

A Slaty-backed Gull

Sight Record for Indiana/With Comments on Identification

by Kenneth J. Brock

Though the date was mid-March, nothing in the harsh domain of Michigan City, Indiana, harbor provided the least hint that winter was waning. Lake Michigan was frozen to the horizon and jagged ice ridges loomed above last summer's shoreline. The yacht basin and harbor were choked with pack-ice and a cold east wind only deepened the gray overcast. This arctic scene greeted Susan Bagby and me upon our 7 a.m. arrival at the harbor on 13 March 1993.

As we drove into the parking lot John Cassady, Lynea Hinchman, and John White were busily assembling scopes and donning cold weather gear. Our spirits soared when a very large mass of gulls was detected near the warm-water discharge of the Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO) power plant; few birds were visible elsewhere. Anxious to scan the gulls for rarities, the entire group headed westward toward the jetty, which would provide a suitable vantage point. During this brief hike, Brendan Grube joined the entourage.

The gulls could be seen reasonably well from the base of the jetty. The flock consisted of perhaps 3,000 birds perched on ice north of the NIPSCO plant. Using a 20X Kowa telescope, I scanned the flock three times detecting only Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. Viewing conditions were less than ideal. The ice was decorated with protruding blocks and irregular mounds that obscured many birds. The density of gulls also

made it difficult to see individuals in the flock. Additionally, most of the birds faced directly toward us, into the east wind, providing only anterior views.

We continued to monitor the flock and at 7:30 a.m. Cassady detected an adult black-backed individual within the throng. My first look at the bird, which was 300 to 400 meters away, revealed an inky-black mantle suggesting a Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*). A slightly better view showed that this individual was not larger than adjacent Herring Gulls. Further, this gull possessed moderate winter head mottling, which does not occur on great black-backed adults. As these characters rule out *L. marinus* I tentatively identified the bird as a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*), attributing its apparent blackness to the overcast.

Someone suggested that we move to the plant; from that location we would be both closer to the flock and have a side view of the gulls as they faced eastward to the wind. I objected, noting that the drive to the plant and hike to the outlet would consume valuable time, thereby decreasing later birding opportunities along the lakefront. My objection was quickly overruled.

As we approached the warm water outlet, the clouds momentarily broke providing some direct sunlight. About this time the gull flock took wing. The bird of interest was quickly detected within the teeming flock, allowing a brief view of the upper wing pattern. In bright sunlight the

black primaries were noticeably darker than the mantle, providing additional evidence that the bird was not a Great Black-backed Gull.

During the flight I checked the upper wing for a white "primary" bar that might indicate Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*). This famous mark, also variously known as the "white tongue," "dividing spots," or "the string of pearls," consists of a white area that separates the posterior portion of the black primaries from the dark gray mantle. It almost appears that the white trailing edge of the upper wing extends into the wing between the inner primaries from the mantle (figure 1). The "bar" is created by subapical white spots or mirrors on the inner webs of primaries five through eight that align when the wing is spread, thus the term "string of pearls".

Not detecting a primary bar, I eliminated Slaty-backed Gull, concluding that the bird was a lesser black-backed. The bird then landed some 200 meters north of the observers and direct sunlight provided excellent viewing of the sitting gull except that its legs were not visible.

Perhaps the cold had numbed my faculties, but for some reason the fact that this bird was too large for a lesser black-backed eluded me and I turned my attention to a second-year Iceland Gull (*L. glaucoides*) that Grube had sifted from the hoard.

Cassady, who was more persevering than I, announced that our swarthy-backed friend had pink legs. A quick look through the 50x Questar