

# NOTES ON THE LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL IN NORTH AMERICA

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(Recent reported observations of the Lesser Black-backed Gull in the Philadelphia - New Jersey area add significance to the following notes. The bird is decidedly difficult to identify in the field, and few sight records in this country are admitted by ornithological authorities. In 1960, besides the gull reported by Bloor, Brady and others at Penn Manor, Pa. and listed in the Field Notes of this issue of *Cassinia*, the author of this article, in company with George F. Ingersoll and Daniel L. Hebard, reported two of the subject species at Brigantine, N. J. on February 20. *Editor.*)

The Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus* L., is a dark-backed gull of northern Europe. Three subspecies are recognized: 1) *L. f. fuscus* L. with a back as black as the primaries, breeding in northern Scandinavia, and generally known as the Scandinavian Black-backed Gull; 2) *L. f. intermedius* Scholer, with a somewhat lighter back, breeding in southern Scandinavia and Denmark; 3) *L. f. graellsii* Brehm, the British Black-backed Gull, whose subspecific distinctiveness from the nominate race was first recognized by P. R. Lowe in 1912 (*British Birds*, 6 (1) : 2).

The British race was included in the fourth Checklist of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1931 on the basis of a gull collected in Greenland (Reinhardt, *Vidensk. Meddel. Kjobhavn*, 1853-1854, 78), although at the Sixth Ornithological Congress held at Copenhagen in May 1926, "the general opinion was expressed that the bird was a *Larus argentatus*, but the case in which the specimen is kept was not opened and details were not forthcoming" (F. Witherby in *British Birds*, 24 (1) : 24-1930). Witherby believed that F. C. R. Jourdain in *Novitates Zoologicae*, XXXV (1929), pp. 82-84 had brought forward sufficient evidence "to afford conclusive evidence that the bird is a Herring Gull" (*British Birds*, 24:25). Jourdain held that this species should be deleted from the A.O.U. Checklist altogether because the reference was based on a specimen of *argentatus* (*Auk*, 50 (2) : 209-1933). This was accordingly done over a decade later (*Auk*, 61 (3) : 448-1944). Five years later

the British form was restored to the list on the basis of a specimen from southwest Greenland (Auk, 66 (3):282-1949).

Since that time five additional Lesser Black-backed Gulls, all *graellsii*, have been collected in the United States: one on Assateague Island, Maryland (Buckalew, Auk 67 (2): 251-1950); one at Buffalo, New York (Jehl, Auk 75 (3): 349-1958); one on Long Island (Paul A. Buckley, pers. comm.); one near Rutherford, New Jersey (Jehl, supra); and one in northern New Jersey (Buckley, pers. comm.)

The two sight records of *fuscus* (Edwards, Auk 52 (1): 85-1935) at Beach Haven, New Jersey, and (Nichols, Audubon Field Notes 7 (1):10) at Jones Beach, Long Island, have been discarded (Buckley, pers. comm.). All sight records, which have increased greatly since 1955, have been from Long Island and northern New Jersey except for the one from Fish House, New Jersey (Cassinia) and one from Aronson, Texas (Auk, F.N., 6 (4):256).

The absence of records from New England is apparently caused by the strictures of Ludlow Griscom (Bulletin Mass. Aud. Soc., 28:181-191-1944). Griscom also wrote in Section 2 of the Audubon Magazine for May-June 1944:83, "Those who see a Lesser Black-backed Gull, are positive of the species and suspect the subspecies, display a knowledge and a competence in using it which I can never hope to emulate." This statement stands today except possibly for birds in their fourth winter when they have attained their full breeding plumage (British Birds 7 (11): 306, "H. F. W." on Ewen Kennedy).

Now that the groups of Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*fuscus*) and Yellow-legged Gulls (*cachinnans*) are treated as one single palearctic species (*fuscus*) (K. H. Voous, Ardea 47 (304): 176-187), no difficulty should be found in identifying yellow-legged gulls with mantles as dark or darker than those of Herring Gulls as Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Difficulty in identification will arise in the case of gulls with legs of another color. A report to the British Trust for Ornithology on 103 Lesser Black-backed Gulls collected between November 1 and February 15, stated that 32 had flesh-colored, 20 had whitish or greenish, 34 had pale yellow and 17 had normal yellow legs (British Birds 54 (1): 1-17). This report also stated that "a Lesser Black-backed Gull with a mantle as black as that of a Great Black-back, *Larus marinus*, can be assumed to be of Scandinavian origin." The Handbook of British Birds, V:96, states that "typical birds of this form can be reliably identified if light is good, but it must be observed that the apparent shade of the British sub-species is greatly influenced by the incidence of light. The best test is that in the Scandinavian form the mantle is very distinctly paler than the primaries. Only birds conforming to this test can safely be put down as undoubted *fuscus fuscus*, as more or less intermediate birds occur in south Scandinavia," and are now considered *intermedius*. Paul A. Buckley, the North American authority on black-backed gulls, is of the same opinion and reached the conclusion independently that the winter leg color makes no difference; at the time he was not aware of the above-mentioned report to the British Trust.

Other distinguishing characteristics of the typical Lesser Black-backed Gull are the deeper yellow, almost orange, bill color with the spot pink rather than orange, and the pink rather than orange eyelids (refer to the illustrations in British Birds 7 (11):306 by "H. F. W.", A Student of Gulls).