

Slaty-backed Gull at Toronto

Bob Yukich and Juha Varella

The Discovery

On 2 January 1999, I (BY) was birding the Toronto waterfront with Juha Varrela, a friend from Finland who was visiting over the holidays. It was a cold, cloudy day (-11°C), with a few flurries and a raw north-east wind. We were just finishing up a morning's birding and were looking over the gulls and waterfowl at Sunnyside before our return home. At about 1200h, as we approached from the west, we saw a small group of gulls sitting on the ice inside the breakwater between the foot of Ellis Avenue and Colborne Lodge Drive. While they were still in the distance, I raised my binoculars to give them a quick scan before approaching any closer. The majority appeared to be Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), but I immediately noticed a dark-backed gull among them which I thought was a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) because it had a lot of dark streaking on the head. I pointed it out to Juha, and we continued toward it until we were almost opposite the spot where the gull rested.

We were now fairly close to the bird and, looking through my binoculars, I could see it sitting on the ice, its legs hidden from view. It appeared to be in definitive basic (adult winter) plumage. However, the mantle looked too dark and the smudge around the eye did not

seem dark enough for the *graellsii* race of Lesser Black-backed Gull. I began to think that it was just a Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*), but that was not right either, not with all the dusky streaking on the head. Next I thought of the *intermedius* race of Lesser Black-backed Gull. The mantle colour was perfect for it. But, this gull looked too large, about the same size as nearby Herring Gulls, and the overall structure, especially the head and bill, was not right for any race of Lesser Black-backed Gull. Juha was very familiar with all of those races from Europe, and especially from Finland. He also had experience with many of the darker Old World races of Herring Gull, but this bird did not match anything that he was familiar with.

I began to think that it might be a hybrid. Whatever it was, it was good! I asked Juha if he had his camera. He said that he did, and ran to his van to get it. Meanwhile, I started studying the bird through my scope (60 mm Kowa with ED glass and a 27x eyepiece), from a distance of 30 to 40 m. I now began to consider Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*) after noticing that this bird had quite a large white tertial crescent. I also realized that the chances of this species showing up here were quite remote. Juha returned with his camera (35 mm, hand held with a 300 mm

lens and fast film). Positioning himself as close to the shoreline as possible and opposite the bird, he began taking photographs. I continued studying the bird. Then the gull stood up, revealing bright pink legs — a promising sign.

After noting as much as I could on the bird, I was hoping to see it fly so that we could see whether it had the diagnostic “string of pearls” pattern of white spots that Slaty-backed Gull shows on the outer primaries. At one point, several of the gulls, including our dark-backed bird, flew up briefly and landed almost immediately. Juha was still clicking but was not sure whether he had gotten a good flight shot or not. It happened so quickly that I really didn’t see much more on the bird. Finally, several of the gulls flew off, but our mystery bird remained with a few Herring Gulls. A short time later, after he had taken about 30 exposures, Juha began walking back towards me. Suddenly our gull flew up and eastward. Juha did not have time to get another shot, and I tried in vain to see the wingtip pattern as it moved away from us. After flying a short distance, it turned and began coming back toward us. I was hoping that it would fly over our heads so that we could see the pattern on the underside of the primaries, but it veered northward and continued flying over the Gardiner Expressway and High Park, all the while gaining altitude. Finally it disappeared from our view. Total observation time had been about 20 to 25 minutes.

When it first flew, I had a

micro-second view of the underside of the primaries. I sensed they might have had the pattern I was looking for, but I could not be sure. In flight, it had a slightly heavy bearing, and the wings did not appear particularly long. Not much else was noted. We then continued walking a short distance in an eastward direction, checking out the various ducks and gulls. After another 15 minutes or so had passed, we returned home, but first we checked the gulls sitting on the ice at the south end of Grenadier Pond. Our bird was not there.

One week later, on 9 January, Glenn Coady and Patrick Stepien-Scanlon saw what they believed to be the same gull farther to the east on the ice inside the breakwater opposite the Boulevard Club. Their description fit the bird that we saw. Patrick also had a paler mantled Lesser Black-backed Gull nearby to compare with. Unfortunately, the gull in question was on private property with no public access and both observers had to content themselves with somewhat distant views. They watched the gull fly out over the lake at dusk, and it was not reported again.

Juha was returning to Finland in a couple of days after our sighting and would not have time to get his slides developed here. We agreed that once he had them developed in Finland he would send me duplicates of most of them. We still were not sure whether he had captured anything on film that we had not already seen in the field.

After the slides were developed in Finland, Juha e-mailed me saying that he had one good flight shot of the upper wing. When he compared it with photographs of known Slaty-backed Gulls, the primary pattern matched perfectly. Everything else had matched up also. We were pretty excited!

About a month after having seen the bird, I received the slides. I looked at them carefully and compared them with various photographs of Slaty-backed Gulls. I also referred to *The Large Gulls of North America* video narrated by Jon Dunn, which I found especially helpful. I felt that the photographs of our bird matched Slaty-backed Gull in every way. Subsequently, the Ontario Bird Records Committee accepted our reports as confirming the second record of Slaty-backed Gull for Ontario (Roy 2000). The first Ontario sighting involved a bird on the Niagara River from 24 November to 29 December 1992 (Bain 1993).

