FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF THE LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

by Richard R. Veit

During the past 30 years, the Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus) has become a regular annual vagrant to the east coast of the United States, ranging from Florida and the Caribbean north to the New York City area (AOU 1975; Bull 1964), with a number of recent records from the Great Lakes. Comparatively few records exist from the coast north of New York, and all Massachusetts records are relatively recent. The species was first recorded in Massachusetts on September 14, 1971 (Petersen, 1973). Since that time, a minimum of 15 sight records has accumulated for eastern Massachusetts (the majority from Cape Cod and the islands, especially Nantucket), and at least 11 of these have occurred during the period 1977 to 1980. In anticipation of increasing occurrences of this species in New England, it seems appropriate to describe the salient points for its field identification.

Identification of adults, or even birds in third-winter plumage, is comparatively straightforward for the competent observer familiar with our local larids. However, most North American observers would not attempt identification of individuals in first- or second-winter plumage, quite understandably, since these plumages (particularly the former) are not accurately described or illustrated in any of the more popular field guides. Indeed, some authors go so far as to suggest that immature Lesser Black-backed Gulls are indistinguishable in the field from the Herring Gull (Larus argentatus). My recent experience in western Europe has convinced me that this is not the case. As described below, the Lesser Black-backed Gull is a species which the careful and patient field observer can readily distinguish in any plumage from its congeners, particularly L. argentatus. Comparison with the Herring Gull is emphasized in the below descriptions of the Lesser Black-backed Gull's general structural features and plumages. The size difference between the Lesser Black-backed Gull and the Great Black-backed Gull is ordinarily large enough to preclude confusion of these species, provided that an adequate view is obtained.

General Structural Features

In comparison to the Herring Gull, the build of the Lesser Black-backed Gull is noticeably slighter overall; the bill is more slender and the head more smoothly rounded, yielding a rather "dove-like" appearance, not unlike the impression conveyed by the Iceland Gull (Larus glaucoides) or, more obviously, by the Mew Gull (Larus canus). In addition, the folded wings of a standing bird attenuate gradually to a fine point, so that the posterior profile suggests the "pencil-point" look of the White-rumped Sandpiper (Calidris fusicollis). Although individual variation will in some instances obscure these generalized structural differences, they are for the most part not crucial to the conclusive identification of the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Plumages

Before describing the plumages of this species, it may be helpful to outline its pattern of molt, which is similar to that exhibited by most other large larids (see Figure 1). The first set of contour feathers acquired

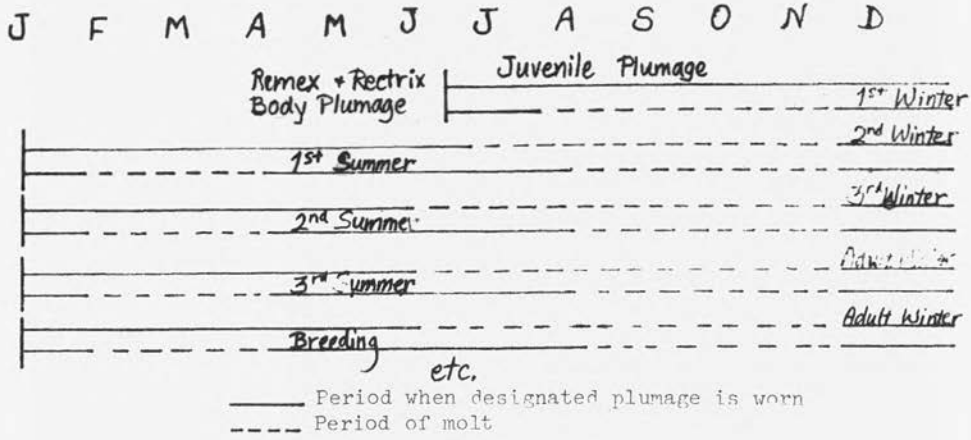

Figure 1. Molt Pattern of Large Gulls

following the downy stage constitutes the juvenile plumage. The remiges and rectrices grown at this time are retained for one full year. During the period September - November of the bird's first fall, a partial molt of the body plumage occurs, resulting in the first-winter plumage. A second partial molt of the body plumage during December - April yields the first-summer plumage. From this point on, all of the feathers are molted annually during the period June - November in a process referred to as the post-nuptial molt. The resulting fresh plumage is termed second-winter, third-winter, or adult winter, depending on the age of the bird. A second, partial molt of the body plumage every year during the period December - April (the pre-nuptial molt) results in the second-summer, third-summer, or breeding plumage. It is important to realize that molting is frequently a continuous process, and that the above somewhat arbitrary classification is adopted primarily as a convenience. Therefore, "intermediate" plumages are frequently observed, are to be expected, and should not engender needless frustration.

Juvenile and First-Winter Plumages

The salient point of distinction between these plumages of the Lesser Black-backed Gull and those of the Herring Gull is the coloration of the inner primaries and greater secondary coverts. In the Herring Gull, the innermost four or five primaries are pale-buff or creamy, forming a conspicuous contrast with the solidly dusky-brown outer primaries. This contrast is such that a translucent "window" appears at the inner "hand" of the bird. The greater secondary coverts are also pale-buff, lightly mottled with dusky brown, so that they form a conspicuous contrast with the uniformly dusky secondaries.

