

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL - Larus fuscus graellsii

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DATE: February 24, 1992.

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LOCATION: Cherry Creek Reservoir SRA, Arapahoe County, Colorado.

NUMBER OF BIRDS SEEN: One.

PLUMAGE AND SEX: Second-winter immature likely changing into second-summer plumage. (Note the markings on the mandibles, the yellow iris and the grayish-yellow legs).

TIME OF OBSERVATION: 1115-1200 MST.

WEATHER CONDITIONS: Clear sky; Wind, south at 4-7 MPH; Temperature 48°F.

HABITAT: Fresh-water reservoir on the eastern high plains along the front range of the Rocky Mountains.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT: 10X50 Bushnell Binoculars; 15X-60X B/L Zoom telescope.

OTHER OBSERVERS WHO INDEPENDENTLY IDENTIFIED THE BIRD:

None that I am aware of.

DISTANCE FROM THE BIRD AND HOW MEASURED: 75 yards up to 250 yards. Estimated.

BIRD/SUN ORIENTATION: Bright sunlight during the entire time that the bird was under observation and directly upon the bird coming from the observer's right. Minimal light waves (shimmering).

BEHAVIOR AND DEMEANOR:

First observed with a small group of other gulls, perhaps 30 Ring-billed Gulls (Larus delawarensis) and 10 Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus), which were sitting on the ice asleep some 50 feet from the end of the boat docks at the west side marina. Its obvious dark mantle caught my attention even though it was asleep with its head tucked back under its wing and situated in the middle of the tightly packed group of gulls. After approximately 15 minutes, the gull stood up, stretching a wing and its neck. At this juncture I was satisfied that it was a "dark-backed" gull, most probably a Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus) since its size was intermediate between L. delawarensis and L. argentatus. Now thoroughly awakened, it took off and began circling around the marina, approaching as close as 75 yards. It finally spotted an adult Herring Gull that was feeding upon a fish on the ice near the face of the Cherry Creek dam. It made straight for this gull forcing it, with its fish, into the air. The Lesser Black-backed Gull gave chase with both gulls in wild, acrobatic flight until the Herring Gull disgorged the fish back onto the ice and flew off. The Lesser Black-backed Gull dropped to the ice where the fish had been deposited and began pecking at it. After a bit, it appeared to lose interest in the fish and it flew off again, this time landing a short distance away along side of an adult Ring-billed Gull and an adult Herring Gull, providing an excellent size and plumage comparison. The Lesser Black-backed Gull was slightly smaller and less bulky than the Herring Gull yet larger and heavier, body-wise, than the Ring-billed Gull. Eventually it took off again circling about the marina several times before flying eastward out across the reservoir where I last saw it. Its flight pattern was graceful, buoyant and agile, much less labored than that of a Herring Gull.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION: A medium-large sized gull and as previously mentioned, noticeably smaller and less bulky than L. argentatus, with a less deep bill, a more rounded head and with proportionately longer wings

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which extended well beyond the tail when folded at rest, giving the bird somewhat of a "large-ended" profile. The mantle was a uniformly grayish-black (ashy) in color as were the upperwings except for the solid black secondaries and primaries. The uppertail was white with an obvious medium-wide black sub-terminal band readily seen in flight.

HEAD AND NECK: White forehead; rest of head, neck and nape white, heavily streaked with dark creating a "dusky-headed" appearance typical of many basic-plumaged gulls.

EYES: Yellow iris with dark pupil. A dusky smudge surrounded the eye.

UPPER AND LOWER MANDIBLES: Fairly long, somewhat narrow bill with a slight swelling at the distal end. Basal end was flesh-colored. Middle of the bill with a wide, black band across it. The extreme distal end was tipped yellow.

LEGS AND FEET: Long-legged with grayish-yellow legs. Feet color not readily noted.

UPPERPARTS: Mantle uniformly ashy-gray (typical of the graellsii race), but clearly darker than nearby adult L. delawarensis and L. argentatus. White rump with faint, dark barring on upper end.

UNDERPARTS: All underparts white with some brownish mottling on the sides and flanks.

