



*Lesser Black-backed Gull, 11 Oct. 1993, Montrose Beach, Chicago, Cook County. The species is becoming more common in Illinois. Photo by Kanae Hirabayashi. (Top right) Sub-adult Great Black-backed Gull (center), 3 December 1992, Brandon Road Lock and Dam, Joliet, Will County. This species has been recorded in Illinois for a century. Photo by Joe B. Milosevich.*

to use size as a determining factor. The observer also should consider

variations between male and female within species.

Keep in mind, too, that discrepancies occur in the literature. For example, Cramp (1983) lists the range of the Great Black-backed Gull's total length as between 64 to 78

cm. while Harrison's (1983) low end is 71 cm. Cramp also says the lesser black-backed has a length range of 52 to 67 cm., while Harrison's high end is only 61 cm. These differences show the danger in relying to any great degree on size.

Overall appearance often gives clues. For example, the lesser black-backed is more lightly built with long, slim wings when compared with the other three species. The great black-backed is the largest and most heavily built.

### Adult Plumage

In adults, the great black-backed is the only one of the four with a black mantle (Table 2). The other three have dark gray mantles; the western's is the darkest. The shade of gray can vary depending on light angle and should be judged through prolonged observation if possible and in comparison to a nearby Herring Gull. In at least one instance, a Slaty-backed Gull had a paler mantle, nearly like a

**Table 1 - Size Comparisons of Dark-Mantled Gulls\***

Species	Total Length	Wingspan	Bill Length
Herring	55-66 cm.	137-142 cm.	4.8-5.5 cm.
Lesser Black-backed	51-61 cm.	124-127 cm.	4.5-5.5 cm.
Western	61-68 cm.	132-142 c.m.	5.4-5.7 cm.
Slaty-backed	61-68 cm.	132-137 cm.	5.4-6.2 cm.
Great Black-backed	71-79 cm.	152-167 cm.	6.1-7.0 cm.

\*The table is based of measurements in Harrison (1983) or Ridgway (1919). Harrison is the only modern reference which uses metric measurements and covers all species.

**Table 2 - Adult plumage Differences of Dark-Mantled Gulls**

Note: All species in adult plumage have from pale to bright pink legs and feet and a yellow/red spot on bill.

For comparison, a Herring Gull has a pale gray mantle with narrow white trailing edge, a black wingtip with some white at edge, and a heavily streaked brown head and neck.

Lesser Black-backed Gull	Western Gull
Heavily streaked brown head and neck Dark slate gray mantle Gray narrow white trailing edge Black wingtips with some white at edge	Lightly streaked brown head and neck Very dark slate gray mantle Narrow white trailing edge Black wingtips with some white at edge
Slaty-backed Gull	Great Black-backed Gull
Lightly streaked brown head and neck Dark slate gray mantle Usually a broad white trailing edge Black wingtips broadly tipped with white	Very lightly streaked brown head and neck Very heavy bill Black mantle Narrow white trailing edge Black wingtip broadly tipped with white

Information based on plates in Scott (1987).