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LOUISIANA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

This form is intended as a convenience in reporting observations of unusual birds. It may be used flexibly and need not be used at all. Leave blank any details not observed. Attach additional sheets if necessary. Please print or type. Attach drawings, photographys, etc.; include all photos if an obscurely marked species. When completed, mail to the Secretary of the LOS Bird Records Committee.

1. Common and scientific name: Great Black-backed Gull, Larus marinus
2. Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g. 2ad. in breeding plumage): 1, in third year or adult winter plumage
3. Locality: Louisiana: New Orleans Parish: Orleans
   At Pontchartrain Beach on Lake Pontchartrain
4. Date(s) when seen: 11/14/82
5. Times of day when seen: 10:30 to 12:00 a.m.
6. Reporting observer and address:
   David P. Muth, 1425 Bourbon-B NOLa. 70116
7. Other observers accompanying reporter who also identified the bird:
   Jack Reinoehl, Norton Nelkin, Dan Purrington
8. Other observers who independently identified the bird:
   ---
9. Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light): Clear and sunny, the sun over the observers shoulders, the bird to the north.
10. Optical equipment (type, power, condition):
    7x35 binos, 2 20x telescopes
11. Distance to bird: less than 100 feet at nearest approach
12. Duration of observation: about 1 hour
13. Habitat (general and specific):
    Estuarine, the bird sat on the pilings in Lake Pontchartrain

14. Behavior (flying, feeding, resting, etc.; include and stress any habits used in identification):

    Seen resting, standing, stretching, and in flight.

15. Description (Include only what was actually seen, not what "should" have been seen. Include if possible: total length; body bulk; shape, bill, eye, and leg characteristics; color and pattern of plumage, etc. Stress field marks):

    While routinely examining gulls, terns, and cormorants resting on the pilings at Pontchartrain Beach at a distance of some 300 yards, I spotted a black-backed Gull. Reinoehl and I then proceeded to move closer to the bird. We approached carefully, and though expecting it to be marinus, we were struck by its apparant Herring Gull size, and supposed that it might be fuscus. However, at a distance of some 75 yds. the bird finally stood up and revealed its pink or flesh-colored legs, thus apparrantly ruling out Lesser Black-backed Gull. We then proceeded to a distance of about 100 feet and made a detailed examination. We retreated, alerted Nelkin and Purrington, and returned with cameras and telescope. We were able to approach to within 100 ft. before the bird flew to a piling at some distance to the northeast. After we left, despite an intensive search, the bird was not seen again. Purrington obtained several pictures.

Description: A black-backed gull, size of a large Herring Gull, though stockier, generally bulkier, in either a late changing third year plumage or winter adult. Head blocky, sloped rather than rounded forehead, slope steeper than in Herring. Neck thick and short, head and neck lightly streaked with gray. Bill very massive, longer and higher than Herring, though perhaps not as long in proportion to the head. Bill was pale cream colored with blackish gonydeal spot and acute gonydeal angle. Eye was dark, definitely not yellow, perhaps flecked with dark amber; orbital ring flesh colored. Mantle and upperwings deep slate gray, very dark; I did not detect much darkening of the outer primaries. Some outer primaries had white mirrors or apical spots. Tail white, no trace of black or brown. Legs and feet flesh or pink.

Discussion: At the time of the sighting it was generally concluded that the bird was L. marinus on the basis of plumage and general build. However, two factors cast some doubt: size and eye color, both of which seemed to raise the possibility of L. occidentalis. I was unfamiliar with both birds. Discussion with Remson and a visit to the LSUMZ revealed that size was not a problem. In addition, my feeling after seeing skins of occidentalis was that the bird was much darker than any sub-species of Western Gull. (This feeling was re-enforced when in February I found L. fuscus graellsii, which I felt to be much lighter than the 11/14/81 bird, and which is supposed to be darker than any Western.) That leaves eye color. Though the bird seemed to be in adult plumage, it's possible that it was completing its final basic molt into adult plumage, but retained third year soft part coloration. The color of the bill and gonydeal spot would tend to support this view.

16. Voice:

not heard

17. Similar species (include how they are eliminated by your observations):

Leg color, size and build eliminate all subspecies of L. fuscus; mantle color, and probably build, eliminate L. occidentalis; no sub-species of L. argentatus approaches its shape or color. There is, of course, the remote possibility that the bird was either L. dominicanus or L. schistisagus, a question I am not competent to judge.

