

**A NEW BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA:
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL**

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

From 3 February through 2 April, 1984, a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) was observed repeatedly by me and several other persons at Lake Hefner, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma.

On 3 February I noticed a dark-winged, dark-backed, but otherwise largely white gull — different from any I had previously seen in Oklahoma — near the lakeshore not far from the southwest end of the dam, just north of my home. In this general area, and southward to the Lake Hefner Golf Course, the gull spent most of its time.



LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

Note the slate gray mantle that contrasts sharply with the black wingtips and with the Starling in background. All photos taken 7 February 1984 at Lake Hefner, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford.

Next day, I received a telephone call from Philip Pearce, a native of England presently living in Edmond, Oklahoma. His rather casual report of birds he had observed that day near my home at Lake Hefner included a Lesser Black-backed Gull in second winter plumage. Pearce is an enthusiastic birder with considerable experience in Great Britain, so I was delighted to have his identification of this European species.

Over the next several weeks the gull was carefully observed repeatedly by perhaps a dozen experienced bird students, and photographed many times. Three important points of identification seem indisputable. First, the mantle color was neither the characteristic light gray of most gulls, nor almost black as in some others, including one race of the Lesser Black-backed Gull. It was instead a slate gray color intermediate between the two (see cover photograph). Second, the bird was intermediate in size between a Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) and a Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) as may be seen in Figure 2. This size difference was checked often against many different individuals of the other two species. And third, much of the underwing was also slate gray in color (Fig. 3). On a worldwide basis, the only bird I found in my numerous identification guides with all three characteristics is the Lesser Black-backed Gull, of which there are three subspecies: *fuscus*, *intermedius*, and *graellsii*. This bird obviously was not *L. f. fuscus*, an almost black-backed bird. On the basis of distributional records discussed later the bird most likely was *L. f. graellsii*. A critical examination of the photos by qualified taxonomists may be sufficient to exclude *intermedius* as a possibility. The following details from my field notes substantiate Pearce's contention that the gull was in its second winter plumage, and many of them can be verified by the photographs. The upper mandible had two nearly black bands between three lighter ones, best seen in the cover photograph. Only the outer one-half of the lower mandible was dark. The eye color appeared brown or tan, but it was definitely not yellow. Crown, face and nape were finely streaked with gray. The mantle was uniformly dark slaty gray except for white tips on the scapulars. Also very dark were the wings, particularly the outer primaries, their greater coverts, and the other greater coverts, all of which were blackish. The lesser wing coverts were lighter gray or even brownish gray. Most of the coverts had light narrow margins producing a subtle "scaly" or "mottled" pattern. Both from above and below the extended wings showed white trailing edges in flight, resulting from the white tips of the secondary and innermost primary feathers. At rest the wingtips extended well beyond the end of the tail. The narrow gray bars on the tail feathers were spaced increasingly closer distally. At a distance, this produced a very dark subterminal tail band about two inches wide. The two central tail feathers lacked the dark band and appeared whiter, perhaps the result of a plumage change. The legs were very pale yellowish, almost an ashy gray, certainly not pink. Nothing that anyone observed about the bird suggested a hybrid or otherwise aberrant gull.

The known breeding range of *Larus fuscus graellsii* extends from coastal western Europe westward to southern Iceland, where the bird appears to have established itself in the early 1900's. In his book "Iceland Summer", George



Fig. 2. Lesser Black-backed Gull, with wingtips extending beyond tail, is larger than the Ring-billed Gull standing in left foreground but smaller than the pink-legged Herring Gull behind it. Also notice differences in sizes of bills.

Fig. 3. Lesser Black-backed Gull, wings extended, showing black and slaty gray of both wing surfaces. Subadult Herring Gull on left.

M. Sutton gives some interesting details of this range expansion to Iceland. He states that according to published statements of Dr. Finnur Gudmundsson, then Director of the National Museum of Natural History in Reykjavik, the Lesser Black-backed Gull was first collected there in 1913 and had begun to

