

## Reviews solicited by Paul Conover:

Bruce,

I hope you don't mind my soliciting your opinion on this bird; if this is an imposition, I apologize. I think you might be uniquely qualified to address my question.

This bird was seen briefly and photographed on May 2 in SW Louisiana. The finders considered it a Great Black-backed, and I helped them get images although I didn't study it as closely as I should have in the field. A later look at images made me think it might be a Slaty-backed, which it seems to match.

I'm curious as to whether Great Black-backed, GBBG X Herring, or anything else you can think of is a better match. I know you've seen plenty of the former, and hoped you might have experience with Great Black-backed hybrids. GBBG is a review list bird here, and though I've seen quite a few in Nova Scotia over the past few years, I see the fat end of the Bell curve, and not a lot of variants.

I really want to know if I'm barking up the wrong tree, because I don't want to claim what would be a good record here if there's no solid grounds for it.

Thank you, Paul Conover

Lafayette, LA

*Paul,*

*Any more pictures would help a lot. It doesn't feel like a GBBG and in fact the bill shape very pale eye at this age do feel SBGU-like. The apparent wide trailing white edge to the secondaries and legs perhaps a little bright for a sub adult GBBG add to the possibility of SBGU. If the tail band had been more solid it would have been difficult to see anything about this gull that was GBBG-like. But one photo can be misleading. There must be more shots even if part of brief sequence.*

*Bruce*

*Bruce Mactavish*

*St. John's, Newfoundland*

*Canada*

Joe (and Dan and Alvaro)

I sent this gull to Donna recently for her opinion. Although it was originally identified as a Great Black-backed, the finders got rushed looks at it, and I was too busy getting images to really study it. When I downloaded the pictures a month or so later, I was pretty sure I was looking at a Slaty-backed.

I believe you've all seen some of the pictures, and at least on first look agreed with my ex post facto ID.

I haven't subsequently found anything that's swayed my opinion, but I'm curious about the pattern of P4. It appears to have a well-marked black subterminal band there. I haven't seen anything more than a black spot or such listed for P4 in SBGU. I believe that Western Gull can sometimes show a similar variation in P4; do any of you know of that happening in Slaty-backed?

Here's what's posted: (links)

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

Thanks, Paul

*This is a 150% Slaty-backed Gull, I have no doubts about it. The issue about assessing wing pattern on a bird like this is that it is not an adult.*

*As it is in its second cycle that age has actually more extensive dark on the wing (as does third cycle) than the adult. So give this bird a year or two and the dark on the wing, and of course the tail will restrict quite a bit. I see 4 year gulls as having a brown year, then the year where the brown goes black, the year where they look essentially like adults with too much black, and then the adult stage. But maximal extend of black on tail and wings often occurs in the second cycle. It is easier seen looking at imagery than explaining it.*

*Cheers, Alvaro*

*Alvaro Jaramillo*

*[chucaco@coastside.net](mailto:chucaco@coastside.net)*

*Half Moon Bay, California*

*I agree with Alvaro. There is no doubt in my mind, either, that this is a Slaty-backed Gull. Sub-adult large gulls have more extensive darkness on the outer wing than adults, even though an adult-like pattern may sometimes begin showing in the second year. I would give little or no emphasis to the precise outer wing pattern at this age. Your bird looks like a classic Slaty-backed to me.*

*Best, Dan Gibson*

**Note: Dittmann requested outside reviews following first circulation. The record file included LBRC member validation comments however validation comments were not identified to member as to not potentially bias outside reviewers.**

## **1) Jonathan L. Dunn:**

*Hi Donna,*

*Actually you did e-mail earlier and sorry I missed you and Steve at WFO. It's my remiss that I didn't respond earlier, but behind on lots of stuff these days, although caught up on personal field notes....progress.*

*Some nice regular rarities here. My fall highlight was early, a Black Vulture just north of Lone Pine on 5 August. I managed to get a photo with a small camera as it flew over my car.*

