

GULL STORY

by P. William Smith, Hingham

On July 8, 1984, I was working Plymouth Beach's birds, trying to pin down some terns for an out-of-state friend who was coming for a photographic session. I was out early enough to beat the summer beach buggies that overwhelm the thousand or more gulls that like to loaf near the tip when there's not too much disturbance. There were plenty to pick through, and I was delighted to notice a bird I had seen depicted in field guides (e.g., Peterson 1980; Robbins, et al. 1983) but had not found in many years of active birding - a large, immaculately white gull. Surely it was the ephemeral second-year Glaucous (*Larus hyperboreus*). It was clearly intermediate in size between the Herrings (*L. argentatus*) and most Great Black-backed (*L. marinus*) and lacked all traces of black or gray in the feathers; its legs were pinkish, and its bill was dull pinkish with an irregularly shaped dark tip, which at some angles appeared to be deformed.

I promptly sent a note off to Ruth Emery; I also mentioned the "Glaucous" to several birding friends. I saw it fairly regularly, as did several others, over the next three weeks or so. The bird acted sluggish and had a rather moth-eaten look to it. I took this to be the effects of molt, active in the local gulls at the time, plus, possibly, a touch of PSP (paralytic shellfish poisoning), the red tide that had caused the nearby shellfishing flats to be closed.

By chance, late in July, I received several back issues of British Birds and happened to thumb through an article by Grant (1981), part of the forerunner of his authoritative book on gull identification (Grant 1982). I was astounded to see photos of "real" second-summer Glaucous Gulls and to read under "Identification Pitfalls" that "reference in some literature to an all-white second-year plumage for Glaucous and Iceland gulls is misleading Any large gull that is genuinely all-white is a certain albino . . ." Aha! What did we have here?



Plymouth Beach, July 1984

Photo by P. William Smith

Asking that question proved easier than answering it. By now the bird could not always be found at Plymouth Beach, but luckily I had a few fair pictures of it, which I showed and mailed around. I was disappointed at the depth of most analyses but not really surprised. Long ago I had learned that identification from photos was notoriously risky, so I become shy myself when the subject of an identification dilemma isn't about to fly away. Since Grant himself was an old friend, I decided to seek his advice.

Peter provided what I would term a specific equivocation, offering a 90 percent probability that it was an albino Great Black-backed Gull but reserving a 10 percent chance for an exceptionally pale and washed-out second-winter Glaucous. He pointed out that if feather color were ignored, the bird had a shape and soft-part colors similar to the adjacent Great Black-backed. He felt that the fairly extensive, angled black tip to the bill was not normally characteristic of Glaucous and that the highly abraded, worn-to-a-point primary tips might suggest weak, albinistic feathers. (See accompanying photograph.) He still believed that the Glaucous and Iceland (*L. glaucoides*) gulls never have all-white feathers unless, of course, they are albinos.

I like Peter's probabilistic approach even after thinking about its effect on my or anyone's birdlist. It is a direct, scientific way of dealing with identification problems such as these and avoids the often unanswerable question of who's the most expert expert. Even if this bird had been collected, its identity might well have been a matter of opinion; for example, many of the skuas shot in New England waters over the years have sported more than one museum label. By calling the bird a probable albino Great Black-backed, it is possible to acknowledge some of the inherent limitations in the identification process itself, especially when photographs become involved (Petersen 1982).

I thank the several people and especially Peter Grant who helped me reach the conclusion stated here. Some of those who also saw the bird have a different opinion, and it's important to acknowledge that fact. If only we could ask the bird who his parents were . . .

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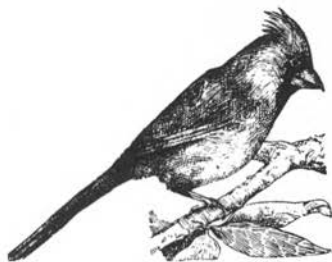


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