

Copies of the original photos will be submitted to the North Carolina State Museum at Raleigh.

Acknowledgements: I thank Dennis Paulson and Steve Heintz for their expert opinions.

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First North Carolina Record of Yellow-legged Gull

ROBERT H. LEWIS
176 Hunter Avenue
Tarrytown, NY 10591

Beginning on the Christmas Bird Count of December 30, 1994 and continuing into January and February of 1995, many observers in the Cape Hatteras Point area (Buxton, Dare County, NC) reported seeing adult gulls with gray mantles darker than Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) but paler than Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), and with yellow or yellowish legs. Several of these birds were thought to be Yellow-legged Gulls (*Larus cachinnans*), but definitive evidence proved difficult to obtain.

Yellow-legged Gull is a recently recognized species that breeds around the Mediterranean Sea and east into Turkey and the Caucasus. The populations that comprise the species were formerly considered to be races of Herring Gull under the names *L. a. michahellis*, *atlantis*, and *cachinnans*. Good references for this complex situation are the well known book by Grant (1986) and the article by D. Gruber in the German magazine *Limicola* (1995). There are several North American records of the species, the best known being the bird that frequented Georgetown reservoir in Washington D.C. for several winters in the early 1990's (Wilds and Czaplak 1994).

Here is an identification summary. When in adult basic plumage (winter), these birds resemble Herring Gull but have yellow legs, brighter yellow bills, very clean white heads (indeed, the German name for the species is “White-headed Gull”), and mantles usually slightly darker gray than Herring, with less of a bluish cast. However, some populations, in particular the so-called “Cantabrian” form of north-western Spain, have mantles the same shade as our North American Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*). The Dutch biochemist and avian genetic researcher Peter de Knijff reports (pers. comm.) that as one travels along the shores of the Mediterranean encountering breeding colonies of Yellow-legged Gull, one finds noticeable and random variations in mantle color. An important field mark shared by all populations is the more extensive black in the primaries (compared to Herring Gull). In flight, the outer wing shows an almost Kittiwake-like “dipped in ink” black triangle. The wings also look longer than those of Herring Gull.



Figure 1: Note the pattern of black on the primaries of the spread wing, especially the extent of black on the outer web of primaries 5 and 6, and the black dot on primary 4.

On March 13, 1995 I encountered an apparent Yellow-legged Gull at Cape Hatteras, a mile or so west of Cape Point, standing on the south beach in a flock of fifty or so Herring, Great Black-backed (*L. marinus*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*). I pointed the bird out to Joe Swertinski and his two companions in another vehicle.



Figure 2: In flight, note the long wings and the Kittiwake-like black triangle formed by the black areas on the outer primaries. Both photos by Robert H. Lewis.

The bird was the size of a small Herring Gull. It had medium bright uniform yellow legs, noticeably long wings, and a mantle the same shade of gray as the Herring Gulls around it. We were able to approach to within about fifty feet of the bird and I secured many photographs of it (figures 1 and 2). Through my 50 power Questar telescope, I was able to see that the bird's orbital ring was red, a fact verified by one of the other observers. This too is a field mark for separating Yellow-legged Gull from Herring Gull, and it is visible under high magnification on one of the original photos. Figure one shows the bird's fanned wing. Note the extensive black on P6 and P5, and the small black dot on P4. The amount of black exceeds that of Lesser Black-backed Gull. Figure 2 shows the flying bird with the classic Kittiwake-like black triangle and the long wings.

These and other photographs were reviewed by four European experts who were unanimous in firmly declaring the bird to be a Yellow-legged Gull. Some felt it was the Cantabrian form, others cautioned against subspecific identification from photos.

I encountered the bird in the same area the following day, but not thereafter. This bird was apparently not one of those reported by others earlier in the winter.

As Lesser Black-backed Gulls continue to increase in North America,

birders need to be aware of the possibility of hybrids between that species and Herring Gull (Post and Lewis, 1995). Indeed, some of the other birds mentioned above seen in January and February may have been such a hybrid. The bird discussed here had mantle color and wing pattern that conclusively eliminate the hybrid possibility.

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