

LOUISIANA BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

1. English and Scientific names: **Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*)**

2. Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g., 2 in alternate plumage):

1 adult

3. Parish: **Acadia**

Specific Locality: **private land in southern part of Acadia Parish, about 10 mi from Crowley (access by permission only). Given the rarity of the bird and the potentially high demand for viewing combined with parking and liability issues, I was told firmly that the exact location should not be publicly shared.**

4. Date(s) when observed: **21, 22 December 2022. Bird was not relocated beyond those dates despite the continued presence of the gull flock.**

5. Time(s) of day when observed: **from around 8:56 to about 10:45 on 21 Dec, late morning on 22 Dec.**

6. Reporting observer and city/state address

Reporting observer: Paul E. Conover
City:
State:

7. Other observers accompanying reporter who also *identified* the bird(s): **Mac Myers on 21 Dec, Rob Dobbs, Dan Lane, Van Remsen on 22 Dec.**

8. Other observers who *independently identified* the bird(s): **Dave Patton**

9. Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light): **Overcast, which allowed excellent scope viewing.**

10. Optical equipment (type, power, condition): **Nikon Fieldscope w/ 20-60 zoom coupled with Samsung S22 phone camera.**

11. Distance to bird(s): **we estimated it at about 200 yards on 21 December. We were within 100 yards on 22 December.**

12. Duration of observation: **almost 2 hours on 21 Dec, probably about the same on 22 Dec.**

13. Habitat: **Mainly large flooded fields resting with other gulls.**

14. Behavior of bird / circumstances of observation (flying, feeding, resting; include and stress habits used in identification; relate events surrounding observation):

21 Dec: Mac and I were going through a mixed flock of gulls in a flooded field and this bird landed next to a Lesser Black-backed Gull we were observing. We immediately noticed the pink legs and that the bird was not a Great Black-backed Gull. The bird looked good for Slaty-backed Gull but we were unable to clinch the ID—it was potentially a first state record of a species of a gull, after all, and hybrids of more common birds might approach SBGU in appearance--without seeing all fieldmarks.

I basically held my phone to the eyepiece of my scope and shot video for the majority of the sighting (almost two hours; very painful) and was unable to determine finer points, e.g. I wasn't able to note whether the wings definitely showed a string of pearls the few times when the bird lifted its wings. Bird was perched in flooded fields in a mixed gull flock; it seemed very passive, not interacting with other gulls much. The bird preened most of the time, yet as noted above rarely raised or stretched its wings. Eventually the bird raised its wings in what I felt would be a definitive pose for noting the primary pattern and Mac and I both noted what appeared to be the "string of pearls" primary pattern. Soon after this the flock bolted to the rear of the property and out of useful viewing range and we continued our drive. As Mac drove, I searched my footage for frames showing different fieldmarks, especially the wing pattern, and only after I had shared those images with Mac did we feel that it was safe to elevate our initial field ID to a solid ID as Slaty-backed Gull. We called Dave Patton to see if he could relocate the bird and he went out and saw the bird from a greater distance than we had, and got marginal photos.

On 22 Dec, Rob Dobbs and I met Van Remsen and Dan Lane and we rode together in one car as access and pullover space was limited. The bird was not at the original spot, but after a long search Dan noted the bird in flight and it ended up in a different set of fields. Remsen and Dobbs (with landowner permission) were able to approach on levees to within maybe 100 yards of the bird. The bird's behavior was similar to 21 Dec, with preening, resting, but not a lot of other activity or interactions with other birds.

15. Description (include only what was actually seen, *not what "should" have been seen*; include if possible: total length/relative size compared to other familiar species; body bulk, shape, proportions; bill, eye, leg, and plumage characteristics. Stress features that separate it from similar species, *or for species that are known to hybridize frequently, stress features that help eliminate possible hybrids*):

Roughly Herring Gull-sized white headed gull, stocky and somewhat short-legged, with dark mantle, pink legs, and heavily streaked hind neck onto upper mantle.



