

First Photograph of Bonaparte's Gull in Panama

J. J. Pujals

On December 26, 1972, in a tidal pool at Coco Solo, on the Caribbean coast of the Canal Zone, I found an unfamiliar larid sitting with Laughing and Franklin's Gulls (*L. atricilla* and *L. pipixcan*). The bird remained until December 29. I was able to supplement my original field sketches with a series of photographs. Compared with the other associated gulls, this bird was distinctly smaller (the bill very much smaller and more slender); the mantle was paler gray; the head and neck were essentially white, with a little gray shading the rear crown, a conspicuous blackish auricular spot, some blackish about the eye and a suggestion of a white eye-ring; a dusky band crossed the wing extending from the wing coverts to the inner secondaries; the wing tips and much of the outer wing border were black, but considerable white was visible on the inner webs of the primaries even with the wing folded, and was especially conspicuous in flight; the tail and underparts were white, except that the former had a narrow terminal band (its tip rounded). The eye looked dark, the bill entirely black, the tarsus light fleshy pink. All these characters (except flight pattern and tail band and shape) are evident in the photographs. In flight the bird was very suggestive of a tern.

The larid agreed with Peterson's illustration of an immature Bonaparte's Gull ("A Field Guide to the Birds", 1947). This species is not mentioned as having occurred in Panama by Wetmore ("The Birds of the Republic of Panamá," Pt. 1, 1965), nor by Eisenmann and Loftin (Field Check-list of Birds of the Panama Canal Zone Area, second ed., 1971). I therefore sent my notes, sketches, and six photographs to E. Eisenmann, at the American Museum of Natural History. He writes:

"Although I know of no previous record quite so far south, the photographs, supplemented by your flight sketch and notes, appear to be of a Bonaparte's Gull in first winter (basic) plumage. This gull seems not usually to winter south of coastal United States and Mexico, but Bond (1971) mentions records from Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Martinique and Barbados, and there are occurrences in Hawaii and Europe.

The very small and slender, apparently wholly blackish, bill, combined with pale tarsus and mantle, head and wing patterns, and obviously smaller general size than the other gulls in the photographs, all agree with an immature *L. philadelphia*. Very similar in plumage pattern is the European Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*, which regularly winters to the Atlantic coast of Canada and the United States, and occurs, at least occasionally, in the Caribbean; but the bill color is different: dull orange to yellowish with



Bonaparte's Gull, (pale bird) Coco Solo, C.Z. Dec. 26, 1972. Photo J.J. Pujals.

only the tip dusky in immatures (red in adults); its bill would probably show up as longer and the wing band as less conspicuous. Also rather similarly patterned are the immatures of two southern South American gulls, the Brown-hooded Gull (*L. maculipennis*) and the Gray-hooded Gull (*L. cirrhocephalus*); but neither is known to range so far north or even to enter the Caribbean, and both have predominantly light-colored bills, which are distinctly longer and heavier, and both are bigger than the bird in your photographs, the Gray-hooded averaging larger than a Laughing Gull. The one other small gull with a diminutive black bill is the Eurasian Little Gull (*L. minutus*); this species has bred in Canada, winters in small numbers in northeastern North America, and in the western Atlantic has been reported at least south to Bermuda and Florida; its head and wing patterns are different from your photographs and its general size is smaller. So of all gulls known to me, your pictures seem to fit only Bonaparte's Gull."—J. J. Pujals, Coco Solo Hospital, P.O. Box 56, Coco Solo, Canal Zone.