

First Record of Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) for South Carolina

Christopher E. Hill

*Biology Department, Coastal Carolina University
PO Box 261954, Conway, SC 29528*

Introduction

I report the first documented occurrence of Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) in South Carolina. The record was accepted by the South Carolina Bird Record Committee in June 2022 (decision archived at Carolina Bird Club website <https://www.carolinabirdclub.org/brc/SC/reports.html>). Slaty-backed Gull becomes the sixteenth gull species documented for South Carolina.

Slaty-backed Gulls breed in Siberia and winter largely in Japan, North Korea, and South Korea (Malling Olson 2018). They are regular but rare in Alaska, occur annually on the Pacific Coast of North America, and annually in the last decade in the Great Lakes region, but are rare strays to the rest of the continent, especially south of about 37° North (McKee et al. 2014).

The only previous record in the Carolinas was in North Carolina on 16 February 2003 (LeGrand et al. 2005). In the rest of the southeastern U.S. prior to this sighting, the only accepted records were two from Florida (Fig. 1).

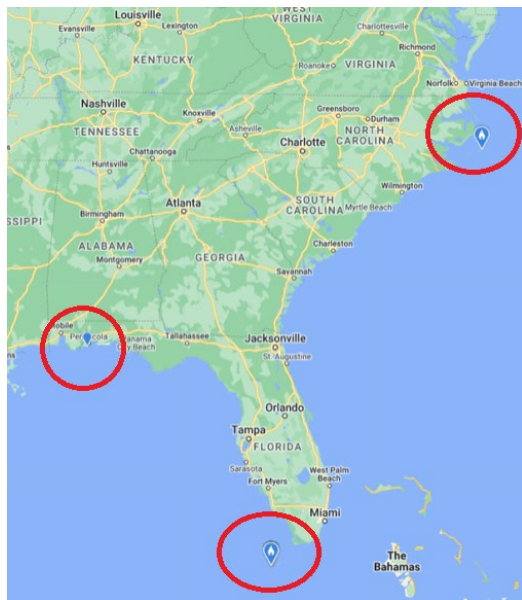


Figure 1. Prior records of Slaty-backed Gull in eBird in the southeastern United States. Red-circled, blue markers indicate three previous occurrences. Image provided by eBird (www.ebird.org), created 12 May 2022.

Observations

On 3 January 2022, while participating in a trial run of a new Christmas Bird Count centered on Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve in Horry County, South Carolina, I visited the Horry County landfill, off Route 90 east of Conway, SC. In a flock composed mostly of about 1500 Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) with half a dozen each of Lesser Black-backed (*L. fuscus*) and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. marinus*) and numerous Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*) and Laughing Gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla*), I noticed an adult gull with a medium dark mantle that struck me as different from the Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

I approached the gull and noted its pink legs and feet. Perhaps due to strong winds, gusting to over 50 kph, the gulls seemed to be content to let me approach fairly closely. Only those gulls within about 15m lifted off to resettle a little farther away, so I was able to obtain many photographs of the bird that showed field marks consistent with Slaty-backed Gull (Figs 2-8).



Figure 2. Slaty-backed Gull at Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022, with Laughing Gulls (foreground) and Herring Gulls (background). Note medium gray mantle, straight-sided bill, tan head mottling, broad white tertial crescent and pink legs. On the folded primaries note that the fourth white primary tip from the end of the wing (P7) appears as a double bump of white, which is the primary tip of P7 next to the white tongue on P8. The same pattern is visible on P6-P7 just proximal.



Figure 3. Slaty-backed Gull in flight. In this underexposed photo, note the wide white trailing edge to the secondaries, the head mottling, and the large white mirror on P10 (contacting the white apical primary spot) and the medium sized white mirror on P9, as well as the head mottling and bill shape. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.



Figure 4. Slaty-backed Gull taking flight with Herring Gulls. This photo shows the “string of pearls” white tongue-tips on the primaries of the far wing particularly well. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.



Figure 5. Note that the underside of the primaries appears gray on the Slaty-backed Gull, not black because the black color on each primary is largely confined to the outer web, unlike, for example, the underside in Herring Gulls. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.



Figure 6. Slaty-backed Gull with Lesser Black-backed, Laughing, Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. This photo shows the mantle color as approximately as dark as the mantle of the Lesser Black-back in front of it, but the Slaty-backed's gray is slightly more leaden, and the Lesser Black-back's mantle is slightly bluer gray. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.



