







Documentation for the PORC

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

Name: Cameron Rutt

Address: PO Box 223, Blooming Glen, PA 18911

Email: cr1193@messiah.edu

Phone Number: 215-767-0298

Other Observers: No other observers when I initially located the bird. However, between March 30-31, 2007, Mike Weible, Deuane Hoffman, Ed Chubb, Adam Stuckert and Shawn Hayes all got to see the bird.

Location: On the Susquehanna River between Fort Hunter (on the east side of the river) and Marysville (on the west side of the river), Dauphin County. I saw the bird on both days about as far upriver as the Marysville Boat Launch and downriver to just above the rapids north of the Rocksville Bridge.

Date and Length of time observed: March 30-31, 2007. I first saw the bird at approximately 11:25 AM on March 30<sup>th</sup> as it was flying upriver with a tight flock of ~125 Bonaparte's Gulls. The entire flock, with the Black-headed Gull, landed not too far upriver from my Marysville viewing location and began drifting back downstream. After a bit, the Black-headed Gull separated from the large flock of Bonaparte's and continued this routine, as it rested with scattered Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls. I watched the bird for about a total of 45 minutes before I had to leave and return to class around 12:10 PM.

I was back at Fort Hunter with Adam Stuckert by approximately 7:20 AM on March 31<sup>st</sup>. At this point, Deuane Hoffman had already located the bird. The bird was still present when we all decided to leave at 9:15 AM and was again seen floating downriver and flying upriver throughout the two hours, and we were essentially able to watch it whenever we felt so inclined.

Optics: The bird was seen through both my Swarovski 8.5 by 42 EL binoculars and my Swarovski ST-80 spotting scope with a 20x-60x zoom eyepiece. Since the bird seemed to favor the east side of the river, we were considerably closer to the bird on the 31<sup>st</sup> than when I had initially found the bird on the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the first day, the bird was primarily on the far half of the river while it was certainly on the close half of the river on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

Habitat and Behavior: The bird cycled up and downriver throughout both days of observation. However, during the 2-3 hours that I watched the bird, it never left a short stretch of the Susquehanna River. It would fly upriver, land, and then float past the observation area, only to pick up and repeat this sequence. I saw this pattern repeated ~10 times between the two days. While I had initially seen the bird associating very closely with a large flock of Bonaparte's Gulls, the bird did not seem restricted to this group in subsequent cycles. For most of the 2 hours that we observed the bird on the 31<sup>st</sup>, it was present with a mix of Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls, although a couple of times it did associate with more species-specific flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls. In flight, it didn't seem restricted to flying with Bonaparte's Gulls either, taking off singly or leaving in small, loose groups of other circulating gulls.

While the bird floated downstream, it would alternate between sleeping, feeding (picking at the surface of the water), as well as simply loafing on the water's surface. Most often, as with the rest of the river birds, it would face upstream while floating backwards. On two occasions, I watched the bird alight on floating wooden debris, the second time joining two Ring-billed Gulls that had the same idea.

This stretch of river is a favorite region for waterfowl and gulls and is situated in a flat, smoothly flowing section between a couple of rapid, rocky regions.

Weather: On the 30<sup>th</sup>, it was partly sunny with temperatures in the mid-50s and light winds coming from the SW. The following morning, it was overcast, becoming sunny towards midday, with chilly early morning temperatures (30s) and a light breeze.

Description: The first characteristics noted were those in flight. As the flock of Bonaparte's got up, I was initially drawn to the fact that one particular individual seemed especially large and had an obvious hood. The hooded effect made this bird fairly easy to locate among the Bonaparte's Gulls. As Black-headed Gulls molt into their hood earlier (starting late Jan – early Feb), it stood out compared to the handful, at most, of Bonaparte's Gulls that had any significant hood (as they start their hood molting in Mar). The overwhelming majority of Black-headed Gulls therefore have their hood by the end of Mar, while only advanced Bonaparte's Gulls have a hood by mid-Mar (Olsen/Larsson).