*Hey, before getting to the gull (ugh!!), Tom and Jo Heindel have reminded me that Steve needs to send them something on the Upland Sandpiper he had at FCR in 1984. They have made real progress on their Inyo manuscript and look forward to seeing it in print.*

*As for the gull, first, why not a 3rd cycle bird? Second cycle Slaty-backs I see at Gambell (the age when I'm confident of ID), are pale, like first cycle birds, but with color at the base of the bill and with a dark slaty mantle, sometimes not solid. This bird looks much more advanced, thankfully. As for the identification, I can't see anything wrong with Slaty-backed, and if I had been there, I think I'd be submitting it as such too! But I always hold my breath with rare large gull records, and I'm seldom 100% certain. With so many hybrids about, etc. I get very worried. But features that look good include the fairly parallel sided bill (a bit of expansion near tip), a staring pale eye, and deep pink legs. And of course it is dark mantled and doesn't appear to fit dark mantled Gulf and Atlantic gulls. It certainly does not look like any Western Gull I've seen. I'm hard pressed to think of any other possibilities for this bird, although would welcome suggestions.*

*Hope all is well with you both. Jon*

## **2) Joe Morlan**

*#1*

*Donna,*

*The Louisiana committee has done a thorough and careful job in assessing this record. My endorsement of it as a Slaty-backed comes from experience in California and Alaska and having voted on a number of California claims. Looking again at the excellent photos, I still feel that the bird is consistent with birds we have accepted as Slaty-backed here in California. The bill shape, mantle color, broad white trailing edge to the secondaries, primary tip pattern, face markings,*

*eye color, and rather heavy set, pot-bellied shape all fit what I expect for Slaty-backed.*

*However, the astute comments by some of your committee members certainly serve to put on the brakes for this first state record.*

*I'm not overly concerned about the leg length or leg color. I think females are smaller and shorter legged than males. I suspect your bird is a male. Leg color in a bird of this age is subject to the health of the bird and other variables. Given the somewhat bizarre plumage and molt, I would not expect the leg color to be exactly typical, but comparing with reference photos, I don't consider the leg color of your bird to be out of range for even a normal Slaty-backed.*

*The point about the lack of pale secondary coverts is very interesting. Nevertheless, looking at images of 3rd cycle birds at:*

*<http://www.coastside.net/chucaogulls/Slatyback.htm#second06>*

*...where there is a mixture of slaty and brown secondary coverts, I do not see a trace of pale coverts there either. I think that's a variable feature and should not be a deal breaker. Compare plate 30.24 and 30.26 in Howell & Dunn which shows variation in first cycle secondary coverts, and 30.33 and 30.35 which shows similar variation in 3rd and 4th cycle birds*

*Concerning the primary tip color, the outer primaries may not appear completely black, but they are quite worn and a bird at this time of year would not necessarily be expected to have a solid black ground color to the primaries.*

*I probably should mention that the "Birders Journal" article published by King and Carey (1999) and referenced in committee comments has received some rather scathing criticism. Its conclusions are questionable at best. When I looked at the images last year, I did not have hybrid Great Black-backed X Herring Gull in mind. Unfortunately I have never knowingly seen such a hybrid and do not feel competent to fully assess that possibility or completely eliminate it from consideration. However, this bird looks so much like a Slaty-backed to me, that if it turned out to be a GBBG X HEGU, I would be rather shocked. It would be quite an insidious hybrid indeed.*

*Thanks for letting me see this interesting record.*

#2 in response to Dittmann's message on Thu, 06 Oct 2011 10:05:18 -0500, "Donna L. Dittmann" <ddittma@lsu.edu>:

Hi Joe, Thanks for that - I will include with the record's second circulation. What are the scathing comments about the King and Carey article – insight appreciated? I have always been interested in the range of mantle coloration of SBGU adults and whether any individual paler than a LBBG does reflect introgression.

