

# Western Gull in Alabama and Northwestern Florida

*Easternmost record of a usually sedentary species*

Charles D. Duncan

ON OCTOBER 24, 1977, Robert A. Duncan (not related to the present author) found an unusual gull at Fort Morgan, Alabama, on the Gulf Coast at the eastern side of the entrance to Mobile Bay. The bird was seen by many observers as late as November 5, 1977 and was identified as a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) (Duncan, 1977). Identification characters mentioned in the report include "yellow bill with indistinct dark markings, . . . a red spot at the angle of the mandible, faint brown blurred streakings on the white head, and slate-gray wings," an estimated length of 17 to 19 inches, and "pallid" legs. It is noteworthy that the

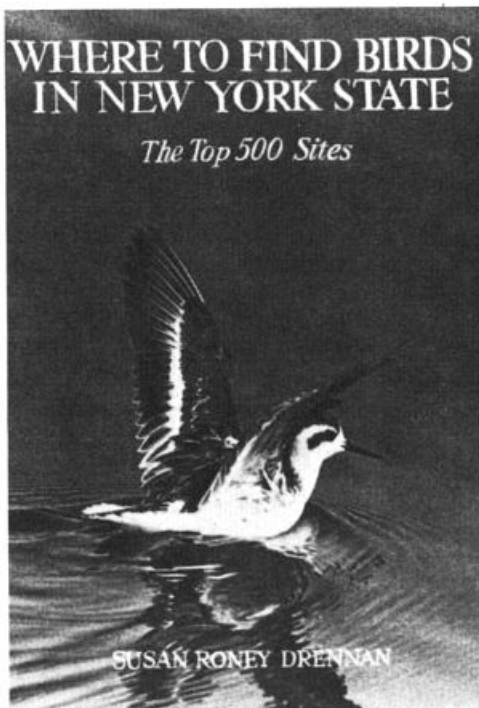
right foot was severed after becoming entangled in fishing line. Since the Lesser Black-backed Gull has become more widespread and more frequently observed in the United States in the past twenty years, reaching even California (Binford, 1978), and since it has been reported in both Florida and Texas in each of the last ten years, Duncan's identification seemed reasonable, and the report caused excitement but little surprise.

Almost eleven months later, on September 17, 1978, Ralph Havard, Tuck Hayward and I found a similar dark-backed gull, also missing its right foot. This was on Dauphin Island, Alabama,

less than seven kilometers across the entrance to Mobile Bay from the original sighting. We assumed it to be the same individual as that seen earlier, photographed it and continued on. The bird was seen by two or three others that day and the next but was not seen thereafter.

Only later, after inspecting my color slides did I realize that on the basis of R. Duncan's report and my slides that Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) could not be eliminated with certainty. Western Gull, however, seemed much less likely, *a priori*, as it is a sedentary species with very few extralimital reports (Kingery, 1978, 1980; Webster, 1981).

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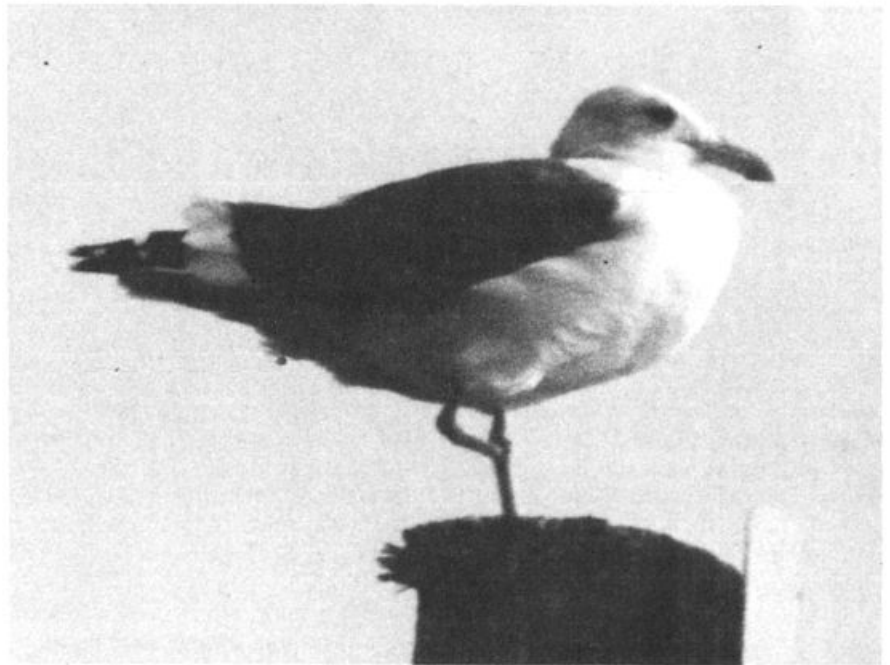
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**Figure 1.** Western Gull, at Fort Morgan, Alabama on November 1, 1977. The stump of the amputated right foot is visible. Photo/Mary Lou Mattis.

