



Adult Vega Gull. Photo: Kirk Zufelt

“Vega” Herring Gull in Algoma District: A new taxon for Ontario

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Introduction

It was a dreary morning typical of the late fall on eastern Lake Superior. An intermittent light drizzle necessitated the occasional use of my windshield wipers as I pulled up to the administrative kiosk at the Sault Ste. Marie landfill. After exchanging pleasantries with the very accommodating landfill staff, I eagerly headed back towards the large cloud of gulls circling the giant rubbish heap.

It was 30 October 2010 and I was partaking in my ongoing survey work of the large gulls of the Sault Ste. Marie area both in Ontario and Michigan. The Sault St. Marie landfill is the municipal landfill for the City of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. This site attracts large numbers of gulls in the fall with between 2,000 and 4,000 gulls being present on an average day from late October to late



Figure 1. Adult Vega Gull, Sault Ste. Marie landfill, 30 October 2010. Photo: Kirk Zufelt

November. The dumping area is an industrial site that is not open to the general public. I had negotiated access to continue my surveying work with strict guidelines to ensure safety and to avoid any interference with workflow.

Trying to avoid the giant mud-filled craters that can swallow a small vehicle, I maneuvered my way back to an optimal observation spot. I settled in and started sorting through the several thousand “American” Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*). Quite quickly, I came across an interesting darker-mantled gull (Figure 1). Although it was elusive at first, within a half an hour it was loafing with several hundred American Herring Gulls within 25 metres of the

car and at times closer. Initially I expected it might be a hybrid, but after close observation I started to consider the possibility that this could be an adult “Vega” Herring Gull (*L. a. vegae*). After very careful study, over several hours, I was able to confirm this identification and obtained a large series of diagnostic photographs.

Taxonomy

According to the American Ornithologists’ Union, Vega Gull is a subspecies of the Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*). The North American subspecies is commonly known as American Herring Gull (*L. a. smithsonianus*) (American Ornithologists’ Union 2012), while the distinct

Siberian-based taxon is referred to as Vega Gull (*L. a. vegae*). Clements' checklist of the birds of the world, Version 6.6, concurs with this outlook (Clements *et al.* 2012). The International Ornithological Congress — IOC Checklist version 2.11 — follows the phylogenetic species concept and considers it a full species, *Larus vegae* (Gill and Donsker 2012).

Olsen and Larsson (2003) considered Vega Gull a distinct species in their monograph *Gulls of North America, Europe and Asia*. Howell and Dunn (2007) support this approach and state that it is “quite distinct from American Herring Gull and better treated as a separate species, Vega Gull, *L. vegae*”.

Although world opinion generally favors treating Vega Gull as a distinct species, changes in the current AOU taxonomy will undoubtedly be deferred until definitive scientific data are presented.



Vagrancy in North America

Documentation of extralimital Vega Gulls in North America has been hampered by its official status as a subspecies of Herring Gull and the reluctance of many bird records committees to review the taxon. The significant difficulty in identifying immature birds, especially those in first cycle, has certainly contributed to the paucity of confirmed records.

Only two previous widely accepted records exist in North America outside of Alaska. The first was an adult documented by Martin Reid and Willie Sekula at the Elliot Landfill, Corpus Christi, Texas on 6 March 2000. Pictures of this are featured on the Texas Bird Records Committee website. The second record was of an adult meticulously documented by Michael Brothers on 2 January 2009 at Daytona Beach Shores, Florida (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Adult Vega Gull, Daytona Beach Shores, Florida, 2 January 2009. *Photo: Michael Brothers*

Status and Distribution

The Vega Gull breeds predominantly on islands and sea cliffs in the high arctic of northeast Siberia (Olsen and Larsson 2003). There is a small breeding population on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering

Sea, which is the only regular North American breeding location (Howell and Dunn 2007). Vega Gulls winter predominantly in Japan, Korea, south and east China and Taiwan. Olsen and Larsson (2003) state “some post breeding wandering to N. Alaskan coast, but no other reliable observations from North America”. Howell and Dunn (2007) refer to specimens from British Columbia and Oregon, noting that “the former pertains to a hybrid...and the latter warrants critical examination”.

This report was reviewed and accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOS Records Committee Report-2009-FOS RC 09-761) (Kratter 2010). Howell and Dunn (2007) report that it is “almost certainly overlooked in western North America, with several December to March records of presumed Vega Gulls from central California”.

