













Common Gull (*Larus canus canus*) at Monaca, Beaver County PA, 13 March 2011

Observer: Geoff Malosh, 450 Amherst Ave., Moon Township, PA 15108-2654, 412.735.3128
pomarine@earthlink.net

Facts: Temperature: 35 F, Wind: unknown, Sky: cloudy with occasional drizzle.

Time: ~7:20 PM to 7:48 PM

Optics: Leica Televid 82-mm APO with 25-50x eyepiece

Camera: Canon 1D Mark IV Digital SLR, 500mm f/4L IS with 1.4x teleconverter, tripod

Photos or audio recordings: 4 photos submitted, taken from a distance ranging from perhaps 75-100 yards, attached to this message

Accompanying observers: Mark Vass (finder), Dave Wilton, Shannon Thompson

Documentation date: see discussion published on the evening after the sighting, 13 March 2011, here: <http://home.earthlink.net/~pomarine4/id6.html>, which is essentially copied below and augmented with additional discussion of subspecific ID.

Submission date: 27 April 2011

Photos: Six attached. All photos are cropped from the original frame and further compressed slightly to their current file size. Photos are prefixed PORC1 through PORC6.

Observation: Late in the evening of 13 March, Mark Vass called my cell and said he had a possible Mew Gull on the Ohio River in Beaver County in Monaca. He wanted additional confirmation from someone with experience with the species before claiming the ID. The spot is about 20 minutes from my house, and I estimate I arrived sometime between 7:10 and 7:20 and found Mark still there. Conditions were very cloudy/dark with intermittent drizzle/flurry. Local sunset on 13 March was 7:25pm, so lighting conditions upon my arrival were poor and quickly worsened. Still, it took me no time at all to pick the target bird out of a flock of about 150 Ring-billed Gulls about 75-100 yards from our position, due to its obviously darker mantle. I watched the bird for 2-3 minutes before congratulating Mark on his find, and I started taking pictures. Conditions for pictures were best described as horrible, but I was still able to tease out some slow shutter, high ISO images. I was deliberately underexposing by about one stop in order to maximize the shutter speed, with plans to correct the exposure in post-processing, which I did (along with minor contrast and color corrections). The entire flock was very active. The birds were near a bridge overpass which they were reluctant to float under, and the river, due to recent heavy rains, was flowing swiftly, so the flock was constantly being quickly pushed toward the bridge. As they got within a certain range, they'd pick up and fly a short way downstream and put down again, only to repeat the process in another minute or two. They were very vocal and were bunching up into a very tight flock while on the water, a behavior we've witnessed in gull flocks on these rivers in the past which is indicative of an imminent departure to resume migration. Sure enough, at 7:48pm in near total darkness, the flock took off once again but this time did not put back down, instead they turned to the north or northwest, gained altitude, and disappeared into the night.

Description The following notes are copied verbatim from my web page posted on 13 March a few hours after the sighting: -- Dark mantle. This bird was so comparatively dark it almost suggested a miniature Lesser Black-backed Gull in among the Ring-bills. When I first pulled up the birds had been flying around and Mark had lost track of it temporarily, but it took me only about 5 seconds to pick it out of the flock once they landed. It was that distinctive. The gull is

shown in flight and at rest in comparison to nearby Ring-billed Gulls above. -- Unmarked bill. The first image shows the bird's bill the best - unmarked dull yellow with no trace of a ring. The bill size seemed to be about that of the ring-bills or slightly smaller, but at this light and distance, it was hard to make out its exact shape and size, even with photos. -- Smudged brown on nape and upper chest. -- Dark iris. -- Very limited white on the outer primaries. The first photo shows the primary pattern better than I could see it in the field while tracking it in the scope in the poor light. At first as I watched it in life, I could not make out a mirror on P9 at all. But the photo clearly shows a mirror on P10 and a smaller, much reduced mirror on P9. The terminal end of P8 is pretty much black throughout except for a white spot at the tip. P7 and possibly P6 show very small white tongues which form a limited "pearl" configuration. -- Wide white terminal margins to the secondaries, narrower margins on the inner primaries. -- Extensive tertial crescent on the bird at rest. -- Size: The photo of the bird among the flock of ring-bills shows a bird visibly bulkier than its ring-billed companions, and particularly thick-necked. Though in life, the bird's overall length did not seem to be any greater than the ring-bills. Sometimes it appeared to be smaller, but in some aspects it seemed to be about the same size. Afterwards I thought this perception (sometimes smaller, sometimes not) may have been due to individual variation among the ring-bills it was next to at the time.

Discussion: All of the features described clearly eliminate even an aberrant Ring-billed Gull. The bird is a Mew/Common type. At the time in the field and for a time afterwards, considering the bird's apparent size and the extensive black in the primaries (particularly P8 lacking any white except at the very tip), I wondered whether this might be a "Kamchatka" Common Gull, *Larus canus kamtschatschensis*. I posted requests for information to both the PA Birds listserv and ID-Frontiers, referencing my web page, and received only three substantive responses and none in direct response to my posts (rather, they were responses to private messages).