18. Photographs (Was it photographed? By whom? Attached?):

Photographed by Dan Purrington, submitted.

19. Previous experience with this species:

none

20. Aids: List books, illustrations, birders, etc. used in identification
a) at time of observation;

b) after observation: Peterson, Robbins, and, later, Laurence Binford, "Lesser Black-backed Gull in California," WesternBirds, v.9,4 and P.J. Grant, Brit Birds 73, 3.

21. This description written from: _____ notes made during observation; ~~XXX~~ notes made after observation; _____ memory.

22. Are you positive of your identification? _____. If not, explain:

yes, but with the caveat expressed above.

23. Signature of reporter: David P. Mark

24. Date and time of writing this account:
4/7/82 from notes made 11/14/81 about 3:00 p.m.

Great Black-Backed Gull, Larus marinus, sightings in New Orleans, Winter 1981/1982

The first bird, an adult, was seen 11/14/81, as described.

The second bird was found 2/28/82, by Robbins and Cardiff, and was observed for about five minutes by Robbins, Cardiff, Purrington, Myers and Muth, just outside the New Orleans Dump on Almonaster Ave. loafing with several hundred other gulls. It was a verylarge first year bird, taller and longer than neighbouring Herring Gulls, with considerably more bulk. The head was blocky and white, with a long sloping forehead; bill was massive and black, actually longer, though shorter in proportion to head length than in Herring, deeper and generally more imposing. The mantle and upper wing were brown, though scalloped, chocalate brown, a very different shade from the lighter Herring; the white neck and underparts contrasted clearly with the back and upperwing , more like a second or even third year Herring than a first year bird. I did not see the tail pattern when the bird took flight, though the others did.

On March 28 , Mac Myers spotted a first year Great Black-backed Gull loafing at Seabrook Bridge in New Orleans. It was similar to the 2/28 bird, though, I believe it was smaller. It was studied at leisure for about two hours by numerous observers, and was well photographed by Myers. I was also able to see the tail on this bird when it stretched: the coverts were white, the tail feathers white with a fairly well-defined broad black sub-terminal band.

DPM 4/23/82

82-5B

LOUISIANA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

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1. Common and scientific name: Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus)
2. Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g. 2ad. in breeding plumage): one adult or sub-adult (third year?)
3. Locality: Louisiana: New Orleans Parish: Orleans
4. Date(s) when seen: November 14, 1981
5. Times of day when seen: approximately 12 noon
6. Reporting observer and address:
   Robert D. Purrington, Dept. of Physics, Tulane U., New Orleans 70118
7. Other observers accompanying reporter who also identified the bird:*
   David Muth, Jack Reinoehl, Norton Nelkin
8. Other observers who independently identified the bird:
9. Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light):
   clear, sun behind observers
10. Optical equipment (type, power, condition):
    20X and 30X telescopes (mine a Balscope Sr, 30X)
11. Distance to bird: as close as 80 ft
12. Duration of observation: nearly one hour
13. Habitat (general and specific):
    On pilings at shuth shore of L. Pontchartrain (Pontchartrain Beach Amusement Park
14. Behavior (flying, feeding, resting, etc.; include and stress any habits used in identification):
    Mostly resting; finally flying to another perch 75 yds away
15. Description (Include only what was actually seen, not what "should" have been seen. Include if possible: total length; body bulk; shape, bill, eye, and leg characteristics; color and pattern of plumage, etc. Stress field marks):
    Large, dark-backed adult or sub-adult gull, slightly hlarger than Herring Gull. Rather heavy straw-colored bill with dusky gonydeal mark. Iris apparently dark (certainly a dark pupil); legs flesh/pink. Mantle/wings significantly darker than Laughing Gull.

*No one was certain of the identification at the time; I thought it was possibly L. occidentalis.

Note: the bird was found by David Muth (first) and Jack Reinoehl. Purrington and Nelkin arrived shortly thereafter. The bird was seen for only about two hours. First record for Louisiana.

16. Voice:

17. Similar species (include how they are eliminated by your observations):

Western Gull and Slaty-backed Gull; see comments by Remsen, Whitney, de Benedictis, et al.

18. Photographs (Was it photographed? By whom? Attached?):

by this observer on a 10-inch diameter (by direct measurement) piling.

19. Previous experience with this species:

None

20. Aids: List books, illustrations, birders, etc. used in identification
a) at time of observation;

b) after observation:

21. This description written from: ____ notes made during observation; ✓ notes made after observation; ____ memory.
22. Are you positive of your identification? Yes. If not, explain:

This identifcation derives from study of the photographs by others.