Figure 7. Slaty-backed showing gray iris with barely visible pale pink orbital ring. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.



Figure 8. Slaty-backed Gull (far right) with Great Black-backed (far left) and Herring Gulls. Although blurry, this photo shows differences in the head and bill shape and markings, and the mantle shade, between the Slaty-backed and an adult Great Black-backed Gull. Photo from Horry County, SC, Landfill on 3 January 2022.

The important features visible on this gull include 1) size approximately that of a Herring Gull, with 2) pink legs and feet; 3) a straight-sided bill, not thick or bulbous as on a Great Black-backed or Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*); 4) a medium dark mantle and upper wing, about as dark as that of the race of Lesser Black-backed Gull that winters in eastern North America (*L. f. graellsii*), and paler than an adult Great Black-backed; 5) a broad white trailing edge to the secondaries; 6) black in the outer primaries separated from the gray in the proximal part of those primaries by white tongue-tips in a “string of pearls” pattern; 7) large white apical spots on each primary, and 8) considerable tan mottling on the head and neck, typical of a bird in winter plumage. The eye on Slaty-backs is described as “pale yellow, sometimes dark-peppered” (Malling Olsen 2018). The irides of this bird were not yellow but gray with pink orbital rings. This eye color is found regularly on Slaty-backs (Alvaro Jaramillo, pers. comm.), and this exact color combination can be found in photographs of Slaty-backs wintering in Japan (see, e.g., Cowton 2006).

The bird continued to be seen at the Horry County landfill by many observers (57 total reports to eBird) through 8 January 2022, but apparently was not seen after that date despite further visits from birders.

Discussion

With large white-headed gulls, not only is there much within-species variability, but most taxa hybridize at least occasionally; some, routinely (Hoffman et al. 1978). In the last two decades many advanced guides and articles have been published covering gull identification, but a firm identification of a vagrant such as Slaty-backed Gull in South Carolina depends on the combination of many features.

Of the most likely species for confusion, Great Black-backed has a darker mantle, a clean white head in winter and a stouter bill; Western has a clean white head in winter, a very

stout bill and less white in the wingtip; and Lesser Black-backed has yellow legs and a more slender and attenuated body shape, with head markings in winter most often dusky streaks rather than tan mottling.

The taxon that could appear most similar to a Slaty-backed, I believe, would be a Great Black-back x Herring Gull hybrid, which could perhaps duplicate the mantle tone, body structure and pink legs. However, birds that have been identified as this combination occur mostly on the Great Lakes rather than the East Coast, and I have not been able to find photographs of any that have the broad white trailing edge to the wing typical of Slaty-backed, as shown in this bird.

A Slaty-backed Gull that appeared in Maryland on 14 January 2022 (Carney 2022), Maryland's first record of the species, shares many features (bill shape and coloration, head markings, details of primary patterning) with the South Carolina bird and may have been the same individual.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the management and staff of the Horry County Solid Waste Authority for allowing birder access to their facility, and particularly to Wayne Martin, who arranged more extensive access for the Christmas Bird Count. I very much appreciate the correspondents on the Facebook group North American Gulls, including its founder Amar Ayyash, who have always been generous in sharing their expertise. I thank Alvaro Jaramillo in particular for pointing out several field characters visible in these photos of the South Carolina bird which I would have otherwise missed. I am indebted to Gene Knight of the Mississippi Ornithological Society, who helped me track down the history of a 1993 Slaty-backed Gull report in Mississippi, which was originally accepted but later rejected and removed from the state list.

Literature Cited

- Carney, T. (2022). eBird Checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S100727206> in eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance (web application). eBird, Ithaca, New York.
- Cowton, K. (2006). eBird Checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S92839077>. in eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance (web application). eBird, Ithaca, New York.
- Hoffman, W., J. A. Wiens, and J. M. Scott. 1978. Hybridization between gulls (*Larus glaucescens* and *L. occidentalis*) in the Pacific Northwest. *Auk* 95:441-458.
- LeGrand, H., Jr, K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, and R. L. Tyndall. 2005. 2004 Annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 69:29-34.
- Malling Olsen, K. 2018. Gulls of the world: a photographic guide. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- McKee, T., P. Pyle, and N. Moores. 2014. Vagrancy and identification of first-cycle Slaty-backed Gulls. *Birding*:39-51J.