A specimen record from Henderson Lake, British Columbia from 27 November 1922 (Campbell 1990) was re-futed by Howell and Dunn (2007) with the assertion that the specimen “pertains to hybrid Glaucous-winged (*Larus glaucescens*) x Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) or Glaucous-winged x American Herring Gull”.

Twelve records of Vega Gull from between 2000 and 2009 in British Columbia were noted by Toochin and Feneman (2008). Fifty percent of these were adult birds. The authors noted that “no attempt has been made to unilaterally pass judgment on any sight records. This responsibility is best left to a proper Rare Birds Committee, which currently does not operate in the province.” At present none of these records have been published or reviewed by an independent records committee so they are considered tentative. Hopefully a mechanism for independent review of British Columbia bird records can be developed to provide legitimacy to these and other rare bird records from the province.

Although a fair amount of gull study has taken place in the Yukon, and Vega Gull is considered casual north to the Arctic coast of Alaska (Howell and Dunn 2007), there are no known records from Canada’s far north although it is quite possible that it has been overlooked (C. Eckert pers. comm.).

Description

The following description of the bird was compiled from my careful observations and notes at the time of observation as well as from the detailed photographs. It is, in essence, the same description submitted to and accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Wormington and Cranford 2011).

Size and Structure

This bird was comparable in overall size to the Herring Gulls that it accompanied. From direct comparison to a large number of Herring Gulls, I estimated it was at about the 70th percentile in size, being smaller than about 30% of the associated gulls.

The structure was also very comparable. The head was relatively rounded at rest suggesting this bird might be a relatively large female. The bill was average in width and length with a relatively modest gonydeal expansion when compared to the Herring Gulls. A direct comparison of the bird’s bill with American Herring Gulls nearby showed that the bill was well within “average” range and certainly not in the larger



Figure 3. Algoma Vega Gull (right) showing similar structure to American Herring Gull but with a darker mantle, 30 October 2010. *Photo: Kirk Zufelt*

end of the American Herring Gull spectrum which one would expect in a Herring Gull x Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*) hybrid. The leg length and primary extension were both very similar to the Herring Gulls.

In conclusion, this bird fit well within the average range for size and structure in direct comparison to several hundred Herring Gulls with which it closely associated during the observation period (Figure 3). This would be the expectation for a Vega Gull.

Bare Parts

In discussing the bare parts, I will compare the findings on this bird with the data presented by Chris Gibbins (2003)

in his study “Identification of Adult Vega Gull: Field Observations from Japan”.

The eye of this Vega Gull was brownish-yellow (Figure 4). It was darker than average for an American Herring Gull, although uncommonly they can have a dark eye. This “in between” eye colour was neither light as in the vast majority of Herring Gulls or in the eastern Pacific population of Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), nor truly dark as would be expected in, for instance, a California Gull (*Larus californicus*). Gibbins (2003) noted that the vast majority of adult Vega Gulls he observed had an “in-between eye color with only about 10 percent having a very dark eye and none having a very light eye”.



Figure 4. Algonia Vega Gull showing darkish eye and reddish orbital ring, 30 October 2010.



Figure 5. American Herring Gull showing typical light eye and yellowish-orange orbital ring, 30 October 2010. *Photos: Kirk Zufelt*

The orbital ring in this bird was definitely reddish with possibly a bit of an orange tinge (Figure 4). Sibley (2000: 217) illustrates this well and he describes the Vega Gull's orbital ring as "orange-red" and the American Herring Gull's orbital-ring as "orange-yellow". Olsen and Larsson (2003) describe the Vega Gull's orbital ring simply as "red". They describe the American Herring Gull's orbital ring as "orange-yellow" (Figure 5).

The bill was a yellowish-orange color with the distal portion of the upper mandible having a bit deeper orange color (Figure 4). The bill was a bit brighter than most of the associated American Herring Gulls, likely because it had not fully transitioned to basic plumage as had almost all of the Herring Gulls at this date. It had a single red spot

on the gonys, near the tip of the lower mandible, with no black markings. In Gibbins' (2003) study of 103 adult Vega Gulls in Japan, the majority had this bill pattern with no black markings.

The leg colour was light pink. Although we often think of Vega Gull as having "bright pink" legs, my review of the adults on Osao and Michiaki Ujihara's website (see Lit. Cited) from this time of year shows some adult Vega Gulls with fairly bright legs and others with rather light to dull pink legs.

