

Great Black-backed Gull: First Mississippi Records

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We observed and photographed a Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus) in Biloxi, Harrison County, Mississippi on 15 March 1984. The gull was present through 21 March 1983 and was observed by many others. This marks the first occurrence of Great Black-backed Gull in Mississippi. Copies of the photographs are on file in the ornithological collections at Mississippi State University.

The gull was immature, and not immediately obvious as a Great Black-backed Gull by size or plumage as it rested on a piling in the Mississippi Sound near the Old Biloxi Lighthouse. A closer look revealed that it was larger than a Herring Gull (L. argentatus) on a nearby piling, and much larger than Ring-billed Gulls (L. delawarensis) which were also present.

The Great Black-backed Gull had a heavier bill, thicker legs, a whitish head, and very dark mantle and wing plumage which was noticeably darker than that of a first-winter Herring Gull on the next piling. It was urged to flight, and presented the saddle-backed appearance of a black-backed gull. The tail, which was dirty white, had a rather well-defined black band, edged in white (whiter but not as extensive as that of the immature Herring Gull).

We approached the Great Black-back as it rested with other gulls, and Covington obtained photographs. They show a size difference between the Great Black-backed and Herring gulls. The dark blackish mantle of the former contrasts markedly with that of the lighter, brownish mantle of the Herring Gull. The heavier, thicker bill and the heavy tarsi of the Great Black-backed Gull are also evident.

We studied the gull for about 10 minutes before it flew to the east. Our observations were made at about 14:30 under low cloud cover and with a slight mist falling.

On 16 March 1983, Toups located what appeared to be the same individual farther east on the beach at Biloxi. Two other

observers (David Ruple and Betsy Washington) later saw the gull in the same place. From 15 to 21 March 1983, the gull was seen by at least 20 observers, either at rest on a piling, on the mainland beach, or on the north beach of Deer Island, less than 0.5 km away. At that distance, and with the aid of a spotting scope, the gull could be easily located and identified.

On 18 March 1983, the gull was found near the bulkhead of the Biloxi smallcraft harbor, where Toups photographed it from less than 10 m away. Although not clearly defined in the photographs, the bill, which had appeared all black at greater distances, was lightly tipped in flesh color; the flesh color was repeated at the base of the bill. This characteristic seems to indicate a second-winter gull (Grant 1982, Harrison 1983).

The Great Black-backed Gull breeds on the east and west coasts of the north Atlantic Ocean. It occurs regularly along the eastern seaboard of the United States as far south as Florida, and has been documented in Alabama (pers. obs.) and Louisiana (Purrington 1982). The documentation of this species in Mississippi indicates that it occurs at least occasionally along the entire northern Gulf Coast.

In addition to the Great Black-backed Gull of March 1983, there are two more recent sight records. I saw two immatures at Biloxi on 8 May 1984, and Larry Gates saw another in flight over the Mississippi Sound at Bellefontaine Beach, Jackson County, on 17 December 1984.

Literature Cited

- Grant, P.J. 1982. Gulls. A Guide to identification. Poyser, Ltd., Staffordshire, England.
- Harrison, P. 1983. Seabirds. An identification guide. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.
- Purrington, R.D. 1982. Central Southern Region. Am. Birds 36: 186-188.