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Utah Ornithological Society Bird Records Committee
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To the Utah Ornithological Society Bird Records Committee,

We are writing to report sightings of two gulls on Saturday, March 14, 1998 in the early afternoon in Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah: Iceland Gull and Glaucous winged Gull. We observed both birds on the water and in flight through Bushnell Spacemaster spotting scopes at a distance of approximately 30 to 60 meters. The sky was clear providing strong lighting. We had the Field Guide to the Birds of North America (2nd Edition, National Geographic Society) and Advanced Birding (K. Kaufman) available for reference at the time of viewing.

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We observed the Iceland Gull at around noon for a period of approximately 1.5 hours in the northwest corner of the dike loop road in the refuge. We were able to compare the overall size, coloration, and shape of the Iceland Gull with a first winter Glaucous Gull, adult and first winter Herring Gulls, adult and first winter California Gulls, and a first winter Thayer's Gull. Comparisons with the Glaucous Gull, Herring Gulls, and California Gulls could be made in one field of view. We also re-observed the bird after viewing a first winter Glaucous-winged Gull to further compare overall size, shape, and coloration. Here we include only field characteristics that we noted at the time of viewing.

- Overall size: the Iceland gull was notably smaller than the nearby Glaucous Gull and Herring Gulls, comparable in size to California Gulls

- Overall coloration: Mantle a light gray-brown slightly darker than a mottled brown-gray wing covert, rump, belly, and tail covert feathers. Mottling brown-gray on cream or nearly white background. Primaries very light brown and appeared translucent and almost white in flight especially from beneath. Tail very light brown similar to the color of the coverts and possibly unbarred (this latter point was not obtained with certainty due to the difficulty of distinguishing the tail pattern from the tail covert pattern). The primaries notably lighter than the rest of the wing when standing and in flight. The head and neck relatively white or cream in coloration with little mottling. Legs pink. Eye dark. Bill with pale base fading into dark tip. The majority of the bill light in color but the demarcation between the dark tip and the pale base not sharp.

The coloration of the bill and the relative proportions of the pale base and dark tip was similar to the first winter Glaucous Gull and unlike the relatively dark bill with a slightly lighter base of the first winter Thayer's Gull. The color of the primaries was similar to that of the Glaucous Gull and notably lighter than those of the first winter Thayer's Gull and dramatically lighter than the primaries of first winter Herring and California Gulls. The overall body coloration was slightly darker than that of the Glaucous Gull especially on the mantle. However, this color was distinctly a much lighter brown than the first winter Thayer's, Herring, and California Gulls. We also noted that the overall body coloration was lighter than the first winter Glaucous-winged Gull that we observed later.

-Overall shape: The head of the Iceland Gull was quite rounded. This rounding was similar to that of the nearby California Gulls and notably different than the relatively flat heads of the Glaucous Gull and the Herring Gulls. The gull lacked the "fierce" countenance of the Glaucous and Herring Gulls. The gull often rested in a hunched posture appearing to have a relatively short neck. The bill of the Iceland Gull was fine and relatively thin. It was notably thinner and finer than the bills of either the Glaucous Gulls or Herring Gulls.

- Wing length: The wings were notably longer than the tail when standing. This was a dramatic contrast to the short proportional wing length of the Glaucous Gull next to whom the Iceland Gull often stood.

We now review the field marks of the Iceland Gull comparing them with other gulls with which this bird could have been confused. Because the tail coverts were striped in appearance and many of the other feathers on the body were mottled, we believe this to be a first winter bird or possibly a second winter bird. The darker mantle could either be early molt into summer plumage or the developed mantle of a second winter Iceland Gull. In any case, this bird definitely appeared not to be an adult. The light primaries in comparison to the rest of the wing feathers quickly rules out most of the gulls of the world (those possessing dark primaries) including Herring Gull, California Gull, and Western Gull. The overall size and shape of the bird rule out any of the black-headed gulls including Ross' Gull. Likely candidates for remaining confusion include Glaucous Gull, Glaucous-winged Gull, Thayer's Gull, Glaucous-winged X Western Gull hybrid, other hybrids, or albinos. We consider each of these in turn.

Glaucous Gull: While the Glaucous Gull has an overall very light appearance and dark tipped bill with pale base in its first winter plumage, we had direct comparisons of the bird with a first winter Glaucous Gull. We note several differences between the bird and

the Glaucous Gull including much smaller body size, a thinner, finer bill, and wing tips projecting much farther beyond the tail. Because we were fortunate enough to have this direct comparison we could quickly rule out Glaucous Gull.

Glaucous-winged Gull: Although we did not have a direct comparison with a first winter Glaucous-winged Gull we did have an indirect comparison (see below). In comparison with the nearby Glaucous and Herring Gulls this bird was smaller and appeared to have a rounded head and thin, fine bill. The wings also projected well beyond the tail. Even though first winter Glaucous-winged Gulls can have light primaries in comparison to the rest of the wing and a generally light brown appearance (Field Guide and Kaufman, p. 121), the extremely light color, the overall size and shape, pale bill with dark tip, and projection of the wings beyond the tail (Glaucous-winged Gulls have "blunt-end" appearance similar to Glaucous Gulls, Seabirds: An Identification Guide, P. Harrison, p. 346) collectively rule out Glaucous-winged Gull.

