

















340-03-1999

**Common Black-headed Gull**  
(*Larus ridibundus*)  
McKees Rocks--Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, PA  
November 21, 1999

by Mike Fialkovich

On November 3, 1999, local birder Scott Kinzey called me at work and reported a Black-headed Gull on the Ohio River at a small boat dock in the town of McKees Rocks (approximately two miles downriver from downtown Pittsburgh). Scott checked for the bird daily on his way to work, and could not find it. I also checked various locations on the rivers in Pittsburgh without luck. On November 20, the bird was relocated at the same place by Scott, and was also seen by Walt and Dana Shaffer. On November 21, I had the opportunity to visit the site again, and the bird appeared.

The gull flew in and landed on the water where it sat on the surface for several minutes allowing me to observe it through my Leica spotting scope at various powers. I could see the dark red bill with a black tip, black in the primaries, gray back, and white head with a black ear spot.

After sitting on the water, the bird took flight and flew past me several times. While in flight I noted the white leading edge of the upperside of the wing, the black tips to the primaries, and the black underside of the primaries.

**Common Black-headed Gull Description**

Small to medium sized gull.

- **Head:** white with a round black ear spot; a light black band over the crown joining the ear spots, and another light black band over the crown from eye to eye. Dark smudge in front of the eyes.
- **Underparts:** breast, sides, belly and vent white.
- **Bare Parts:** I only observed the bird on the water and in flight, so I could not see the legs and feet. The bill was dark red with black at the tip.
- **Wings:** pearly gray mantle and wings. The upper wing had a white leading edge, similar to the wing pattern on a Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*). Primaries tipped black. The underside of the wings (primaries) were black. The inner portion of the underwing (coverts and secondaries) was grayish. The black underside of the primaries was obvious while the bird was in flight.
- **Tail:** white.

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- **Size:** the bird was on the water and in flight with Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). The Common Black-headed Gull was slightly smaller than the Ring-billed Gulls.
- **Age:** The gray upper surface of the wings, the clear white leading edge of the wings, the white tail, black ear spot, and red bill with a black tip indicates an adult bird in basic plumage. A basic one bird would have an orange bill with a black tip, along with dark markings on the upper surface of the wings, and a tail with a black subterminal band.

#### **Comparison with other gulls**

Adult Bonaparte's Gulls and Black-headed Gulls have similar upper wing patterns, but the underwings of a Bonaparte's lack the black primaries which were obvious on this bird. In addition, Bonapartes' have entirely black bills.

When comparing size between the Black-headed and the Ring-billed Gulls, the black-headed was slightly smaller than the ring-billed; Bonaparte's would be noticeably smaller than the ring-billed.

**Mike Fialkovich**  
**805 Beulah Road**  
**Pittsburgh, PA 15235**  
**mpfial@sgi.net**

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To: Nick Pulcinella and PORC

From: Scott Kinzey, 614 South Avenue, Verona, PA, 15147, 412-828-2993

Enclosed is documentation for a bird which I saw and believe was a Black Headed Gull. I am submitting this for review by PORC. Our county compiler, Mike Fialkovich, is aware of the sighting.

Included are:

- \* Siting Details
- \* my notes written soon after the sighting
- \* my notes written on 11/20/99
- \* 4 by 6 prints and an 8 by 10 print
- \* a copy of Ed Kwater's response after having seen the Nov 3 prints
- \* Bird Refound 11/20-21

#### SIGHTING DETAILS

Date and Time: November 3, 1999 - roughly 1410 to 1430

Location: docks just downstream from the mouth of Chartiers Creek on the Ohio River near Pittsburgh, PA, Allegheny County

Weather: snowing and windy, a small snow storm, temp approaching freezing

#### MY NOTES WRITTEN SOON AFTER THE SIGHTING

This was written one or two days after the sighting. I looked for the bird on subsequent days and didn't find it.

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I parked my car by the side of the road to observe gulls that have been here for at least a few weeks, all Ring Billed. I was on my way to work and didn't have much time for birding. I stepped out of the car and looked out at the gathering of gulls with my naked eye (glasses) and immediately noticed one gull with bright white on the wings. I automatically assumed it was a Bonaparte's Gull, which is a yearly, but uncommon bird in Allegheny County. I quickly grabbed my binoculars to look at the supposed Bonaparte's and too see if there was more than one. In the meantime, the bird had landed on the docks. The bird struck me as different very quickly, the brightness of the red/orange legs, the size maybe, this was more of a feeling I admit.