RETRICES: Square-tailed with white upperside and with a black, medium-wide sub-terminal band contrasting well with the white rump and uppertail (most easily noted when the bird spread its tail upon alighting).

WINGS: Rather long and slender wings, extending well beyond the tail when sitting. Upperwing: All coverts uniformly ashy-gray contrasting well with the solid black primaries and secondaries. Distal end of the secondaries edged in white. Underwing: Uniformly dark throughout with the exception of slightly lighter wing linings.

VOCALIZATION: None heard.

ELIMINATION OF SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES (second-winter plumage in all instances):

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (Larus marinus): Eliminated in all plumages by great size and massive bill. Mantle with bold, slaty patches. Uppertail with a broad, black sub-terminal band. Underwing lining and coverts are white. Head normally white (less streaking than in L. fuscus).

HERRING GULL (Larus argentatus): This species averages slightly larger (however size can be quite variable within any species of gull, particularly among immatures). First signs of adult plumage appear with some clear gray on upper mantle, inner-wing coverts and inner-primaries. Lower back quite blotchy with brown. Upperwing with black primary cover and black outer primaries. There is a dark bar across the secondaries which is interrupted by the mainly gray inner-primaries. The whole effect of the upperwing is a variegated pattern. Underwing is predominately white.

THAYER'S GULL (Larus thayeri): Roughly the same size as L. fuscus, but generally much paler overall. Outer primaries on upperwing are tan to pale brown in typical individuals (some birds giving the semblance of a "white-winged" gull). Uppertail with a fairly broad, tan or brown sub-terminal band. The key difference here is the obvious silvery underwing (including all flight feathers), which flashes brightly in flight.

CALIFORNIA GULL (Larus californicus): As with L. thayeri, this gull is roughly the same size as L. fuscus. However, the mantle is mostly gray second-winter birds (particularly those approaching second-summer plumage) Upperwing with some gray in the coverts and inner-primaries providing a "window" effect. Underparts generally with some brownish mottling (more predominate than with L. fuscus). Rump is whitish but uppertail mostly dusky.

RING-BILLED GULL (Larus delawarensis): Decidedly smaller with narrower wings and with much pale gray on the mantle and the innerwings. Second-winter birds retain a strong, dark bar across the secondaries. Uppertail with a narrow, black sub-terminal band. Bill is much smaller.

MEW GULL (Larus canus): Smaller still and really of no consequence for elimination.

WESTERN GULL (Larus occidentalis): Eliminated on much larger size, more robust profile and pink legs in all ages. Also, this species has a more massive, deeper bill with an obvious bulbous distal end. Typical second winter birds have a black bill with some paleness at the basal end. This is a very pelagic species on the Pacific Coast which seldom occurs inland and, to date, has never been recorded in Colorado.

YELLOW-FOOTED GULL (Larus livens): Very closely resembles the southern race of the Western Gull (L. o. wymani). Thus it is considerably larger than L. fuscus, with a very large, bulbous-tipped bill. This is a "three year" gull which by second-winter plumage approaches that of an adult (all yellow beak with a red spot on the gonys and bright yellow legs). Has restricted range in North America from the Salton Sea in California to the Gulf of California. Has not, to date, occurred in Colorado.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (Larus schistisagus): Considerably larger, very heavily structured. White rump contrasts with all dark uppertail. Much whiter (less streaked) head, neck and nape. This is a northeastern Asiatic species that would be well out of range in Colorado (normally very pelagic), but it has occurred a couple of times recently in the lower forty-eight.

BLACK-TAILED GULL (Larus crassirostris): Somewhat smaller (averages slightly smaller than L. delawarensis) otherwise quite similar. Head in second-winter birds is white with minimal streaking over crown only. This is an Asiatic species recorded as "Accidental" in North America (three occurrences in Alaska) and only recently accepted by the A.O.U. Check-List Committee (37th Supplement, July 1989) and thus, would not be expected in Colorado.