breed by 1928, but that the species had continued to be "strictly migratory" (Sutton, G.M., 1961, Iceland summer, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 219). Peter Harrison states that there is "a westwards drift of a few individuals from southwards-migrating Icelandic population probably accounts for the regular, but small wintering population which now passes through Newfoundland, in America, wintering S to Florida" (Harrison, P., 1983, Seabirds, Croom-Helm Ltd., London, p.340). The species "has been seen in North America with increasing regularity, especially among flocks of migrating and wintering gulls . . . most North American records from Atlantic coastal plain but reports increasing in Midwest and Gulf States. Recorded in Northwest Territories, Manitoba, California, and Colorado." (Wilds, C., in Farrand, J., Jr., [ed.], 1983, The Audubon Society master guide to birding, Vol. 2, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., pp. 64,66). Although they do not breed on the American side of the Atlantic, small numbers have been seen there even during the summer in recent years (Stokes, T., 1968, Birds of the Atlantic Ocean, Macmillan Co., N.Y., p. 106). Virtually all North American records of the Lesser Black-back are of the *graellsii* race (Wilds, *loc. cit.*).

The gull was remarkably easy to observe. Quite active and moving about considerably, it often chased and out-maneuvered other gulls for food. Occasionally it returned to rest along the shoreline mudflats with the numerous Ring-billed and Herring gulls where direct comparison with them was possible. The last day we saw the gull was 2 April. I presume that it left with the general exodus of our wintering gulls.

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THE CAROLINA CHICKADEE IN THE PALO DURO CANYON OF TEXAS

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

In the Texas Panhandle, the Carolina Chickadee (*Parus carolinensis*) is primarily a bird of the easternmost tier of counties. But it occasionally and sparingly wanders farther west along the thickly wooded streamsidings of the Canadian River and its tributaries as far as the Boys Ranch area in northeastern Oldham County. Rarely has it been seen outside these riparian habitats. During the course of the last 30 years or so, it has been reported only nine times in Amarillo (Potter and Randall counties), and then only in the older and more wooded sections of the city. The dates of these sightings range from 7 January to 4 December, with intervening dates in April, June, July, August, September, October, and November. All sightings have been of single birds and seldom did any remain in a given area more than a day. Only once during this period was a chickadee seen in the Palo Duro Canyon system in Randall County (on 27 December 1958, by Peggy Acord), and then it was listed simply as a "chickadee".

On 31 October 1982 I observed two chickadees, which after careful observation I decided were Carolina Chickadees. This was in the Christian Church Camp located in the upper reaches of South Ceta Canyon of the Palo Duro, in southeastern Randall County. Rather narrow and secluded, this canyon is

well-watered by South Ceta Creek and is dominated by many majestic cottonwood trees (*Populus deltoides*) as well as hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*), soapberry (*Sapindus drummondii*), and willow (*Salix* sp.) trees and, on the sloping higher elevations, junipers (*Juniperus* sp.) and mesquites (*Prosopis juliflora*) are common. The brushy vegetation along the banks of much of the creek is covered with grape (*Vitis longii*) and creepers (*Parthenocissus* sp.). With Barry Zimmer, I found two chickadees at this location on 15 January 1983 and on 11 September 1983, Rena and George Ross, Ester and George Waddill and I again saw two birds there.

On 4 and 7 May 1983, a Carolina Chickadee was found at the Palo Duro Club, located in the upper reaches of the main canyon of the Palo Duro in central Randall County, by Peggy Acord, Rena Ross, and Ester Waddill. This canyon is traversed by the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, and its habitat is similar to that of South Ceta Canyon. These locations, as well as other like areas of the Palo Duro Canyon, should be watched closely for nesting chickadees.

Area observers speculate from time to time as to whether all the chickadees seen in the Texas Panhandle are, in fact, *P. carolinensis*. These speculations arise because of the nearness of those chickadees in the western Panhandle to areas where the Black-capped Chickadee (*P. atricapillus*) has been reported. In New Mexico the Black-capped Chickadee is a "resident in the northern highlands and vicinity . . ." that during migration and winter casually to occasionally moves into adjacent areas as far east as the Clayton area of Union County in the northeastern corner of the state (Hubbard, J.P., 1978, Revised check-list of the birds of New Mexico, New Mexico Orn. Soc. Publ. No. 6, pp. 54-55). Specimens have also been collected in southwestern Colorado (Bailey, A.M., and R.J. Niedrach, 1965, Birds of Colorado, Vol. 2, Denver Mus. Nat. Hist., pp. 573-574). P.A. Johnsgard (1979, Birds of the Great Plains, Univ. Nebraska Press, Lincoln, p. 293) indicates that the breeding range in Kansas extends southward to the southernmost tier of counties, including the Arkansas River Valley. G.M. Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 384-385) reported the status of *P. atricapillus* in Oklahoma as "uncertain" and stated that no unequivocal specimen has ever been collected in the state.

