

Chicago Black-tailed Gull: second inland North American record

by Robert Hughes

There's a darker-backed gull over here.

Those were the prophetic words of Montrose birder Mike Miller early on the morning of 7 August 2003. Upon hearing Mike, I swung my telescope around to where he was looking and almost immediately noticed what looked like an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull standing on the beach with the resident Ring-billed Gulls. In the back of my mind I knew this could be the coveted Black-tailed Gull that had been seen as recently as the day before at Miller Beach in Indiana and several months earlier along the southern Wisconsin lakefront and Lake County, Illinois. We were too far away to see the diagnostic red tip to the bill so, with hearts racing and hopes soaring, we picked up our scopes and gear and ran over to get a better look at the bird. With closer views the red-tipped bill was visible, clinching the identification as a Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*), almost certainly the Black-tailed Gull that had apparently been wandering around Lake Michigan for the past few months.

After taking a few dozen photos I made a mental description of the bird. It was about the same size as a Ring-billed Gull and had a slaty-gray mantle similar in color to a *grællsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), yellow legs, a yellow bill with a black subterminal band and red tip, and a black tail band. Within minutes other birders started to arrive including Montrose regulars Kanae Hirabayashi and John Purcell. I decided that I had enough photos of the bird so I sped home to get word out regarding this



Black-tailed Gull at Montrose, Cook County. 7 August 2003. Photo by Robert Hughes.

Asian vagrant that was at Montrose Beach. Luckily, the Black-tailed Gull spent several hours at Montrose and, unlike the earlier sightings in Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana, was seen by a number of birders. The bird also made the Channel 7 evening news, the Chicago Tribune, and the MSNBC website.

Over a 54-day period, nearly two months, in three different states, Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana, between Miller Beach, just east of Gary, Indiana, to Racine, Wisconsin, a Black-tailed Gull, probably the same individual, was observed a minimum of five different places. These include the Racine and Kenosha, Wisconsin lake fronts; the south unit of Illinois Beach State Park in Lake County, Illinois' Montrose Beach in Chicago and Miller Beach, Indiana. The distance between the farthest two locations (Miller and Racine) is 83 miles, as the crow flies. Between approximately 7 a.m. 12 June 2003 (Wind Point in Racine) and its next sighting at 6:30 p.m. 13 June 2003 (south unit of Illinois Beach State Park), the bird had moved approximately 19 miles. The Black-tailed Gull was

also seen 12 June 2003 on the beach south of Cohorama Point in Kenosha, Wisconsin. It was seen 5 August 2003 at Miller Beach in Indiana before it was found two days later at Montrose in Chicago.

The Black-tailed Gull is normally found in the western Pacific Ocean around Japan (Harrison 1983). Indeed, one of the common names of this species is Japanese Gull. There are about 11 records for Alaska and another 9 or so for the rest of North America, including sightings as far south as Belize and as far east as Newfoundland, Canada (Lethaby and Bangma 1998). What makes the Chicago Black-tailed Gull significant is that there is only one previous interior North American record of this species, a bird seen in 1987 at Lake Winnipegosis, Manitoba. Clearly this is not a species that is likely to show up in the Midwest anytime again soon.

Literature Cited

Harrison, P. 1983. Seabirds, an identification guide. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston MA. 448 pp.

Lethaby, N. and J. Bangma. 1998. Identifying Black-tailed Gull in North America. *Birding* 30 (6): 470-483.

— Robert Hughes
696 W. Irving Park Road
Chicago, IL 60613
rhughes.enteract@rch.com

Editor's Note: The Illinois Ornithological Records Committee accepted this sighting as the first confirmed state record of Black-tailed Gull. See the Committee's report, which features this species, in this issue.