

Photo Salon: Texas Gulls



Above: This Slaty-backed Gull, the second for Texas, was at Balmorhea Lake, Reeves County 1-10 (here 7) December 2003. The dull bill perhaps suggests a bird in its fourth winter, but otherwise the bird appears to be in definitive basic plumage. The slate-gray tone of the upperparts, coarse but sparse gray-brown streaking on the nape, faint gray mask around the very pale eye, and large amount of white on the tertial "clump" all help to identify this bird, even though the distinctive primary pattern cannot be seen in this image. A Slaty-backed at Corpus Christi on 21 December 2003 was possibly the same individual. Photograph by Mark Lockwood.



Above Right, Left, and Right: Black-tailed Gull has been recorded once before in Texas, in 1999 at Brownsville, but this bird was unusual in being the first individual detected in the Lower 48 states in second-basic plumage. Even before the darker upperparts and bill pattern of definitive plumages are evident, the shape of the body and bill (along with the black tail band) set the species apart from North American gulls. Photographs by Willie Sekula.



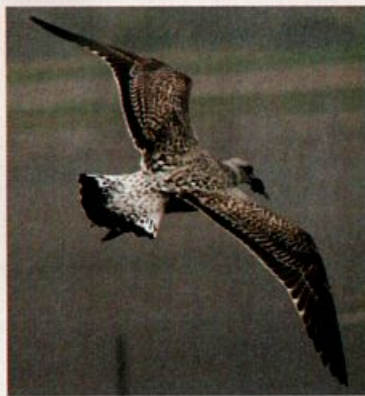
Above and Right: Herring Gulls resembling the one above, photographed 4 March 2004 at Corpus Christi's Elliott Landfill, have recently been found in a few locations in the lower 48 states and several times in Texas. The shade of the upperparts, rather darker than *smithsonianus* Herring Gull, and the distribution of black and white in the primaries suggest the possibility of the eastern Asian taxon *vegae*, usually treated as a race of Herring Gull but lately sometimes split as Vega Gull, *Larus vegae*. This combination of features, however, might be seen in other Herring Gull taxa; diagnostic field marks for *vegae*, if they exist, have yet to be fully determined. Photographs by Martin Reid.



This first-winter Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus cachinnans michahellis/atlantis*; top two images), judged by European gull experts to be a close match for the subspecies *atlantis*, was located 24 January 2004 (left) at Corpus Christi's Elliott Landfill and remained through at least 3 April (right). In shape, the species is intermediate between Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls, with upperparts showing plumage palest in the mantle and scapulars, darker in the lesser and median coverts, with darker primaries and tertials a bit darker than the coverts. The bird's head was generally paler than first-winter Lesser Black-backed Gulls photographed at Corpus Christi (see more images at <www.martinreid.com>), more like a first-winter Great Black-backed Gull, with the paleness of the breast and belly also recalling Great Black-backed. Photographs by Willie Sekula.



A different Yellow-legged Gull, judged (again by European authorities) to be more likely *michahellis*, also visited Corpus Christi's Elliot landfill on 4 March 2004 (above and right). This taxon is paler-backed than *atlantis* and generally less similar to Lesser Black-backed in plumage and structure. Photographs by Willie Sekula.



In flight, the remiges of the apparent *michahellis* (lower left and center images) appear blackish brown above, with the "window" (paler webs of inner primaries and outer secondaries) is much less pronounced than seen in *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls. In contrast to a first-winter Lesser Black-backed Gull at Elliot 9 March 2004 (bottom-right image), the greater secondary coverts are not uniformly dark but patterned brown and white (some Lesser Black-backed can approach this pattern). The mostly white tail with sharply contrasting black tailband contains limited dark markings in the outer webs to outermost rectrices. The tailband is a useful mark—typically wider than seen in Caspian Gull (*Larus cachinnans cachinnans/ponticus*) but less extensive than in Scandinavian Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus argentatus*). Compare the variable but darker tail of first-winter Lesser Black-backed (at right); the tail of *smithsonianus* Herring Gull is more uniformly dark. Photographs by Martin Reid (right and middle) and Willie Sekula (left).



This Glaucous-winged Gull at Fort Worth, Tarrant County, Texas 6 (here) to 8 January 2004 provided the first record for the state. Glaucous-winged Gulls are notorious for hybridizing with other large gull species, but this flight portrait shows the detail of the primaries clearly: neither too much nor too little dark pigmentation for Glaucous-winged. The rich brown vermiculated hood is also typical of winter birds. Aside from records of the species in Morocco and the Canary Islands (perhaps the same individual), this bird represents the most extralimital record of the species confirmed to date. Photograph by Martin Reid.

Thayer's Gulls, usually first-winter birds, are rare winter and spring visitors to coastal Texas. This bird at the Elliott Landfill, Corpus Christi 4 March 2004 was in its second winter, a plumage never previously documented in the State. The patterns of wing and tail are too dark for a Kumlien's Iceland Gull, but this plumage is highly variable, with some birds as pale-winged as Iceland, others as dark as Herring Gull. Photograph by Martin Reid.



At Elliott Landfill, Corpus Christi 14 February (here) to 8 March 2004, this large gull shows characters consistent with a hybrid Glaucous-winged Gull x Western Gull hybrid, often called "Olympic Gull" or "Puget Sound Gull": the short wings, large, heavy-tipped bill and large head, darkish mantle, and overall size are right for *occidentalis* Western Gull, but the vermiculated breast and slightly paler-than-expected mantle suggest admixture of Glaucous-winged genes. Occasionally documented in the Great Basin and Rocky Mountain states, this bird represents the "easternmost" record for this hybrid thus far. Another was documented in winter 2003–2004 in Colorado. Photograph by Willie Sekula.



This typical adult Thayer's Gull at Corpus Christi 28 February 2004 (left, with adult *smithsonianus* Herring Gull) was one of few adults ever satisfactorily documented in Texas. Photograph by Willie Sekula.



California Gulls of both subspecies, *californicus* and *albertaensis*, have been documented in Texas. This bird photographed at Corpus Christi 7 February 2004 shows the rather dark mantle typical of the nominate race—yet another western gull taxon documented in the state in winter 2003–2004. Another westerner rare in Texas, Mew Gull, has become an annual to the Fort Worth area; two were noted there in winter 2003–2004. Photograph by Willie Sekula.



Franklin's Gull is hardly rare in Texas, but a newly arrived Franklin's Gull at Corpus Christi, breast blushed with rose, on 9 April 2004 is a sure sign of spring's arrival. Photograph by Willie Sekula.