As you might guess, I am the reviewer questioning the wing panel: you reference the SECOND CYCLE - HALF MOON BAY - FEB 4, 2006 as an individual lacking a pale wing panel pattern to support ID that our bird as a SBGU. How do you confirm that the Half Moon Bay individual is a pure SBGU and not a hybrid X HEGU or X GLGU, or X GWGU or X GLGU-GWGU? This must be a consideration for all California records considering nesting SBGUs have been reported breeding in AK in those species colonies? I just have zero experience with SBGU on the breeding grounds (zero in total personal observations) but assume that the same hanky-panky probably goes on when you have a very small number of SBGU colonists among numbers of available breeders, and gulls, being gulls...

*Hi Donna,*

*The "scathing" comments were mostly from Steve Howell and my recollection is that Steve disagreed with the captions on some of the photos, and with the conclusions which identified birds as hybrids. Steve thought they were either other species or not hybrids. If you want details, you are better off contacting Steve directly instead of relying on my recollection which is a mixture of first and second-hand verbal chit-chat. For me the take-home message was that the article was not reliable.*

*As to your point that some of the reference birds and photos may not be pure Slaty-backed, I cannot argue that. I agree that Slaty-backed probably does hybridize with GWGU, HEGU (various forms) and possibly other species. There may also be back-crosses of course.*

*This very issue came up back in 1994 when Gustafson & Peterjohn published their Slaty-backed article in "Birding." There was a consensus that some of the paler mantled Slaty-backed in that article were not pure birds and were likely hybrids. However some of these birds were actually type specimens and thus correctly identified by definition. The problem is that not all the types conform to what birders today consider to be "pure" Slaty-backed. This is a conundrum that I think is beyond the scope of a records committee to deal with. We are not taxonomists, and while we may have doubts and opinions about matters of taxonomy, I see our committee role as more limited. E.g. there is no member of the CBRC that believes*

*Iceland and Thayer's are different species, but we accept "pure" Iceland Gulls anyway as long as they are phenotypically good enough.*

*In the case of the Louisiana record, I would argue that it's tough hurdle to discount the reference birds from sources such as Jaramillo's web site (all records endorsed by the CBRC) or the Howell & Dunn book. I consider both sources to be very solid and to reflect current knowledge.*

*Having said that, I certainly acknowledge that the Louisiana Slaty-backed is a messy looking beast, and it may not be what you want for a first state record. I continue to endorse it because of the large suite of characters that point to Slaty-backed, but I certainly won't be insulted if it fails.*

### **3) Steve N. G. Howell:**

*#1*

*Hi Donna*

*In an airport about to board.*

*If I had to vote on this I think I'd accept as SBGU, with the caveat it's not a species I know well, and obviously hybrids are a problem with gulls. I doubt it's a KEGU hybrid, and not sure what else might look like this. It looks better than a number of gull records I know are accepted as species (I think) they're not! But that doesn't mean much.*

*Second-cycle LWHGs are about as bad as it gets, and I'm sorry I can't shed any definitive light on the record*

*Best regards, Steve*

*#2 in response to the following question on 10/7/11 4:16 AM from Dittmann":*

*Hi Steve,*

*I was corresponding with Joe Morlan and he indicated that the "Birders Journal" article published by King and Carey (1999) and referenced in committee comments received some rather scathing criticism and suggested that its conclusions are questionable at best. Can you shed any more light on that...thanks for your time, Donna*

*Hi Donna*

*There were certainly problems with the article but I think its conclusion, that mantle color/tone is not as variable as suggested by the Birding (?) article, is fairly sound, and that paler spectrum birds may well be hybrids vs pure SBGU.*

*Best, Steve*

#3 in response to my PS – how many do you think are actually SBGUs on this page: <http://www.coastside.net/chucaogulls/Slatyback.htm#second06>

Seems to me, some are a tad too divergent from the “norm”....and with SBGU in AK in large gull colonies, and gulls being gulls...

Thanks, Donna

*Given variation due simply to photos I don't think one can say anything with confidence.*

*Steve*