

24 April, 1999

Paul D. Hess
1412 Hawthorne St.
Natrona Heights, PA 15065-1629

Dear Paul,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Mew Gull you saw at Moraine State Park on 8 September, 1996. The record circulated the committee for two rounds. After careful review and much discussion, we regret that we are unable to accept this record. Although the committee felt your report was an excellent one, the record was not beyond reasonable doubt and we decided to err on the side of caution rather than accept it. One problem was the pale mantle color which prompted one member to state that "a rare species shouldn't leave any doubt". This does not mean of course that the bird was not a Mew Gull, merely that the details did not allow for a definite determination.

We hope that this does not discourage you from submitting documentation on any rare birds you find in the future. Please be encouraged to send as much detail as possible when submitting a report.

Sincerely,

For the Committee,
Roy A. Ickes, Chairperson

Record # 344-02-1996

344-02-1996

SPECIES: *Larus* sp., apparently Mew (Common) Gull (*L. canus canus*)
in definitive alternate plumage

DATE AND TIME: September 8, 1996, 3:30 p.m.

LOCATION: Lake Arthur, Moraine State Park, Butler County, Pennsylvania
(picnic and beach area at south shore of large recreational lake)

OBSERVERS: Paul Hess, 1412 Hawthorne St., Natrona Heights PA 15065
C. Richard Byers, 3570 Clawson Dr., Murrsyville PA 15668

WEATHER AND LIGHT: Sunny, 70's, bright late-afternoon sun behind and to our left

TIME & DISTANCE OF OBSERVATION: about 2 minutes; from 30 yards to 200+ yards;
optics, Leica 8 x 32 (Hess) and Swift 8.5 x 44 (Byers)

BIRD'S BEHAVIOR: First seen at 30 yards in straight, horizontal flight from our right to left at eye level, carrying an orange item possibly a piece of junk-food. After a few seconds, one and then two juv. Ring-billed Gulls began chasing it, evidently trying to pirate the food. The gull continually outflung them in a long series of very fast and acrobatic turns and dives for about 2 minutes before it disappeared beyond lakeside trees. It did not reappear in more than an hour that we continued to look for it, nor was it seen by other observers that evening and the following morning (E. Kwater, M. Higbee, pers. comm.).

OTHER GULLS PRESENT: 40 Ring-billed of various ages, and 1 juv. Laughing Gull

DESCRIPTION:

Size, shape, jizz -- Noticeably smaller than pursuing Ring-bills, perhaps 90% of their body length but with wings only slightly shorter, thus a distinctive short-bodied long-winged appearance. Also short-necked, round-headed and small-billed, compared to the Ring-bills.

Head and neck -- Pure white, no trace of grayish winter markings. Head nicely rounded without the somewhat angular Ring-billed shape.

Bill -- Smaller than Ring-billed. Entirely bright yellow, no dark mark or smudging. Straight, relatively short and thin, no gonyeal bulge, front of culmen curved down to tip.

Eye -- Appearing large and very dark against the white face, but true iris color not visible.

Mantle, lower back, scapulars, upper-wing coverts and wings to outer primaries -- Unmarked silvery-gray, about the same shade as adult Ring-bills which were present nearby in the same lighting conditions. This was not the familiar darker blue-gray of a Mew. As a result, the wings' white trailing edge was no more prominent than a Ring-billed adult's. No white area between the gray and the black outer primaries was conspicuous, and no white tertial edge was visible in flight.

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Outer primaries -- Prominent mirror of two white panes looked disproportionately large compared to the area of black, and thus the black area seemed more limited than on a Ring-billed even though it extended well up onto the wingtip. The big mirror was fully visible to Hess for only a few seconds in normal horizontal flight, too briefly to remember its exact shape, but it instantly attracted attention to "stay on" the bird. White "string-of-pearls" primary tips were not prominent. For most of our view during the bird's fast aerial gyrations, the outer primaries were tightly overlapping in a narrowly pointed wingtip. Now the black almost disappeared into a thin triangle, barely visible, and the mirror looked long and thin along the leading edge. (See rough sketches)

Rump and tail -- Pure white. Rear edge of tail smoothly rounded.

Underside -- Head, neck, body, and tail bright unmarked white. Underwings plain dull white except for the thin triangle of black remaining visible on the tightly narrowed primaries. Underwing-tips were not clearly visible during bird's normal flight at eye-level.

Legs and feet -- Color not seen, but no dark contrast with the light underparts was evident.

