Kelp Gull (fourth-alternate?) ***(Larus dominicanus)***

Gulf of Mexico S Fourchon Beach, Jefferson Par.; Louisiana

17 April 1999 8:00-8:30 am Scattered, thin clouds; low to mid 60s; moderate breeze

Description by Curtis Marantz

also seen by David Muth, Donna Dittmann, Steven Cardiff, Mac Myers, Dan Purrington, Joe Kleiman, and many others

This seemingly pure Kelp Gull was seen in the company of an apparently Kelp X Herring Gull hybrid amid a flock of over 1000 gulls and terns that were following a shrimp boat in the "green-water" belt about two hours out of Fourchon Beach. Though I have no idea exactly where we were when we saw these birds, I believe that Dan Purrington will be able to supply the coordinates of our sighting based on his GPS. It was not long after we pulled up alongside the shrimp boat and its associated flock of birds that this bird was initially located. I was at the back of the boat when this bird was first spotted, I believe from the upper deck. I have since been told that it was David Muth who initially spotted the bird as a dark-backed gull, and Donna Dittmann who first identified it as a Kelp Gull. All I can say for certain was that, by the time I managed to get onto the first bird, which was not all that long after it was first spotted, it was already being called a Kelp Gull. Not long after getting onto the first bird, I watched it fall well behind the boat and join a second bird that was not only similar in shape, but also with a dark mantle and wings. Soon thereafter, we were able to obtain better views of both individuals together. The second bird was clearly somewhat paler above than the initial bird. Donna suggested that this second individual fit closely hybrids collected on the Chandeleur Islands. For the next half-hour or so we stayed with this flock, observing the two dark-backed gulls intermittently when they could be picked out among the huge number of birds. When in view, the birds were as near as 25 meters from us and seen in good light through my 10X42 binoculars. The birds were often much farther than this, however, and sometimes in poor light. The darker-backed of the two birds was observed both in flight (when both the upperside and underside were well-seen) and at a greater distance when sitting on the water; the second bird was seen only in flight. From memory, I would estimate that I observed the darker of the two birds for a total period of five or more minutes over this half-hour period. Because I always concentrated on the darker of the two birds when both were in view, I saw the second bird for probably no more than a minute or two in all. The second bird was typically also farther away from us, at least when I saw it. Although the darker-backed of the two birds often opened its bill as if it was calling, I was never able to pick this call out among the cacophony of the flock.

Because I spent most of my time observing the darker-backed of the two birds, I will begin by describing that individual. Only later will I touch upon the differences noted on the second bird, which appeared identical to the initial bird with the exception of the shade of the upperparts and underwings, and the extent of white in the wing tips. Both birds were relatively large gulls that appeared at least comparable in size to the numerous Herring Gulls *(L. argentatus)* seen in the same flock. Not only did these birds appear conspicuously large, but even more obvious, they were heavy-bodied, stout-necked, and large-headed. The birds had relatively long wings that ended in reasonably pointed tips, and they had short, square tails. In fact, the tips of the webbed feet reached nearly to the tip of the tail when the birds were seen in flight. Although I was unable to compare directly the bills of these birds with those of the Herring Gulls, these birds seemed to have relatively large, stout bills that appeared to expand noticeably at the tip. Both birds were in