I started to seriously consider that this was a Black Headed Gull. I have seen only one Black Headed Gull, the one at Moraine SP seen by many in Dec 98. I was somewhat prepared because of having seen the specie once before, at close range.

I had a camera with 70-300mm lens with me and my spotting scope. I went for the scope first and while getting the scope, the bird had flown and landed on the same docks, but even closer to me (maybe 40 yards?). It was snowing, windy, and cloudy, so it wasn't bright. I put the scope on it and looked at leg color, bill color, and feathers on the neck. I had remembered that the BH Gull at Moraine had a cleaner, whiter looking neck than the Bonaparte's around it. This bird had a clean white neck. I could better see the bright red/orange legs also, and the bill was very



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roughly 70% red/orange, the outermost 30% dark. At this point I was almost certain that I had a BH Gull, although this was somewhat erroneous because I wasn't aware until afterwards that Bonaparte's can also have bright reddish legs (National Geo guide drawing).

I went for the camera next and took about 10 pictures of the bird. They have been developed and the bird appears very small in all but the one that was taken by holding the camera up to the scope, this picture is dark and the bird was preening with it's bill hidden unfortunately. I had to leave for work after taking the pics.

I will add that the bird was clearly smaller than the surrounding Ring Billeds. The relative size shows in the photographs. Thinking back on the sighting, the bird just didn't appear small enough to be a Bonaparte's.

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#### MY NOTES 11/20/99

I was going to comment on the photographs, but I'll leave that to the experts. The prints aren't too good anyways. I just want to briefly summarize why I believe it was a Black Headed Gull.

1. in flight - bright white on leading edge of wing which brought my attention to it
2. when perched on the docks - bright color of bill and legs...
3. larger size than a Bonaparte's...
4. cleaner looking neck than a Bonaparte's (white rather than dusky) - Ed Kwater called this the "nape", I am not well seasoned in bird topography...
5. when looking at some of the prints with an 8X loupe - a two toned bill is ever so slightly discernible...
6. ear spot and hood remnants

#### ED KWATER'S COMMENTS ON THE PRINTS (copied from an 11/18 e-mail)

Hi Scott,

Congratulations ! The bird in your photos (which I received today) is an adult Black-headed Gull in basic plumage. I can see the relatively long, red bill (compared to Bonaparte's), relatively long red legs (Bonaparte's has shorter more pink legs), and white nape (it is gray in Bonaparte's). It also looks relatively larger than a Bony's would in relation to the nearby Ring-billeds. I'll mail the photos back to you tomorrow. Well done once again. Must have been quite a thrill.

Regards.

Ed Kwater  
Brandon, FL  
Himantopus@aol.com

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### BIRD REFOUND

After having written ~~the~~ all of the above I saw a Black Headed Gull at this same location again on November 20. I had been there several times in between and didn't see it. Probably still the same bird. This time I better knew what to look for, had excellent views of the reddish bill and dark underwing in flight. Identification on this end is no longer in question. Walt Shafer, Dana Shafer, Mike Fialkovich and Joyce Hoffman were then able to see the bird which continues through the 21st of November. Mike will probably send his documentation, so I will end mine here. Photos of mine from Nov 21 are included.

Scott Kinzey  
614 South Avenue, Verona, PA, 15147  
412-828-2993



# Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

## Voting Ballot - Round One

Species: Black-headed Gull ( *Larus ridibundas* )

Date of Sighting: 3 November 1999 to 3 November 1999

Location: ALLEGHENY

County: OHIO RIVER NEAR PITTSBURGH

Observer(s): Scott Kinzey, Walt Shaffer, Mike Fialkovich

Date of Submission: 1999

Submitted by: Scott Kinzey, Walt Shaffer, Mike Fialkovich

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

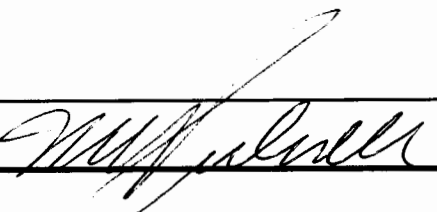
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead	X							
D. Couchman	X							
P. Hess	X							
R. Ickes	X							
B. Reid	X							
P. Rodewald	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0/0

Signature (Secretary):



Date:

11/2/00