

WORDS FROM BEL AIR, MARYLAND

On March 25, 1984, a Mew Gull was reported at Falmouth by a group of observers and the following details were published in the field records of Bird Observer [12(3): 166].

Ring-billed Gulls were nearby for comparison, and the bird was slightly smaller and had a shorter, thinner, brighter yellow bill which was unmarked. The head was smaller and more rounded. Head, neck and body were white with some gray streaks on the head and neck. The mantle was similar to the Ring-billed's. Leg color was a brighter, more intense yellow. The orbital ring was red, and the eye color was a pale yellowish-tan. The spots on the primary tips of the folded wings were larger, and the area of white between the black of the tips and the gray of the back or coverts was wider.

The following letter from Eirik A. T. Blom was received by the Field Records Committee of BIRD OBSERVER, and permission to reprint it has generously been given by the author.

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Dear Sirs:

I am sure this is not the first or last letter concerning the record of a "Mew" Gull in Falmouth on March 25, 1984.

Since I was not present, I can only judge the record on the basis of the published notes. Of course, other researchers and records committees have the same problem. Still, despite fairly short notes (which is not to say that more were not submitted), it is possible to reach some conclusions.

The first and most important is that the observers did not see a Mew Gull (Larus canus), or if they did, it was so aberrant as to be unidentifiable in the field, in range or out. Mew Gulls of all races have dark eyes, appearing black in the field. Any gull with a "pale yellowish-tan" eye cannot be a Mew. I suspect the villain in the case was the unmarked yellow bill. I have seen Ring-billed Gulls (Larus delawarensis) with unmarked or apparently unmarked yellow bills on at least four occasions in Maryland. On two occasions, photographs were obtained by Robert F. Ringler (3501 Melody Lane, Baltimore, Md 21207).

This is an excellent example of why single field marks, no matter how presumably diagnostic, should not be used to identify out-of-range birds. An examination of the other characters described in the note is instructive. It suggests how easy it is to overvalue the importance of slight differences when an identification seems settled.

The bird is described as "slightly smaller" than nearby Ring-bills with a "shorter, thinner, brighter yellow bill." The head is noted as "smaller and more rounded." Mew Gulls are smaller than Ring-bills, but there is considerable variation in both species. On average, Mews appear noticeably smaller than Ring-bills. Only a very large Mew would look "slightly" smaller than all the Ring-bills in a

nearby flock. Bill size and shape are the most distinctive clues to Mew Gulls. Again, only on the largest Mew (probably European or Siberian in origin) would the bill approach the length and thickness of a small Ring-bill. The shape, not described, would still be typical of Mew. Depending on the individuals involved, the bill is likely to be brighter yellow on Ring-bill than Mew. Mews have smaller and more rounded heads, and the difference is fairly striking on most birds. Mews are "dove-headed," and the dark eye is large and prominent.

The mantle of Mew Gulls is not "similar" to Ring-bills. It is visibly darker. Even accounting for individual variation, any Mew will look darker than any Ring-bill.

The size of the sub-apical spots on the primaries is different on the two species as is the shape of the spots. Just saying they are larger without specific description and comparison is not adequate to eliminate variation in Ring-bill. The same is true of the amount of white between the gray of the mantle and the black of the primaries.

In fact, no single field mark, except for the bill, points to Mew and several point to Ring-bill. Clearly, no matter what the bird is, aberrant characters need to be explained. Given the information available, I think the choice is clearly Ring-bill, with a rare but not unrecorded variation in bill pattern. I am unaware of any report of a Mew Gull with a pale eye. Notes from other observers and expanded notes from the original observer would shed more light on the issue.

Despite all the discussion about identification, my real concern is that the record is in print as a Mew Gull in one of the most deservedly respected bird journals in the country. Unless there is some explanation or recantation, the record will resurface again and again, muddying the waters of Mew Gull vagrancy and distribution in the United States.

This is intended in the friendliest possible manner. I have spent years studying and flubbing gulls (and continue to) and am immensely sympathetic to and admiring of anyone who tackles the problems of large, white-headed gulls. Nothing would please me more than to discover that there were clear, unequivocal photos of the birds in question and to have to eat gull from afar.

EIRIK A. T. BLOM, who served as one of two chief consultants for the 1983 National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America, has long had a particular interest in gulls. Eirik is director of the Maryland/D.C. Breeding Bird Atlas Project and chairman of the Maryland Rare Birds Records Committee. BIRD OBSERVER is grateful to Rick for calling attention to this record, and we will publish comments from our readers about his interpretation of this sighting.

Editor's Note: The observers of the March 25 gull are to be commended for submitting a report sufficiently detailed to permit evaluation after this lapse of time. The notes indicate the bird was thoroughly studied, and the pertinent details recorded while the sighting was fresh in the mind. It is not unusual for records to be re-examined after long periods of time (even years later), and this demonstrates the importance of reports that include the complete notes made in the field at the time of the sighting.