Identification Points

The Slaty-backed Gull appeared to be the same size as the Herring Gulls it was with, maybe a bit chunkier, and with a similar shaped head and bill. I believe that this gull was probably a female because of its relatively small size and small bill. Slaty-backed Gulls can exhibit much sexual dimorphism. The mantle colour was a dark slate, darker than on the *graellsii* race of Lesser Black-backed Gull but paler than that of a nearby Great Black-

backed Gull; it was intermediate between the two. The large white tertial crescent was noticeably larger than that on any of the Herring Gulls, and its large round-shaped scapular crescent was also larger than on any of the nearby gulls. The visible folded black primaries contrasted slightly with the dark mantle. Each primary was tipped with white, beginning with a fairly small apical spot on P10. These spots became successively larger inwardly, through to P6, the white tip of which was often just visible at the edge of the white tertial crescent. At times I could see the underside of the outermost primary, P10. It showed a small white tip with a narrow band of black next to it, followed by a large, oval-shaped white "mirror" that completely covered both webs.

The bill was similar to that of nearby Herring Gulls, moderate in size with little swelling at the tip, and not much gonydeal angle (almost parallel sided). The basal two thirds of the bill was a chalky yellow, and the tip was a brighter orange yellow. There was a medium-sized red spot near the tip of the lower mandible, and a small dusky mark (possibly extending slightly onto the upper mandible) posterior to and touching this spot, suggesting a fourth year bird. The crown appeared rounded or slightly flattish, depending on the bird's posture. The eye was pale yellow as in Herring Gull. The orbital ring was not noted.

The head, neck and breast were



Figure 1: Slaty-backed Gull at Sunnyside Beach, *Toronto*, 2 January 1999, showing diagnostic “string of pearls” in primaries. Photo by *Juha Varella*.

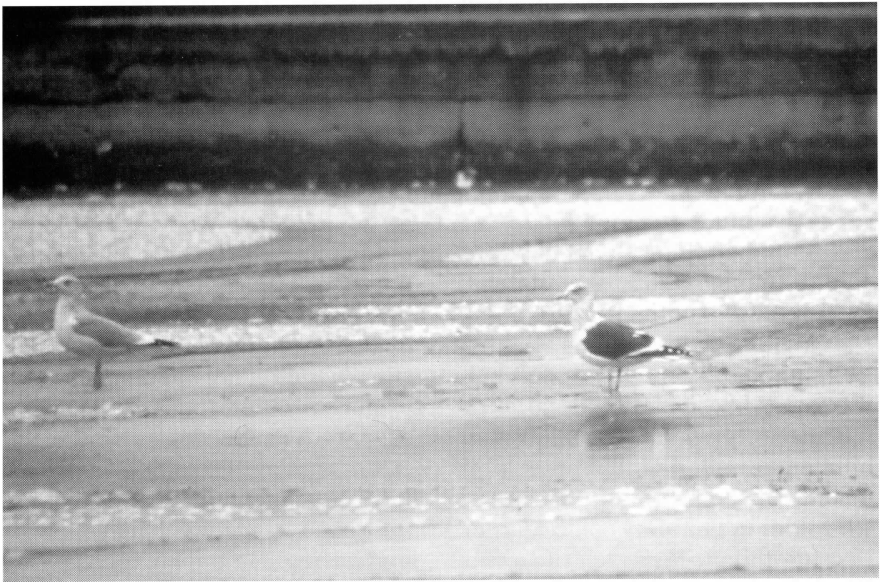


Figure 2: Slaty-backed Gull, 2 January 1999, showing deeper chest and longer neck than nearby Herring Gull. Photo by *Juha Varella*.

streaked and mottled with greyish browns. The dense streaking around the eye formed a dark eye-patch extending posteriorly in a point, upwards and toward the rear of the crown. It also extended in a similar fashion in front of the eye, but possibly more bluntly so. This eye-patch was not as dark as is usually seen in definitive basic Lesser Black-backed Gulls of the *graellsii* race. There were short dusky streaks on the crown that continued down the nape, more heavily so down the hindneck and darkest on the lower hindneck. The front and sides of the neck were also streaked dusky, being perhaps more mottled on the lower neck. The underparts were white with large well-spaced mottling across the entire breast. This mottling had a more brownish hue than the rest of the streaking, which was more greyish brown. The tail was all white. The legs were a bright pink, and this colour was matched by a few Herring Gulls with the brightest legs.

The most important photograph (Figure 1) reveals the upper-side of the gull in flight, showing well the wide white trailing edge of the secondaries which extends into the inner primaries, much wider than on any of the Herring Gulls in the photo. The wing also shows a conspicuous white leading edge. Most important is the "string of pearls" effect created by the white

"tongues" in P7, P6 and P5. These are separated from the white tips on each feather by varying amounts of black. P10 shows a large white "mirror", and P9 and P8 have no mirrors at all, just white tips. The amount of white in P8 on Slaty-backed Gull is variable; it can sometimes have none at all, as in this individual (although there could be a slight mark on the inner web of P8, hidden by the outer web of P7). Difficult to see in this photograph, but visible upon close inspection, is the grey inner web of the outer primaries (mostly covered by the black outer web of the primary next to it). This feather pattern (black outer web and grey inner web) is right for Slaty-backed Gull. Also evident in Figure 1 are the wide-based wings, noticeably wider than on any of the Herring Gulls.

The photograph of the bird standing (Figure 2) shows the deeper chest and longer (and thicker) neck of this gull when compared with the Herring Gull next to it. The wide white tertial crescent and large scapular crescent are also visible in this photograph.

Literature Cited

- Bain, M.** 1993. Ontario Bird Records Committee report for 1992. Ontario Birds 11: 46-63.
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