

SIGHTING OF A FRANKLIN'S GULL
IN VINEYARD SOUND, MASSACHUSETTS

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On Monday, October 10, 1977, at 1:00 P.M. EDT, while guiding the Bird Watcher's Islands Cruise aboard M/V SHOREHAM, I saw a Franklin's Gull (Larus pipixcan) at 41° 30.0'N, 70° 37.5'W, 1.5 nautical miles north-west of West Chop Light, at the north-east end of Vineyard Sound, Massachusetts.

The ship had left Newport, R.I., that morning and was en route to Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard. Right after lunch, I went on deck and shortly thereafter noticed a small gull sitting alone on the water about 500 feet away off the port bow.

I initially assumed the bird to be an adult Laughing Gull (Larus atricilla) in winter plumage since a) differentiating field marks were not noticed while the bird sat immobile, and b) large numbers of Laughing Gulls had been seen during the morning, especially at the mouth of the Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island.

As the ship approached at 12 knots and I watched the gull through 7 X 35 binoculars, it raised and spread its wings slightly, preparing to take flight. At this point my attention was drawn to the fact that the bird displayed significantly more white on the wings, apparently on the outer trailing edges, than one would expect on a Laughing Gull. When the bird was within about 200 feet, it lifted itself from the surface of the water and flew south-west, opposite to the ship's direction, slightly below eye level at a distance of about seventy feet. It then vanished behind the ship.

In spite of rather quick wing beats and rapid motion relative to the ship, an irregular white band was clearly visible on the upper surface of the wing, cutting diagonally inward from front to rear across the middles of the primaries and dividing the slate-gray mantle and inner primaries from the outer primaries which were mostly black with white tips.

The gull had been observed on the water for about 20 seconds and was seen in the air for about 10 seconds. The view was excellent and allowed observation of the prominent diagnostic field marks on the wing, but was too short in duration to permit thorough study of the more subtle differentiating factors or the precise wing formula.

I was able neither to show the gull to the tour, nor to obtain the confirmation of additional observers since only five of the non-birding passengers had yet returned to the deck after lunch. I have seen large numbers of Franklin's Gulls in the northern plains states years ago, but recognition was due primarily to previous study of field guides and regional compilations.

Summary of Observed Field Marks

Head: white, with a grayish patch beginning behind eye, extending over the dome and around the back of the head and ending at the nape,

Bill: dark

Mantle: slate-gray

Wings: described above. In comparison to the plate by Singer in Birds of North America, which I consulted just after the sighting, the white band across the primaries was less regular in appearance, blending into the slate-gray at the proximal side and describing a less even line of demarcation with the black of the outer primaries at the distal side. This may have been due in part to the almost horizontal angle at which the bird was seen while in flight, which tended to foreshorten the pattern. The general effect is well shown in Forbush, Vol. I, Fig. 9, with the exception that the black appeared more extensive. The underwings were not well observed due to shadow and the slight downward angle of view.

Underparts and tail: pure white

Feet and legs: not well observed.

Differential Identification

Laughing Gull. As described, the wing pattern rules out this species. Size difference was not obvious, but the bird was alone and no direct reference was available. No difference in the shade of the mantle was specifically noted. Due to the briefness and unexpectedness of the sighting, my attention was focused on the prime field marks--the wings--at the expense of the more subtle differentiating features.

Bonaparte's Gull (Larus philadelphia) adult has to be considered, but the white triangle on the forefront of the primaries simply did not exist. No Bonaparte's Gulls were seen on October 10.

Aberrant plumaged juvenile small gulls of any species are unlikely candidates, especially since the gull was observed to have a pure white tail.

Weather Conditions

On October 9, 1977, the day before the sighting, a large low pressure system over the Great Lakes caused gale conditions along the New England coast. Southerly winds of 30 knots and heavy rain were experienced in Vineyard Sound. By October 10, the low had moved north-east and a cold front had moved through. At the time of the sighting, winds were gentle westerly, temperature was about 50°F, and there was a high, thin, partial overcast. The horizon was clearly visible and conditions for observation were generally ideal.

Literature Cited

Robbins et al., Birds of North America, 1966.

Forbush, E. H., Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States, Vol. I, 1925.