23. Signature of reporter: [signature]
24. Date and time of writing this account:

4/22/82; copy of form filled out 8/5/82

82-5C

Campus Correspondence

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY IN NEW ORLEANS

FROM:

TO: **DATE:**

Great Black-backed Gull (notes copied from field notes of 11/13/81). [= 11/14/81? JVRemsen]

Seemed slightly larger than a Herring Gull but difficult to tell since bird was perched on a post in water where direct comparison was not possible. Mantle very dark – easily called black. Head a few streaks. Legs pinkish flesh. Bill yellow with very faded dusky spot. Eye dark (despite several attempts to see it as light).

Seen at a distance as close as 75 feet with 7x50 binoculars & 20 power scope for about a half-hour or more.

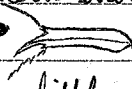
Norton Kelkin

25 Feb. 1982

Dear Mr. Purrington —

Please allow me to apologize for my very late response to your letter, with photographs of the New Orleans "Black-backed" gull. I have been away from home practically non-stop since mid-Dec. leading birding tours.

Anyway, I have looked carefully at the photos now. The bird appears to be in 3rd-winter plumage (or later), evidenced by essentially adult features with the exception of the conspicuous dark blotch near the tip of the mandible and dark smudge on the maxilla, and what seems to be a scattering of brownish feathers through the mantle. The iris is clearly dark from what I can see in the photos. Large gulls such as this typically take 4 years to attain definitive (adult) feathering (although some known-age, wild Herring Gulls are known to show what we call "3rd winter" plumage at the actual age of 5 & 6 years).

Aside from the aging then, the bird appears to be very heavy or bulky through the neck and head, with a stout, thick-based bill. The body and legs, too, seem thick. The bird is clearly larger than the Herring Gull which you included in your photographs. Thus, the possibilities (for N. America) for a 3rd-winter bird such as this are Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, and Western. Lesser Black-backed can be eliminated, I feel, as the bird in the photos is too large (L. Black-backed is virtually always smaller than Herring), and has a dark iris and very little head streaking (L. Black-backed would have a pale iris by 3rd-winter and would typically show much more streaking (+ yellow legs of course)). Western Gull, too, can be eliminated on the basis of size (it is typically the same as or smaller than Herring) and bill shape (Western shows a very deep gonys, imparting a bulbous-looking tip to the bill ). Western Gull does have a rather dark (golden-brown) iris, very little winter head streaking and one white mirror on primary #10 (as the bird in the photo does, it appears). These latter features may at first appear to rule against the final possibility, Great Black-backed — (as well as only minimal winter head-streaking) this species has a pale iris and white mirrors on both #9 and #10 as an adult. Here is where the importance of aging comes in — the bird in the photos

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seems to me to be perfectly O.K. for 3rd-winter Great Black-backed, — with some brown in the mantle, a small mirror on #10, dark iris (although some do have a pale iris by 3rd-winter), very large size and stout bill. Many Great Black-backed's are larger yet (but I've seen many that were not much larger than Herring). Western Gull is also extremely unlikely to show up on the Gulf Coast (or anywhere near) — it is very rare away from the immediate vicinity of the Pacific Coast — there are only a handful of records of the pink-footed races L. a. occidentalis occidentalis & L. o. wymani more than 30 miles inland (one record for extreme W. Tx for L. o. wymani, 1st-winter, is the only significantly inland record I am aware of except for a few from the Salton Sea, Calif, where the race L. o. livens occurs regularly — the next A.O.U. will probably "split" this one off). Thus, any reports of Western Gull from our area should be examined very critically. I mention all this because of confusion that developed over a bird nearly identical to the one you photographed, that appeared on Galveston Bay near Houston in Nov. 1980. It too was well-photographed, and stayed around for a long time. One was also reported by a well-respected birder, at the Corpus Christi dump later that winter (another report of Western).

Well, I hope this is useful — I would be interested to hear what the general concensus is on the identification. Thanks for sending this material, and please let me know if I can supply further explanation or other assistance. Good luck birding!

Sincerely,

Bret Whitney

P.S. I have enclosed the photographs — I found the flight shot especially helpful.

9446-85 road
Woodhaven, NY 11421
30 March, 1982.

