

The Gray-hooded Gull in North America:

First Documented Record



Figure 1. Adult Gray-hooded Gull in alternate plumage at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida, 26 December 1998, resting on roof of boat. Note the upright posture, moderately long carmine bill and carmine tarsi, carmine orbital, pale iris, well-defined pale gray hood with darker posterior margin, and pale gray mantle, scapulars, and secondaries. Photograph/T. L. Lewis

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On 26 December 1998, I discovered an alternate-plumaged adult Gray-hooded (Gray-headed) Gull *Larus cirrocephalus* on the waterfront along Scipio Creek at the boat landing beside the headquarters for St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida. I watched the bird from 1030–1215 hr; T. L. Lewis joined me toward the end of this period. The Gray-hooded Gull associated with other gulls, mainly Laughing *L. atricilla* and Ring-billed *L. delawarensis*, at discarded calico scallop shell mounds, resulting from a boom scallop harvest. The gull spent most of its time feeding on the viscera of scallops; it also joined other gulls resting on paved, gravel, or shelly roadsides along the waterfront and above ground on boats, buildings, and pilings. It permitted a close approach, but was not tame. I baited it with bread and attempted to capture it with a butterfly net but was unsuccessful (although I captured and released other gulls that were present at the same time by this method, including an immature Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan* [TTRS P650–654], which is locally rare). After the last attempt to capture it, the Gray-hooded Gull departed and flew off alone to the east across the Apalachicola River and over the inaccessible marshes. Neither T. L. Lewis nor I relocated it. The previous day I located six Franklin's Gulls at the same site, including one salvaged specimen (McNair et al. 2000).

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The Gray-hooded Gull had an upright posture, was smaller and slimmer than a Ring-billed Gull, similar in size to a Laughing Gull. Its bill was moderately long and thick, carmine with no black tip (Fig. 1); the gonydeal angle was not pronounced. The tarsus and feet were also carmine, the nails black; the tarsi were fairly long. The orbital ring was carmine, the iris pale yellowish-white, the pupil dark. The well-defined pale gray hood, which extended only to the hind crown behind the ear, was darker at the posterior margin (Fig. 1). It lacked white eye crescents, but had a complete diffuse whitish eyering contrasting with the orbital. The sloped forehead had a small whitish patch above the base of the bill, with a smaller white patch on the chin. The white hindneck separated the hood from the mantle and rump, which were gray, lighter than on a Laughing Gull, but slightly darker than on a Ring-billed Gull. Most of the wing coverts were the same shade of gray as the mantle. The wings were fairly broad and long. The upperwings had a prominent white leading edge, the white being most extensive on the middle primaries and primary coverts. The wing tip was mostly a large black triangle, which extended up both the leading and trailing edge (Fig. 2). Black feathers on the trailing edge of several middle primaries had tiny pale tips. A large, white, and short rectangular subterminal mirror was present on each of the two outermost primaries. The mirror of the outermost primary (p10), which was larger, extended across to the trailing edge of the feather, but the mirror on p9 did not extend to the trailing edge of the feather on the underside of the wing (Fig. 3). The underside of the wings lacked a white leading edge. The underside of the primaries

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Figure 2. Adult Gray-hooded Gull in alternate plumage at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida, 26 December 1998, in flight over Scipio Creek. Note the prominent white leading edge on the upperwing and the black wing tip with one large white subterminal mirror on each of the two outermost primaries. Photograph/D. B. McNair

was dark (except for the two white mirrors), although paler than the black wing tips on the upperside; the underside of the secondaries and all wing coverts were light gray, paler than the gray upperside of the wings (Fig. 3). The underparts, under- and uppertail coverts, and tail were white. The tip of the tail was worn considerably. Numerous color photographs by T. L. Lewis and me verify these characters (TTRS P655-664). The bird called twice, giving a short low *kwaah* superficially resembling an abbreviated call of a hoarse American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*.

The combination of soft-part and plumage characters, especially the carmine bill and tarsi, pale iris, and diagnostic wing pattern, eliminate all possible species of "hooded" gulls in the world except for the Gray-hooded, including species such as the Silver Gull (= Red-billed Gull *L. n. novaehollandiae* [Grant 1982, Harrison 1983]). The Florida bird was an adult in alternate (breeding) plumage, in at least its third year (Grant 1982, Harrison 1983). Characters that identify the bird as a Gray-hooded Gull also eliminated the possibility of a natural hybrid "hooded" × "white-headed" gull (e.g., Black-headed *L. ridibundus* × Ring-billed Gull [Richards and Gill 1976, Weseloh and Mineau 1986, Nikula 1993]), an exotic hybrid (e.g., Silver Gull × "hooded" gull species [Richards and Gill 1976]), or an aberrantly-plumaged "hooded" gull (e.g., Black-headed Gull [Jorgensen 1984], Laughing Gull [Grant 1982, Postmus and Postmus 1996]).

