

# ICELAND GULL AT KATEPWA LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN

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On 24 April 1980, my wife, Marjie, Manley Callin and I drove to the west end of Katepwa Lake, which had considerable ice on it. About 1600 in brilliant sunshine, we searched the area with our binoculars but saw nothing unusual. However, I raised my 10x50's slightly and found in the field of view a large gull that had settled some distance from the edge of the ice, perhaps 200 m from me. I could see it was a very pale gull with no black in the plumage discernible. We had a 20-45X telescope on a car-window mounting and through this it was evident that the mantle was an off-white, not the dazzling white of a gull's breast plumage but still too pale to be termed gray. It was sitting with its back partly towards us but at such an angle that one folded wing tip could be seen but the head was not in profile and the bill was not visible. The legs and feet were hidden. Most importantly, no black could be seen on the wing tip.

I had forgotten to bring the tripod for the telescope so I walked to the lake edge with my binoculars, about half way to the gull. I had no sooner got my glasses on the gull that it turned its head to look at me, spread its tail, opened its wings and flew low over the ice to settle again, but this time out of sight, hidden by the ice hummocks.

The bird's take-off revealed three things: I saw the head profile and was struck by its peculiar rounded shape; the tail feathers were a brilliant white but the mantle did not show the marked contrast that would have been seen had it been gray as in a Ring-billed Gull; I could see no black at all on the wings.

We had two field guides with us, Peterson and Robbins *et al.*, so we looked at the three pale-mantled, white-winged gulls: Glaucous, Glaucous-winged, and Iceland<sup>7 8</sup>. I had seen a Glaucous Gull in Regina on 8 May 1979 (although in second-year plumage) and felt that this gull was too small to be of that species. Although estimating size at extreme range where a comparison standard is lacking is a chancy business, nevertheless I thought it too small also for the Glaucous-winged Gull as I remembered that species from the Pacific coast, and I thought its mantle was darker than this bird. I suggested to Manley that we had an Iceland Gull but I wanted to check the literature further.

At home that evening I looked over the literature I had at hand. Godfrey<sup>1</sup> confirmed that the Glaucous-winged Gull was indeed larger and darker than the Iceland Gull, and the illustrations in Tuck and Heinzel show the contrast very well.<sup>15</sup> But it was not until I picked up Snyder and read, under Iceland Gull "(it) has a higher forehead, thus a more rounded head profile," that I was certain of the identification.<sup>14</sup> Later, I found a reference to the rounded head in Jehl and Smith.<sup>5</sup>

On the next day, 25 April, David R. M. Hatch proceeded alone to the sighting location where he immediately found the gull, resting on the ice. The note he left for Manley said: "I had marvellous views of the Iceland Gull on Katepwa Lake. It is a typical adult. I was within 60 m and used my 20-45X telescope. There were Herring and Ring-billed Gulls to compare with it. The



*Glaucous Gull*

F. W. Lahrman

small bill size and round head are distinctive."

David was familiar with the species so we are content with his confirmation. This is the fourth occurrence of Iceland Gulls in Saskatchewan and the first for the Qu'Appelle region. Dr. R. W. Nero collected an immature male near Beaverlodge Lake on 9 June 1960, for the Province's first specimen (now in the University of Regina collection) and observed several others there, including adults.<sup>6</sup> The next sighting was Saskatoon's first: a group from the Saskatoon Natural History Society saw two immature birds on 23 and 24 September 1977.<sup>11</sup> The third occurrence was that seen by Wayne Harris on

the Christmas Bird Count of 23 December 1979, at Squaw Rapids.<sup>4</sup>

Godfrey notes that the breeding range of the subspecies that occurs in Canada, *Larus glaucooides kumlieni*, is coastal southern Baffin Island north of Hudson Strait, part of the island's eastern coast, and extreme north-western Quebec.<sup>1</sup> It winters mainly on the Atlantic coast in southern Labrador, Newfoundland, coasts of southern Quebec and the Maritimes; also in small numbers on the Great Lakes and upper St. Lawrence River and its drainage.