Dear Van,

The gull photos you forwarded appear to represent a Great black-backed molting into 4th winter plumage — the bird looks massive ... among other points of difference its leg color excludes Lesser black-backed and the black on the mantle excludes Western — was the eye entirely "dark"? A slide in my collection depicts a 4th winter Great black-backed on December 24th with a dark iris surrounded by a dull yellow eye, the yellow is difficult to detect except under bright magnification, and the bird was photographed at about 20' with a 400 mm. lens in bright sunlight. I have no familiarity with Slaty-backed Gull but this species' appearance in Louisiana seems highly unlikely.

Thank you for the opportunity to study and comment on these photographs. If you desire, I'll send a Kodak dupe of my 4th winter bird for your perusal.

Cheers,

Tom Davis

February 14, 1982

Van Remsen
Museum of Natural Science
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70893

Dear Van,

I've finally had a chace to review and evaluate the prints and attached notes of the black-backed gull that was seen on Lake Pontchartrain at New Orleans on Nov. 14, 1981. Having done so I have no doubt that the bird is an adult Greater Black-backed Gull, although I cannot absolutely exclude the possibility of it being a Slaty-backed Gull.

The bird is clearly not a Lesser Black-backed Gull, the most likely possibility on distributional grounds, as the the size appears much too large, especially when comparing the bird to the Herring Gull that was sitting on the same pole at a different time frame. A Lesser Black-backed should be somewhat smaller than a Herring Gull, though there is no doubt some degree of overlap because of the sexual dimorphism in regards to size in gulls. Further the head also appears to be quite large and quite square shaped. To me the Lesser Black-backed has a proportionately smaller and rounder head. Additionally, the very dark mantle (essentially concolor with the wing tips) is perfect for a Greater Black-backed and is much too dark for all but the nominate race of the Lesser Black-backed, a subspecies that has not yet been documented for North America. Also, the bill appears much too heavy and long for that species. Also the"pink" or "flesh" colored legs would exclude Lesser Black-backed (I've never seen or heard of an adult Lesser Black-backed with pink legs). Finally, an adult Lesser Black-backed in November would have considerable head streaking that would be very noticeable in the field. I can't detect any head streaking from the prints, but note from the description that there was "light, but distinct, streaking on head". This would be perfect for a winter adult Greater Black-backed.

The mantle color is also too dark for a Western Gull. Even the darker more southerly race, wymani, shows some contrast between the mantle and the primaries. In any case a vagrant Western Gull to Louisiana would be more likely of the paler and more migratory nominate race. The bill also looks too long for a Western Gull to me and I have the impression that a Western Gull would have a more pronounced angle at the gonys. Additional possible characters that don't seem quite right for Western are the large appearing eye and the prominent white spots in the primaries. To me a Western Gull appears to have a much smaller eye in proportion to the head and shows smaller white sub-apical spots on the primaries. I should state though that these last points are only impressions.

As for Slaty-backed, I must plead ignorance on this one. Obviously, the odds are greatly against a Slaty-backed ever turning up in Louisiana. Some characters that might eliminate Slaty-backed are the following: Since Slaty-backed is a very northern gull, wouldn't adults show more prominent head streaking during the winter? Also, the bill

looks too long for even the bird being a Slaty-backed. Finally, I'm told by L. C. Binford that Slaty-backed Gulls (adults) show a prominent white bar on the inside of the wing tips and thus have a Franklin's Gull type wing pattern. Obviously this character would only be of use on flying birds, but the one flight picture does not show this apparent Slaty-backed pattern (on the visible right wing). I also get that impression from the bird on the buoy with its wing spread. This character warrents further checking.

In summary then I feel that Western and Lesser Black-backed are clearly eliminated. I don't know Slaty-backed Gull, but have suggested characters that might prove as a means of further eliminating that species from consideration. Given the remote distributional likelihood of a Slaty-backed Gull turning up in Louisiana and the fact that this bird seems to perfectly match a Greater Black-backed Gull, I feel comftorable in considering the bird to be the latter species.

As an added note, I showed the prints to Guy McCaskie and he judged the bird to be an adult Greater Black-backed Gull. He was certain of his judgement.