Cramp and Simmons (1983) and Harrison (1983), following Dwight (1925), recognized two subspecies of the Gray-hooded Gull, *L. c. cirrocephalus* of South America and *L. c. poiocephalus* of Africa. *L. c. cirrocephalus* has larger, longer mirrors, a paler gray saddle and upperwings, and a larger bill and body size than does *L. c. poiocephalus*. These differences are slight (Dwight 1925) and difficult or impossible to assess from photographs. P. Hockey, P. Ryan, and I. Sinclair (pers. comm.) informed me the bill of the Gray-hooded Gull in Florida appears to be too short and compact, the legs too long, and the legs and feet too brightly colored to fit an African bird. It had large mirrors, which also suggests that it may have been of the nominate race (Dwight 1925), but the bird could not be positively identified to subspecies with confidence.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

The Gray-hooded Gull has been listed in the Appendix of the AOU *Check-list* (1998) on the basis of a sight report of an adult in non-breeding plumage on the Pacific coast of Panama 25 September 1955

(Ridgely 1976, Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). A purported sub-adult discovered near Folly Beach, Charleston County, South Carolina, 17 February 1987 was collected in mid-March and determined to be a hybrid "hooded" × "white-headed" gull, probably Laughing × Herring *L. argentatus* (LeGrand 1987, W. Post *in litt.*). Thus, this Gray-hooded Gull record from Florida is the first for the United States, the first photographically documented occurrence for North America, and was unanimously (7-0) accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC 99-396). Its occurrence paralleled the occurrence of one in Spain, also an adult from coastal marshes (Ree 1973, Grant 1982), until a juvenile was discovered at Gibraltar 17 August 1992 (Vavrik unpubl.). There are five additional occurrences from the Mediterranean region, all in North Africa (Vavrik unpubl.).

ORIGIN

The natural occurrence of this gull is unknown, and making that determination for any bird is difficult. Choices range from natural unassisted vagrancy from either South America or Africa to assisted passage or escape from captivity. Its occurrence at a remote estuary in a small harbor where it scavenged for food—typical behavior in this preferred habitat in its normal range (Tovar and Ashmole 1970, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Cooper et al. 1984, Urban et al. 1986)—supports natural vagrancy, despite the absence of occurrences between Panama and Florida. Its abraded tail tip might have been from captivity, but the otherwise fresh plumage, including the wing tips, suggests otherwise. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) did not list the Gray-hooded Gull as having occurred as an exotic in Florida, and the December 1997 International Species Inventory List did not list the species in any official registered facility in the New World, nor did Sea World of Orlando keep any in captivity. Earlier lists (see Smith and Smith 1995), going back to 1994, also did not list the species, nor do U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service import files (usually held for only five years; C. Skouder pers. comm.). Private unregistered collections of exotic birds could possibly hold Gray-hooded Gulls, but I did not obtain such information from these sources.

In Florida, because none of the Band-tailed Gulls *L. belcheri*, another vagrant from South America, showed signs of previous captivity nor were any known to have been imported, Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) believed these birds probably also represented natural, perhaps ship-assisted, occurrences.

Despite much smaller populations on the Pacific than the Atlantic coast (Murphy 1936, Harrison 1983, del Hoyo 1996), if the Gray-hooded Gull was a natural vagrant the most likely source of origin based on proximity to Florida is the Pacific coast of South America, where the species breeds north to Ecuador (Ridgely and Wilcove 1979, Harrison 1983, Duffy and Hurtado 1984, AOU 1998). This conclusion is supported by records along the Pacific and Gulf coasts of North America within the last 30 years of three other species of southern hemispheric gulls normally restricted to the Pacific coast of South America, the Gray *L. modestus*, Band-tailed (Belcher's), and Swallow-tailed *Creagrurus furcatus* gulls (Olson 1976, Stevenson et al. 1980, Muth 1988, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, AOU 1998, Lethaby and Bangma 1998, M. M. Rogers *in litt.*). The Kelp Gull *L. dominicanus* has occurred along the Gulf coast of North America, but normally occurs in South America where it ranges much further north along the Pacific than the Atlantic coast (AOU 1998, Dittmann and Cardiff 1998, D. L. Dittman *in litt.*). The absence of any documented occurrence of gulls of African origin in the New World suggests that the Florida Gray-hooded Gull was not a trans-Atlantic vagrant, although prior transport by a tropical cyclone

is a remote possibility from the Atlantic coast of West Africa (Murphy 1936), where it breeds north to Mauritania (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Cooper et al. 1984, Urban et al. 1986).

Useful information is limited on the timing of Gray-hooded Gull molt on the Pacific coast of South America or Atlantic coast of West Africa. Documented breeding populations are small (fewer than 1000 pairs) from both regions, where the breeding season in each is from April to September (Hughes 1970, Tovar and Ashmole 1970, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Cooper et al. 1984, Duffy et al. 1984, Duffy and Hurtado 1984, Urban et al. 1986). Thus, it would not be breeding in late December in these areas. Adults in breeding plumage in both regions have only occurred as late as November and as early as March, but Murphy (1936) stated that adults in breeding plumage were captured along the coast of Peru in December and January, corresponding to the Florida bird. Larger, more southerly populations breed in December (e.g., southern Africa; Cooper et al. 1984), but the likelihood of a bird in Florida arriving from these regions seems remote. Regardless of the timing of molt, an adult Gray-hooded Gull in breeding plumage in Florida in late December suggests that it had not been in the Northern Hemisphere for an extended period of time; it probably arrived not long before discovery.

SUMMARY

The photographic record of a Gray-hooded Gull at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida, 26 December 1998, is the first occurrence of this species in North America. The bird was an adult in alternate (breeding) plumage. Its origin is unknown. The preponderance of the evidence supports the interpretation that it was most likely a natural, possibly ship-assisted, vagrant, that probably arrived from the Pacific coast of South America.

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Figure 3. Adult Gray-hooded Gull in alternate plumage at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida, 26 December 1998, taking flight. Note the absence of a white leading edge on the underside of the wing, dark underside of the primaries except for the two mirrors, and pale light gray underside of the secondaries and wing coverts. See text for more details. Photograph/T. L. Lewis

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