

# THE GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA

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*Great black-backed Gull with Herring Gulls near Seven Sisters, Manitoba, 15 June 1985*  
Dennis Fast

At about noon 15 June 1985, I was birding at Seven Sisters dam on the Winnipeg River (50° 7'N, 96° 1'W). About 2 km away, near the north shore of Natalie Lake, a swimming gull stretched its wings, and I got the impression that it was a dark-mantled bird. Bearing in mind that such impressions can be misleading, I pondered the long hike that would be necessary to check it out. However, the bird was then considerate enough to take flight, circle around the eastern end of the lake, then fly towards me and land near the Seven Sisters dump, where it was much more readily accessible.

It was indeed a dark-mantled gull, in adult plumage. It was resting in a bare field with about 50 Herring Gulls. Its flesh-coloured legs and very heavy yellow bill, with pronounced gonydeal angle and large, brilliant red spot, in-

dicated that it was a Great Black-backed Gull, and ruled out the Lesser Black-backed Gull.<sup>12</sup>

Two features of this bird — size and mantle colour — caused some initial confusion. Apart from the larger head and bill, the bird did not appear substantially larger than the biggest Herring Gulls. However, this is in accordance with recorded measurements of the two species.<sup>10 12</sup> (Coincidentally, the first Minnesota record of the Great Black-backed Gull involved a small individual.<sup>3</sup>) There was significant contrast between the dark slate mantle and the black primaries; this was enhanced in strong sunlight, and was more noticeable when the bird was at rest than in flight. At certain angles, the mantle appeared brownish. Some field guides indicate that the Great Black-backed Gull's mantle is as black as the primaries. However, Grant's specialised

guide confirms the distinction in shade, and states that the brownish tone of the mantle is characteristic of faded adult summer plumage.<sup>12</sup> The size and mantle colour were thus fully consistent with a rather small Great Black-backed Gull, and there is no need to invoke the possibility of hybrid Herring X Black-backed ancestry.<sup>8</sup>

The remote possibility that this bird was a Western Gull (southern race), or even a Slaty-backed Gull, was finally eliminated by close inspection of the eyes and wingtip pattern. The eye-ring was red, and the irides were a darker yellow than the Herring Gulls'. All primaries were tipped with white, with relatively large white patches at the tips of the two outermost primaries in each wing.

The absence of any dusky feathers on the head, neck or tail, or any brown freckling (as opposed to the uniform brownish tone) of the mantle, or any dark markings on the bill, confirmed that this bird was in full adult plumage (i.e. at least fourth summer, as defined by Grant<sup>12</sup>).

The gull remained near the dump throughout the afternoon of 15 June, and was present again the following day. It was seen by about 10 experienced observers, and was photographed by Dennis Fast, Stewart Holohan and myself.

This is the fourth record of the Great Black-backed Gull in southern Manitoba, and the first of an adult. Three previous sightings of immature birds have been reported by experienced observers. A first-winter bird was seen by Stewart Holohan and John Christie at the Springfield dump, Winnipeg, 16 November 1980.<sup>16</sup> A first-summer bird was observed by T. French and J. Van Os, and subsequently by many other birders, near Oak Hammock Marsh between 2 and 5 June 1982.<sup>11</sup> A second-summer bird was seen at Clandeboye Bay, at the southern end of Lake Manitoba, by Gor-

don Grief, Peter Hamel, George Holland and Rudolf Koes 25 May 1985 (Koes, pers. comm.). This species is a more frequent visitor to the Hudson Bay coast of northern Manitoba.<sup>1 10 17</sup> According to Jehl and Smith (1970), it was first reported at Churchill by Mowat and Lawrie 25 May 1947, and "has become a rare but regular summer visitor in recent years."<sup>17 20</sup>

The Great Black-backed Gull is primarily a bird of the North Atlantic.<sup>1 10</sup> The number of wintering birds on the lower Great Lakes has increased greatly in the past 50 years, many of these birds originating from breeding colonies on the St. Lawrence estuary.<sup>2</sup> There are scattered nesting records from Lakes Huron and Ontario.<sup>1 2 10 21</sup> However, this species remains a rarity on Lake Superior; for example, there are only six Minnesota records.<sup>3 6 7 13 14 15</sup> The gull's breeding range on the East Coast has expanded southward in recent years, and it is increasing, although very rare, as a winter visitor to the Gulf Coast.<sup>5</sup> There are recent records of individuals wandering west to Colorado (twice) and Montana, and there is a possible sighting for southern Saskatchewan.<sup>18 19 22 23</sup>

The occurrence of four Great Black-backed Gulls, three of them in late spring, in southern Manitoba between 1980 and 1985, does not fall into any obvious regional pattern. The three Minnesota records within that period were all in mid-winter, as were the Colorado (1980, 1982) and Montana (1977) records. The unconfirmed Saskatchewan sighting was 9 May 1983, and is thus closer to the Manitoba pattern.<sup>23</sup>

The most obvious explanation for the Manitoba sightings is that a few birds are wandering westward from the Great Lakes. It is possible that they are migrating to and from the Gulf Coast, but there are no records from the intervening States that might support this hypothesis. The pattern of occurrence in



Manitoba is rather similar to that of Glaucous, Iceland and Thayer's gulls — all Arctic-nesting species.<sup>4 9 24</sup> This raises the possibility of an overland migration of Great Black-backed Gulls between the northern United States and Hudson Bay, or elsewhere in Arctic waters.

I am grateful to Rudolf F. Koes for information on the three records of immature gulls, and for helpful comments on the manuscript. I thank Stewart Holohan for additional information on measurements.

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