

## FIRST RECORD OF THE WESTERN GULL FROM IDAHO

MICHAEL H. TOVE, 303 Dunhagen Place, Cary, North Carolina 27511

CHARLES H. TROST, Department of Biology, Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho 83209

On 21 October 1984 we observed a Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) in third-winter plumage at the north shore of American Falls Reservoir, Idaho. The bird was subsequently seen there to at least 27 October. First observed in flight with about 300 Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*), the bird was distinctly larger and darker mantled than any other gull present. From 1530 to 1630, we followed the bird as it moved from its initial location west to a boat mooring strip made of automobile tires. At this location, we were able to attract it by throwing bread toward it and other gulls, enabling us to study the bird carefully at very close range.

The bill was noticeably stout, especially in the region of the gonydeal bulge, which was greater than twice as wide as the eye. The bill was tricolored, with a yellow tip, blackish middle, and pinkish gape and base. The feet were bright flesh-pink, and the eye was yellowish. The head, neck, and upper chest were smudged with sooty gray to grayish brown, and the lower parts were mostly white. The dark slate-gray mantle contrasted with the black primaries. The tail was black and contrasted sharply with the white upper tail coverts (Figure 1). Behaviorally, the bird clearly dominated all other gulls present. In fact, its aggressive nature was such that it never took bread from the water but rather harassed the other gulls as would a jaeger (*Stercorarius*).



Figure 1. Third-winter Western Gull at American Falls Reservoir, Idaho, 21 October 1984. Note the black tail, which contrasts with the white upper tail coverts, the dark upper wing surface, and the stout bill.

Photo by Michael H. Tove

## NOTES

The Western Gull is a member of a complex group of closely related larids of the west coast of North America. Included in this complex are two races of Western Gull (*L. o. occidentalis* and *L. o. wymani*), the Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. glaucescens*), their hybrids (*L. o. occidentalis* × *L. glaucescens*), and the Yellow-footed Gull (*L. livens*) (W. Hoffman et al., *Auk* 95:441-458, 1978; P. Harrison, *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*, Croom Helm, England, 1983). Although distinguishing among these forms can be tricky, we believe our bird to have been of the nominate (northern) race of the Western Gull (*L. o. occidentalis*). The combination of coal-black tail and primaries and pink feet eliminates all possibilities except the two races of the Western Gull. The slate-gray mantle, darker than that of a California Gull (*L. californicus*) but paler than that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus graellsii*), suggests the northern race.

This sighting constitutes a first record from Idaho. Ordinarily, such a sighting might be passed off as an anomaly. However, American Falls Reservoir appears to act as a magnet for larids that have wandered or been blown off course. For example, on the previous day (20 October), Trost saw an adult Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) in breeding plumage. Moreover, this location is the first location in Idaho where Thayer's Gulls (*L. thayeri*) appear to be regular, if not uncommon (M. H. Tove, *W. Birds* 16:147-150, 1986). We believe that the combination of a large lake oriented north-south and major river system (Snake River) oriented east-west provides an effective migrant trap for these birds. Notably, this sighting was only 3 days after the passage of the most severe storm system of the season to date. However, many questions remain unanswered. For example, do these birds reorient on the lake and then follow the rivers (Snake to Columbia) back to the coast or do they drift south after the lake freezes? How many other similar concentration points for gulls exist and how many of these "accidental" species are in fact regular? Gull-watchers on both coasts have witnessed tremendous range expansions in some "rare" gull species. We believe that careful scrutiny of large gull flocks in the intermountain West will result in discoveries of a similar magnitude.

Accepted 16 August 1985