

# PROBABLE LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL AT REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN.

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My wife, Margie and I were enjoying the lovely evening of May 28, 1977, parked on the road which penetrated the flooded area south of the TransCanada Highway at the Pasqua Street exit, Regina. At 7:00 p.m. the sun was still high and the sky was clear. I looked eastward and noticed what I thought was one of the abundant Ring-billed Gulls flying towards us from the direction of Wascana Lake, about a mile away. I had a head-on view of it. Then, as it turned towards the southwest, I saw the gull's back briefly. The entire mantle was black except for white wing-tips and a white margin on the trailing edge of the wings. Its head and tail were white. It levelled off and flew on, less than 20 feet from us, showing a strong, yellow bill with a red blotch near the tip. The moment I saw the black back I exclaimed, "Look, a Lesser Black-backed Gull!" which drew Margie's attention to it in time for her to see the black back also. Unfortunately, it soon disappeared behind a farm house and we did not see it again. We had not seen the colour of the legs or the eyes or heard any call from it.

Although my first reaction was that the bird was a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) (which we had seen some years before in England), when I checked Peterson's and Robbins' field guides in the car, the only similar bird shown was the Western Gull, so I concluded we had seen a wandering gull of that species.<sup>6 7</sup> I left on vacation the next day and because of various pressures it was some weeks before I had the opportunity of looking into the literature concerning dark-mantled gulls.

In all the world there are only five species of gulls with white heads and tails, dark mantles and yellow bills with a red blotch.<sup>1</sup> The Southern

Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) is confined to the Southern Hemisphere. The Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*) of northeastern Asia seldom ventures beyond the Aleutians and the Pribiloffs and, when it does, is confined to the Alaskan coast. The Great Black-backed Gull, the largest of the gulls, dwells on the coasts of the North Atlantic, drifting south in winter. Godfrey reports that it is regularly seen inland, particularly about the Great Lakes.<sup>4</sup> Jehl and Smith record it as a rare but regular summer visitor to Churchill, Manitoba, in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Also, we had seen these huge gulls, whose wingspread exceeds 5 feet, in England and there was no doubt that our bird was much too small to be this monster. The remaining two are the Western Gull and the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

The Western Gull is remarkably set in its ways. The main population, with pink legs, breeds on the coast from northern Washington south to Baja California. Its Gulf of California (Mexico) population, which has yellow legs, regularly visits the Salton Sea in southern California after the breeding season in small numbers and has been recorded off course in western Arizona.<sup>3 8</sup> A search of the records published in *American Birds* since 1971 shows that the species has been found once in Eugene, Oregon, (about 50 miles from the coast) and as such was worthy of comment. The A.O.U. Check-list lists one record at Chicago which, since this bird is not much of a gypsy, is quite remarkable.<sup>3</sup>

The Lesser Black-backed Gull breeds along the coasts of northwestern Europe, the British Isles, the Faeroes, and Iceland, (accidental in Greenland). In contrast to the Western Gull, the Lesser Black-back is

migratory. It has become established in Iceland since the turn of the century.<sup>9</sup> It was first taken in Iceland in 1913, it had begun to breed about 1928, and is now well established but continues to migrate. It has been reported regularly since 1934 in small numbers along the eastern seaboard as far south as Texas. An examination of the pages of *American Birds* discloses at least one bird observed several times at Galveston during the winter and following spring. One could reasonably conjecture that such a winter visitor could have accompanied Ring-billed Gulls northward in the spring.

Godfrey did not include the Lesser Black-backed Gull among the birds of Canada up to about 1964.<sup>4</sup> However, Alsop and Jones, reporting on a Lesser Black-back at Arctic Outpost Camp (69° X 103°) on Victoria Island, N.W.T., on July 7, 1972, noted that Godfrey had since accepted two Ontario and two Nova Scotia records as well as a sighting of this species at Fort Churchill, Manitoba, on June 5, 1968, by R. K. Ross, F. Cooke, G. Littlefield and B. Knudsen.<sup>2,5</sup> This was Canada's first record.

Obviously, the presence of a dark-mantled gull in the interior of North America, whatever the species, is a remarkable event. Regrettably, our views of the bird were too brief to get

a full set of field marks. However, it could only be the Western or the Lesser Black-backed Gull, and in view of the poorly developed migratory and wandering habits of the former when contrasted with the wide-ranging movements of the latter, I am confident that the bird we saw was a Lesser Black-backed Gull.

<sup>1</sup>ALEXANDER, W. B. 1954. *Birds of the Ocean*. Putnam, New York.

<sup>2</sup>ALSOP, F. J., III, and E. JONES. 1973. The Lesser Black-backed Gull in the Canadian Arctic. *Canadian Field-Nat.* 87:61-62.

<sup>3</sup>A.O.U. 1957. *Check-list of North American Birds*. Fifth ed.

<sup>4</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The birds of Canada, National Museums of Canada Bull. 203, Ottawa.

<sup>5</sup>JEHL, J. R., Jr., and B. A. SMITH. 1970. *Birds of the Churchill region, Manitoba*. Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature Winnipeg.

<sup>6</sup>PETERSON, R. T. 1961. *A field guide to western birds*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

<sup>7</sup>ROBBINS, C. S., Bertel Bruun, and S. Zimm. 1966. *Birds of North America*. Golden Press, New York.

<sup>8</sup>SMALL, ARNOLD. 1974. *The birds of California*. Winchester Press, N.Y.

<sup>9</sup>SUTTON, G. M. 1961. *Iceland Summer*. Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma.



Grasses in snow

J. B. Gollop