HYBRIDS: Always a possibility with Larids. If this were a Hybrid, I do not feel qualified to speculate from whence it came. I do feel confident that the identification is correct due to the number of consistencies with typical second-winter (emerging second-summer) immature birds. As far as its occurrence being "man-assisted", I believe this to be too far fetched and therefore of no consequence.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES:

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (Larus fuscus graellsii): Have seen two winter plumaged adults in Colorado: one on December 14, 1976 at Lake Sangre de Cristo, Adams County and one on February 6, 1988 at Hamilton Reservoir, Larimer County. Also, one first-winter immature at Chatfield Reservoir, Jefferson County on December 14, 1991 (Denver Christmas Count). And finally, one second-winter immature at Pueblo Reservoir, Pueblo County on December 17, 1991 and again on January 21, 1992. Have observed a num-

of individuals of various ages on September 20, 1989 while crossing the Kattegat Straits between Frederikshavn, Denmark and Göteborg, Sweden. Also observed at Stockholm, Sweden in September 1989. And more recently in Europe, September 1991, observed a number of birds at various points throughout the British Isles. I had excellent study opportunities at the "Round Pond" in the Kensington Gardens and at "The Serpentine" in Hyde Park, both of which I visited regularly during a one week's stay in London, England. Also observed this species at various English Channel sites between Plymouth and Lands End.

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*):** Have observed in all plumages along the eastern coast of North America from South Carolina to Newfoundland (but primarily on Long Island, New York between 1948 and 1961, and numerous visits thereafter) during the past 40+ years. Also seen in good numbers in the British Isles during September 1991. Found the first state record for Colorado on January 1, 1980, a first-winter immature at Centennial Park, Englewood, Arapahoe County. Have seen on two other occasions in Colorado: a first-winter immature at Cherry Creek Reservoir, Arapahoe County from January 25 through February 13, 1982 and a first-winter immature at the same location on November 2, 1988.

**HERRING GULL (*Larus argentatus*):** Observed in all plumages during the past 50 years throughout the continental United States and Canada as well as during two visits to Europe in 1989 and 1991.

**THAYER'S GULL (*Larus thayeri*):** Have seen and studied this gull thoroughly since 1970 in Colorado where it winters regularly (both immatures and adults). Have also seen it in the Churchill area of Manitoba, Canada (June 1984) and in winter along the Washington and California coasts.

**CALIFORNIA GULL (*Larus californicus*):** Observed in all plumages throughout eastern Colorado since 1965, including a number of winter sightings. Have also observed it along the coasts of Washington and California since 1961.

**RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*):** Observed throughout most of North America in all plumages over the past 50 years.

**MEW GULL (*Larus canus*):** Observed five times in Colorado since 1980. Found it to be most common during an eight-week motor trip throughout Alaska in 1985. Also observed in good numbers in Norway in 1989, particularly in and around the harbor at Bergen.

**WESTERN GULL (*Larus occidentalis*):** Seen only along the coasts of Washington and California in all plumages during numerous visits since 1961.

**YELLOW-FOOTED GULL (*Larus livens*):** Have never seen one.

**SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*):** Seen twice in Alaska, both adult birds: one on July 1, 1985 at the "Homer Spit" on the Kenai Peninsula and one on May 18, 1988 on Attu Island in the Aleutians.

**BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*):** Have never seen one.

**THIS REPORT WAS WRITTEN BASED UPON NOTES AND SKETCHES TAKEN AT THE TIME OF OBSERVATIONS AS WELL AS AFTERWARDS.**

**REFERENCES USED TO PREPARE THIS REPORT:** References which adequately describe observable immature plumages of gulls in the field are just about non-existent. Those that attempt to provide details come up short (the popular field guides) and for all practical purposes are nearly useless. Nevertheless, the following references were consulted:

Gooders, John. 1990. Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe?  
Kingfisher Books.

Grant, Peter J. 1986. Gulls, A Guide to Identification. Buteo Books.

Harrison, Peter. 1983. Seabirds, An Identification Guide. Houghton,  
Mifflin Co.

Tuck, Gerald and Heinzel, Hermann. 1980. A Field Guide to the Birds of  
Britain and the World. William Collins Sons & Co. ltd.

