

## FIRST RECORD OF THE BLACK-TAILED GULL FOR MEXICO

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On 7 June 1997 we (along with Ted J. Nordhagen) observed an adult Black-tailed Gull, *Larus crassirostris*, at the fishing village of El Golfo de Santa Clara, near the mouth of the Colorado River in extreme northwestern Sonora, Mexico (31° 42' N, 114° 30' W). Field descriptions and a series of color photographs (three of which reproduced in black and white as Figures 1–3) confirm the identity of this distinctive eastern Palearctic gull, which has previously been recorded as near to Mexico as San Diego, California (Monroe 1955, Heindel and Patten 1996) and Belize (Howell and Webb 1995). We located the bird on the beach at the north end of town and watched it for about 20 minutes, at distances as little as 15 m. The description below is based on a few notes and sketches made in the field while the bird was under observation, as well as more extensive notes made fifteen minutes after the sighting. It was mostly clear (a few clouds), calm, and about 27° C; the tide was rather low (the tidal range at the northern end of the Gulf of California is tremendous), exposing 100+ m of flats on the beach.

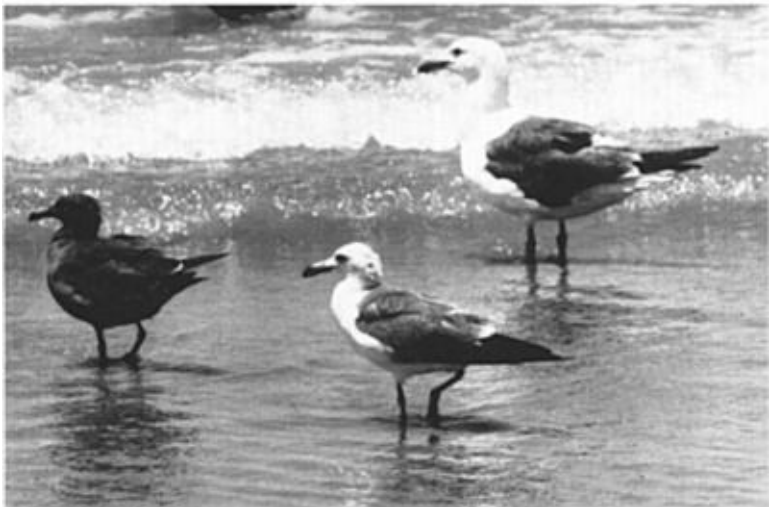


Figure 1. Black-tailed Gull (center), with Heermann's Gull (*Larus heermanni*, left) and Yellow-footed Gull (*L. livens*).

Photo by Kimball L. Garrett

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Figure 2. Black-tailed Gull near a Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*); Yellow-footed Gulls in the background. Note size, mantle color, and bill length relative to the Ring-billed.

Photo by Kimball L. Garrett

Garrett first noticed the bird as it began to take flight in a group of 25+ Heermann's (*Larus heermanni*) and Yellow-footed (*L. livens*) gulls among the pangas and fish and ray offal on the upper, dry part of the beach. Immediately noticeable was the exceptionally long yellow bill with a mostly black tip, a rather dark mantle, and, as the bird flew away toward the water's edge, a clean, thick black band across the white tail; the bird looked like a medium-sized gull on this initial quick observation. Subsequent scope views reaffirmed our initial feeling the bird might be a Black-tailed Gull; our views were leisurely, with Molina and Nordhagen using spotting scopes and Garrett approaching and attempting to obtain photographs. The bird was still sitting on the beach (after we flushed it twice for short distances) when we left. Despite searches of the area by K. Radamaker on 8 June and S. N. G. Howell and M. San Miguel on 10 and 11 June, the bird was never relocated.

### DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The following description is taken verbatim from notes written by KLG immediately after the sighting; additional words provided for clarity are in brackets.

**Bill** strikingly long for size of bird. Long curve at tip of culmen; [bill] moderately slender, but with moderate gonydeal angle. Basal ~2/3 (or almost 3/4) bright deep yellow. Most of remaining (distal) portion black, which extended slightly farther posterior on mandible than on maxilla. Very tip of maxilla (along curved tip) orange-red; also [orange-red] on very tip (last

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Figure 3. Black-tailed Gull in flight; note long bill, extensive white trailing edge to the secondaries, white apical spots on inner primaries, and black subterminal tail band bordered laterally by white.

Photo by Kimball L. Garrett

~3 mm) of mandible. Touch of red on mandible behind black. **Iris** white (maybe with slight yellow tint); eye moderately large. Thin, rather bright red orbital ring. **Head** pure white—feathering on hindcrown/hindneck a bit matted, stringy. **Underparts** pure white. **Mantle** slaty-gray—[shade] about like [that of a] Laughing Gull or Heermann's—definitely paler than Yellow-footed Gull, but darker than a California and *much* darker than a Ring-billed. Lower back and rump white. **[Wing:]** Small white crescent at tips of tertials. Primaries long—bird long and tapered at rear. [Primaries] darker than mantle—dull blackish; no white tips on primaries, but [primaries] rather worn. **Tail** white at base with broad, solid black band all the way across distal ~1/2 (2/3?). Thin, distinct white terminal band on tail. **Legs** rather deep yellow; no tint of green or pink. **In flight** dark gray mantle grades gradually into blacker primaries. White trailing edge to secondaries. Black tail band clean and obvious. **Size:** elongate, slender. *Slightly* smaller than Heermann's or Ring-billed. Dwarfed by Yellow-footed Gull."

