

23-94-30

accepted

LAUGHING GULL
Larus atricilla

Location: Upper Queens Reservoir; about 15 miles SE of Eads; Kiowa County, Colorado

Date: May 22 and 28, 1994

Setting:

I was alone when I found this bird at about 9:45 a.m. on the 22nd. I observed it until about 10:15 a.m. I was able to approach it rather closely, especially on the 28th when I got to within about 50 yards of the bird as it walked on the beach. I observed the bird in good light while it stood on the beach and also in flight. Distances were 50-500 yards. I used B & L 10 x 40 binoculars and Kowa 10-40 x scope. The bird walked quietly along the beach, sometimes with a Ring-billed Gull, and on the 28th, sometimes in close company with a Franklin's Gull. This afforded excellent side-by-side comparisons.

Description:

This was a distinctive bird, even at a distance. It was a first winter bird, molting into first summer plumage. Overall it was a medium-sized gull. It was very long-winged, especially when perched, and the wing-tips extended past the tail about 1 1/2". It had a long bill and long legs. It was between a Ring-billed and Franklin's Gull in size, but was closer to the Ring-billed, being much larger than the Franklin's. The most conspicuous difference from the Franklin's Gull (when side-by-side), besides the larger size and more long-winged and long-legged proportions, was the bird's long, drooping bill.

Standing: The back was dark grey, much darker than Ring-billed Gull. On the 22nd I guessed it was about the color of a Lesser Black-backed Gull; on the 28th I saw that it was very close to, though slightly darker and browner than, the color of a Franklin's Gull. The head was white with an indistinct, smudgy blackish "hood", more pronounced at the back of the head. The hood was vague and greyish, not nearly as pronounced as the Franklin's Gull. The forward part of the face was nearly white. The mantle was dark brownish-grey. The undersides (breast and belly) were white, with a grey wash at the sides and a dusky wash to the breast and belly. The tail was well worn with a black terminal band (approximately the distal one half) that included black outer tail feathers. The bill was distinctive, being long, thick, and drooping. It was black, with a browner base. The legs were long and black, the portion below the "knee" being particularly long.

In flight: This was a very dark and distinctive gull in flight. Mantle dark brownish-grey. Upper wing coverts dirty brownish-grey. Outer and inner primaries black or blackish, primary coverts black. Secondaries blackish. This all combined to give a fairly uniform, very dark upper wing in flight. The under wing was also very dark, with blackish primaries, primary coverts and secondaries. The rump and upper tail were white and the lower tail was black from edge to edge.

Similar Species:

The partial hood indicate one of the "black-headed" gulls. Bonaparte's, Little and Common Black-headed would be much lighter on the back, have narrow black tail bands, be red-legged and the first two would be much smaller. I observed this bird on the sand within two feet of a Franklin's Gull on the 28th. Franklin's Gull was much smaller, shorter-legged, and with shorter wings. The wings of the Franklin's barely extended past the tail. Franklin's had a much more petite bill that was not thick nor noticeably droopy. Also Franklin's had a darker grey face and a more pronounced, blacker hood; whiter underparts without a grey wash, black on the lower tail that did not extend from edge to edge, and a plainer grey back (not greyish-brown).

Experience with Species:

I have seen thousands of Laughing and Franklin's Gulls.

This report is prepared from notes made during and after observation on both May 22 and 28.

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