Gibbins' (2003) study showed that in later winter Vega Gull legs were mostly quite a light pink color and the pictures of the birds on his website show this fairly pale pink color in all the birds. It appears that most adult Vega Gulls have fairly bright pink legs during breeding season transitioning during the fall and early winter to a much lighter pink not significantly different from the American Herring Gull.

Plumage

Molt

One of the very key features supporting this gull's identification as a Vega Gull is its molt strategy. At the time of the



Figures 6 and 7. Algonia Vega Gull showing extensive molt and retained old primaries as well as broad white trailing edge to wing and extensive white tongue tips to outer primaries, 30 October 2010. *Photos: Kirk Zufelt*

sighting, the bird was still in definitive prebasic molt. It can be seen that it had at least three old retained primaries on both wings, P-7 missing on both wings and P1-6 were freshly grown (Figures 6 and 7). This is characteristic of Vega Gull, which molts much later than the American Herring Gull. On 25 October 2006, O. Ujihara noted that of 40 adult and sub-adult Vega Gulls he observed at Miura Kanagawa, Japan, only two individuals did not have some old retained primaries. Of the more than 500 adult American Herring Gulls I studied on the same date and the next day, I could not find a single bird with any retained primaries. The outer secondaries of the bird were fresh with a few inner ones being very worn. There was extensive

molt of the coverts noted on the open wing photos (Figures 6 and 7).

Head

The head was entirely white, as was the nape, hind neck, throat, chest and neck. Given the Vega Gull's late molt, this lack of head streaking appears fairly regular for this taxon in October, although many birds would appear to have some head markings by this stage. Several adult Vega Gulls in mid- to late-October shown on Ujihara's web site have an unmarked white head, neck and nape.

Under Parts

The under parts were entirely white and otherwise unmarked.

Upper Parts

The mantle and scapulars were a uniform gray with the exception of a small white scapular crescent (Figure 8). Using the Kodak Gray Scale I estimated the gray as 7. The gray mantle of the associated American Herring Gulls was estimated as a 4.5. This is consistent with the estimates of upperparts gray given by Howell and Dunn (2007:26). The scapular crescent was mostly worn away but was much more contrasting than in the associated American Herring Gulls because of the bird's darker mantle colour.

The wing pattern exhibited by the bird was quite distinctive. The outer secondaries were fresh and the innermost



Figure 8. Algonia Vega Gull, 30 October 2010. *Photo: Kirk Zufelt*

ones old and very worn. Primaries 1-5 were fresh and fully-grown. P6 is fresh and partially grown in on the left and mostly grown in on the right. P7 was absent on both wings and P8-10 were old and worn. There was extensive molt of the coverts (Figures 6 and 7).

The secondaries and inner primaries had long white tips, giving the bird a very broad trailing white edge typical of the Vega Gull. The outer primaries revealed a large mirror on P10 and a smaller mirror on P9. There was black on the primaries from P4 to 10. The amount of black on P4 was minimal. There were extensive white tongue tips to the outer primaries typical for the Vega Gull and best seen on the freshly emerged P5 and P6 (Figures 6 and 7). The wingtip pattern on this bird was very close to that of #2 Vega Gull illustrated in Olsen and Larsson (2003:28). The rump, tail and undertail coverts were entirely white.

Discussion

The Vega Gull is a relatively distinct taxon. Structurally, it is practically identical to the American Herring Gull, its closest relative. Distinguishing features include bare part differences, including a darkish eye and a reddish orbital ring, as well as plumage differences, which include a darker mantle, and differing patterns on the wing primaries. The primary pattern of the Vega Gull usually shows more extensive white-tongue tips on the outer primaries giving a “string of pearls” type impression similar to that

of a Slaty-backed Gull. The very broad trailing edge to the inner primaries and secondaries are another feature shared with Slaty-backed Gull.

The timing of molt in Vega Gull is considerably later than in American Herring Gull and this adds considerable support for the identification in this case. Olsen and Larsson (2003) note that adult Vega Gulls molt “P5-6 mid Sept-Oct, P7-8 late Nov., P9-10 late Dec-Jan”. This correlates nicely with the stage of molt of this bird. American Herring Gulls have generally completed prebasic molt by mid-October. I specifically studied over 500 adult American Herring Gulls from 30-31 October 2010 and could not find a single bird still in active primary molt or with retained old primaries.

