FEATURED PHOTO

AN UNUSUAL PLUMAGE VARIANT OF THE HEERMANN'S GULL

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Minor individual plumage variation in gulls is one of many factors confounding field identification of this notoriously difficult group. Plumage variation can sometimes take the form of more extreme anomalies such as leucism and albinism (Grant 1986). A well-known variant of the Heermann's Gull, *Larus heermanni*, shows patches of white on the greater primary-coverts (Hubbs and Bartholomew 1951), as depicted, for example, by Sibley (2000); some individuals have additional white on other wing coverts, scapulars, or remiges (pers. obs.). White primary-covert patches occur in 0.01% (Hubbs and Bartholomew 1951) to 0.5% (Sibley 2000) of Heermann's Gulls. I photographed a different Heermann's Gull variant in Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County, California, on 16 January 2000 (see back cover).

Typical of leucistic or albinistic gulls (Grant 1986), the Santa Barbara bird shows bare parts (bright red basal four-fifths of bill and thin red orbital ring) that are normally pigmented and in this case suggest that the bird was an adult in definitive plumage. The normal dark grays of the body plumage have been replaced by paler gray (many upperwing coverts and scapulars) or creamy white (underparts, center of back, greater secondary coverts, and tertials). Other photographs not reproduced here show pale gray underwing coverts and confirm that the normally blackish areas of the remiges and rectrices were dusky brown (secondaries, incoming inner two primaries, dark areas of rectrices) to pale brown (outer eight primaries, which are presumably faded). Active primary molt in Heermann's Gulls generally commences in May (S. N. G. Howell pers. comm.), so this individual is anomalous in this regard, as well as in its pigmentation. The pure white head indicates definitive alternate plumage, which is typically acquired between November and January (S. N. G. Howell pers. comm., contra Dwight 1925).

The bird is at least 2.5 to 3.5 years old and thus may have survived into adulthood in this leucistic plumage; alternatively, it bore normal subadult plumages and exhibited leucism only in its first (or a subsequent) definitive plumage. In this case a suite of characters including size, shape, and, most importantly, bare-part coloration makes the identification of this unusual variant simple. However, varying degrees of leucism shown by other gulls, in particular the large white-headed gulls of the northern hemisphere, can lead to difficult or intractable field-identification problems.

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