

## FIRST REPORT OF THE GRAY HERON IN THE UNITED STATES

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On 1 August 1999, at about 1400 ADT, Mike Greenfelder flushed a large *Ardea* heron from the shore of Weather Bureau Lake on St. Paul Island in the Pribilof archipelago, Alaska (57° 09' N, 170° 14' W). The bird disappeared into dense fog before it could be identified to species. Greenfelder and Smith searched fruitlessly the rest of the afternoon, and in the evening they were joined by Burton and several other birders. We finally saw the bird in flight near its original location. The heron alighted briefly at Rocky Lake, then continued flying west, calling repeatedly. Although the light was poor and our views were distant, we tentatively identified the bird as an adult Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*, in breeding plumage, on the basis of coloration and voice. We followed it by automobile to Southwest Point, where the road becomes essentially impassable and the heron disappeared behind bluffs, heading north as if to circumnavigate the island.

The following morning, we found the bird standing in a hunched posture on a rock at Webster Lake (11 km from Weather Bureau Lake and 20 km from Southwest Point). We observed the now stationary bird for almost an hour through spotting scopes from a distance of about 300 m and took detailed notes, on which the following description is based. This period of observation confirmed the previous evening's tentative identification. We were too far for photos and decided against closer approach until others had seen the bird and a video camera had been obtained. The heron was still in the same place when Burton saw it again several hours later, but it was wading actively when Smith returned with other observers. Before photos or videos could be obtained, the bird flushed inexplicably, and it was not seen again despite several days of intensive searching.

This observation has been accepted on the Alaska unsubstantiated list and represents the first report of a Gray Heron in the United States.

In general appearance the bird resembled a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), a species with which all the observers are quite familiar, but had a less massive bill. The features that distinguished it from that species were its whitish, not rusty, thighs and complete lack of rufous on the shoulders. In flight, the upperparts showed stronger contrast between the black remiges and the gray back and wing coverts than is typical of a Great Blue Heron, and the underwings were a fairly uniform bluish gray with a pale leading edge. Its call, uttered frequently in flight, was a throaty "kraak," higher pitched than the croak of a Great Blue Heron.

The distal part of the bill was dull yellowish, becoming darker toward the base, especially on the culmen. The bird had a whitish crown, paler than the gray of the forehead and lores. Single black supraocular stripes extended posteriorly from the eyes, broadening and joining at the nape and forming nuchal plumes. White on the lower part of the face blended into gray on the sides of the neck; this was a paler gray than that of the mantle and secondary coverts. Several whitish plumes extended from the scapulars. At rest, the bird showed a black shoulder patch bordered on the sides with white, with no rufous anywhere on the wing.

Short black streaks extended in two lines down the whitish foreneck. The breast, belly, thighs, and undertail coverts appeared creamy white overall; the sides of the belly were black. There was a dusky wash, from which a few creamy plumes protruded, across the breast and a dusky band across the lower belly. Grayish

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streaking extended along the flanks, and the undertail coverts showed sparse dingy streaking. The legs were dull yellowish green, paler than is typical of a Great Blue Heron.

Our sighting was preceded by a week of predominantly southwest and west-southwest winds averaging 15–21 knots daily. We found no other Asiatic vagrants on St. Paul associated with this weather system, but similar conditions produced a Chinese Pond-Heron (*Ardeola bacchus*) on 4 August 1996 (Hoyer and Smith 1997). The Pribilofs' only other heron records are of single Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) on 3 April 1979 and 6 August 1986. The early-August occurrence of three of the Pribilofs' four heron records is notable.

The Gray Heron breeds widely across Eurasia and Africa, withdrawing from most northern areas in winter (del Hoyo et al. 1992). In northeast Asia, the nominate race extends to Sakhalin Island and the Aldan River in the Russian Far East, roughly 3000 km west of St. Paul, while *A. c. jouyi* reaches Korea and Japan (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951, Howard and Moore 1991, del Hoyo et al. 1992). *A. c. jouyi* tends to be paler than *A. c. cinerea* on the neck and upperwing coverts, with no buff or mauve tinge on the neck (Cramp and Simmons 1977, Hancock and Kushlan 1984). However, these differences are subtle, relative, and obscured by intergradation and clinal variation (Cramp and Simmons 1977, Hancock and Kushlan 1984), making subspecific identification of the St. Paul bird impossible.

Gray Herons disperse widely after the breeding season (Hancock and Kushlan 1984), which typically extends into the third week of July in northern Europe (Cramp and Simmons 1977) and early July in Japan (Brazil 1991). Migratory movement of most populations is to the southwest (Moreau 1972, Hancock and Kushlan 1984), though some individuals may move in other directions (Ali and Ripley 1968). There are many records of vagrants, and in North America the Gray Heron has occurred in the lesser Antilles and Bermuda (Hancock and Kushlan 1984, American Ornithologists' Union 1998), although the open sea is a major barrier to dispersal (Cramp and Simmons 1977). The Gray Heron has experienced exponential population growth in east Asia in recent decades (del Hoyo et al. 1992), increasing the likelihood of strays.

The closely related and very similar Great Blue Heron is resident in southeastern and south-coastal Alaska west to Prince William Sound, approximately 1400 km east-northeast of St. Paul (AOU 1998). It wanders north and west after the breeding season but so far has not been recorded west of Kodiak Island.

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