Significant differences in bare parts, mantle color and structure separate Vega Gull from other darker-mantled species such as California Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), Slaty-backed Gull and Great Black-backed Gull.

Clearly the “hybrid question” is often one that significantly complicates identification of *Larus* species. This question must be addressed adequately in any extralimital occurrence. I have done so on this occasion by answering the following questions.

1. Why isn't this an American Herring Gull x Lesser Black-backed Gull hybrid?

The main argument against this is the primary pattern and the very broad white trailing edge to the wings. This

would not be something you would expect given that the adult Lesser Black-backed Gull usually has only a small white mirror on P10, minimal white tips to the primaries and a relatively narrow white trailing edge (Figure 9). Some individuals will have a small mirror on P9. None of the multiple pictures of adult Lesser Black-backed Gulls I reviewed in many sources had as much white on the wings as this bird. All the putative American Herring Gull x Lesser Black-backed Gull hybrids I have seen in person and in photographs have had a very odd



Figure 9. Adult Lesser Black-backed Gull showing maximal amount of white on wings with small mirrors on P9-10, St. John's, Newfoundland, 7 January 2007.

Figure 10. Putative adult American Herring Gull x Lesser Black-backed Gull showing darker mantle, light eye and distinctive yellowish legs with pinkish feet, St. John's, Newfoundland, 7 January 2007.

Photos: Kirk Zufelt



pinkish-yellow leg colour as well as a considerably darker mantle than would be typical for a Vega Gull (Figure 10).

2. Why isn't this an American Herring Gull x Great Black-backed Gull hybrid?

This is clearly the most likely alternative identification. In fact, initially in the field this was my presumption for this bird's identification. However, as I watched the bird, I was increasingly stumped by its relatively light mantle, which was much lighter than I would expect for this combination. Next, I noted the total lack of any Great Black-backed Gull structural characteristics. There was no sign of the massive bill or the odd "skinny looking", flat head that is usually associated with this hybrid (Figure 11). The size was that of a medium-sized Herring Gull with none



Figure 11. Putative third basic American Herring Gull x Great Black-backed Gull showing long legs, flat Great Black-backed Gull-like head, stout bill and light eye, 20 November 2009. *Photo: Kirk Zufelt*

of the “long-legged” look of a Great Black-backed Gull. The next reason this bird was not likely an American Herring Gull x Great Black-backed Gull hybrid was its primary and secondary flight feather patterns. Both the American Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull have medium-sized white trailing edges to the secondaries. This bird was typical of a Vega Gull and had a very wide trailing edge reminiscent of (or maybe even wider than) a Slaty-backed Gull.

Thus, the distinctive features of this bird fit very nicely with its identification as a Vega Gull. The mantle colour, structure and distinctive wing pattern, as well

as molt timing, were all consistent with the Vega Gull and inconsistent with potential hybrid imitators.

Summary

The Vega Gull is a distinct taxon which is variably treated either as a distinct species or a subspecies of the Herring Gull. Its primary range is northeastern Siberia with a small breeding colony in North America on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Vagrants outside Alaska have rarely been documented sufficiently to be definitive. Only two previous adult Vega Gull records, one from Texas and a second from Florida have been widely accepted. Numerous reports from the



Figure 12. Algonia Vega Gull showing roundish head, average “Herring Gull” type beak and darkish eye, 30 October 2010. *Photo: Kirk Zufelt*

west coast of North America suggest that it may be a regular visitor to that area.

On 30 October 2010, I observed a dark-mantled gull at the Sault Ste. Marie landfill, Algoma District, Ontario (Figure 12). This bird had Herring Gull-like size and structure with a darker mantle, a reddish orbital ring, a very broad white trailing edge to the wings and a typical Vega Gull primary pattern. The eye color, leg color and bill pattern were all consistent with the majority of Vega Gulls studied by Gibbins (2003) in Japan. It was still in active definitive pre-basic molt with three retained outer primaries, a feature which strongly supports the identification of Vega Gull in late

fall. I believe this is clearly sufficient evidence to identify this bird as an adult Vega Gull. My report was unanimously accepted as pertaining to an adult Vega Gull by the Ontario Bird Records Committee in 2011 (Wormington and Cranford 2011), thus providing the first confirmed record of this taxon for Ontario and Canada.

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