

North Mississippi Records of Black-legged Kittiwake,  
Little Gull, and Common Black-headed Gull

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Recent occurrences of the Black-legged Kittiwake (Rissa tridactyla), Little Gull (Larus minutus), and Common Black-headed Gull (L. ridibundus) lead me both to review my prior records and to present the most recently added observations from the lakes of north Mississippi.

The initial records of Black-legged Kittiwake in Mississippi away from the Mississippi Sound were of two immature birds seen on Grenada Lake near the south end of Grenada dam on 4 December 1967. The first specimen for the state was an immature collected on 10 February 1969 at Sardis Lake, Panola County (Davis 1970). The latter bird was seen several times from 25 January until its collection, on Lower Lake, a 120-ha basin below the outlet channel of Sardis dam. Another single immature kittiwake was observed at this site on 3 and 4 January 1976, simultaneously with an adult Little Gull.

Most recently, I found an adult Black-legged Kittiwake at Lower Lake on 28 December 1983. The intermediate size of this species, between that of Bonaparte's (L. philadelphia) and Ring-billed (L. delawarensis) gulls, is an important character to aid in "spotting" a kittiwake, as is also the distinctive neck-wing-and-tail pattern of the immature.

The first record of a Little Gull in Mississippi on 15 March 1970 was confirmed by collection of the single adult on 16 March 1970, at Lower Lake below the dam at Sardis Lake. That specimen is in the Vaiden Collection of the Department of Biology, University of Mississippi (Davis 1971). Two later sightings of single birds were made at Lower Lake: an adult on 3 and 4 January 1976 (Davis 1976), and an immature on 5 February 1978. I obtained my first record of the species at another site, Grenada dam outlet channel, on 7 January 1984. Both this

and a second sighting there on 19 December 1984 (Muth 1985) each consisted of a single bird in first winter plumage, with markings as illustrated in Farrand (1983). The latter observation, during the 1984 Christmas Bird Count, was shared by Gene Knight, as the bird was noted in active feeding flight up and down a 75-m section of the outlet channel. Both in adult and immature plumage, the Little Gull can be distinguished fairly readily from the adult and immature Bonaparte's Gulls in whose company the former is typically found. The smaller size of the Little Gull is a helpful criterion, in addition to the distinctive dark underwings of the adult and the black markings on the mantle and tail of the immature. Furthermore, the neat dark cap of the first-winter Little Gull, which is lacking in Bonaparte's, is a feature likely to catch one's attention. I am unaware of any other Mississippi records than these five from Panola and Grenada counties.

In the course of the Christmas Bird Count at Grenada Lake on 20 December 1972, I observed one adult and one immature gull that I identified as the Common Black-headed Gull. The same day the birds were shown to Lula and Ben B. Coffey, Jr., who concurred in the identification (Davis 1973). Although the species' body length (38 cm) differs little from that of Bonaparte's Gull (30-36 cm) according to Farrand (1983), my first impression was of the birds being too large for Bonaparte's, but obviously smaller than Ring-billed Gull (L. delawarensis).

This size difference also was evident upon my second observation of the Common Black-headed Gull on 9 January 1985. In this case the single adult was seen for 3-4 minutes while coursing over the outlet channel, whereas the 1972 birds were seen near shore 200 m east of the south end of Grenada dam for 10 min (Davis 1973). The darkness of the underwing, suggestive at first of the adult Little Gull, initially attracted my attention in this second Mississippi sighting. However, the presence of white outer primaries with a gray mantle clearly distinguished it from the adult Little Gull, although making it quite similar (as was true also for its head markings) to the adult winter plumage of the Bonaparte's Gulls with which it was flying.

Although field guides do not show dark underwing coloration for the Common Black-headed Gull extending beyond the inner primaries, photographs in Grant (1982; Figs. 11, 17, and 21)

show some birds that appear more generally dark gray to black over much of the wing's under surfaces. This may be more likely under poorly illuminated conditions, as in this case when the bird was seen about 1600 with a fully cloudy sky. Similarly, the light conditions were inadequate for discerning the red on the bill of the Common Black-headed Gull, especially on a continually-moving bird. Unfortunately, although another observer was present, he could not pick out this particular bird from among the 70 rapidly wheeling, diving, and coursing Bonaparte's Gulls before it left the outlet channel to fly over the dam to the lake proper. Efforts to relocate the bird were unsuccessful. There is no photograph or specimen as yet to confirm this species' occurrence in Mississippi.

These observations of three rare species of gulls for Mississippi range over dates from 4 December to 21 March. Distribution of the occurrences by month was as follows: 4 in December, 5 in January, 2 in February, and 1 in March. In all cases except 2, the unusual species were present in the immediate company of moderate to large numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls, and the dates coincide with the period of the greatest concentration of the latter species in the immediate area of the outlet channels of the 2 dams. It remains to be established whether the Black-legged Kittiwake, Little Gull, or Common Black-headed Gull might be occurring also among aggregations of Bonaparte's Gulls in other areas of Mississippi.

#### Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the late Professor Y.J. McGaha, Department of Biology, in the collection of the specimens mentioned in the text.

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