alternate plumage, and as such, the head, neck, underparts, rump, and tail were completely white in both birds. I detected no trace of dark flecking on the head or neck of either bird. Whereas the underwing coverts were white in color, they contrasted with the rather dark undersides of the remiges, at least on the darker of the two birds. From above, the upperparts contrasted strikingly with the otherwise white plumage. On the darker bird, the mantle, scapulars, and coverts were an even, slaty-blackish in color. Although there was only a very subtle contrast between the blackish uppersides of the wings and the jet-black primaries, the white leading and trailing edges of the wings were striking. The white of the underwings extended uninterrupted along the leading edge of the wing through the marginal coverts. The white of the leading edge of the wing was complemented by a white band that extended along the trailing edge of the wing at least from the inner secondaries, through all of the remaining secondaries, to the inner few primaries. Even on the inner primaries, this white band was continuous; it did not ever appear as a series of spots extending into the middle primaries. Despite close inspection, I never saw any trace of a white mirror on the outermost (10^{th}) primary. Far more subtle than the contrast between the white and dark regions of the wing, was that between the black primaries and the blackish remainder of the upperwing. Close inspection suggested that the distal portion of the primaries was entirely black, but that the inner portion combined black and blackish "striping." I suspect that this striping resulted from the presence of slightly paler tongues extending out the inner webs of the feathers, these contrasting with the jet-black color of the tips and outer webs of these feathers. I should also stress that the contrast between the black outer-region of the wing and the blackish inner-region was minimal, approaching far more closely that of Great Black-backed Gull *(L. marinus)* than that shown by the other "black-backed" gulls such as Lesser Black-backed *(L. fuscus)*, Western *(L. occidentalis)*, or Yellow-footed *(L. livens)*. This bird had a bright-yellow bill that had a conspicuous red spot on the gonys just short of the tip of the lower mandible. Although I could see clearly that the iris was pale (possibly yellowish) when the bird made a close pass in good light, I was never able to see the orbital ring. In fact, the only thing that I could say about this ring was that it was not conspicuous. Finally, the legs and webbed feet were a deep yellow in color.

Relative to the darker-backed bird that was suggested to be a pure Kelp Gull, the second individual was noticeably paler throughout the mantle, scapulars, coverts, and secondaries. This bird was a dark, slaty-gray in those regions where the first bird was blackish. I judged this color to be comparable to that of a dark Western Gull or a Yellow-footed Gull (this would also be approximately comparable to a normal, British Lesser Black-backed Gull *(L. f. graellsii)*). Whereas one had to look carefully to detect any contrast between the dark regions of the darker bird, such a contrast was immediately evident on this individual. Moreover, it seemed that the distal gray parts of the wing were paler than were the regions nearer the body, this further accentuating the contrast between the gray and black regions of the upperwing. Complementing the paler color of the upperwing, the underwing showed much less contrast between the dusky undersides of the remiges and the white underwing-coverts. Whereas the contrast of the darker bird was at least as obvious as is that of a Lesser Black-backed or a Western Gull, the contrast did not appear to be quite as obvious on the apparent hybrid. The last character that separated the two birds (and I am somewhat more fuzzy on this myself, despite the fact that others noted it quite clearly), was the fact that the apparent hybrid individual clearly had a white mirror on the outermost primary. Other characters such as iris and orbital-ring color were not noted on this

bird, and even things such as leg and foot color and bill pattern were noted in much less detail than they were on the darker-backed bird.

These birds unequivocally represent the first likely Kelp Gulls that I have seen anywhere in North America. Furthermore, even though I believe that I saw dark-backed gulls with entirely white tails flying by in Lima, Peru, I was never certain that I saw this species there because most birds we saw along the beaches of Peru were Band-tailed Gulls *(L. belcheri)*, and it is possible that I managed to miss the dark tails of some of them. It therefore appears that the last time that I unequivocally saw Kelp Gulls was in Australia and New Zealand during the summer of 1986. I unfortunately remember little about these birds, in part, because there was always something more interesting to look at when Kelp Gulls were present. About all I remember of these birds was that they looked structurally quite similar to Western Gulls, but that they had dull, greenish legs and feet. I further suspect my observations of Australian Kelp Gulls are not overly helpful in the identification of the Louisiana birds, which clearly were a far brighter yellow color on the legs and feet than anything I remember from the past. A published photograph of a Kelp Gull taken in Chile (Howell et al. 1993. First records of the Kelp Gull in Mexico. *Euphonia* 2: 71-80) depicts a bird with leg and foot color quite similar to that shown by the birds I saw this day. Probably the best characters to use in the identification of these birds is the combination of the very dark upperparts and the yellowish legs and feet. The darker-backed of these two birds was much darker above than I have ever seen on a Lesser Black-backed or a Yellow-footed Gull. Even though nominate Lesser Black-backed is as dark above as was this bird, it should not be nearly as large nor as heavy-bodied as were these birds, nor should it have such a heavy bill (Howell et al. 1993). Great Black-backed Gulls may be even darker above than were the Louisiana birds (showing no contrast at all between the back and primaries), they are larger overall (though this may be difficult to judge in the field, these birds did not appear all that much larger than the Herring Gulls), and they never have yellow legs and feet.