In the Lesser Black-backed Gull, all of the primaries and the greater secondary coverts are solidly dark-chocolate-brown. The net effect conveyed is a broad, dark, uninterrupted trailing edge to the wing. This diagnostic difference is obvious in flight, as clearly illustrated in the accompanying figures (Figures 2 and 3, which are excerpted from Lars

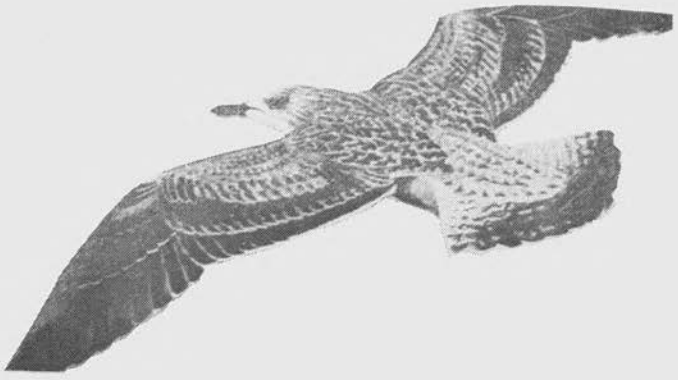

Figure 2. Lesser Black-backed Gull (juvenile)

Figure 3. Herring Gull (first winter)

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Jonsson's Birds of Sea and Coast and are reprinted by permission). The Herring Gull illustrated here is of the western European subspecies, L.a. argentatus, which is much more pale-bodied than the North American L.a. smithsonianus. It possesses nevertheless the same primary greater-secondary-covert pattern as L.a.smithsonianus.

The coloration of the head and underparts of juvenile/first-winter Lesser Black-backed Gulls is variable with the stage of molt, but is generally similar to that of the Herring Gull, although some individuals that I have seen displayed a conspicuous dark nuchal collar set off from the otherwise whitish head - a feature that I have never noticed on young Herring Gulls. In addition, typical individuals show conspicuous dark eye spots caused by blackish feathering in that area. The bill is blackish-brown with a pale bone-white tip, and the legs either flesh or flesh-pink. The subterminal band on the tail is usually narrower and more sharply delineated than that of the Herring Gull. This character is frequently of some value as a field mark.

First-Summer Plumage

Since the juvenile remiges and rectrices are retained for the duration of the first-summer plumage, their coloration remains the most distinctive feature for identification in this plumage as well. The bill may begin to acquire a flesh-colored base in this plumage.

Second-Winter Plumage

With the onset of this plumage, which follows the first post-nuptial molt, Lesser Black-backed Gulls acquire the characteristic contrast between the mantle and underparts which renders them quite distinct from any plumage of the Herring Gull, and schematically similar to the first-winter plumage of the Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus). The head and underparts are whitish and irregularly marked with brown-gray spots, streaks, and blotches, particularly heavily about the nape and flanks. The newly molted mantle feathers (back as well as upper wing coverts) have slate-gray centers and broad brownish margins; the relative amounts of gray and brown vary so much that the bird may appear slate-mantled, brown-mantled, or slate scaled with brown. The new remiges are uniformly blackish, with no white markings in the primaries, while the fresh tail has, on the average, a narrower and more sharply delineated terminal band than that of the previous plumage. The legs remain flesh-pink or neutral-toned, while the bill usually acquires a fleshy base, which is sharply demarcated from the dark tip, although it may remain entirely dark until the third winter.

Second-Summer Plumage

The pre-nuptial molt of the body plumage renders the head and underparts whiter. A few solidly slate-gray feathers appear on the back, and some yellow coloration appears in the bill and legs, especially on the back, as in young Snowy Egrets.

Third-Winter Plumage

The remiges acquired with the post-nuptial molt are coal-black, with no

white markings in the primaries, while the fresh rectrices are pure white. The new mantle feathers are solidly slate-gray with the exception of the secondary coverts, which are narrowly margined with brown. The bill becomes largely yellow, frequently with a blackish smudge at the angle of the gonys, posterior to the red spot typical of all the larger larids. The legs assume a straw-yellow color. A bird molting from second-summer to third-winter plumage is clearly described by Petersen (1973).

Third-Summer Plumage

This plumage does not differ appreciably from the third-winter plumage, except for a continued intensification of the soft-part colors.

Fourth-Winter (=Adult Winter) and Breeding Plumages

The new primaries are coal-black; a single white spot is formed by the confluence of white spots on the tenth and ninth primaries (cf. double white spots of Herring Gull or Great Black-backed Gull). The tail and underparts are pure-white and the mantle is solidly slate-gray. The head and nape are much more profusely marked with brownish spots and streaks than in the Herring Gull in adult winter plumage, and the bill tends toward orange-yellow rather than straw-yellow. The leg color varies from a pale flesh through lemon to vivid orange; the intensity of the coloration of the soft parts is highest during the breeding season. The head and nape of breeding adults are pure-white.

Probable Origin of North American Vagrants

To date, virtually all subspecifically identified records from North America are assignable to L.f. graelsii, the breeding form of the British Isles and Iceland, which in winter regularly migrates as far south as tropical Africa, including Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and the mouth of the Congo River (AOU, 1975). This migratory pattern, coupled with the pronounced southerly distribution of coastal North American records, strongly suggests that Lesser Black-backed Gulls observed here could have been drifted across the tropical Atlantic by the easterly trade winds and associated cyclonic activity, as analogously hypothesized for North American vagrant Curlew Sandpipers (Calidris ferruginea) and Ruffs (Philomachus pugnax) (Eisenmann, 1960). Alternatively, these birds could conceivably be continuing their typical autumnal east-west migratory route across the North Atlantic, as suggested for Palearctic waders by Nisbet (1959). This latter theory might better account for the presence of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the Great Lakes region and off Labrador (Powers, 1979).

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