FIRST UTAH RECORDS OF THAYER'S AND MEW GULLS, WITH COMMENTS ON THEIR REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

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Over the last few decades, there has been a generally widespread increase in North American gull populations (e.g., see Conover et al. 1979, *Am. Birds* regional reports). Although this trend principally involves the commoner species, a number of extralimital species (i.e., "rarities") also have been documented. However, the apparent increase in reported rarities exceeds that of the commoner species. This apparent increase is at least partly due to an increase in the number and expertise of field observers (see Fussell et al. 1982). A significant proportion (majority?) of these "rarities" are immature birds, notable in being difficult to identify (Fussell et al. 1982, Grant 1982, Farrand 1983). Recent identification articles (e.g. Gosselin and David 1975, Lehman 1980, Lauro and Spencer 1980) as well as the newer "sophisticated" field guides (e.g. Farrand 1983, Scott 1983) have greatly contributed to heightened observer awareness, resulting in increased discoveries of "rarities." Thus, it should not be surprising to find that previously unrecorded species "suddenly" occur with regularity in small numbers. However, apparently sudden changes in status and distribution of a given species should be viewed with caution and, for each case, evidence supporting a particular explanation should be provided.

On 13 November 1982 I observed two first winter Thayer's Gulls (*Larus thayeri*) flying across an impoundment at Farmington Bay, north of Salt Lake City, Utah. Both individuals were paler and more uniformly tan-colored overall than nearby immature Herring (*L. argentatus*) or California (*L. californicus*) gulls. In flight, the back and upper wings were notably lacking in contrast except for the three outermost primaries and the tips of the next four to six primaries, which were somewhat darker brown. From below, the primaries and secondaries were white. The upper tail surfaces were brown and slightly darker than the outermost primaries. The bills of both birds were entirely black. Both had darker feathers around the eyes, resulting in a "punched-in-the-eye" appearance. All of these characters are consistent with descriptions of typical first winter Thayer's Gulls (Gosselin and David 1975, Lehman 1980) and collectively satisfy the requirements to "build a case for identification" (see Gosselin and David 1975, Fussell et al. 1982).

On 9 February 1984 I located a first winter Mew Gull (*L. canus brachyrynchus*) at the Salt Lake City sanitary landfill (Figure 1). The bird was in the company of some 4000 gulls, of which roughly two-thirds were Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*). Relative to the Ring-billed Gulls, the Mew Gull was easily 10% smaller and appeared shorter-legged. Its bill was a little shorter and about half the thickness of that of a Ring-billed. The small bill, in conjunction with a rounded crown resulted in a "dove-like" appearance. The body plumage was uniformly grayish-brown except for a slight profusion of slate-gray feathers on the upper back, and whitish mottling in the belly. The tail was grayish brown and blended into heavily barred upper tail coverts. The under tail coverts were mottled brown on white, and generally darker than the lower belly. In flight, the upper wing coverts were darker brown and primaries lighter colored than those of immature Ring-billed Gulls. A careful study of the middle secondary coverts and tertials revealed distinctly rounded and evenly colored "centers" filling all of the feather but the outermost edge, which was tan-white. In contrast, the dark centers of these feathers in immature Ring-billed Gulls were concave-edged with pointed tips and largely restricted to the distal third of the feathers; thus, each feather was predominately white. These characters separate immature Mew from Ring-billed gulls

and eliminate the possibility of "Common Gull" (*L.c. canus* or *L.c. kamchatkanensis*), as discussed by Lauro and Spencer (1980) and Grant (1982).