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES: Combination of conspicuously shorter body length viewed in the same binocular frame with the two Ring-bills, small pure-yellow bill, large wingtip mirrors, and overall short-bodied long-winged jizz distinguished it from typical Ring-billed. Small size and small bill more obviously eliminated Herring, California, and (along with the spread outer-primary pattern) Thayer's. Large mirrors immediately eliminated Black-legged Kittiwake. It was not a tube-nose, e.g. Northern Fulmar.

One possibility is an aberrant Ring-billed. Individuals with small plain bills are known, although it is hard to imagine a single Ring-billed showing such a dramatic combination of abnormalities that would also include the large mirror, small body size and proportions.

EXPERIENCE WITH SPECIES: Hess saw countless wintering Mew Gulls (*brachyrhynchus*) while living along the California coast until 1955 and many September birds in Puget Sound, Washington, in 1987. Byers has seen Mew Gulls more recently in coastal Washington. Hess saw a small number of breeding-plumaged Common Gulls (nominate *canus*) in Ireland in May 1975.

COMMENTS:

Hess' experience with nominate *canus* was too long ago to recall their exact shade of gray, but this bird was definitely paler than any adult *brachyrhynchus* we have seen -- troubling when we first made our ID, because we were otherwise convinced that the gull had to be a Mew. Nominate *canus* do average paler than *brachyrhynchus* but remain typically darker than Ring-billed (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Harrison 1983, Tove 1993). Pennsylvania's first Mew, a nominate *canus*, stood out darker than accompanying Ring-bills (Kwater 1992). However, various references and reports point to the possibility of a pale *canus*:

* A gray scale measuring the range of mantle color shows no overlap between *brachyrhynchus* and Ring-billed but slight overlap between nominate *canus* and Ring-billed, with a few Common Gulls almost as pale as the average Ring-billed (Tove 1993). These pale extremes are not at all frequent and would result only from unusually severe wear and fading (M. H. Tove, pers. comm.).

* Grant (1986) mentions no truly light birds but says "In sunny conditions...it is often difficult to distinguish even between the rather dark grey of a Common or Mew Gull and the much paler grey of a Black-headed or Ring-billed Gull" (p 21). Grant also notes possible effects of fading and wear on plumage color as a bird approaches its autumn moult (p 18), as this individual would have been.

* Harris et al. (1994) briefly remark that "unusually pale Common Gulls do exist." (p 112)

* Even *brachyrhynchus* may rarely look pale. A Mew in Michigan was no darker gray to the eye next to Ring-bills, though it did look slightly darker in photos (P. Chu, former state records committee chairman, pers. comm.). A Mew at Vancouver was slightly paler than Ring-bills, though it also had other non-typical features (A. Jaramillo, pers. comm.). [Note: Their comments imply no suggestion that our proposed ID is correct.]

Our bird's relative paleness and more black on wingtip than *brachyrhynchus*, plus the fact that most eastern U.S. records have been nominate *canus*, indicate the possibility of a Common Gull. The bird occurred just after passage of Hurricane Fran's remnant when two other regionally rare gull species, Laughing and Sabine's, also appeared. How a vagrant Common Gull might relate to this weather system is not clear; no other Mew/Common Gulls were reported among a long list of inland rarities in the mid-Atlantic states that weekend. Only one other Mew was reported in the east this fall, on 9/20 at Nantucket Island.

Two-minute observation, no view of the bird standing, crude field sketches, and missing details like iris color and precise outer-primary pattern are less than ideal documentation for such a rarity. In any case, the description of this distinctive gull may be of interest.

REFERENCES:

- Cramp, S., and K. E. L. Simmons. 1983. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol 3. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Grant, P. J. 1986. Gulls: A Guide to Identification. 2nd Ed. Poyser, Calton.
- Harris, A., L. Tucker, and K. Vinicombe. 1994. The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification. Grange, London.
- Harrison, P. 1983. Seabirds: An Identification Guide. Croom Helm, Kent.
- Kwater, E. 1992. Pennsylvania's first Mew Gull, with notes on its racial identification. Pennsylvania Birds 6: 8-9.
- Tove, M. H. 1993. Field separation of Ring-billed, Mew, Common, and Kamchatka Gulls. Birding 25: 386-401.