My slides, as well as some of the 1977 bird taken by John Findlay III and by Mary Lou Mattis, became a circulating photo file. They were sent to a number of recognized experts in gull identification. The almost unanimous opinion was that the bird was not a Lesser Black-backed Gull, and most comment centered on Western Gull as the most reasonable identification. The possibility of it being a hybrid, Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) x Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*), recently discussed by Foxall (1979), was mentioned as being worth considering, but



**Figure 2.** Western Gull at Dauphin Island, Alabama on September 17, 1978, again showing the amputated foot. This location is less than seven kilometers from Fort Morgan. Photo/C.D. Duncan.

was rejected by two people familiar with that cross (T.H. Davis, *pers. comm.*; R.A. Foxall, *pers. comm.*). No other possible identifications were suggested. Still, the absence of careful field notes

including eye color, pattern of wingtips, and field impressions of mantle and wing coloration of the unusual bird left a small, but unsettling, uncertainty.

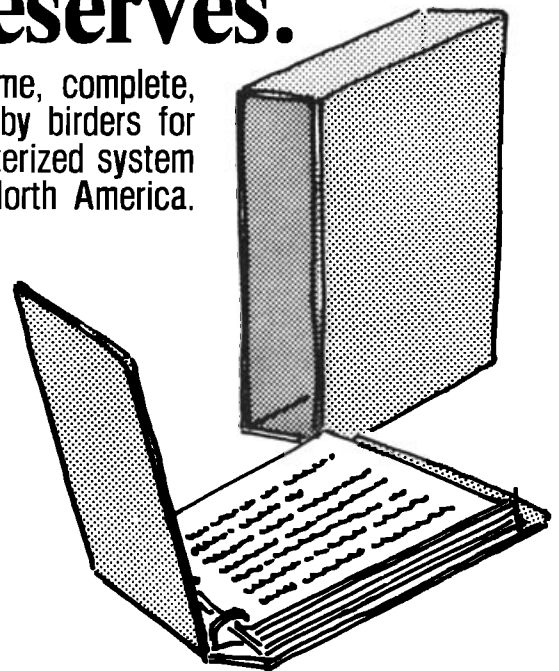
Tantalizingly, on April 22, 1981, Phil Tetlow found a one-legged, dark-

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backed gull at Fort Pickens, Florida, some 70km from the original sighting, but the bird left before it could be seen by others. Then, in September, 1981, a bird with these same characteristics was found by Mary Lou Mattis, again at Fort Morgan, Alabama.

**T**HE MOST REASONABLE assumption is that all sightings from 1977 to date have involved a single individual, and that it is now at least eight years old (assuming four years preceding adult plumage). This bird can finally be conclusively identified as a Western Gull on the basis of the following characters, which I recorded with C. Dustin Gardner on September 19, 1981 at 9:20 a.m. and on September 20, 1981 at 9:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Viewing conditions were excellent with clear skies and moderate-to-no wind. The gull was about 60m distant, perched on a piling in the water or flying in the immediate vicinity. Observations were made through 7x35 binoculars and a 20x Bausch and Lomb Balsacope Sr. telescope.

**Age and molt:** Adult in fresh plumage. No signs of wear on primaries. One

tertial was out of place and possibly molting.

**Body size:** Considerably larger than nearby Laughing Gull, (*Larus atricilla*); about the same size as Herring Gull (not nearby enough for very good comparison).

