

# **Louisiana Bird Records Committee**

## **Rare Bird Documentation**

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*Species:* California Gull, *Larus californicus*

*Number of individuals:* 1

*Age and Sex:* Adult, unknown

*Date:* 7 March, 2014

*Location:* East Baton Rouge Par.: Zachary, West Irene Road landfill retention ponds

*Lat/Long:* 30.598680°N, 91.239159°W

*Other Observers:* Dan F. Lane, Michael Plauché, J.V. Remsen, Ryan S. Terrill

*Original Observer:* Myself

**Circumstances.** The West Irene Road retention ponds have recently been discovered as the premier gull-watching site in East Baton Rouge Parish. Multiple recent observations of Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) by Michael Harvey drew a small contingent of gull enthusiasts composed of myself, the above-mentioned observers, plus John Mittermeier (who left just before the California Gull was found). We were not disappointed, observing an estimated 3500 Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), 150 Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), 11 Lesser Black-backed Gulls (probably a regional high-count), and one Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*, a locally rare species).

While sorting through the ~1000 gulls swarming over the concrete-lined retention pond with a 20x spotting scope, I discovered an adult California Gull. The bird almost immediately took flight with several hundred other gulls, but I managed to stay on it with the scope, describing its flight path to the other observers. Only RST was able to find and follow the bird as it circled around and made several close passes. After a tense minute or so, the bird settled back down, where I was able to direct the other three observers to the bird. We then observed it as it sat amongst the other gulls for the duration of our visit, some twenty minutes. DFL was able to take some digiscoped photos, which he will hopefully include in his report.

**Description.** This was a medium-sized gull in definitive-basic (ie, non-breeding) plumage. Overall, it was rather similar to the adjacent Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, in that it had a light-to-medium gray mantle, clean white under parts, some markings on the nape, and a yellow bill with darker markings.

*Head:* The bird had an overall white head. There were brownish smudgy markings on the rear crown and nape, which were more smudgy and less well-defined than similar markings on similarly aged Ring-billed and Herring gulls. The bill was dull yellow, tubular without a distinct gonydeal angle, and relatively rather long. It was marked with black spots towards the tip on both the mandible and the maxilla; the

mandibular spot was larger than that on the maxilla. When the bird passed by rather closely in flight I was able to see that there was an indistinct red spot anterior of the mandibular black spot, but when the bird was standing I was not able to distinguish this red spot due to the bird's distance from me. The eye was dark, and I was not able to observe the color of the orbital ring. The shape of the head was more rounded than flat or blocky, but was not "dove-like", as are the head shapes of several potentially confusing congeners.

*Body:* The under parts were clean white. The mantle and scapulars were medium-gray, noticeably a couple of shades darker than equivalently-aged Herring and Ring-billed gulls; there was no difference in color between the mantle, scapular, and wing coverts. The legs were dull greenish-yellow.

*Wings:* At rest the primaries extended well past the tertials, giving the bird an elongated look. Each of the visible primaries had a distinct white spot on them. The tertials were the same medium-gray as the coverts and back, but were fringed broadly in white. In flight the outer half of the primaries (to ~P5) were variably entirely black (P10-P7) to partly black (P6-5), giving the open wing broad, wedge-shaped black tips. Again, each black primary tip was distinctly tipped in white. I did not observe any active wing molt while the bird was in flight, as I was more focused on staying on the bird and trying to get other observers onto it.

*Tail:* The tail was almost completely white, though there were faint blackish centers to most rectrices.

**Discussion.** Having spent hundreds of hours of studying gulls and observing many hundreds of thousands of California Gulls in their normal range, this is a species I feel intimately familiar with. I was able to identify the bird immediately upon seeing it, and I am absolutely confident about the identification of this individual.

*Similar species:* We observed four additional species of gulls while observing the California Gull. Though the identification of adult California Gulls is straightforward, two of these could be considered confusion species. I used the following criteria to eliminate them:

Herring Gull. I eliminated this species chiefly by overall shape and structure: this bird was distinctly smaller and less robust than the adjacent Herring Gulls, and had a more elongated look to it; the head was rounder and less blocky, and the bill was relatively finer and less massive. Additionally, the lack of a pale eye, overall darker mantle coloration, and greenish-yellow legs further eliminated Herring Gull.

Ring-billed Gull. I also eliminated Ring-billed Gull chiefly by shape and structure, though this species is (relatively) more similar to California Gull. This bird was clearly larger and more robust than the adjacent Ring-billed Gulls, with a longer, larger bill, bulkier build, larger, less-rounded head, and longer, thicker legs. Additionally, equivalently-aged Ring-billed Gulls have pale eyes. Plumage characters similar to those I used to eliminate Herring Gull applied to Ring-billed Gull as well. Finally, the bird clearly had a red gonydeal spot, which Ring-billed Gull always lacks.

Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*). This species could be considered a potential identification challenge. However, because Thayer's Gull is very similar in many

respects to Herring Gull, identification criteria used to rule out that species may also be applied to Thayer's Gull.

*Subspecific identification:* California Gull has two recognized subspecies: nominate *californicus*, which breeds primarily in the Great Basin, and *albertaensis*, which breeds in the northern Great Plains. The nominate subspecies averages slightly smaller and lighter-mantled than *albertaensis*, but on a single out-of-range bird these differences are difficult to judge. Based on geography, it seems that *albertaensis* would be the more likely subspecies to occur in Louisiana.

*Broader relevance:* If accepted by the LBRC, this record will represent the first record for *Larus californicus* from East Baton Rouge Parish, and one of only a handful of records for the state away from the Cameron coast.

### **Literature Consulted.**

Howell, S.G.H. and J.L. Dunn. *Gulls of the Americas*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 2007

Pyle, P. *Identification Guide to North American Birds. Part II*. Point Reyes Station: Slate Creek Press. 2008.