

# Apparent hybrid Common Black-headed Gull nesting in Lake Ontario

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This gull was probably a Common Black-headed  $\times$  Ring-billed Gull hybrid. Photo/Martin H. Edwards.

**O**N MAY 13 AND 14, 1982, WE OBSERVED a dark-headed gull at a nest with three eggs on Little Galloo Island, Lake Ontario, New York. Little Galloo Island is located at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, about 11 miles west of Henderson Harbor on Henderson Bay, in the southwest part of Jefferson County, New York. Little Galloo Island is on the western side of Stony Island, which is the island closest to the mainland. This island can be seen on U.S. Hydrographic Chart Number 21 or Cruise Nautical Chart Number 3.

The bird was paired with a normally plumaged adult Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*). We observed the pair for 20 minutes on May 13, and saw the dark-headed gull relieve the Ring-billed Gull at the nest. Both birds aggressively defended the nest territory from other nesting Ring-billed Gulls.

We returned on May 14 with M.H. Edwards, who took a series of photographs. The following is a description of the dark-headed gull: legs—dark yellow, darker than those of nearby Ring-billed Gulls; mantle—as in Ring-billed Gulls;

head—powder black to dark powder gray, *i.e.*, darker than mantle of Ring-billed Gulls but not as dark as tips of their primaries and the dark hood rose sharply at the back of the head in an inverted "V"; gape—entirely orange; bill—orange with diffuse black tip, gonys not as well developed as in Ring-billeds, bill of dark-headed gull more dagger-like than Ring-billeds; size—similar to Ring-billeds; eye—dark greenish yellow, with red orbital ring surrounded by light feathering.

We concluded the gull was probably a Common Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*).

us) with some plumage anomalies, e.g., it lacked the darkened distal one-third of the underwing (Jorgensen 1984). Soon thereafter, Edwards forwarded his series of photographs to W. Earl Godfrey at the National Museum of Canada. After examining them, Godfrey concluded that the bird was probably a Common Black-headed Gull × Ring-billed Gull hybrid (*pers. comm.* to R.D. Weir; also Kingston Field Naturalists 1982).

It would appear that there are two unusual occurrences here. First, the appearance of a Common Black-headed × Ring-billed Gull hybrid, and second, its pairing and nesting with a Ring-billed Gull on the Great Lakes. The second condition may not be too unusual if the genetics of the first are correct.

Based on physical appearance alone gulls can be grouped as either "white-headed" or "black-headed". This grouping, except for a few instances and one addition, is in agreement with Moynihan (1959). To place the current hybrid record in perspective it would be useful to review hybridization among and between "white-headed" and "black-headed" gulls.

Hybridization between species of "white-headed" gulls is not unusual. Several naturally occurring interbreeding populations are known: Herring (*L. argentatus*) × Glaucous-winged gulls (*L. glaucescens*) in Alaska (Williamson and Peyton 1963; Patten and Weisbrod 1974), Herring × Glaucous gulls (*L. hyperboreus*) in Iceland (Ingolfsson 1970), and Glaucous-winged × Western gulls (*L. occidentalis*) in the Pacific Northwest (Hoffman *et al.* 1978). Interbreeding between Herring and Lesser Black-backed gulls (*L. fuscus*) is well known in England (Tinbergen 1953; Brown 1967) but is felt to be primarily the result of cross-fostering experiments (Harris 1970; Harris *et al.* 1978). Cockrum (1952) and Gray (1958) report more than 40 "white-headed" gull hybrids involving at least 15 different species and/or subspecies.

Evidence of interbreeding between "black-headed" gulls appears to be exceedingly rare. The only reports known to us are of hybrid Mediterranean (*L. melanocephalus*) × Common Black-headed gulls (van Ijzendoorn 1950, *vide* Taverner 1970a, Taverner 1970a,b).

Interbreeding between the two groups of gulls also appears to be rare but perhaps is more common than between species of "black-headed" gulls. Gray (1958) listed 12 occurrences all involving



Common Black-headed Gulls are native to Europe, but are now regular along the east coast of North America. Photo/Martin H. Edwards.

*Larus ridibundus* and at least four species of white-headed gulls (no Ring-billed Gulls). Additionally, Jones (1980) reported the interspecific copulation between the Slender-billed Gull (*L. genei*) and Common Black-headed Gull and Taverner (1970a) reported interbreeding by Mediterranean and Common Gulls (*L. canus*). More recently, a suspected homosexual pairing between a ♀ Ring-billed Gull and a ♀ Laughing Gull (*L. atricilla*), where each laid infertile eggs in the same nest, has been reported from western Lake Erie (Elliot Tramer, *pers. comm.*). In Canada, Weseloh (1981) reported an apparent Franklin's Gull (*L. pipixcan*) × Ring-billed Gull pair nesting near Edmonton, Alberta. Thus, it appears that this present sighting represents the first published record of a Common Black-headed Gull × Ring-billed Gull hybrid.

The sequence of events which led up to the present hybrid pairing are open to speculation. We did not visit Little Galloo Island again until much later in the season when most nesting activity had ceased. Hence we do not know the outcome of the nest.

Finally, the breeding of a Common Black-headed Gull (albeit a hybrid) on the Great Lakes or anywhere away from the north Atlantic coast in North America, has not been reported previously. Common Black-headed Gulls are native to Europe and Asia, but are now regular along the east coast of North America

(Erskine 1963), and have nested in Newfoundland in 1977 (Finch 1978), on the Madeleine Islands, Quebec, in 1982 and 1983 (Gosselin and David 1982, David 1983, R. Poulin, *pers. comm.*), and in Massachusetts in 1984 (Nikula 1984). They are not known to nest west of these areas. In the interior of North America, Common Black-headed Gulls are reported regularly from Lake Ontario (and to a lesser extent Lake Erie) in the spring and autumn (e.g., Kibbe 1981a, Goodwin 1982, Weir 1982). Prior to the sighting of our bird, a Common Black-headed Gull (not identified as a hybrid) was seen in mid-late May 1979-1981 at the Perch River in western New York near Lake Ontario (Kibbe 1981b, R. Weir, *pers. comm.*). The Perch River bird could have been the same bird we saw (the subtle hybrid features being overlooked initially). Although Weseloh looked specifically for the hybrid gull on visits to Little Galloo Island in May 1983 and 1984, it has not been seen since 1982. Given the 74,000 pairs of gulls estimated to be nesting on this island (Blokpoel and Weseloh 1981), it could have been missed in other years.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our appreciation to the Phillips Petroleum Company for access to Little Galloo Island and to the Technical Operations Division of the National Water Research Institute at the

Canada Centre for Inland Waters for logistical support. Martin H. Edwards kindly took the photographs without which the true identity of the dark-headed gull may not have been known. Martin K. McNicholl and Iola M. Price commented on an earlier version of the manuscript. M.K. McNicholl provided several useful references.

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