Although both these records constitute first documented sightings for Utah (accepted by the Utah Field Ornithologists Records Committee), the occurrence of these gull species in Utah should come as no surprise. Both species winter commonly along the west coast, arriving there by lengthy migrations from their breeding grounds in arctic Canada and Alaska (AOU 1983). In addition, both species occur regularly in Nevada and Colorado (Kingery 1979). Since the 13 November sighting, Thayer's Gulls have been seen with increasing regularity in northern Utah. One was present near Logan, Cache Co., 10 to 12 December 1983. Another was at the Salt Lake City landfill 17 December 1983 (Figure 2) with up to four there from 19 February 1984 through at least the first week of March when the gulls began to disperse. Three more were located about 8 miles NW of Logan on 17 March 1984, with at least one remaining through 19 March. All were first year birds. In addition, this species was seen regularly during the fall of 1983 at American Falls Reservoir, Idaho, about 90 km north of the Utah border. The initial sighting was of three individuals on 6 November with four or five individuals present through at least 26 November (M.H. Tove and C.H. Trost). With the possible exception of one bird, all of these gulls were in first winter plumage. However, the only previous records from Idaho are of adults from Coeur d'Alene in the northernmost part of the state (Rogers 1977, 1978, 1981). This point is significant because it suggests that Thayer's Gulls (especially immatures) occur regularly and have been overlooked. This supposition is further supported by a general reluctance of many local observers to address the problems of immature gull identification, particularly when a species that is difficult to identify is involved.

Likewise, a similar scenario applies to the Mew Gull. Although immatures are fairly distinct, given a knowledge of the correct field marks, the "traditional" field guides

Figure 1. First winter Mew Gull at the Salt Lake City sanitary landfill, 9 February 1984. Note the very small bill, uniformly brown plumage and shape of the "centers" of the secondary coverts (see text).

Photo by Michael H. Tove

have been very misleading or even incorrect in their treatments. Thus, like Thayer's Gull, Mew Gulls are probably more common than current records indicate. In summary, it is suggested that increased observation of gull concentrations in the northern Great Basin region will reveal that Thayer's Gulls are uncommon to rare and Mew Gulls are rare to occasional winter visitors. Mew Gulls were noted in exceptionally large numbers in the interior portions of Oregon (Mattocks 1984) and northern California (LeValley and Rosenberg 1984) during the winter of 1983-1984. The effects of this incursion were noted as far east as coastal North Carolina where a first winter bird (*L.c. brachyrynchus*) was observed (LeGrand 1984). It is likely that these occurrences relate to the severe weather patterns of fall 1983 (see Lehman 1984), and the appearance of Utah's first Mew Gull was perhaps related to this incursion.

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Figure 2. First winter Thayer's Gull at the Salt Lake City sanitary landfill, 17 December 1983. This individual was darker than average but still paler in flight than an immature Herring Gull. Note the whitish remiges from beneath and the lack of contrasting dark primaries on the upper wing.

Photo by Michael H. Tove

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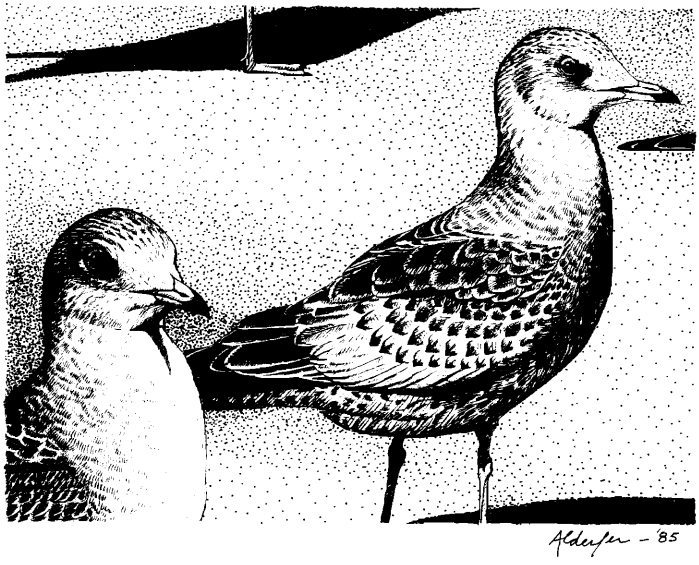

Mew Gulls, first winter *Sketch by Jonathan Alderfer*