FIRST RECORD OF A LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL IN COLORADO

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On 11 December 1976 we found an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull *(Larus fuscus)* standing on the ice at Lake Sangraco, a small sand and gravel borrow area 2.5 km north of Interstate 70 along Lowell Boulevard, northwest of Denver, in Adams Co., Colorado. When first observed it was in a flock of gulls consisting of 15 adult Herring *(L. argentatus),* 5 adult California *(L. californicus)* and 50 adult Ring-billed *(L. delawarensis)* gulls. Later in the week, a first-winter Glaucous Gull *(L. hyperboreus)* and an adult Thayer's Gull *(L. thayeri)* were also present for comparison. The Lesser Black-backed Gull remained at Lake Sangraco through 1 January 1977. This, the first recorded occurrence of the species in Colorado, was also the first record from the deep interior of the United States.

Description: Body color: entire ventral plumage immaculate white. Body bulk: slightly smaller than adult *argentatus.* Mantle color: deep slate-gray, distinctly paler than primaries. Mantle much darker than that of *californicus*. Wing length: at rest the wing-tip extended slightly beyond the tip of tail. Tail color: pure white. Wing color: primary tips dorsally as black as those of adjacent *delawarensis* and *argentatus.* With the wing folded, the primaries were white-tipped, indicating relatively recent renewal. Two flight photographs verify our observations that white subterminal mirrors were absent from distal primaries. Either these mirrors were lacking or the outermost primaries might have been in molt. When seen from below in flight, the dorsal darkness of the primaries and secondaries was visible through the extended wing, as noticeably as on one of the darker races of the Western Gull *(L. occidentalis wymani).* Secondary color same as mantle, the color shade transition from black primary tips to the slate gray of the secondaries gradual. Head shape: forecrown angularity and supraocular ridge similar to *argentatus.* Crown streaking: strongest on pileum with some streaking above and below eye at base of lower mandible. No streaking on forecrown or chest, or from eye to bill. Iris color: pale straw-yellow, appearing whiter than that of *delawarensis.* Eyelid color: very conspicuous red, providing sharp contrast with iris color and face. Tarsus color: legs, carefully compared with *delawarensis* and *argentatus,* were pale yellow, with no hint of pinkish along tarsi; intensity of leg color was slightly more yellow than adjacent *delawarensis,* whose tarsi at this time had a tinge of pinkish color, especially at the "knee." Tarsus size: only slightly thicker in diameter than *delawarensis* and noticeably less stout than *argentatus.* Left foot damaged, causing the bird to walk with the toes in a closed position. Bill color: bright yellow with very extensive oval red spot at the gonydeal angle. Bill shape: relatively long and shallow; gonydeal angle not as acute as *californicus* or *argentatus,* but more angular than *delawarensis.* Comparisons indicated bill about as long as the longest *argentatus* bill nearby.

All other adult dark-mantled North American gull species could be ruled out on the basis of numerous characteristics, but most readily by: (1) Leg color pinkish to pinkish-white in Great Black-backed *(L. marinus)* and Slaty-backed *(L. schistisagus)* gulls, as well as the two Western Gull races *(L. o. wymani* and *L. o. occidentalis).* (2) Eyelid color yellow in the Yellow-legged Western Gull *(L. occidentalis livens).*

The likelihood of the similar Dominican or Kelp Gull *(L. dominicanus),* a coastal South American gull, or one of the dark-backed yellow-legged Middle Eastern races of the Herring Gull finding its way to the deep interior United States seems extremely remote. Also, *dominicanus* should be in worn plumage in December.

Two observers experienced with *L. fuscus,* P. Gent and W. Brockner, concurred with our identification, as did most other observers who studied the bird. Judging from the overwhelming number of typical *L. fuscus* features, particularly tarsus color and thickness, evering and iris color, bill shape, body shape, size and mantle coloration, the possibilities that it was a dark-backed *argentatus* or was of hybrid origin ("an intergrade") seem remote. The statement that it "lacked several diagnostic features" (Kingery 1977) thus seems unfounded. Based on examination of study skins, photographs and descriptions of *L. fuscus* in the literature (Dwight 1925, Witherby et al. 1941, Dement'ev et al. 1951, Voous 1963), consideration of probable hybrid characteristics of dark-backed gulls (Jehl 1960, Andrle 1972), and discussions with individuals familiar with the species, we feel that the Colorado Lesser Black-backed Gull best fits the British race *Larus fuscus graellsii.*

The seasonal pattern of many North American winter and spring Lesser Black-backed Gull records corresponds well with the migration pattern of the Old World populations. In the Old World, Wallace (1973) observed coastal wintering of *L. f. fuscus* and *L. f. graellsii,* mainly adults, at Lagos, Nigeria (7°N,5°E), far south of the breeding range. He found a general increase in numbers from November through February, with *L. f. graellsii* peaking in January and dropping off sharply (presumably as birds returned north) in February and March. Details of the species' inland passage through southern Europe are summarized by Voous (1963), where in his discussion of the long distance transcontinental route of *L. f. fuscus* he mentions its occurrence on central African lakes.

Figure 1. Adult Lesser Black-backed Gull *(Larus fuscus,* probably *L. f. graellsii).* 11 December 1976 through 1 January 1977, Lake Sangraco, Adams Co., Colorado.
Photo by Mike Pogue, courtesy Denver Museum of Natural History.

Table 1. Summary of 67 Lesser Black-backed Gull records in North America north and south of 39° latitude, 1968 through 1977.

	November-December	January-February	March-April
North	29 (82.9%)	3 (8.6%)	3 (8.6%)
South	9 (28.1%)	14 (43.8%)	9 (28.1%)

Based on a survey of 10 years of eastern United States *L. fuscus* records in *Audubon Field Notes* and *American Birds* (1968-1977), there is an indication of movement south during January through February (Table 1). The test for equality of percentages (Sokal and Rohlf 1969:608) indicates significant north-south differences ($p<0.05$) between each of the three 2-month periods of November through December, January through February, and March through April. In the northern region (north of 39° latitude), 83 percent of the 35 records occurred during November and December, but in the southern region the highest numbers were recorded during January and February, when 43 percent of the 32 records occurred. In northern localities, 35 percent of all records involved birds remaining longer than two weeks (i.e. probably overwintering individuals); whereas, in southern localities only 13 percent of the records involved birds remaining longer than two weeks. The short duration of most records at southern United States coastal localities suggests that *L. fuscus* is transient there. This leads us to the speculation that some individuals of the North American *L. fuscus* population may migrate through the United States, perhaps to winter farther south along the coasts of Mexico, Central and South America, and in the Caribbean Islands. Based on the correspondence between distributional patterns of the United States and the Old World, we feel that occasional Lesser Black-backed Gulls can be expected in the interior United States in passage from their northeastern summer localities to distant coastal wintering localities.

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