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Larus sp.: apparently Mew (Common) Gull (*L. c. canus*)

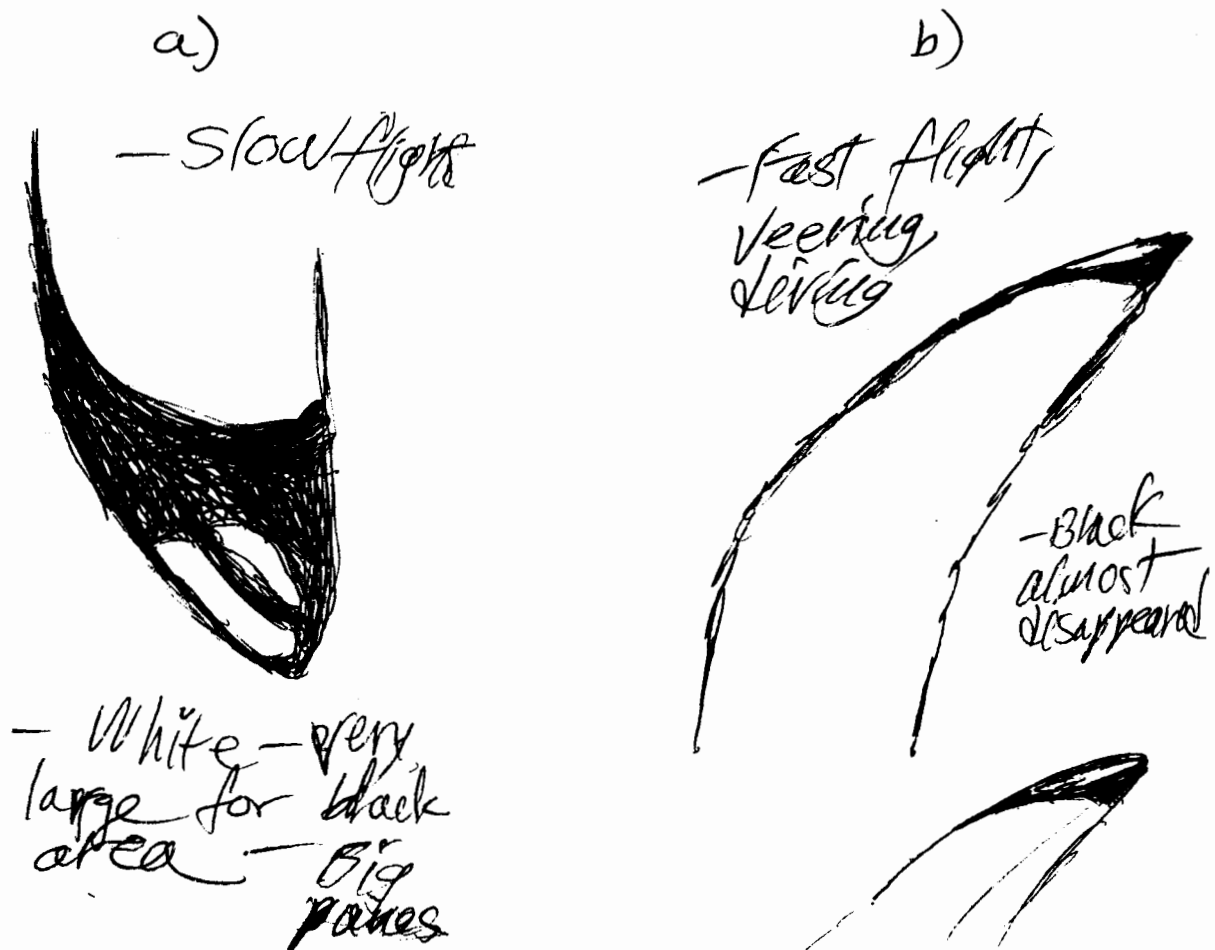
Lake Arthur, Butler County, Pennsylvania
Sept. 8, 1996

Observers: Dick Byers, Paul Hess

Rough sketches of wingtip pattern drawn by Hess while waiting for the gull to reappear:

a) Wingtip spread normally in slow flight -- Mirror of two large panes was so prominent that it left an impression of smaller black area compared to Ring-billed. Shape of panes is not exact, but was drawn to convey their size relative to the black area.

b) Wingtip sharply pointed in fast turns and dives -- The mirror was still visible as a long thin strip, but the area of black almost vanished from sight on the greatly overlapping primaries.



Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of 2

Species: Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)

Date of Sighting: 8 September 1996 to 8 September 1996

Location: MORaine STATE PARK

County: BUTLER

Observer(s): Paul Hess

Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Paul Hess

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
N. Pulcinella				X				
E. Kwater				X				
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams				X				
P. Schwalbe			X					
S. Feldstein			X					
TOTALS			4	3				
DECISION								

Comments:

Send to second Round.

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

8-16-97

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

Species: Mew Gull (Larus canus)

Date of Sighting: 8 September 1996 to 8 September 1996

Location: MORaine STATE PARK

County: BUTLER

Observer(s): Paul Hess

Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Paul Hess

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
E. Kwater				X				
R. Ickes				X				
S. Feldstein				X				
J. McWilliams				X				
N. Pulcinella				X				
TOTALS			2	5				
DECISION				X				

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

8-15-96