Mantle and wings dark gray, differed in tone from adjacent Lesser Black-backed Gull (less ashy gray, more bluish or blackish gray? Grays are pretty subjective). At certain angles a slight contrast in glossiness between fresher mantle and duller wing coverts visible, but the difference was not obvious. Rear edge of scapulars with broad white terminal edge. Tertials with thick white terminal edge extending outward as wide trailing edge of secondaries and inner primaries; on outer primaries the white trailing edge split into two white lines, one thin line forming the white primary tips, the other forming a broader subterminal band (“string of pearls”) composed of a series of white crescents on pp6-8 and larger white mirrors on pp9-10. Space between these two white lines filled in by black, contrastingly darker than the gray of the primary bases. Proximal to crescents forming string of pearls, outer web of primaries black, inner webs slaty gray. In essence, with the doubled white lines on the primaries the wings gave me an impression of looking like two wingtips on each wing.



Head white with fine brown streaking on crown, with a smaller more concentrated area of forming a small darker area on crown between eyes, with sparser fine streaking on rear of head. Areas of dense dark streaking around eye forming dark eye patches and short eyelines. Nape with dense brown streaking running onto mantle, expanding into denser lines of brown markings on mantle and on sides of neck. Some sparse brown markings onto throat and breast. Rest of underparts, tail, and rump white. Overall, the markings on the head and neck contributed to the effect of a slightly dingy hood weakly contrasting with the bright white of underparts.

Underwings with bright white wing linings contrasting with dark gray primaries and blacker primary tips contrasting with dark gray primary bases, and with same string of pearls pattern as on upperwing.



Folded wings extended just beyond tail. On folded wings the white tips of the primaries showed as a row of evenly spaced distinct and conspicuous white spots. These white spots, the broad white edge to the tertials and scapulars, and the rear edge of the upperparts formed a large area of white dorsally, much more than on LBBGs nearby for comparison. The white spots of the scapulars were especially conspicuous, isolated against the dark mantle like a pair of headlights or eyes.



Eye pale white or yellow contrasting strongly with dark eye patch. Orbital ring purplish or dark pink evident in the photos by Remsen). Bill pale straw yellow, perhaps glossier and brighter yellow toward

bill tip, with discrete reddish-orange oval on gonys. Bill fairly small, with indistinct gonydeal angle, appearing to be of roughly uniform thickness throughout its length. Legs and feet a very rich pink or purplish pink.



17. Similar species (include how they were eliminated by your observation): **Small bill and shorter, richer pink legs (among others) eliminate GBBG. Lesser Black-backed by size (this bird was notably stockier than nearby LBBG in flocks. Hybrid GBBG x anything not plausible due to lack of intermediate features indicating GBBG parentage.**

Combination of mantle color, leg and feet color, shape and color of bill, eye and orbital ring, and diagnostic string of pearls pattern put this bird definitively in SBGU column.

18. Photographs or tape recordings obtained? (by whom? attached?): **Yes; I took a lot of video. Stills from my video are grouped together below; the pdf allows zooming. Mac was also shooting pictures, and Rob Dobbs, Dave Patton, Dan Lane, and Van Remsen got photos/video later.**

19. Previous experience with this species: **No direct experience, but a lot of book/internet study.**

20. Identification aids: (list books, illustrations, other birders, etc. used in identification):

a. at time of observation: **We knew to look for bill shape and color, dark around eye, pale eye, brown markings on nape and neck, deep pink legs, wide white margin on tertials and trailing edge of wing, string of pearls, as well as overall shape and structure of species.**

b. after observation: **I consulted Geo guide and verified that the marks we were looking for were indeed relevant and to see if we had missed/misinterpreted any; we had accurately remembered and assessed all marks during the sighting.**

21. This description is written from: **Observations shared aloud during sighting, some taped, as well as detailed study of my images and the images of other observers.**

22. Are you positive of your identification? **Yes. This is a classic adult SBGU in every fieldmark.**

23. Date: **21, 22 December 2022 with edits and proofreading subsequently.**





