THE OHIO KELP GULL

By Ben Morrison

(*Editor's Note: At press time, the Ohio Bird Records Committee had not voted on the documentation of this sighting, so the possibility remains that its identity will not be confirmed. But I consider that very unlikely*.)

Introduction

For more than thirty years, Springfield Lake in ***Summit*** has provided me a place to decompress from a difficult day at work. One such day was 05 Dec 2015. On this sunny afternoon I dropped in for some therapeutic lake scoping. There was nothing to see out of the ordinary, or so I thought. While packing up my scope, I glanced to the east end of the lake and saw a gathering of gulls on a roof. Even at a great distance I could see an extremely dark backed gull. I had previously seen a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) at this location, but this bird looked much darker backed. I set up my spotting scope up again for a better look and saw a stocky gull with the blackest back I had ever seen. A much closer view and help would be needed with this odd gull.

Kent Miller was my "go to" guy. It must have sounded like I had lost my mind when I described the bird I was viewing. All the while I kept asking, "What could this bird be?" Kent arrived in short order. Multiple pictures were taken and possibilities were discussed. We were convinced, or nearly so, that we could be looking at Ohio's first documented Kelp Gull (*L. dominicanus*). We realized that we needed to get as many eyes on this bird as possible. Diagnostic pictures of this bird would be needed for proof. The bird was put to roost on the roof of Springfield Roller Rink.

Photo by Ben Morrison

The next morning several seasoned birders gathered to get a glimpse of the potential Kelp Gull. Our southern hemisphere visitor was accommodating and stayed on Springfield Lake until those gathered saw the bird. At this point the consensus was that this was indeed a Kelp Gull. Most felt that the identification was good but more evidence was needed for a rare bird so rare in North America.

Over the next few days the bird was seen early in the morning and late in the evening. Frustrated observers often would get just a fleeting glimpse of the black mantled gull as it headed southeast to its daytime feeding areas. The gull was seen intermittently until the end of Dec, once on 10 Jan, and then there were no reports until 06 Feb. Several people saw the bird that day and until 11 Feb. During this period, evidence was gathered from diligent photographers and even a video was taken of the gull. Also, gull experts were contacted and photos were sent for opinions. Most, if not all, were in agreement with the identification and had very little reservation that it was a Kelp Gull.

Much effort was also put into finding the daytime feeding areas. The gull seemed to always head southeast at daylight. Perhaps it was going to a landfill during the daytime hours to feed and then returning to the lake at night to roost. Getting admittance into a landfill is not an easy task. One Stark County landfill in Bolivar did allow admittance after a required safety course was completed, and the required safety equipment was purchased. On 11 Feb, the Kelp Gull was found and photographed at close range at this landfill. Several diagnostic pictures were passed to the gull experts of the world. They found no fault in calling this bird a Kelp Gull (Alvaro Jaramillo and Amar Ayyash, email communications with Kent Miller). The gull was never seen there again, maintaining its unpredictable status.

With a cold snap on 17 Feb, the large gulls gathered in southern regions of Canton, ***Stark***. In late afternoon, the gulls would come streaming from the south to this area. The Kelp Gull made a stunning appearance circling overhead in the evening sun. There was one other potential report from Springfield Lake after the Canton sighting. There are no other known sightings. Only time will tell if this is the last of the Ohio Kelp Gull.

Photo by Kent Miller

Description

The Kelp Gull is a stocky gull with an extremely black back (mantle) and wings. The head, underparts, and tail are clean white. The upper wing is black with a wide white trailing margin on the tertials, and the primaries are tipped with four or five small white spots. The leading edge has a narrow white margin. The under-wing is white with dark gray primaries shading to black at the tips. A single white spot or mirror can be seen on both the upper and lower surfaces of the 10th primary.

When settled the Kelp Gull appears to have a short wings and tail making it appear heavy fronted. In the folded wings, the white tertial crescent forms a white margin or skirt around the wings. The legs are a dull yellow to gray and are long, especially in the tibia portion. The iris is yellow and the orbital ring is yellow to reddish. The gape is yellow and the bill is large and yellow with a red spot on the mandible. The beak is bulbous at the tip and exhibits a deep gonydeal angle. The overall size is a bit smaller than Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) but structural differences make the exact size difficult to determine.

The photographs submitted will attest that the Springfield Lake gull meets the criteria as described for a Kelp Gull. Our visitor is believed to be in basic (non-breeding) plumage, as pointed out by the experts. There is slight flecking on the head and nape and the orbital ring is more yellow than reddish. These characteristics suggest this gull has switched to a Northern Hemisphere molt pattern opposite to the species' usual one. This has been demonstrated in Southern Hemisphere birds that have been in northern latitudes for some time. (Olsen, 2004) The life-span for a Kelp Gull has been found to be up to twenty years which would give ample time for such a transformation. (Kelp Gull).

The Springfield Lake Kelp Gull is an adult bird. The following discussion of similar gulls will also refer to adult birds.