Thayer's Gull: Thayer's Gulls and Iceland Gulls can be extremely difficult to separate because there is considerable variation in each species (Kaufman, p. 123). Size of the two species is similar as are general overall proportions of the head and bill. However, we observed several characters that collectively seem to rule out Thayer's Gull. The first is the fact that the primaries appeared lighter than the rest of the wing. Kaufman suggests that in Thayer's Gulls the primaries will always be darker than or at most the same color as the rest of the wing (p. 123). We also noted that the tail seemed to be very similar in color to the covert feathers unlike Thayer's Gull which should have a distinctly darker tail (Kaufman p. 120). While Kaufman suggests that Iceland Gull should have fine barring on the tail (p. 120), we had difficulty observing this character. In most views, the tail appeared unbarred. However, this appears to be consistent with "Kumlien's" race of Iceland Gull about which Harrison (p. 348) remarks "tail almost uniform pale grey" which is different than the description of the nominate race "biscuit-white marbled grey-brown at base." Finally the coloration of the bill is unlikely for Thayer's Gull. The bird we observed had a notable dark tip to a pale bill. Although this demarcation wasn't as sharp as in the Glaucous Gull, we note that this is a variable character for Iceland Gull (Kaufman p. 123, Harrison p. 347-348). First winter and even second winter Thayer's Gulls are unlikely to have an extremely pale base to the bill with a notable black tip (Kaufman). We also compared the bill coloration to an obvious first winter Thayer's Gull in the flock. The Thayer's Gull had a dull greenish base of small extent but most of the bill was extremely dark unlike the individual Iceland Gull where most of the bill was pale. The dark eye of this bird is consistent with Thayer's Gull, but first winter Iceland Gulls and some number of adult Iceland Gulls possess dark eyes (including an adult "Kumlien's" Iceland Gull

observed by Kevin Johnson in Minnesota). Taken together these observations tend to rule out Thayer's Gull.

Glaucous-winged X Western hybrids: These birds should have similar plumage patterns to Thayer's Gulls but with a much heavier bill and larger body. Our observations on size and shape for ruling out Glaucous-winged Gull and our observations on plumage pattern for Thayer's Gulls apply here and rule out a Glaucous-winged X Western hybrid.

Other hybrids: Kaufman does not discuss other gull hybrids and Harrison diagrams (p. 146) a Herring X Glaucous Gull hybrid. This hybrid is superficially similar to Iceland Gull but should be much larger and have a dark tail band. Based on the above observations, we rule out this possibility. While we are unable to rule out other conceivable hybrid combinations (not depicted by either Kaufman or Harrison), we note that almost no bird record is completely free from any possibility of hybridization, such that hybrid origin could often remain a distinct (but typically extremely small) possibility.

Albinos: Harrison (p. 146) shows an albino first winter Herring Gull. We note that the plumage of albinos should be completely white, but the gull we observed possessed gray-brown mottling.

Although Iceland Gulls are found much more commonly on the east coast of North America, reports of Iceland Gulls in the west are found (Kaufman p. 115). Because gulls are well known for vagrancy and many species have enlarged their distributions in modern times (e.g. Lesser Black-backed Gull) it seems conceivable that a vagrant Iceland Gull would appear on the Great Salt Lake. Given that we felt confident in ruling out all other possibilities, we believe that the gull we observed was a late first or possibly second winter Iceland Gull (possibly "Kumlén's" race based on coloration and distribution).

2-1998 In addition to reporting the above Iceland Gull, we also report on a first winter Glaucous-winged Gull observed along the south dike road of the tour loop in Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, UT. We had comparisons of this individual with first winter Herring Gulls and adult California Gulls. Here we include our notes (see the discussion of Glaucous-winged Gulls in the Iceland Gull discussion for further comparisons and similar species). The Glaucous-winged Gull had a light chocolate brown mottled appearance that was lighter than the first winter Herring Gulls. The tail was an even brown color and the wings (including the primaries) were the same color as the mantle. The underwings were lighter than the upper wings and did not show any darkening in the primaries (in contrast to the first winter Herring Gulls). The bill was very heavy and thick (more so than even the Herring Gulls). The bill was dark but somewhat darker at the tip. The overall body size

was comparable to Herring Gull and much larger than the nearby California Gulls. The legs were pinkish. The general size, shape, and coloration rule out all other gulls and all characteristics were consistent with a first winter Glaucous-winged Gull.

Thank you for considering these two interesting records and we hope that this report of Iceland Gull will encourage other birdwatchers to carefully consider the possibility of Iceland Gull in Utah in the future.

Sincerely,

Kevin P. Johnson, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin P. Johnson".

Tony Jones

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