

# FIRST RECORD OF THE IVORY GULL IN CALIFORNIA

JOEL D. WEINTRAUB, Department of Biological Science, California State University, Fullerton, California 92834

MIKE SAN MIGUEL, 2132 Highland Oaks Drive, Arcadia, California 91006

On 5 January 1996 at about 0945 Weintraub, Carolyn Raynesford, Lucy Lee, and Irene Horiuchi found an immature Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) on a gravelly beach at Doheny State Beach, Dana Point, Orange County, California (33° 27' 33" N, 117° 40' 31" W). Later the bird flew to the nearby mouth of San Juan Creek where it was subsequently seen by approximately 25 observers including San Miguel. It left the beach sometime between about 2230, when the last observer saw it with a flashlight and by a full moon, and 0400 the next morning, when it was next actively searched for. The California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) reviewed numerous reports and photographs taken of the bird that day and unanimously accepted the sighting as the first record of Ivory Gull for California.

During most of the daylight hours the Ivory Gull sat alone at the high surf line. It appeared fatigued and allowed observers to get within a few meters. It often sat with its belly on the wet sand with its head slowly drooping and eyes closed. A few times the bird stood and drank sea water, and fluid was seen dripping from the bill, presumably brine from its salt gland. When the bird was standing, one of its wings often drooped, and a few times oncoming waves knocked the bird off its feet. As the afternoon progressed, its condition appeared to deteriorate. According to one observer who saw the gull at about 2130, however, it was very active and was flying along the beach.

## DESCRIPTION

The bird's length as it stood, estimated from one photograph that showed a stick (later measured) in front of and parallel to the gull, was about 38 cm. The gull was quite distinctive in its mostly white body, elongated wings, short legs, compact shape, and high round crown (Figure 1). The small bill was greenish gray with a pinkish yellow tip; the straight culmen was rounded at the tip. Black mottling on the face was most intense in the lores and on the chin and upper throat. Fine white crescents were present above and below the dark eyes. Widely scattered black spots marked the crown and sides of the neck, and the auriculars had distinct black spots. The primary tips were black, narrowly edged with white at the extreme tips. Nine primaries were visible beyond the tertials, and four primary tips extended beyond the tail. The borders of the black marks were sharply defined distally but were somewhat ragged basally, extending up the shafts on some feathers. The primary coverts and rectrices were all similarly marked, as were some of the upper tail coverts. Only sparse black spots marked the lesser and median secondary coverts, while the secondaries and greater secondary coverts were all white. There were two black spots on the tertials. Figure 2 shows the bird in flight and the markings on its upper surface. Other photographs of this bird can be found in McCaskie (1996) and Weintraub (1996).

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Figure 1. The Ivory Gull at Doheny State Beach, Dana Point, California, on 5 January 1996.

*Photo by Joel Weintraub*

The underparts were almost pure white except for one gray spot on the breast and a few black spots near the tips of the outermost undertail coverts. On a few occasions the bird stretched its wings, revealing pure white underwings and coverts. White feathers extended down to the ankle joint; the joint was flushed with reddish. The short legs and fully webbed feet were black.

### STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION

One of the more unusual vagrants to have occurred in California, this immature Ivory Gull represents the southernmost occurrence of this species, eclipsing a record at Choshi, Honshu, Japan (at 35°43' N) in 1981 (Brazil 1991), and the first accepted record for the Pacific coast of North America south of Canada. The Ivory Gull breeds exclusively in the Arctic. It breeds in the Canadian Arctic at Ellesmere, Seymore, Baffin, and Perley islands, with a population estimated at 2400 (Thomas and MacDonald 1987). It also breeds in northern Greenland and Spitzbergen, and in Russia in Severnaya Zemlya, Novaya Zemlya, and Franz Josef Land (Haney and MacDonald 1995).

From early September to mid October the Ivory Gull migrates south, wintering primarily at the edges of pack ice, on icebergs and drift ice (Cramp 1983, Haney and MacDonald 1995). In the Bering Sea it is common from October through June (Kessel and Gibson 1978). It is a late-winter and early-spring visitor to Newfoundland and Labrador, where several hundred have been seen. The Ivory Gull also winters regularly south to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and rarely straggles to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Harrison 1983).

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Figure 2. Ivory Gull in flight at Dana Point on 5 January 1996.

*Photo by Joel Weintraub*

In the contiguous United States records of the Ivory Gull are predominantly from the northeast (Mlodinov and O'Brien 1996). From 1972 through 1994 there were 17 records from Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey; the species has been recorded along the Atlantic coast as far south as Delaware and Virginia. Fourteen records from Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, and Tennessee have been accepted since 1972. Farther west, the Ivory Gull was recorded in Colorado in 1926 (Bailey 1926) and Montana in 1974 (Skaar 1980). Most far-southern records in North America are for late November to early March, with the peak from late December to mid-January. Most vagrants are immatures.

The Ivory Gull is a rare vagrant to southern and southeastern Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978); on the west coast of North America south of Alaska the

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only previous accepted records of this species are five from British Columbia, the earliest in 1889 and the most recent in 1988 (Campbell et al. 1990). There is still no satisfactory record for Washington. One reported at Gray's Harbor on 20 December 1975 (Crowell and Nehls 1976) was not accepted by Washington's records committee. The carcass of an "absolutely white" bird found at Destruction Island, Jefferson Co., on 15 November 1916 was badly decomposed and not preserved (Jewett et al. 1953).

Records of vagrant Ivory Gulls other than ours have been associated with much colder temperatures, ice, and snow. We do not know what caused the Ivory Gull to appear to be so lethargic or why its behavior changed dramatically later in the evening. Uspenskii (1969) and Orr and Parsons (1982) suggested this species is more active at night during the winter. Some of its daytime behavior on the beach at Dana Point might be attributed to thermoregulatory difficulties. The bird was obviously experiencing higher air and seawater temperatures (14° C for both at 0935 on 5 June; data from the Dana Point Harbor Weather Station) than it would experience in its normal wintering range. We also do not know what route (from offshore, down the coast, or inland) the gull took to get to Dana Point, but two weeks prior to its appearance, an intense low-pressure area centered in the Gulf of Alaska generated one of the strongest storms along the west coast in the last decade, with hurricane-force gusts approaching 191 km/hr (NOAA 1995).

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