

First record of a gull (*Larus atricilla*) for the Samoan Islands

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DURING A RECENT EXTENDED stay in the Samoan Islands, we recorded the first sighting of a gull of any species for these islands. We were there photographing the birds of Samoa for a forthcoming book and spent three months in American Samoa and three months in Western Samoa. Our field work consisted of daily surveys around the island roads and frequent forays into the interior.

On January 23, 1980 at 8:15 a.m. a solitary gull was seen standing 15m from the shoreline opposite the village of Malua on the North Shore road of the Island of Upolu, Western Samoa. It was low tide and the bird was conspicuous on the mud flat of the lagoon. We had a scheduled plane to meet and, therefore, could observe the gull for just ten minutes at this time. It was partially cloudy, but the sun was out and the lighting was excellent.

Our previous research of available literature on this area of the Pacific Ocean had not prepared us for the appearance of any gull and, although we were able to determine at once that it was an immature bird, we were uncertain as to species. Later that morning at 11:30 we returned to the same location and found the gull again, but now perched on a cement piling. We watched for 30 minutes as it flew about the area to a freshwater pond across the highway, apparently fishing, and then returned again to the perch. We photographed it at close range using a Leicaflex with 560 mm Leitz telephoto lens.

We realized that we had a problem in identification. First, we are not experts on gulls and, secondly, we were very limited as to available literature in the small library in Apia which had only

W.B. King's *Seabirds of the Tropical Pacific Ocean*. No other literature which we had with us dealt with gulls. The fact that it was an immature bird made it even more difficult to identify.

WE RETURNED TO MALUA the following day, January 24th, and found the gull still there. We observed it carefully for an hour. Again, it fished in the freshwater lagoon and then returned with its catch to the cement piling.

Because of the location of these islands in the southwest Pacific Ocean, we were inclined towards some kind of Southern Hemisphere gull, few though there are. One possibility was, perhaps, the Southern Black-backed (or Dominican) Gull. There had been no recent severe storms, although it was the hurricane season; thus, we could not ac-

count for the bird being out-of-range for this reason. Much later we learned of severe winds and storms in Hawaii during the week of January 7-12.

We can summarize our description as follows: small to medium-sized based on comparison with the Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*) and Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus incanum*), both in close proximity; gray to mottled brown on head, back and upper wings; white on tail, with dark terminal band; wing tips black; gray on breast and sides; white underbelly; white forehead and 'appearance' of white eye ring; beak black; legs and feet dark to 'blackish'.

The gull was subsequently seen at one other location—the mudflats at Mulinu'u Lagoon near Apia, approx-



Probable Laughing Gull, Malua, Western Samoa, January, 1980. Photo/C.J. Muse.

imately 15 miles east of Malua—on January 26th and 27th. We determined to our satisfaction that it was the same individual when we drove at once to the Malua location and did not find it there.

On January 26, we were accompanied by two touring Canadian Wildlife Service Biologists, Ragni Askevold and Brian Keating, and we all concluded it was "an immature gull of some type." Without more accurate sources for identification, we were not prepared to go beyond that. We also photographed it on several other occasions. The bird appeared content and had a ready source of fish available. It was totally unfamiliar to the Samoans nearby and they simply identified it as a "Tuli", the name applied to *all* shorebirds by the Samoans.

ON FEBRUARY 9, Terry Teppen, a Peace Corps volunteer with a Master's degree in biology, observed the bird with us. He confirmed the sightings, but could offer no more concrete identity. We last observed the bird, healthy and well fed, on February 27, 1980 as we drove to the airport prior to our departure.

Upon arrival in Walla Walla, Washington, we contacted several known ex-

perts at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution (George E. Watson), Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute in San Diego (Joseph Jehl), Buffalo Museum of Science, New York (Robert F. Andrlé), Guy McCaskie, California, and John Weber, Washington State University. We provided them with color slides of the bird and copies of our field notes. The consensus is that the gull was a first-winter-plumaged Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*). In overall size and shape, bill shape and size, mantle coloration, eye ring, white on the head, primary color and tail and rump pattern it agrees with available literature and museum specimens of this bird.

The gull was observed about 8000 km from its nearest breeding area in Southern California and since it is not an oceanic species, this should make our observation one of great interest.

The Samoan Islands should continue to provide both the professional ornithologist and the amateur birdwatcher excellent opportunities to do interesting field work and also record exciting possible "first" sightings.

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Possible sighting of an Eskimo Curlew in Guatemala

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ON NOVEMBER 19, 1977 a birdwatching group from the Sacramento Audubon Society visited the Pacific lowlands of Guatemala. We rented a boat near the resort of Likin, and went south on Canal de Chiquimulilla.

Suddenly a lone bird flew over the boat. The bird was obviously a curlew but definitely not a Whimbrel, with which we were familiar. After it passed our boat it flew back and circled, affording us a good chance to study it. The bird was small—about a foot in length; very buffy underneath, with the upper

parts darker. There were no distinct markings on the head. It did not fly high enough for us to see the undersurface of the wings. The bill was short—about two or three inches long and slightly decurved. The leg color was not observed. The bird flew into a cove and onto a grassy field. We turned around and went back, but did not see the bird again.

We used our reference in the field, Hugh Land's "Birds of Guatemala", 1970. On pages 97-98 he describes the Eskimo Curlew, Long-billed Curlew, and the Whimbrel. The Eskimo Curlew

was reported at San Geronimo, Guatemala, by Slavin (Slavin and Godman, 1879-1904. *Biol. Cent. Am. Aves* 1-3.) His sighting (in April) was inland and northeast of Likin. We feel certain that the bird we saw was not a Long-billed Curlew or a Whimbrel.

The possibility that this bird was the Asian Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*) seems unlikely, but it can not be ruled out.

—Sacramento Audubon Society, Sacramento, CA.