

MELANISTIC BONAPARTE'S GULL IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS

by H. David Bohlen

On November 22, 1991, I observed a small dark gull on Lake Springfield, Sangamon County, Illinois. The gull was far out on the lake where hundreds of other gulls were roosting for the night. I guessed that it was a Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*), but it looked too small and puzzlingly appeared dark ventrally. Soon it became too dark to see.

On November 25, I found the gull again. Fortunately this time it was much closer to me and in bright morning light. The gull appeared to have an all gray body with a blackish head. It was with a flock of similarly-sized Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*). The bird sat on the water apparently asleep. As it awoke I noted the following field marks. A small, all-dark gull with a still darker head and black primaries. When folded,

the black primaries had several white hash marks showing. The bill was slender and black and the tarsi were reddish-orange, as they are in a Bonaparte's Gull. There were broken, but definite, narrow white eye crescents. The throat was whitish and the forehead was grayish in contrast to the rest of the head. Ventrally the gull

was as gray as it was dorsally. When the bird flew, it reminded me of a Black Tern in basic plumage. The tail was whitish—but not bright white. The undertail coverts were whitish also. In flight, there was a hint of the translucent window in the wing of an adult Bonaparte's Gull, but it was much dimmer than normal. The ventral surface of the wing was the same gray as the rest of the body.

I concluded that the bird in question was a melanistic Bonaparte's Gull. Note, however, that the melanism affected only certain parts of the plumage. Also, the head was much darker than any Bonaparte's Gull at that season. Behavioral observations supported my identification. When the gull flew, the flight was fluttering, identical to the Bonaparte's Gull. When it landed in among flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls (there were about 500 present), the melanistic gull was very obvious. The dark gull was an adult, since it had neither carpal nor secondary bars on the wing or black tail band, as in first-winter Bonaparte's Gull. The gull fed on small fish (most likely shad) at Lake Springfield. It fed many times with a large swirling mass of gulls, which individually plunged into the water for fish.

On November 27, Dennis Oehmke and I canoed out on the lake and Dennis took a series of photographs (see photograph). The gull stayed at Lake Springfield until December 2, 1991. I have not been able to find any reference in the literature to this unique plumage of the Bonaparte's Gull.



Melanistic Bonaparte's Gull, second from left, with other Bonaparte's Gull.

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