

BLACK-TAILED GULL SIGHTING

by Patricia A. O'Neill

Saturday, June 24, 1995, was a dreary day, and at about 9:30 AM, I took a walk on Second Beach in Middletown, Rhode Island. I was not birding, but I had my binoculars in hand, and, of course, I had to check out the small gathering of gulls, mostly Ringed-bill Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), picking in the seaweed at the water's edge. The tide was low, and the beach was deserted except for the odd walker or two. I immediately spotted a small dark-winged gull that appeared to be just perceptibly larger than the Ringbills it was consorting with.

The bird was dramatically smaller than the few Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) in the group. My first thought was that it was a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graelsi*), but it seemed a bit small, and it had a black band across the bottom of the tail with a worn white outer tip. The head and breast were pure white, and in the light that day, the wings appeared to be slate-gray with mirrorless black primaries. There appeared to be some brownish gray, but not much on the wing coverts. When the bird stretched its wings, the secondaries were bordered with a white trailing edge that did not extend out to the black primaries. The mantle was the same slate-gray as the inner wing.

The legs and the base of the bill were a clear yellow with a greenish tinge. The bill from the gonys forward seemed to be ringed with black with an orange-yellow tip that I could not always make out. I believe that specks of red seaweed were adhering to the bill. The iris was a pale yellow, the orbital ring red. The head was less rounded than that of the Ringbills and seemed to slope up from the bill at about a forty-five degree angle, round off, and then angle back. I made notes with paper and pen cadged from a group of beachgoers that had arrived and were setting up a volley ball net.

The National Geographic Society *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, the only bird book I had with me, left me mystified. The gray of the wings was correct for *Larus fuscus graelsi*, but the broad tail band and the bill color were wrong for a bird that appeared to be almost an adult. I was assuming that the bird was a third summer bird, that is, born three years ago this spring or summer. I called two Rhode Island bird gurus, David Emerson (no answer) and Paul Buckley (left message on his answering machine). When I returned home to Milton, Massachusetts, late the next day, a quick glance at European sources provided no answers.

Monday night, before doing any further research, I spoke with Paul Buckley, who agreed immediately that a near adult Lesser Black-backed Gull with a clear white head and breast would not have the dramatic tail band I described. He paused and asked if I had considered a Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*). I replied, "A what?" He told me that one had been seen in Virginia in March and suggested that I look at the gull in Harrison's *Seabirds*:

An Identification Guide (1983), and in a past issue of *Birding* and call him back. When I called him back, I told him that it looked good.

The next day, Tuesday, June 27, Rhode Island's birding luminaries descended upon Second Beach and the surrounding areas. Unfortunately Extreme Games participants were descending on the area too. Surfboard skydiving was the event of the day. Few other winged creatures remained in the area.

The following Saturday morning, July 1, 1995, I set out determined to refind this bird and confirm that it was in fact a Black-tailed Gull. It was another dreary day. Second Beach was virtually birdless, but at my next stop I found the bird at about 9:30 AM in a large roost of gulls just north of the creek on Third Beach.

It appeared somewhat scruffier than it had a week ago, and not much was left to the white terminal band on the tail. There also appeared to be more brownish-gray in the wing coverts. The brownish lesser and greater coverts, which looked extremely worn, were separated by what appeared to be fresh gray median coverts. The secondaries also appeared to be fresh, giving the folded wing an almost banded appearance. I noted that the tail band appeared to be about two inches wide and perhaps a third of the tail length. The two lateral outer tail feathers were white. The orange tip of the bill could be clearly seen as well as an orange smudge behind the black on the lower mandible.



I raced to a convenience store, bought film, refound the bird, and shot the whole roll with my snap-and-shoot camera (Nikon Smart Flash; 35-70 zoom). I took pictures with a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) in the background for size comparison before the Blacktail flew off. I got two pictures on the wing from the rear. After it landed, I got photos of it with Ringbills, and in one lucky shot, was even able to pick up the bill tip color. I believe the photos would have been adequate to document the identification.