Best regards,

Jon Dunn

Jon Dunn

Hi Van,

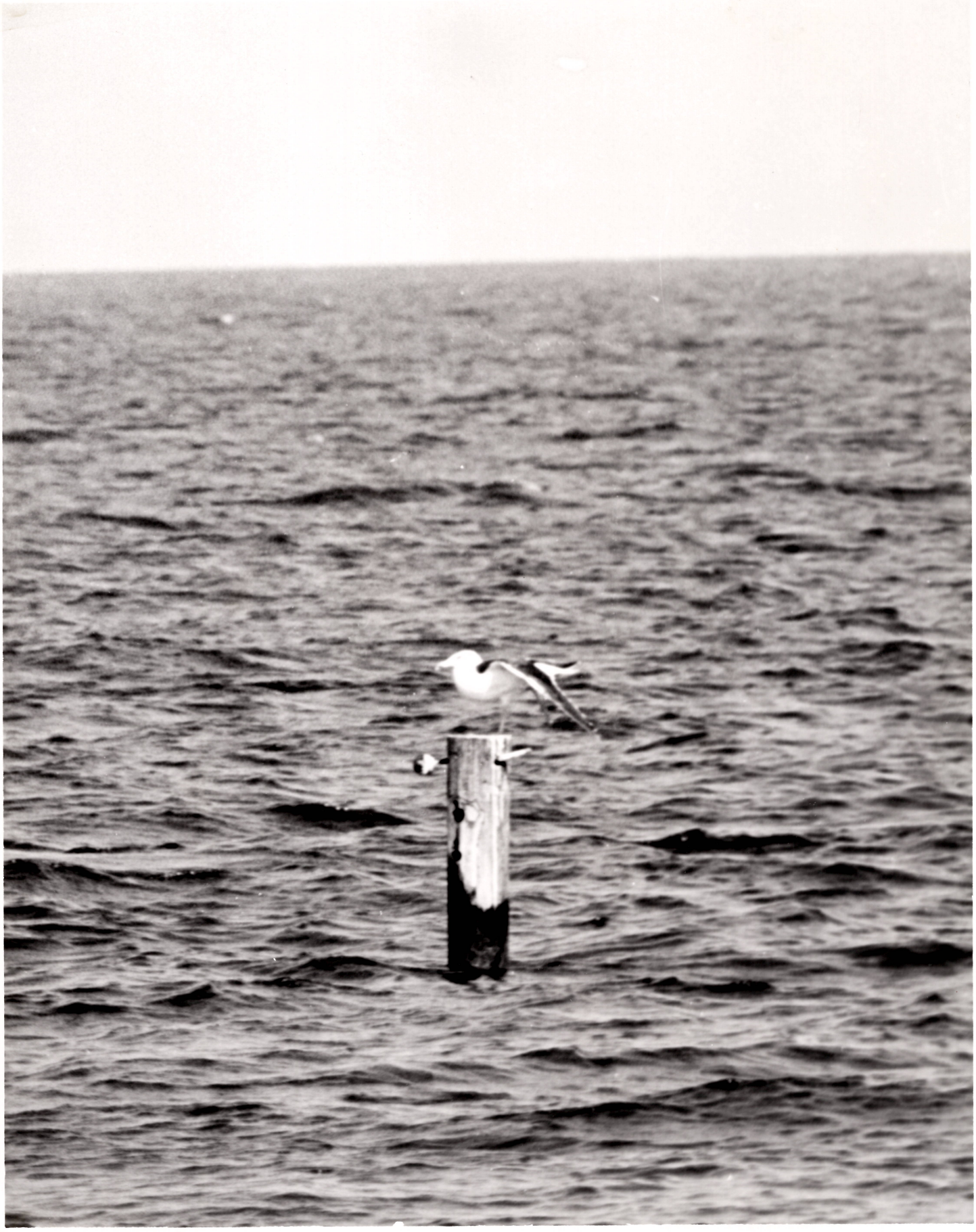
I agree with what Jon has written, in general. While some of the individual pictures give the bird a different look (sometimes smaller headed or smaller billed) most show a large black backed gull with a fairly large and long bill and flat head. Looks like (in most pictures) a typical Great Black-backed.

Say hello to Steve. I will likely not be in your area this spring, as I had previously thought I might. It's been a fairly good winter, especially with Smew and Gyrfalcon up north. Lots of overwintering eastern stuff here in the South (including Grace's, Mourning, Worm-eating, Bay-breasted, Black-throated Blue, Cape May, Chestnut-sided, Least Flycatcher, Indigo Bunting, Black-chinned Hummingbirds, plus lots more)

-- Paul

Paul

Paul Lehman



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LOS 82-5B

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Great Black-backed Gull
14 November 1981 New Orleans
R.D. Currington