Apparent hybrid Common Black-headed Gull nesting in Lake Ontario

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On 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. ridibun-
perboreus) in Iceland (Ingolfsson 1970),

...the present hybrid pairing are open to
typo, 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. Sev-
eral naturally occurring interbreeding
populations are known: Herring (L. ar-
gentatus) × Glaucous-winged gulls (L.
glaucens) in Alaska (Williamson and
Peyton 1963; Patten and Weisbrod
1974), Herring × Glaucous gulls (L. hy-
perboreus) in Iceland (Ingolfsson 1970),
and Glaucous-winged × Western gulls
(L. occidentalis) in the Pacific Northwest
(Hoffinan et al. 1978). Interbreeding be-
tween Herring and Lesser Black-backed
gulls (L. fuscus) is well known in Eng-
lan (Tinbergen 1953; Brown 1967) but is
felt to be primarily the result of cross-
fostering experiments (Harris 1970; Har-
riss 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 ex-
ceedingly rare. The only reports known
to us are of hybrid Mediterranean (L. me-
lanoccephalus) × Common Black-head-
ed gulls (van Ijzendoorn 1950, fide Tav-
erner 1970a, Taverner 1970a,b).

Interbreeding between the two groups
of gulls also appears to be rare but per-
haps is more common than between spe-
cies 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) re-
ported the interspecific copulation be-
tween 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 ho-
mosexual pairing between a ♂ Ring-
billed Gull and a ♀ Laughing Gull (L.
aticilla), where each laid infertile eggs
in the same nest, has been reported from
western Lake Erie (Elliot Tramer, pers.
comm.). In Canada, Weseloh (1981) re-
ported the interspecific copulation be-
tween the Slender-billed Gull (L. me-
lanoccephalus) and Common Black-headed
Gull (albeit 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 initial-
ly). Although Weseloh looked specifica-
ly 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 nest-
ing on this island (Blokpoel and Weseloh
1981), it could have been missed in other
years.

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LITERATURE CITED


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