Kelp Gull is unfortunately not included in any of the standard references that I use for detailed descriptions of gulls. Apart from Howell et al. (1993), the only references that I have available provide little help in identification, in large part because where this species occurs normally it presents little challenge in identification because it is usually the only large, dark-backed gull that has an all white tail. Blake (1977. Manual of Neotropical Birds, Vol. 1. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago) confirmed the soft part colors by at least noting that the irides were pale yellow to grayish and that the legs and feet were greenish-yellow (though I never did note a green tone, I have been told that this may not be unusual for birds seen in the Gulf of Mexico). Blake's comment that the mantle and wings vary from slaty to sooty-black may well include the shade that we noted on the apparent hybrid, in addition to the apparently pure bird. Although interbreeding with Herring Gull has been documented on the Chandeleurs, it may also be a good idea to examine further variation in mantle and wing color in pure populations of Kelp Gull. I say this to be thorough, despite the fact that I still have a difficult time believing claims by some regarding extensive variation in the mantle color of Slaty-backed Gull *(L. schistasagus)*. Though Blake further indicated that the subapical spot on P10 varies in size and shape, he does not indicate that it can be lacking altogether on an adult bird, which tends to confirm Donna's suspicion that the darker of the two birds was in its fourth-year rather than being a definitive adult. Even in Australia and New Zealand, Pacific Gull *(L. pacificus)* presents few challenges for identification because it has such a large bill. Despite the text adding little to what Blake said, the Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds (1986. Reader's Digest, Sidney), the

Reader's Digest Complete Book of New Zealand Birds (1985. Reader's Digest, Sidney), and Ginn et al. (1989. The complete book of southern African birds. Struik Publishers, Cape Town) all include stunning, color photographs of the species, which in the former two cases show birds with a mantle coloration similar to that noted on the darker-backed of the birds seen this day (the latter shows only a flying bird from below). These references also differ widely in the descriptions of leg and foot color, which suggests a high degree of either individual or geographic variation in this character. Finally, Harrison (1987. A field guide to seabirds of the world. The Stephen Greene Press, Lexington, Massachusetts) includes several photographs showing birds that appear similar to the darker-backed of the two birds seen on this trip. The text adds little if anything to that noted above, apart from noting that these birds have dark irides (a point that not only conflicts with all of the previous references, but also with most of the photographs contained therein).

I will yield to the experience of Donna Dittmann and Steven Cardiff on the separation of pure Kelp and Kelp X Herring Gull hybrids and for the identification of the latter. Whereas the paler-backed of the two birds would have fit closely the mantle color of a Lesser Black-backed Gull or a Yellow-footed Gull, guilt by association suggests that it was probably a Kelp Gull hybrid. I personally could not have eliminated a Yellow-footed Gull in this particular case (though I believe that a Lesser Black-backed Gull would have been smaller overall, slimmer-billed, and slighter-bodied), because I never saw the color of the orbital ring. Donna indicated that whereas the darker bird fit closely apparently pure birds seen on the Chandeleur Islands (one specimen of which she showed me only two days before this sighting), the paler-backed bird closely matched presumed F_1 hybrids.

Although the possibility of a ship-assisted bird can never be ruled out, the reasonably large number of recent reports of Kelp Gulls (even accepting that many may be hybrids) suggests to me that the birds truly are natural strays or colonizers. I would further suspect that a bird that was trapped on a boat and transported a long distance from home would quickly make its way back home, rather than remain and begin nesting in Louisiana. The number of records also leads me to believe that the birds we saw this morning off Fourchon Beach are probably different individuals than those found breeding on the Chandeleur Islands nearly 75 miles away. The probability of finding the one pure bird that remains on the Chandeleurs behind a shrimp boat off Grand Isle has got to be remote indeed. This description was typed from memory on 21 April 1999 before I had consulted any field guides or other references (which were added only after the account was basically completed). As is normal for me on boat trips, I did not write any field notes at the time (others on the boat who saw me can probably indicate why this may have been the case).