flashing white feather bases when the bird spread its wings; the primaries were black and unpatterned, (the innermost colored more like the mantle). In flight the primaries were smudged with black below; the rest of the underwing was pure white. The wings were very long, extending 2 to 3 inches beyond the tail tip, and the tip of the secondaries came to within an inch of the tail tip. The head was noticeably small for the size of the bird and the bill, orangey yellow with a red spot at the gonys like a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*), was long and slender, about 3 times as long as deep and with almost no suggestion of a gonydeal angle. Leg color (was difficult to determine); the knees were a dark, dirty pink, and the tibia were darker (the color was clearly in contrast to the yellow-green of adult Ring-billed Gulls and the fleshy pink of Herring Gulls and immature Ring-bills); the feet were never seen. The eye was small and appeared to be uniformly dark.

My general impression of the bird was a gull the shape of an overgrown Ring-billed Gull, or even better, the long-winged extreme of Iceland Gull (*Larus*

glaucoides), only with a mantle like a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) but darker, although not quite the slaty black of the Great Black-backed Gull. Because of the problems associated with identification of this species in North America, I comment on why I think all other species (and most hybrids) can be eliminated. Soft part colors can be attributed to the bird's immaturity. The small size of the bird, and in particular the small-headed, slender-billed, long-winged appearance at once eliminates Great Black-backed Gull, Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*), Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*), and Herring X Great Black-backed hybrids, all of which are larger than most Herring Gulls and noticeably heavier billed, as are the two most similar Old World races of Herring Gull, *L. a. atlantis* and *L. a. heuglini*. In addition the former is paler than *fuscus* (Scheider and Probst both thought this bird was darker than the bird which wintered at Ithaca) ; *heuglini* could only be eliminated on the basis of size, but presumably is also paler. Of the European forms, only the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) has been documented for North America. Counting all appearances of the Ithaca bird as 1 record, this appears to be the 4th record in New York State away from Region 10, and the second for Region 5.

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Ed. comment: The writer of this note is to be commended for an excellent job of documentation without being unnecessarily wordy. Those reporting rarities are sometimes upset over being asked to document carefully their observation, not realizing that it is not merely a question of full verification but also to enable a reader, now or in decades to come, to evaluate the report accurately. Too often good sight records have had to be thrown out for lack of background information.

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