

Harry B. Nehls
Oregon Bird Records Committee
2736 S.E. 20th Ave.
Portland, OR 97202

I observed a bird which I believe to be a first winter Great Black-backed Gull from 1400 to 1445 on 1/30/91 at Moolach Beach, Lincoln County, OR. I viewed the bird through Minolta 7x35 binoculars and a Bausch and Lomb 15-60 zoom telescope set at 15 to 40 power. I initially saw the bird from the edge of Highway 101, a distance of perhaps 300 feet. After leisurely studies, I approached the bird slowly, stopping to study it every so often, and had telescope views from as close as 30 feet. At that point I left the telescope to be sure of good views as the bird flew, and approached to within 20 feet. I had several brief looks at the bird in flight as the flock moved south along the beach. I then returned to the highway shoulder and again studied the bird through the telescope. As I had no camera and was accompanied by a beginning birder, Will Vestal, I was hopeful that other birders might be able to arrive before dusk to attempt to document the sighting. I drove to a telephone and attempted to reach both [REDACTED], and left messages on their answering machines. I did not have the names or phone numbers of Lincoln County birders with me, and did not have time to return to Moolach Beach myself, so I returned to Tillamook. That evening I discussed the bird with [REDACTED]. I returned to the area 2/1-2/91 and was unable to relocate the bird, but found a markedly different flock of gulls present every time I checked this location.

Weather was high overcast, cold and windy. It was too cloudy for sun angle to be a factor, but as I viewed the bird I was looking due west for the most part, southwest and south for the final portion of the observation.

The description which follows is based on notes made during the observation and about 2 hours later prior to consulting any books except the National Geographic Society guide, which I had with me at Moolach Beach. I have since consulted all of the standard North American guides, and both of Harrison's seabird books. I do not have access to Godfrey's Birds of Canada, or the Peter Grant book on gulls.

I had stopped to scan the gull flock for any of the Glaucous Gulls recently seen at this location. None were present at that time. There were perhaps 1000 gulls present with all birds present felt by this observer to be Western or Glaucous-winged Gulls (or hybrids between the two) except two individuals. One was a probable second year Herring with very pale gray mantle feathers, dark brown wingtips and very pale eye. The other was the bird in question. I noted it several times because of its pale head and larger size as a possible Glaucous, but noted an all black bill and dark wing tips and kept scanning. It was only after the bird caught my attention several times that I studied it carefully.

The bird was larger than all other gulls present. While this was not immediately obvious with the unaided eye, it was evident in direct comparison with numerous Western Gulls, and often this bird's head was held higher than the other gulls around it when all had their heads up.

Much more evident than larger size was this bird's larger, heavier head. The head was longer from base of the bill to back of the crown than any other bird with which I was able to directly compare it, and this difference was readily apparent. The bill was heavy with prominent gonydeal angle and was solid black. The largest billed Western Gulls had bills that were nearly as large as this bird's in direct comparison.

The body also appeared heavier and more barrel chested than other gulls present. This was especially noticeable in flight. The wings were broader at the base than the Westerns. Even the feet on this bird were noticeably larger than other gulls in the flock when they were spread as the birds were walking directly away. Two Glaucous Gulls present in the same flock two days later were also notably larger than the Westerns but lacked the long head and heavy body of this bird, and despite their pale coloration, neither stood out from the flock by size the way this bird did.

The bill and eye were dark; the feet were pink. The head was white with faint gray streaks and smudges between the eye and the bill. These were darkest just anterior and superior to the eye. There was a dusky streak behind the eye and a fairly well demarcated spot of dusky gray about the size of the eye perhaps one inch below and behind the eye. This was present on both sides but more defined on the left. The underparts were basically white with tan-gray spotting down the sides blurring into a grayish wash on the belly and brownish barring on the undertail.

The back was mottled brown and whitish, showing much more contrast than most of the other first year gulls. Some first year Westerns showed as much contrast, but a greater portion of the back was dark on these birds so that the overall color was darker. There were no gray or black mantle feathers. The secondaries were chocolate brown with broad whitish edges. The primaries were dark brown. The tail was also dark brown, the rump was whitish. I did not have opportunity to carefully study the wing and tail pattern in flight, and cannot say whether the inner primaries were paler or how much white there was in the bases of the rectrices.

I have extensive prior experience with Great Black-backed Gull on the Atlantic coast from North Carolina to Nova Scotia and on the Great Lakes. I have seen all the regular North American gulls except Red-legged Kittiwake on several prior occasions, but have seen Lesser Black-backed only twice and never in first year plumage. I have seen Slaty-backed Gull several times in Alaska, but have found the information in the standard guides inadequate to confidently separate immature Slaty-backs from the more common vagae Herring Gulls in the same areas. (Incidentally, I have compared fresh specimens of adult Slaty-back and vagae in the hand; they are more similar than most North American birders would believe.)

The very white head on this bird, together with the dark flight feathers and tail should eliminate any typically plumaged first year Western, Glaucous, Glaucous-winged, Herring or Thayer's. Hybrid Glaucous x Herring is worth considering. I have twice seen first year birds I felt were

⊗ spelled vegae in some sources, vagae in others. Harrison followed here.

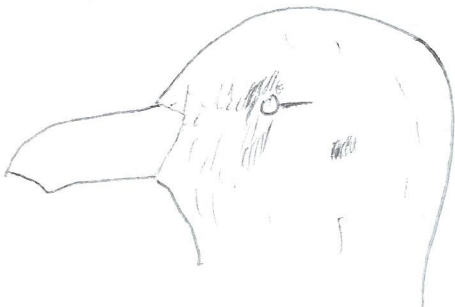
this hybrid. They had pale body plumage with darker remiges and rectrices but had pink-based bills, even pale tawny head and body and paler wingtips than this bird.

Lesser Black-backed can apparently approach this bird closely in plumage. In fact photo number 3 in An Audubon Handbook; Eastern Birds by John Far- rand, page 38, closely approximates the bird I saw, and the degree of whiteness on the head in that picture is closer to what I saw than many photos of Great Black-backed. Of course Lesser Black-backed is slimmer and thinner winged even than Herring Gull, a difference evident on one of the two I've seen. I can't help but wonder if that photo is misidentified, and suspect the bird in photo #456 in Harrison is more typical.

First year Slaty-back is a bird I have no good mental image of, but a bird between #220c and #220d in Harrison's Seabirds, an Identification Guide could approach the bird I saw. This species would more closely approach the size and build of the bird I saw, but should not be much different than a Western.

The bird I saw closely resembled the photos in the Master Guide and Harrison #454. The long head shape is well shown in both these pictures. The wing coverts were not as strongly checkered as in Harrison, but close to the Master Guide. The primaries were not as black as either of these photos. The head was whiter than either of these birds, especially the crown and nape. The very heavy bodied look of the flight photo in Harrison #453 is like the bird I saw. (Note that the slender winged bird in #452 is actually a misidentified Lesser Black-backed according to published corrections to this book.)

In summary, I feel that this bird was almost certainly a first year Great Black-backed Gull, but I am all too aware of the pitfalls inherent in a single observer record of an immature gull that was not photographed. I assume this record will not be accepted, and doubt that I would vote to accept it if submitted to me. Still I felt there was a purpose in submitting it for review and discussion.



traced from sketch made in the field while viewing the bird.

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2/3/91