Apparently the migration routes of this gull in Canada are not well known but from the number of sightings at Churchill, Manitoba, it may very well be



on one. Jehl and Smith note that it is very uncommon in summer but may be commoner during migration early in May and October although there were no fall records at that time.<sup>5</sup>

That this is a rare gull in the interior is evident from the paucity of records. An adult was very carefully examined at Coeur d'Alene Lake, Idaho on 24 December 1967, and again on 14 January 1968<sup>9</sup>; an immature was observed at the Oak Hammock Marsh Wildlife Management Area north of Winnipeg on 23 May 1975, by George E. Holland, an experienced birdwatcher who has seen them in spring and fall in Ontario where he formerly resided (H. W. R. Copland, pers. comm.); Coeur d'Alene city dump had one in first-year plumage on 28 December 1977<sup>10</sup>; Skaar lists an immature at Canyon Ferry near Helena, Montana in February, 1978, when photographs were obtained.<sup>13</sup> However, it is interesting to find that Gosselin and David, after exhaustive examination of records and specimens, concluded that the sub-adults of the very similar Herring, Thayer's and Iceland Gulls cannot be reliably distinguished with black and white photographs.<sup>2</sup> A bird in first-year plumage was photographed at Oak Hammock Wildlife Management Area during the period 10 to 18 November 1979, which was reported by F. Koes and seen by many observers (H. W. R. Copland, pers. comm.).<sup>3</sup> A first-year bird was photographed at the Brownsville, Texas, city dump on 27 March 1978, but the state Check-list Committee had not accepted it when published.<sup>16</sup> An immature was photographed at Fort Peck Lake, Montana, on 4 December 1979, and North Dakota's first record, a first-year bird, was documented at Garrison Dam on 14 December 1979.<sup>12</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The Birds of Canada. Nat. Mus. Canada Bull. 203. Ottawa.
- <sup>2</sup>GOSELIN, MICHEL, and NORMAND DAVID. 1975. Field identification of Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*) in eastern North America. Am. Birds 29(6):1059-1065.
- <sup>3</sup>HARRIS, W. C. 1980. Prairie Provinces region. Am. Birds 34:172-174.
- <sup>4</sup>HOUSTON, M. I. 1980. 38th annual Saskatchewan Christmas Bird Count — 1979. *Blue Jay* 38(1):17-30.
- <sup>5</sup>JEHL, JOSEPH, Jr., and B. A. SMITH. 1970. Birds of the Churchill Region, Manitoba. Manitoba Mus. Man and Nat. Spec. Publ. 1. Winnipeg, Man.
- <sup>6</sup>NERO, R. W. 1963. Birds of the Lake Athabasca Region, Saskatchewan. Sask. Nat. Hist. Soc. Spec. Publ. 5.
- <sup>7</sup>PETERSON, R. T. 1961. A Field Guide to Western Birds. Houghton-Mifflin, Boston.
- <sup>8</sup>ROBBINS, C. S., BERTEL BRUUN and H. S. ZIM. 1966. Birds of North America. Golden Press, Racine, Wisc.
- <sup>9</sup>ROGERS, T. H. 1968. Northern Rocky Mountain-Intermountain region. Audubon Field Notes 22:460-463.
- <sup>10</sup>ROGERS, T. H. 1978. Northern Rocky Mountain-Intermountain region. Am. Birds 32:376-380.
- <sup>11</sup>SERR, E. M. 1978. Northern Great Plains. Am. Birds 32:220-223.
- <sup>12</sup>SERR, E. M. 1980. Northern Great Plains. Am. Birds 34:284-285.
- <sup>13</sup>SKAAR, P. D. 1980. Montana Bird Distribution. P. D. Skaar.
- <sup>14</sup>SNYDER, L. L. 1957. Arctic Birds of Canada. Univ. Toronto Press.
- <sup>15</sup>TUCK, GERALD, and HERMAN HEINZEL. 1978. A Field Guide to the Seabirds of Britain and the World. Collins, London.
- <sup>16</sup>WEBSTER, F. S. 1978. South Texas region. Am. Birds 32:1028-1031.