

**Great Black-backed Gull** (first-basic) (*Larus marinus*)  
 BFI Crescent Acres Landfill, Arabi, St. Bernard Par.; Louisiana  
 21 December 1991 10:30 am - 2:30 pm (off and on)  
 also seen by Steven W. Cardiff and Donna L. Dittmann **Description by Curtis Marantz**

Steve initially spotted this bird as it flew into the swirling mass of gulls that were feeding around the active dump site. After feeding, the bird flew some distance away from this site to roost among a huge flock of Herring (*L. argentatus*) and Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*) gulls. The Great Black-back was initially found at about 10:30 am and we had it under observation off and on until about 2:30 pm (actually, the bird was in view for most of the first hour and then, again, from about 2:00-2:30 pm). The mid-day light was quite good for both observation and photography. I managed to get several quite good photographs of the bird, duplicates of which have been submitted to the committee. Like the other birds seen this day, I watched the Great Black-backed Gull with my 10 X 40 binoculars, 22X wide-angle scope, and my 400 mm telephoto lens. I was able to approach to within 25-30 meters of this bird when attempting to photograph it; however, most of my observations were from somewhat farther away.

The bird was clearly a large gull that stood out immediately as substantially larger than the nearby Herring Gulls. The bill was quite stout and blob-ended; in color, it appeared mostly black with some paling at the base of both mandibles. The head and underparts were quite white in color, noticeably more so than in any of the first-year Herring Gulls present. The underparts were concolor with the head, and thus the bird did not have the pale-headed look that was shown by many of the Herring Gulls. The head and underparts were only sparingly streaked with dusky markings, these being most prevalent, nearly forming blotches, at the sides of the breast. The upperparts were strikingly patterned. The mantle feathers had dark, nearly blackish, centers with contrasting whitish fringes. The lesser and median wing-coverts also had blackish centers and broad, whitish edges. The overall look was of a scaly back and wings; however, the pale fringes were broad enough so that the bird really did not appear all that dark-backed even though the feather centers were nearly black in color. The primaries appeared black, and in flight, the bird showed a distinct dark secondary bar. I cannot recall more detail of the secondary pattern. In flight, and when the bird was seen preening, it was clear that the rump and base of the tail were bright white in color. Contrasting with the rump was the bold and broad, blackish tail-band; it was this contrast made the bird easily separable in flight from the numerous Herring Gulls. The legs were quite long and a relatively bright pink in color. The irides were a medium brown.

Because I waited until 23 December to type up the above description from memory, it is a little sketchy on certain points. The combination of waiting several days to write the description, the numerous review birds seen on this day (six in total), and my concentration on photographing all review species in question, made this description less than ideal. For this reason, I have added, in addition to the above description which was edited minimally to make it more readable (i.e., I made no content changes), the following notes that were based on the numerous photographs taken on 21 December 1991. Rather than duplicating the above description, these additions, made on 25 August 1993, should be used to clarify certain points and fill some of the gaps in my admittedly sketchy, initial description.

The white of the head and underparts was interrupted by some brownish smudginess about the eye, and prominent dark streaking on the sides of the neck and breast. The flanks and undertail coverts were marked with rounded, blackish spots. The lesser and median secondary coverts had blackish arrow-shaped centers and buffy-white edges, whereas the greater coverts appeared to be the same buffy-white but with black crossbars. In contrast, the large, rounded scapulars were noticeably darker than the apparently paler coverts; the brown edges of these feathers further added to their darker appearance. The mantle feathers appeared to have triangular dark centers that contrasted with pale grayish edges. The secondaries were blackish with buffy-white tips; in flight, the blackish secondary bar was quite striking as it contrasted with the paler wing coverts and inner primaries. There was no obvious covert bar, as one would expect on a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*). In flight, the primaries, with the exception of the inner two or three pairs, appeared

blackish with the basal three-quarters or so of the inner web of each feather appearing paler and browner. The underwing coverts additionally appeared to be blackish with white tips that created the effect of several rows of black bars on the underwing. The undersides of the primaries appeared to contrast as blacker than the remainder of the wing. On the closed wing, the primaries appeared solidly black. When the wings were spread, the relatively unmarked, bright white lower-back and rump were striking as they contrasted with the broad, black tail band. This tail band appeared to include about the distal one-half of each rectrix. The black was demarcated sharply from the white basal half of each feather; moreover, the basal portion of each feather was marked with several rows of blackish bars. At least the three outermost rectrices had narrow, whitish tips.

As one can see clearly from the photographs, the bird was a first-basic plumaged Great Black-backed Gull. No other North American Gull should show the combination of very large size; short but stout, black bill; whitish head and underparts; strikingly scaly (or checkered) pattern to the upperparts; and the contrast between the broad, black tail-band, and the whitish lower back, rump, and base of the tail. The prominent whitish edges to the feathers of the mantle and wing coverts (rather than solidly blackish feathers), in addition to the tail pattern, should serve to age the bird as a first-winter. Although this was my first Great Black-backed Gull in Louisiana, I have additionally seen the species along the Atlantic seaboard between the Maritime Provinces of Canada and the Central Atlantic states (most recently in New Jersey during November 1990); I have also seen a single, adult bird on the upper Texas Coast in April 1986.

Curt Rost