

Lesser Black-backed Gull in Panama

Neal Griffith Smith

A LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) has been seen at various times on the beaches of Panama City, Republic of Panama, from December 1st, 1979 by Paul Sharf to February 15, 1982 (author). These sightings represent the southernmost record of this species in the area covered by the new American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (in prep.) and together with one reported from Guyana (Devillers, 1979), the southernmost record for the Western Hemisphere. There are a number of records from Aruba (Voous, 1977) which lies north of Panama and Guyana.

When first discovered by Sharf in 1979 the bird was in adult basic (winter) plumage. The evidence that all observations were of the same birds is: the gull possesses a peculiar dark mark near the tip of the upper mandible (possibly visible in the photograph) which is not a species characteristic and suggestive of an injury of some type. The bird also sat on the same area of beach at Ft. Amador, often alone, when most of the sightings were made between 1979 and 1982. The latest date before disappearing until the following December was April 12, 1981 (author). At that time it was curiously in the same plumage that it possessed in December including the typical "winter head streaking" of *L. fuscus*. It was initially identified as a



Lesser Black-backed Gull, Ft. Amador, Panama, Dec. 31, 1980. The original color slide clearly shows yellow legs and clear yellow eye. Photo/N. G. Smith.

Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) and later as a Western Gull (*L. occidentalis*). Up to that time I had seen only color transparencies which were taken at a distance which made positive identification impossible.

In 1981 I examined the gull with a Questar telescope at 80x and 160x from distances as close as 7 meters, and photographed the gull with a 1000 mm lens on Kodachrome 64 film. This yielded 26 slides of the gull in various positions

including flight, and in the company of a variety of species.

Binford (1978) has detailed how to distinguish *Larus fuscus graellsii* from all other possible gulls. I won't repeat these, for the matter here is straightforward. The bird agrees in every respect with *L. fuscus graellsii*: body size of a small Herring Gull, but with a dark neutral gray mantle (Ridgway, 1912), a streaked head, clear yellow iris and a reddish purple eyering, and very bright yellow legs. This combination of char-

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acters, especially the leg color, eliminates all other gulls.

THE ONLY RACE of *L. fuscus* collected in North America is *graellsii* (American Ornithologists' Union Check-list, 1957) and the mantle color of the Panamanian bird agrees with the color of that race rather than the darker mantled *L. f. fuscus* of Scandinavia. In recent years there have been numerous sightings of Lesser Black-backed Gulls from Canada, the Atlantic coast of North America to Florida, Texas and California (Binford, 1978). This species may be following the trend shown by the Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) and the Little Gull (*L. minutus*) which, after years of repeated sightings, were finally found to be breeding in North America. At the present, the Lesser Black-backed Gull breeds no closer to North America than Greenland (Vaurie, 1965). In the Old World, this species regularly winters in tropical Africa.

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—Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Box 2072, Balboa, Republic of Panama.

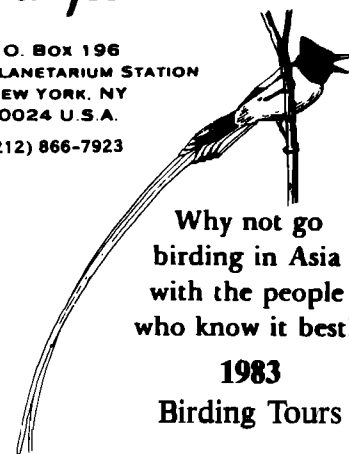
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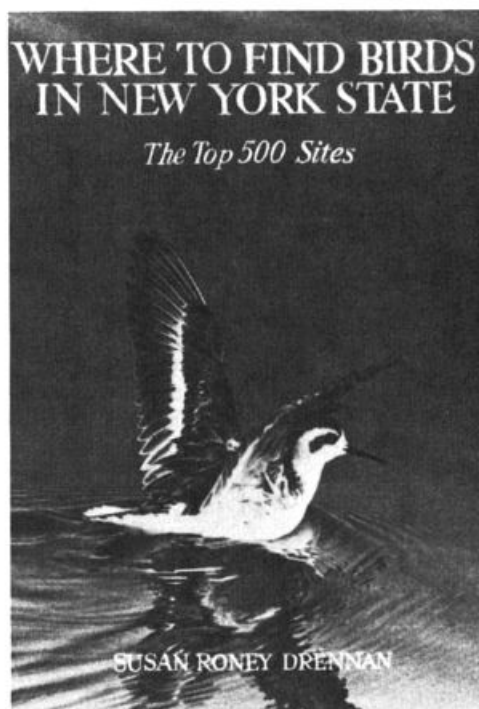
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