It was only once I looked more carefully at this bird in flight that I was able to discern the black underside of the outer primaries. This was very evident in flight, even from a good distance. On the underside of the wing, the bird exhibited one bright white primary (P10). The next "outer" primaries (what I would guess to be P4-P9) were marked with a distinctive black, especially going towards P9. The black, however, was not a solid sheet of black. When the bird landed, it would hold its wings arched over its body, allowing a good analysis of its underwing pattern. It became evident that there was some white "streaking" (probably one of the vanes or a feather edge) present in the strikingly black underside of the outer primaries.

Compared to the Bonaparte's Gulls, this adult summer Black-headed Gull had a more relaxed, less snappy, flight. The head looked like it had been dipped in ink, with a clear-cut end to the hood beyond the eye. I was surprised that the bird's size was really quite obvious in flight, distinctly standing out when it was flying among nearby Bonaparte's Gulls. The upperwing pattern was the same as that of an adult Bonaparte's Gulls: gray back and wings with a white wedge of outermost primaries and a black trailing edge to the primaries. In flight, the bird's white tail and white neck were also visible. It was only in flight that I was really able to detect the bird's dark red bill and see any signs that the hood was not jet black. At times I got glimpses of what appeared to be more of a dark, velvety brown coloration.

On the water, the bird appeared bigger in every regard to the petite Bonaparte's Gulls: longer winged, more robust body, longer, and thicker bill, etc. In size, the bird fell between the Bonaparte's Gulls and the Ring-billed Gulls, appearing to size up with the Ring-billed Gulls more favorably. The black primaries stood out as being much more conspicuous, and perhaps more solid, than the surrounding Bonaparte's Gulls. The underside of P10 was white with a small black tip. The gray mantle coloration was a bit paler than the Bonaparte's Gulls, but I couldn't really separate the shading compared to that of the Ring-billed Gulls. The hood was complete, starting below the bill and going sharply vertical just behind the eye. This gave it the appearance of having a bit of a more restricted hood than that of the Bonaparte's Gulls. Very thin, white eye-arcs, or perhaps a partial eye-ring, seemed to meet behind the eye; however, the white did not meet in front of the eye. When the Black-headed Gull landed on a floating log, the bird's dark red legs were also visible. Lastly, since a number of the Bonaparte's Gulls were still in winter plumage, the Black-headed Gull's clean white neck also stood out compared to the dusky gray necks of the Bonaparte's.

#### Similar Species:

Bonaparte's Gull – This individual was easily distinguished from this species by its noticeably larger size, black underside to its outer primaries (excluding the outermost primary), lighter gray mantle, and by its longer, thicker, and red bill.

Little Gull – This species' lack of a white wedge to the upperside of its outer primaries, lack of black tips to the primaries, entirely coal-black underwing, and smaller size, among other characteristics, preclude this species from consideration.

Note: Attached are four photographs that were digiscoped with my Sony Cyber-shot camera.



Aside from cropping, the pictures have not been touched up in any way. The first picture (taken on March 30<sup>th</sup>) gives a nice size comparison between the Black-headed Gull on the right, a Bonaparte's Gull on the left, and 2 Ring-billed Gulls in between. The remaining three pictures were taken on March 31<sup>st</sup>, with the final two shots providing a view of the diagnostic underwing pattern.

# Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

## Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Black-headed Gull (Larus ridibundus)

Date of Sighting: 30 March 2007 to 31 March 2007

Location: DAUPHIN

County: FORT HUNTER

Observer(s): Cameron Rutt et al.

Date of Submission: 2007

Submitted by: Cameron Rutt

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut	X							
A. Guarente	X							
T. Johnson	X							
<del>J. Stanley</del> B. Gutter	X							
E. Witmer	X							
J. Heller	X							
G. Malosh	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary)

Date: 12/6/07