**Forehead and crown:** Very sloped in front, then dropping off sharply to the back of the head. Feathering very slightly dusker than pure white underparts.

**Bill size and shape:** Large, but not massive, with *slightly* bulbous tip. Moderately strong angle at the gonys. Slight recurve to the maxilla. Maxilla extending noticeably beyond the mandible.

**Bill color:** Yellow with bright orange-red gonydeal spot. The spot appeared nearly round and not especially large.

**Eye color:** Relatively dark and hard to see—a dusky amber color. Never seen as clear or lemony.

**Periorbital ring:** Exceedingly hard to see; apparently yellow-orange. Visible only with ideal light and pose; more easily seen near midday. [G. Jackson (pers. comm.) de-

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scribed the periorbital ring as appearing flesh pink on September 27 1981.]

**Head streaks:** Very faint and found only on the hindneck. Narrow and warm-brown colored. Could easily be overlooked without close scrutiny in good light.

**Underparts:** Snow-white.

**Mantle:** About 1/2 to 1 shade (Binford, 1978) darker than nearby Laughing Gull. Much lighter than jet-black tips of primaries.

**Primaries:** Dark gray, distally jet-black with obvious white apical spots on numbers 6 through 10. Several times the wings were held aloft during preening and no large subapical spots could be seen. In flight an

impression of *small* subapical spots was gained but their number and position could not be ascertained. The primaries were dark below, and extended only slightly beyond the tail at rest. Tertiaries were broadly tipped with white.

**Leg color:** The right leg (foot missing) appeared a dull gray-pink. The left leg and foot, including the webs, were a brighter, "healthier" pink.

All of these characters are consistent with Western Gull and several are quite inconsistent with Lesser Black-backed Gull. The latter has a clear lemon-yellow eye with a red periorbital ring, has a shallow bill with a very shallow gonydeal angle, is heavily streaked on the hindneck in winter, has primaries extending well beyond the tail (contributing to a generally long and slender overall appearance) and has yellow legs in most individuals, especially those of this age. These distinctions are summarized from the following: Binford (1978), L.C. Binford, *pers. comm.*; T.H. Davis, *pers. comm.*; J. Dunn, *pers. comm.*; D.W. Finch, *pers. comm.*; Godfrey (1979); P.J. Grant, *pers. comm.*; and W.C. Russell, *pers. comm.* Note: Detailed descriptions of all stages and plumages of Lesser Black-backed Gull are now available in Grant, P.J. 1982, *Gulls: A Guide to Identification* Buteo Books, Vermillion, pp. 88-93.

Since that time, the bird has been seen again in Florida, at Fort Pickens on November 27, 1981 by Robert Duncan. He confirms most of the field characters presented above. He adds the facts that this bird is slightly (perhaps 1 or 2 in) smaller than nearby Herring Gulls, and that its bill is comparable in proportions to those of the Herring Gulls. (Duncan, *pers. comm.*) This represents the first record of Western Gull east of the Mississippi River. Other occurrences may

have been missed because of identification difficulties and the presumed impossibility of the occurrence of Western Gull in the East. Finally, I echo Dunn's comment: where does this bird spend its summers?

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

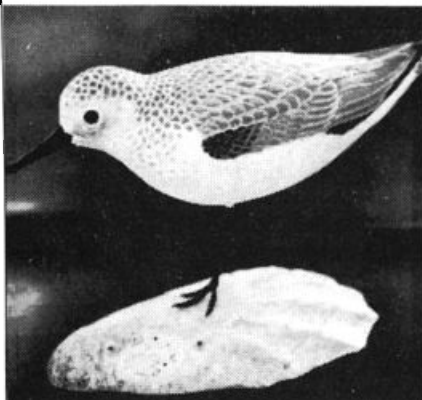
I am indebted to Howard M. Einspahr and to Robert and Lucy Duncan for helpful comments and lively discussions, to Lyn Atherton for her generous loan of Lesser Black-backed Gull slides, to John Findlay, III and Mary Lou Mattis for the extended loan of their slides of the 1977 bird, to Mary LeCroy and the Linnaean Society for their comments, and of course, to all those whose comments have already been mentioned for their kind interest in this sighting.

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