

RARE GULLS AT BEAR RIVER BIRD REFUGE

The dreaded Friday the 13th of March 1998 proved to be pretty lucky for Keith Evans and I. We drove to the Bear River Bird Refuge on that day to check for the Eurasian Wigeon and some of the rare gulls that had been reported on the Utah Bird line by Terry Sadler.

We left Ogden about 10:30 A.M. and located the Eurasian Wigeon at about 11:45 a.m. It was just 3.9 miles west from the I-15 exit #366. These rarely seen in Utah wigeons are always a treat to see.

We ate our lunch at the bowery at the start of the auto tour loop. At about 1:30 p.m. (13:30) we reached the northwest corner of the tour loop where the rare gulls were being reported. As we pulled up we spotted a second year Glaucous Gull right through the windshield of the vehicle. This gull was amongst a group of 70 to 80 gulls that were approximately 150 to 200 feet west from the parking area. Most of the gulls were resting and feeding on large dead carp where an effluence stream of water from the refuge was flowing into the area. In a matter of minutes, in addition to the Glaucous Gull we had identified Glaucous-winged, Herring, Thayer's, California and Ring-billed Gulls in various plumage. In fact if you considered the adults, first and second year birds, there were at least 10 different looking gulls in that one spot.

After about 15 minutes we noticed this one unusual gull swimming directly towards us just on the south side of the effluence. It was very pale in color resembling the second year Glaucous, or Glaucous-winged Gull in the area, but seemed a little smaller than these gulls. The coloration was evenly distributed over the entire bird including the wing primaries. The bill was more delicate than most of the other gulls and was black but appeared to me to have some lighter color at its base.

While we were looking at the above mentioned bird a young man from Indiana pulled up. He was on his way to Washington state, had called the bird line while making a rest stop, and decided to drive out to the refuge. He had seen Iceland Gulls on the East Coast and said that is what it looked like to him. Keith and I agreed that from the 4 or 5 field guides were looking at that it did look like an Iceland Gull, but did our best to talk ourselves out of it since it was so far out of range.

Before we had a chance to seriously compare details on this gull something caused the whole gull flock to take to the air. In the maze of birds we lost track of the gull in question. About a minute later all the gulls settled back down on the water. We then located on the north side of the effluence a light grayish gull which we thought to be a pale first year Thayer's Gull. One of these gulls may or may not be the same one seen the next day which was thought to be an Iceland Gull. The gull I saw and seen by many people starting march 15th I believe was probably always the same one. It was seen and photographed by either Keith or I or both on March 15, 16, 19, and 21. A description of this bird is as follows:

It was similar to, but not quite as pale as the Glaucous or the Glaucous-winged in the area. The plumage was a modeled light grayish-brown from the head down to the breast around to the back down to and including the secondaries. However, the primaries were darker than the rest of the bird. They were not a solid color; around the edge of the top side of each primary was lighter than the main part of the feather. The bottom side seemed lighter and more evenly colored. When the wings were folded they extended about 1 1/2 inches beyond the tail.

The two outer most tail feathers on each side were whitish and spotted on both top and bottom. The top of the tail had a light bar on the tip which appeared to be perhaps 1/2 inch in

width. The next 2 inches or so of the tail, excepting the two outer feathers on each side, were a mousy grey-brown, this was near the same color intensity as that on the top wing primaries or maybe just a little lighter. This color band of the top middle feathers seemed to be unbroken and was darker than the field guides indicated it should be for an Iceland but lighter than any other gulls except the Glaucous Gulls. The underside of the tail was light, looking fairly even in color except for the spots on the two outside feathers of each side.

The bill was more the shape of a Thayer's or Ring-billed Gull bill and was for the most part solid black in color. The eye was dark, the legs and feet were on the dark side of pink. I saw this gull right next to a California Gull and the gull in question was slightly larger (see photo #3). To me the most interesting thing about this gull was its loner personality and feeding habits. It was usually along the rippling effluence, often setting on the bank close to the water. It would remain in one spot for 10 to 20 minutes, watching for a small fish to swim by, and then grab it much like a heron. It is the first time I have ever seen a gull catch fish in this manner. Although its fishing ability was unprecedented it sometimes miscued making an uncoordinated bill first plunge into the water. Actually small live fish are all we saw it eat. It seemed to have no interest in the larger dead fish that the other gulls were feeding on.

Originally I thought perhaps this gull could be an Iceland Gull. It is amazing how different this gull looked under various light conditions and distances. For example in photo #1 & 2, which are back lighted, the wing primaries look much lighter than those on the bridge (# 4, 5, & 6) with the better light. All were taken on March 15, 1998 between 2 PM (14:00) and 2:30 PM (14:30).

The general color, shape, and size of this gull makes me think it is probably a Thayer's Gull although in some ways it doesn't seem to fit --especially the tail. The only gulls mentioned, in the books and information available to me, to have this fish catching ability are Iceland Gulls.

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Flora and Fauna - Fotos, Facts, Fables, and Figurines

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15 Mar 1998

Gull @ Iceland Glacier --
(Question Prints)
(2-1998?)

April 18, 1998

Terry Sadler
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Terry,

Just a few last minute thoughts on this gull thing. I am enclosing a picture of the only other gull I saw on March 15, 1998 that I thought could have been the Iceland Gull. This bird was a long way out so this is the best I could do on a photograph. The tail and wing does appear fairly light but its just to far away to be sure of the colors. I think it is a Glaucous-winged Gull but I am not an Expert.

Keith Evans got some fantastic flying pictures of the Thayer's/Iceland whatever gull... you may already have them. One has to appreciate the fact he did this without an autofocus camera. After seeing his photographs I am even more convinced that people were observing this gull and believing it to be two different birds under different conditions. When the wings are spread they appear to be much lighter on the top and almost translucent from the bottom.

Instead of one, there are two outer tail feathers on each side which are whitish and spotted both top and bottom. This also makes the tail look different depending on what angle you see it from. The previous statement I made about the 2 inch band of mouse-brown color across the top is somewhat wrong because of this. You can actually see how different the tail can look by comparing photo #1 and #6 of those I previously sent.

I also forgot to put the time on those photographs. They were taken March 15, 1998 between 2:00 PM (14:00) and 2:30 PM (14:30) as was the one enclosed in this letter.

I am enclosing a set of photos and a statement about a gull Keith and I saw last fall -- I am not sure what it is! These photos were sent to Steven Hedges in December of 1997 so the records committee may already have them. I just thought you might like a little more gull confusion. I think gulls are the "hell of bird" identification -- maybe its a tie between them and flycatchers.

I am enclosing corrected copies of my statement on the pale gray-brown mystery gull, I guess I should have waited a bit before sending it in the first place. Let me know if I can be of further help with anything more on this gull thing.

Arnold