

A CALIFORNIA GULL SIGHT RECORD FOR OHIO

On November 24, 1979, I was birding the harbor at the mouth of the Huron River in Huron, Erie County, Ohio, in the company of Evelyn Gordon. At approximately 0800, I got a brief glimpse at a gull in flight that appeared to have a slightly darker mantle but had extensive black on the wing tips. At first, I thought nothing of this bird and continued to observe the large numbers of gulls feeding in the harbor. Almost as a second thought before undertaking the hike to the end of the pier, I decided to get a better look at the bird with an apparently darker mantle.

At 0815, I found this bird sitting on the boat docks several hundred feet south of the Twine House Restaurant along the west side of the river. For the next 45 minutes, I closely examined this bird with a 20X telescope at a distance of approximately 100 feet with the sun mostly at my back. The gull spent most of this time sleeping and preening on the boat docks with many herring (Larus argentatus) and ring-billed gulls (L. delawarensis) although it made several short flights around the basin. I recorded the following field notes during this observation.

In direct comparison, this bird was the same size as a female herring gull. It was noticeably larger than both sexes of ring-billed gull while it was distinctly smaller than a male herring gull. Its overall shape was similar to a female herring gull except that its legs were much shorter. The legs of this bird were nearly identical in length to those of the ring-billed gull.

The head, neck and upper chest of this bird were heavily washed with dusky gray-brown and appeared to be much dingier than the herring gulls. The remainder of the underparts and tail were pure white. The mantle was a shade darker gray than the herring gull. The difference in mantle color was quite distinctive and allowed this bird to be readily picked out of the large number of gulls sitting on the dock. In flight, this bird had a distinctive wing pattern, particularly the amount of black on the wing tips which was more extensive than that of the herring gull. The outer 3-4 primaries were black to the wing coverts which created a straight line where the black and gray meet on the wing rather than a concave arc typical of the herring gull (these different wing patterns are clearly shown in plate 32 of Godfrey, 1966). On the outermost primary, the white spot was larger, appeared to extend to the tip of the feather, and was more noticeable in flight than that of the herring gull.

This bird had a dark brown iris. Its bill was yellowish-green with red and black spots on the lower mandible and a plain upper mandible. The size and shape of the bill was similar to a female herring gull, being noticeably smaller and slimmer than that of a male herring gull. The legs were greenish-yellow.

The following combination of field marks, size of a female herring gull, short greenish-yellow legs, slightly darker mantle, distinctive wing tip pattern in flight, dark brown iris, and red and black spots on the lower mandible are all characteristic of the California gull (L. californicus) and eliminate all other similar

gull species. Both observers have had previous field experience with this species in the western United States and agreed on this identification.

Between 1030 and 1050 on the same day, I showed this bird to John Pogacnik, Erdine Thompson, Frank Hlebcar, Tim Cullinan and Jan Hall. They all agreed with the identification although none had previously seen this species. The next day, this bird was observed at the same location by Ray Hannikman, Larry Rosche and Elinor Elder who also noted these field marks and concurred with this identification.

This sighting provides the first documented sight record for the California gull in Ohio. I could locate only two previous sight records of this species in western Lake Erie, these being immature birds observed at two Michigan localities, the Monroe power plant on March 24, 1978 and at Metropolitan Beach on April 10, 1978 (Eckert, 1978). I know of no specimens or photographs of the California gull from this area. Since this species breeds as far east as North Dakota and Manitoba (Godfrey, 1966), it is not inconceivable for a few individual California gulls to migrate east with the herring and ring-billed gulls that breed in the same area and winter along the Atlantic coast. Hence, this species should be looked for among the large flocks of gulls that frequent Lake Erie during late fall.

Literature Cited

- Eckert, K. 1978. Western Great Lakes Region. American Birds 32 (5): 1010.
- Godfrey, W. E. 1966. The Birds of Canada. National Museums of Canada Bulletin No. 203. pp. 180, plate 32.

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