I then began to seek other birders to document the record. Nick Logothets from the nearby Sachuest National Wildlife Refuge was first on the scene and blew the bird away with a 300-millimeter lens. Dave Emerson arrived on the beach at about 12:30 PM with camera and camcorder. By Sunday, the word was out, and birders continued arriving from around the country to add this Asian gull to their list.

In flight, the long wings and the tail band make the bird quite easy to follow; the dramatic tail band stands out from a distance, but this circumstance

was to change. By July 8, it was evident that the bird was molting. A few gray flecks had appeared on the head. I could also see large white patches in the secondary coverts that had not been there a week earlier. The patches are the exposed underwing feathers as the bird loses its secondary coverts. On the ground, the bare feather shafts of the greater coverts were apparent.

By July 14 the bird had acquired more speckling on the head, although the flecks were still sparse, a few on the top of the head, the back of the crown, and behind the eyes. I was unable to get a good look at the progress of the molt on the folded wing, as we were viewing the bird's body head-on and partially backlit. On July 16 I noted that the bird had lost its two central tail feathers, so it no longer sported a clear black band across the tail. It was in the water just beyond the large seaweed wrack and appeared to be picking at food items in the floating seaweed lifted up by the incoming tide. A Lesser Black-backed Gull was in the flock and in close comparison is a bigger, bulkier bird with significantly darker wings. This bird is closer in color to *Larus f. fuscus* than to *Larus f. graelsi*. The gray of the Black-tailed Gull's mantle was about the same as that of a Laughing Gull (*Larus rissa*).

By July 24 the gull had developed a fully speckled gray head, especially heavy on the lower nape, and new secondaries appeared to be coming in. By August 1 the back of the nape had gotten quite gray, and the wing color seemed paler. From a distance, however, the bird still looked dark and was plainly darker than the Herring Gulls that it was with.

By August 6 new black-banded tail feathers were emerging in the center of the tail but were short of the remaining band on the older feathers. The new three inner primary feathers were also growing in. The outer two of the three were black with white tips. The inner feather was a lighter gray, with a black smudge and then the white tip.

By August 19 the tail band had been fully replaced with a clean white terminal band beyond the black band. By September 4 the molt appeared to be complete. One could see three very small white mirrors or dots at the tips of the primaries. The eye was paler than that of Ringbills, but leg color seemed to have brightened again. The red tip of the bill had become more prominent, but there was still not a straight black ring dividing it from the gray-green of the base of the bill. The red smudge at the basal side of the black ring on the lower mandible remained. The head was heavily smudged, not flecked, with gray, cut off in an almost straight line at the base of the nape. I could find only a hint of one small brownish feather in the median coverts. The tail band was beautiful.

The Black-tailed Gull is a "three year gull," and this individual appeared to have completed its molt into its first adult or third winter plumage. The white lateral outer tail feathers are an indication that this bird had reached near-adult or adult plumage as the tail band on the second winter bird extends to the outer feathers (Harrison 1983).

The Black-tailed Gull is an abundant resident along the Japanese coast from Kyushu northward. It breeds in colonies on small, rocky, coastal islands from southern Sakhalin, Ussuriland, and the Kurile Islands, south through Japan, eastern China, and Korea, and it winters along coasts from Japan and Korea south to eastern China, Taiwan, and the Ryuku Islands. It feeds on small fish and in winter on waste from commercial fisheries.

There have been at least eight prior sightings in North America. Appendix A to the A.O.U. Checklist lists a sight record from Attu on May 29, 1980, and an individual collected in San Diego Bay that was present November 16-18, 1954. The July 1995 *Winging It* reported a bird present in Homer, Alaska. Wayne Petersen of the Massachusetts Audubon Society reports additional records from Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska, from British Columbia, from southern Manitoba, and in 1984 from Maryland. Bob Abrams, Paul Donahue, and David Ludlow saw a Black-tailed Gull in Belize in 1988. Although this last sighting was never reported, the experience of the birders involved makes the record entirely credible. Most recent was the well-documented bird in Virginia in March 1995. The Rhode Island bird was clearly a different individual because the Virginia bird was a full adult and had an injured left leg.

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