Chickadee specimens thus far collected in the Texas Panhandle have proved to be *P. carolinensis*; however, all of these were taken in the eastern counties. The observations of chickadees cited above for the western Panhandle are not far distant from where *P. atricapillus* has been reported in New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. Both of the Oldham County sightings were in fall: I observed two on 19 November 1967 and Ester Waddill and others saw "several" on 10 November 1968. However, it has never been reported there in summer. Could fall and winter chickadees in the far western Panhandle be drifters from the northwest and north coming down the Canadian River and the Punta de Agua and Rita Blanca Creek drainages? The speculation is worthy of attention and specimens should be collected to clarify the question.

GENERAL NOTES

A Black-shouldered Kite in Marshall County, Oklahoma. — On 29 April 1984 at 1300 (CDT), we saw a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus* — formerly the White-tailed Kite) in southern Marshall County, south-central Oklahoma. We observed the bird for about 30 minutes from distances of 25-150 m (80-500 ft). The sighting was in a mixed grassland-deciduous forest area of the University of Oklahoma Biological Station. Our observations were made during a dust storm commanding west winds of 25-40 kph (16-25 mph). Just one hour before our observation, strong south winds and severe thunderstorms had swept through the area. The white bird with prominent black wing patches was initially perched on a highline wire along U.S. Highway 377 (Oklahoma Highway 99) .5 km (.3 mi) north of the Red River Arm of Lake Texoma. When we approached to within 25 m (80 ft) the kite retreated to a dead tree nearby from which it occasionally soared away, only to return within a few minutes. We saw no other kites in the vicinity and were unable to find this kite there the following day.

Five other records of this species in Oklahoma are known, one nest in 1860 and four sightings since 1982, including two recent nestings. A review of these was presented by Andrew, J.M., *et al.*, 1983, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 16:30-31; see also Kennington, J., 1984, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 17:22. — E. M. Choinski and Steve T. Threlkeld, *University of Oklahoma Biological Station, Star Rt. B, Kingston, Oklahoma 73439, 20 June, 1984.*

First Black-shouldered Kite Record for northeastern Oklahoma — At 11:30 on 19 May 1984, a quiet day with clear skies and a temperature of 75°F, Dee Ann and Barbara Wilson and I were watching birds near the Oxley Nature Center located in Mohawk Park, northeast Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma. The 2830-acre park encompasses two small lakes and numerous streams, is forested with open stands of mixed hardwoods and bottomland trees, and lies along the south of Bird Creek. Approximately 500 feet away, we noticed a gull-like bird that continually hovered above a clearing. After viewing it through a 20X telescope, however, we quickly agreed that this bird was not a gull at all, but a kite, because of its long, pointed wings and longish tail. Appearing slightly larger and much whiter than a Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), it hovered considerably more than that species. Careful inspection revealed a dark patch around each eye that contrasted sharply with the light gray head color. The general grayness of the upperparts was interrupted only by a distinct patch of black at the bend of the wings and the wide white edges of the tail. As the field characters fell into place, I was astonished that before us was a species I had encountered in California just three months earlier — a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*).

Until 1982, this kite had not been recorded in Oklahoma since 1860 (Nice, M.M., 1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):70). There are four recent state sightings (including two nestings). For a summary of these, see Andrew, J. M., *et al.*, 1983, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 16:30-31, and Choinski, E. M., and S. Threlkeld, 1984, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 17:22. — John Kennington, *9143 Marshall Place, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74115, 5 July, 1984.*

Late spring record for Bonaparte's Gull in Oklahoma. — The cold, wet spring of 1984 brought several late sightings of Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) to northeastern Oklahoma. The latest was on 28 May 1984 (a cool, windy day) when I noticed a small black-headed gull flying buoyantly in the channel below Copan Lake Dam, in northern Washington County. Since the date was a month late for our area, I carefully rechecked all field marks and was satisfied that the gull was indeed an adult Bonaparte's and, moreover, that it was in nuptial plumage. One gate of the dam was open, allowing water to rush voluminously into the channel, carrying great numbers of fish with it, while many others could be seen jumping in the spillway. All that I saw were shad (*Dorosoma* sp.), and they were being preyed on by the Bonaparte's Gull, two Franklin's Gulls (*L. pipixcan*), one Ringed-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), and a Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) along the shore.

