

# Presumed hybrids of the Herring Gull and the Great Black-backed Gull —

*a new problem of identification*

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**O**BSERVERS IN EASTERN CANADA and the northeastern United States should be aware of the increasing number of apparent hybrids of Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) and Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*). These birds could be misidentified by the unwary as the paler race of the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus graellsii*), dark mantled subspecies of *L. argentatus*, Western Gull (*L. occidentalis*) or by the very ambitious as Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*).

The first North American specimen of a presumed *argentatus* × *marinus* hybrid was collected by Jehl, January 10, 1959 at Staten Island, New York (Jehl, 1960). Since then specimens have been taken at Kingston, Ontario January 12, 1967 (Godfrey, 1973); on the Niagara River December 5, 1970 (Andrle, 1972) and November 22, 1971 (Andrle, 1973); and at Ottawa, Ontario, September 25, 1974 (spec. in Nat'l Mus. of Nat. Sci., Ottawa). In addition there have been sight records of similar individuals on the Niagara River in 1968 and 1969 (Andrle, 1973) and at Ottawa November 23-28, 1972 (see Godfrey, 1973), November 11-24, 1973 (both by Ron Pittaway and the author) and November 16-23, 1974 by Richard Poulin, Ron Pittaway, and the author.

All the specimens described in the literature bear a striking resemblance to one another. All are adult females. In each case the mantle color, body size, and wing, bill and tarsus measurements are intermediate between those of *argentatus* and *marinus* (for measurements summary, see Godfrey, 1973). The mantle color of each is described as close to "neutral gray" of Ridgway (1912). The primary pattern is slightly variable but consists basically of a long subterminal white spot on the tenth (terminal in the New York specimen) with a shorter (about half as long) subterminal white

spot on the ninth. The leg color is whitish or very pale flesh. The colors of the iris and eye-ring are various shades of yellow. The streaking about the head and neck is variable but always markedly less intense and more restricted than that of typical winter-plumaged *argentatus*.

**T**HE SPECIMEN COLLECTED at Ottawa differs from the above only in that there is virtually no subterminal white spot in the ninth primary and there is no streaking about the head and neck. As far as can be ascertained in the field, the Ottawa sight records are of very similar birds also, with one significant exception. The eye-ring of the 1973 bird appeared dark and that of the 1974 bird (which may have been the same bird) was seen clearly to be bright red.

It seems strange that, with the exception of the first record, all the records are from Ottawa or the lower Great Lakes. All records occurred in the fall or winter seasons. Obviously more information is needed on the occurrence of these birds and their distribution. Observers should not only report all sightings of such birds, but also look for mixed colonies to determine their source.

The occurrence of these birds will pose an identification problem for observers unaware of their existence. The combination of characteristics described above is sufficiently different from that of those species with which it may be confused so that, under ideal conditions, experienced observers should realize that such a bird is something different. However, some of the characteristics are difficult to determine in the field and judgment of size, mantle color, and bill proportions may depend upon which species are present for comparison. Although the mantle color is somewhat paler than that of *L. f. graellsii*, poor lighting conditions can make the mantle appear much darker, particularly in flight. The author

has seen such hybrids misidentified as *marinus* and *fuscus* (tentatively), in both cases the lighting was dull and the only other species present was *argentatus*. However, under ideal conditions the paler mantle, heavier bill, larger size, and eye-ring color (when yellow) should prevent confusion with *fuscus*. Conversely, observers identifying *fuscus* with whitish or pinkish legs should ensure always that the bird is similar in size to *argentatus*, the bill more slender, and the eye-ring red. In addition the streaking about the head and neck of typical winter-plumaged *fuscus* is reddish-brown and relatively heavy. Similarly under ideal conditions the other possible confusions can be avoided. The mantle is too dark and the size too great for most of the subspecies of *argentatus* that have noticeably darker mantles than *L. a. smithsonianus* (*L. a. atlantis*, *barabensis*, *cachinnans*, *michahellis*, *mongolicus*, *taimyrensis*, *vegae*). *L. a. heuglini* is larger and much darker mantled than *L. a. smithsonianus* but the leg color is yellow. In *L. occidentalis* the mantle is darker, the iris usually dark, the eye-ring yellow, and the white in the outer primaries is restricted to the tenth. *L. schistisagus* has a much darker mantle and a red eye-ring.

In conclusion, observers in eastern Canada and the northeastern United States should be aware of these presumed hybrids, take particular care in the identification of any dark mantled Larid other than *marinus*, and should make an effort to contribute to the scarce available data regarding these hybrids by attempting to determine their source.

The author is grateful to Dr. W. E. Godfrey, Curator, Ornithology, National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, for his constructive criticism of this article and for supplying a detailed description of the specimen collected in Ottawa.

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