Figures 1–3 show several of the characters described above. The orange-red bill tip is visible but difficult to see in the original color photos. The flight photos show white terminal spots on the inner 4 primaries. They also show a narrow margin of white on the outer rectrices lateral to the black tail band. The photos confirm that the bird is smaller (at least in bulk) than the Ring-billed and Heermann's gulls, though certainly longer billed and longer winged than those two species.

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The combination of white eye, red orbital ring, long yellow bill with black distal portion and red tip, moderately dark mantle, black tail band with white on the terminal and lateral edges, yellow legs, elongate appearance, and medium-small size makes this a striking and easily identified gull. The most thorough discussion of plumages of *crassirostris* is that in Higgins and Davies (1996). From their discussion we are reluctant to age the bird for certain as an adult (as opposed to one in second alternate plumage), but feel the brightness of the bill and legs, purity of the white head and underparts, and distinct white apical spots on the inner primaries do suggest an adult. There was no hint of any brown in the wing coverts, and although the primaries were a bit dull (worn?), they were more blackish than dusky. The limited red tip on the bill of this individual may be within the normal range of variation for adults.

Published illustrations of this species range from adequate to poor. The only North American field guides depicting this species are those by Pough (1957) and Griggs (1997). In both the bill shape is incorrect; the former shows a bill too small, and the latter shows one far too thick. The plate in Higgins and Davies (1996) is accurate, although copies I have examined show the mantle and wing coverts too pale. The portrayals in Flint et al. (1984) and Wild Bird Society of Japan (1982) severely distort the species' general shape and bill shape. Several depictions, including those in Harrison (1983), del Hoyo (1996), and Griggs (1997) show the bill too thick, and some texts also mention that the bill is heavy (as suggested by the specific epithet *crassirostris*). This did not appear to us to be the case: although the bill is not especially slender, its length (relative to the size of the bird) and long curved culmen tip give it a unique appearance. Harrison (1983) accurately captured the elongate and tapered body and wings of this species. Correct bill shape, body proportions, and plumage are shown well in some published photos, as in Takano (1981), Pringle (1987), and Petersen (1995). The identification of first-year birds was discussed by Rosenberg (1997).

## DISTRIBUTION AND DISCUSSION

As with most cases of transoceanic vagrancy in gulls, we cannot rule out some kind of ship assistance in explaining this bird's occurrence at the head of the Gulf of California; however, a recent wide pattern of vagrancy in this species suggests the record may pertain to a natural vagrant. In addition to the records cited above for San Diego, California (280 km WNW of El Golfo; 26–28 November 1954) and Belize (11 March 1988), there are also recent records for the east coast of North America as well as western and southern Alaska.

Gibson and Kessel (1992) cited four May and June records for western Alaska, all of adults, and Heintz (1997) listed three summer and fall records (two adults and one bird in second alternate plumage) in southeastern Alaska. Since those summaries three additional birds (two in first alternate plumage, one subadult) have been found in southern and southeastern Alaska in summer and fall 1995 (Tobish 1995, 1996a) and an adult was at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, in June 1996 (Tobish 1996b). There is a sight record for the Queen Charlotte Islands in northwestern British Columbia, Canada, on 22 November 1991 (Siddle 1992). The only mid-continental

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record is a sight report for southern Manitoba on 2 June 1987 (Knapton 1990), although we feel the published description does not eliminate other gulls, including alternate-plumaged Band-tailed (*Larus belcheri*) and Olrog's (*L. atlanticus*) gulls. Along the Atlantic coast of North America there are records for Maryland in July 1984 (Armistead 1984), Virginia in March–April 1995 (O'Brien et al. 1995) and in March and December 1996 (E. A. T. Blom pers. comm.), and in Rhode Island in the summer and fall of 1995 (Petersen 1995) and again in summer 1996 (Petersen 1996). There is also a May–June 1997 record for Sable Island, Nova Scotia (Lucas 1997). Some of these records may pertain to the same individual, and the natural occurrence of each has been considered uncertain. The San Diego record was not included in the state list published by McCaskie et al. (1970) because of the perceived possibility of the bird's having been transported to San Diego by ship traffic from Asia during the Korean War. The California Records Committee has since reassessed this record and accepted it for the state list (Heindel and Patten 1996). The wide geographic spread of the North American records suggests a pattern of repeated natural vagrancy, frequent ship-assisted travel, or perhaps some combination of the two.

El Golfo de Santa Clara is the northernmost important fishing village in the Gulf of California, lying at the southeast edge of the Colorado River delta. Much fish offal is dumped on the beach here after the fishing pangas have returned with their catch, and we suspect El Golfo will prove to be an excellent place to study gulls. On eight other visits here we have recorded one first-winter Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), one first-winter Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. glaucescens*), and at least seven Western Gulls (*L. occidentalis*), along with the more expected species. Puerto Peñasco, a much larger fishing town about 110 km southeast of El Golfo, has proven one of the best places in Mexico for “northern” gulls, with numerous records of the Glaucous Gull.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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