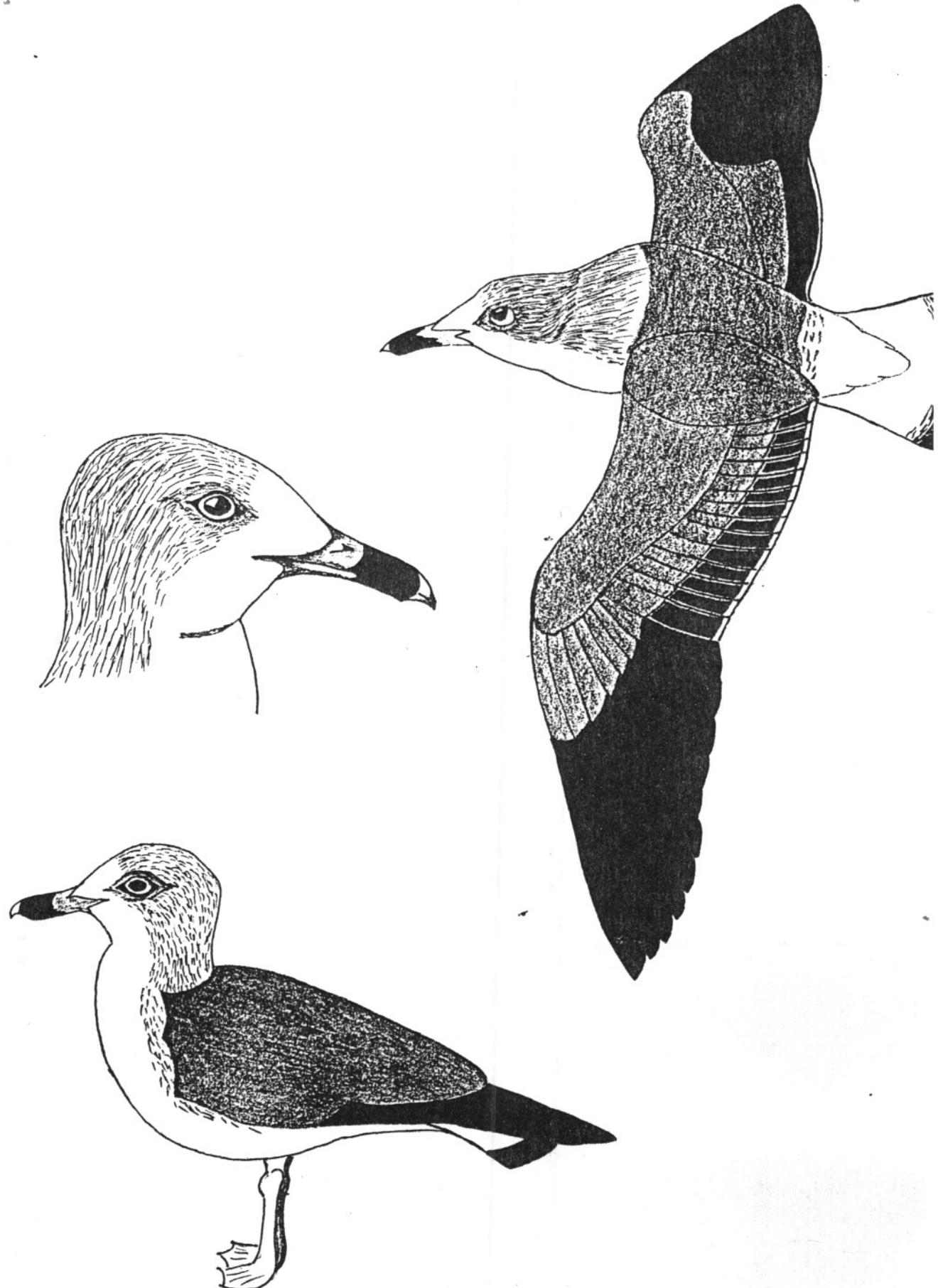
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DATE: March 4, 1992

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