Kelp Gulls differ from Lesser Black-backed Gulls in that the mantles of the former are noticeably darker. The one exception is the "Baltic" Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus fuscus*). The "Baltic Gull" breeds in Scandinavia, and migrates to East Africa in the winter months. It has never demonstrated vagrancy to the North American continent. With all Lesser Black-backed Gulls, including the "Baltic" subspecies, there are several other differences from the Kelp Gull. The Kelp Gull is larger and stockier and has a larger and more bulbous bill. The Lesser Black-backed Gulls have longer and narrower wings and shorter legs. The white trailing edge of the upper wing is also much narrower in the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Kelp Gulls differ from Great Blacked-backed Gulls in that they are smaller and less bulky overall. Great Blacked-backed Gulls have more extensive white in the tips of the primaries and the legs are pink. Great Blacked-backed Gulls do not have as wide a white trailing margin. The wings when settled or folded do not have the white skirt that the Kelp Gull exhibits. Though the mantle of a Great Black-backed Gull is dark, it is not as black as that of an adult Kelp Gull.

Other remote possibilities to consider would be the Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*) and Yellow-footed Gull (*L. livens*). Both of these species have a lighter gray mantle than the Kelp Gull. The Slaty-backed has pink feet and the Yellow-footed has bright yellow feet. The "Chandeleur" Gull, a Kelp x Herring Gull (*L. smithsonianus*) hybrid, has a lighter mantle and carries some other characteristics of the Herring Gull as well.

The Kelp Gull is widespread and abundant over much of the southern hemisphere. It is found in South America, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Antarctica as well as islands below the equator (Olsen, 2004). The Kelp Gull has shown a trend of expansion in range and population (del Hoyo, 1996).

Larry O'Meallie and Dan Purington saw the first of this species in the United States, on Curlew Island, Louisiana in the Chandeleur Island chain on 08 Jul 1989. Not one, but a pair were found and reported as Lesser Black-blacked Gulls (Dittman, 2005). A year later on a return trip the birds were relocated and confirmed as Kelp Gulls. The saga continued where perhaps five different Kelp Gulls were found in the Chandeleur Islands. All but two were found to be paired with Herring Gulls; the two paired with each

other. This was unique in that both species were far from their usual ranges. This situation brings to mind the Stephen Stills song, "Love the One You're With". (Though actually this should be the theme song for all *Larus* species.) The Kelp x Herring Gulls pairs produced hybrid offspring which became known as Chandeleur Gulls. This population was finally wiped out in 2005 by hurricane Katrina, which dispersed the Kelp Gulls and Chandeleur Gulls to unknown locations (Dittmann, 2005).

The incidence of vagrancy by Kelp Gulls continued with sightings from widespread locations. One was recorded in Galveston, Texas in 1996 (Gottschling, 1996) and another was there in 2004 (Lockwood and Freeman, 2004). Single Kelp Gulls were identified in Indiana in 1990 (Hess, 2004) and in Colorado in 2003 (Hess, 2004). Perhaps the most famous and observed of Kelp Gulls, "Shrimpy", was seen intermittently in Maryland from 07 Feb 1998 through Nov 2004. A third-cycle Kelp Gull was found in Florida during the West Pasco CBC on 08 Dec 2010 (Pranty, 2011). Ohio's own Bob Lane was instrumental in the identification and documentation of this bird. Another at Wheatley Harbor, Ontario on 07 Sep 2012 was the first provincial and Canadian Kelp Gull record. (Swick, 2015)

A putative Kelp Gull was seen on 17 and 18 Jan 2015 on the Ohio River near Pittsburgh. Apparently the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee has not yet acted on this sighting (Pennsylvania, 2015). This individual could be the same one that appeared at Springfield Lake. Finally, California entered the Kelp Gull parade on 20 May 2015 when Alvaro Jaramillo found that state's first (Swick, 2015).

The frequency of vagrancy is on the rise with this once solely southern hemisphere gull. The El Niño effect is one plausible explanation; however, the northern movement is exhibited in other parts of the world as well (Davis, 2003). The occurrence of the Kelp Gull in Ohio, or anywhere in North America for that matter, is indeed a rare event. But the trend of expansion shown by this species does make an encounter more likely than 20 years ago.

What I learned from this experience is to pay close attention to all aspects of the bird in question. The minutest detail can be monumental to the documentation and separation from similar birds. Take as many photographs as possible and make detailed field notes. Do not be afraid to call on those with more experience than you. Most experts are more than happy to share their learning and experience. [*and file a report with the OBRC! – Ed.*]

Finding this potential Kelp Gull was wonderful, but seeing others get to see and experience this magnificent vagrant was even better. I would not be surprised if this gull is still in the vicinity and could resurface at any time. "Shrimpy", the Maryland gull, took sabbaticals on occasion, and so may our Ohio bird. Perhaps on a cold icy day next winter some lone birder will look on a roof and find an extremely black backed gull sunning itself.

Photographs and documentation have been sent to the Ohio Bird Records Committee, and of course many other photos have been posted online. This gull's identity remains conjectural, though, until the Committee members have weighed all the evidence and possibilities.

Acknowledgements

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Appreciation goes out to all who were there that first morning responding to some "crazy" person reporting a preposterous Kelp Gull.

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