Dotty Goard later told me that she, too, had seen possibly the same bird near the Copan Dam on the previous day, 27 May, in company with two Franklin's Gulls and two Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*), the latter species not having been recorded before in the county. Almost two months earlier (on 1 April), Don Verser had identified a Bonaparte's Gull in the same vicinity, this one in winter feather.

On 23 April 1984 Mary Vogh saw approximately 200 Bonaparte's Gulls, most or all in breeding plumage, below the dam of Oologah Reservoir in Rogers County, 35 miles southeast of Copan Lake. All the gates were open that day, and fish were jumping in the stilling basin. Only a solitary Bonaparte's Gull, still in winter feather, was found there by Randy Porter on 17 May 1984.

G.M. Sutton (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p.18) gave 8 May as the latest date in spring that Bonaparte's Gull had been seen in Oklahoma; a bird in breeding plumage seen in Marshall County on 17 May he considered exceptionally late. Sutton commented further that the species is "probably commoner now than formerly because of extensive impoundment of water within recent years" (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 221). — Melinda Droege, *Route 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006, 9 July, 1984.*

Black-capped Vireo in marshy habitat in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. — At 0825 on 16 June 1984, while banding birds near the coffer dam at the north end of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, I was surprised to net a female Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*), for the habitat here was atypical for that species. After banding it (no. 2000-26803), I examined this uncommon bird closely. Its red eye was surrounded by a full white eye ring continuous with the white lores except for a broken section above and slightly in front of the eye. Its underparts were largely buffy and the head grayish, blending into olive-gray on back and wings. Two yellowish wing bars were discernible on each wing. Measurements were: total length 105 mm, wing chord 53 mm, tail 38 mm, and weight 10 grams. A photo is on file in the Cameron University Museum of Zoology, Lawton, Oklahoma.

The nets had been set in a cattail marsh, much of it inundated with shallow water. Furthermore, the place was heavily overgrown with small willows (*Salix nigra*), red mulberries (*Morus rubra*), and roughleaf dogwoods (*Cornus drummondii*) in which tangles of wild grape (*Vitis sp.*) were not uncommon. *Vireo atricapillus* is usually found in drier, more upland habitats where there is some relief in the topography. Jean W. Graber (Distribution, habitat requirements, and life history of the Black-capped Vireo, Ecol. Monogr. 31:334, 1961) characterized the species' favored habitat as being extensive stands (one square mile or more) of mixed, scrubby blackjack oak, post oak, and juniper, in clumps of irregular height and distribution in areas of rough topography, often where eroded slopes are present. She also noted that the presence of water was not essential.

This species is a summer resident in Oklahoma and there is one other record for Oklahoma County: on 12 April 1965, V.J. Vacin saw a non-singing male at Silver Lake in northwest Oklahoma City (Baumgartner, F.M., 1965, Aud. Field Notes 19:488). — Hubert H. Harris, 4907 North Willow, Bethany, Oklahoma 73008 2 July 1984.

Late fall record for Northern Waterthrush. — At 1615 on the late date of 8 November 1979, at a settling-pond near the north end of Lake Overholser (a place which lies along the Oklahoma-Canadian County line in central Oklahoma), I "squeaked up" a Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) from an area of small saplings growing near the bank not far from a dense stand of cattails. Its constantly bobbing tail first caught my attention. The yellowish or buffy-white breast, overlain with heavy dark streaks, was in sharp contrast to the bird's uniformly dull brown back. Also noticeable was the light stripe over the eye, unquestionably yellowish rather than white. By comparison, the color of the eyestripe, breast, and unstreaked throat of the very similar Louisiana Waterthrush (*S. motacilla*) is clear white.

Wesley S. Isaacs and I returned the following day (9 November) and caught the waterthrush in a mist net. We banded and then measured it (band #890-79022; wing 71 mm, tail 48 mm, exposed culmen 12 mm, tarsus 24 mm). The age and sex were not determined. Several color photographs we took plainly show that the streaking of the breast extended high onto the buffy throat. The bird was not subsequently seen. We also caught a Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) and a Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) in the same place that day.

Heretofore, the latest fall record for *Seiurus noveboracensis* in Oklahoma was 19 September. On that date in 1955, Elizabeth Hayes and Anne Reynolds saw a single bird in Tulsa, Tulsa County, northeastern Oklahoma (Baumgartner, F.M., 1956, Aud. Field Notes 10:36). — John S. Shackford, Rt. 1, Box 125, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73111, 13 July, 1984.