The following features are inconsistent with *Larus brachyrhynchus* (Mew Gull of western North America) and had initially suggested the possibility of *kamtschatschensis*: bulky appearance, especially the thickness of the neck, extensive dark in the primaries (particularly P8), bill size apparently equal to nearby Ring-billed Gulls, or at least not noticeably smaller, and comparatively narrower trailing edge to the inner primaries vs. the secondaries. However none of these features were pronounced enough to make the bird a definite *kamtschatschensis* either. The bird was not big enough, the bill not large enough, the primaries perhaps not dark enough. It seemed that this bird didn't fit either *brachyrhynchus* or *kamtschatschensis* perfectly and instead showed features of both. Well after the fact I realized that the true question was actually *L. brachyrhynchus* vs. *L. c. canus* (European Common Gull) and that *kamtschatschensis* was probably never a real possibility.

All of the problems with calling this bird either *brachyrhynchus* or *kamtschatschensis* are better addressed by considering *canus* instead. The size of the bird and its bill were incorrect for both, but are basically correct for *canus*. More importantly, the pattern on P8, P9, and P10 actually most closely fits *canus*, whereas it has to be considered at the end of variation for the other two subspecies. Most tellingly against *brachyrhynchus* is the apparent gap between the "pearls" on P6 and P7 and the mirrors on P9 and P10. Furthermore the mirror particularly on P9 is extremely limited. Some *brachyrhynchus* can apparently show this pattern, though, for example see <http://www.pbase.com/jpkln/image/131047052>. Also the trailing edge of the inner primaries is narrower than typical for *brachyrhynchus* but perhaps not totally out of the range of variation, for example see: <http://www.pbase.com/jpkln/image/119412858>. However both features are much closer to the typical *canus* than to an extreme *brachyrhynchus*. This taken in conjunction with the bird's relative size and bulk compared to Ring-billed Gulls seem to indicate that *L. c. canus* is the correct identification. Though I personally believe *canus* is a safe identification, I would also easily agree that this bird as photographed and described may not be separable from *brachyrhynchus*

at the edge of variation and may need to be considered no more specifically than "Mew/Common" type.

Not addressed in the discussion above is separation from the central Eurasian ssp. of Common Gull, *L. c. heinei*. I do not attempt to make any distinction between *kamtschatschensis* and *heinei* primarily because there do not seem to be any currently accepted criteria for definitively separating the two. However if one accepts that the bird is not *kamtschatschensis*, then *heinei* is sufficiently ruled out for the same reasons.

Prior experience: I have a fair amount of experience with *L. brachyrhynchus* in western North America (mostly Alaska and Washington) but no experience whatsoever with any Eurasian ssp. of *L. canus*.

References consulted after the sighting:

Olsen, K.M. and H. Larsson. 2003. *Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia*. Princeton University Press.

Howell, S.N.G. and J. Dunn. 2007. *Gulls of the Americas*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.

Various websites.

I have also attached a PDF of a portion of the BNA account for Mew Gull detailing its systematics and some of the difficulties that have developed in naming and describing the various populations. However I have not used the common names indicated in this document and have instead opted for the names used normally by American birders: the western American population is "Mew" and European populations together are "Common". For this reason I have generally indicated the ssp. by its specific name in this document to avoid all confusion.

Also please note that my webpage has not been updated since I created it on 13 March, so much of the discussion there still centers on the question of *brachyrhynchus* vs. *kamtschatschensis*. That discussion should be disregarded in favor of the discussion in this document. For the purpose of this report, the website merely serves as my source notes from the day of the sighting.

From the CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY and the AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION.

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Mew Gull

Larus canus

Order

CHARADRIIFORMES

– Family

LARIDAE

Issue No. 687

Authors: Moskoff, William, and Louis R. Bevier

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All taxa now included under Mew Gull are clearly closely related; they are sometimes divided into 2 or 3 species, however. Major groups include: European and central Asian breeders (*canus* group), the name Mew Gull sometimes restricted to these populations; ne. Asian breeders (*kamtschatschensis* group) called Kamchatka Gull; and North American birds (*brachyrhynchus* group) named Short-billed Gull ([Am. Ornithol. Union 1998](#)).

The name “Mew Gull” has been used confusingly, with most North American literature now using it for the species as a whole (as classified here). In the past, and to some extent recently, Mew Gull has been used for European birds only (*canus* group), with Short-billed Gull used for North American *L. c. brachyrhynchus* (e.g., [Ridgway 1919](#), [Bent 1921](#)). Likewise, the name “Common Gull” is applied confusingly at times, with English literature in Europe generally using this name to refer to the species as a whole, but many popular North American accounts and field guides using it, perhaps incorrectly, to refer to Euro-pean birds of the *canus* group. In this account, Mew Gull is used for the species as a whole, and each subspecies group is referred to by the names given above.

Species limits within the Mew Gull remain uncertain. The Short-billed Gull (*brachyrhynchus* group) seems most distinct both genetically and morphologically; the relationship between North American and Eurasian populations and whether to recognize 1 or 2 species across Eurasia requires further study. Although Kamchatka Gull (*L. c. kamtschatschensis*) differs in a number of morphological characters (size, plumage pattern, eye color) from the *canus* group, it appears to be the end point of more or less clinal variation in these characters across Europe and Asia. While some authors have noted that many characteristics of Kamchatka Gull appear intermediate to Short-billed Gull (e.g., darkness of gray mantle and heavy mottling in Juvenal and Basic I plumages; [Grant 1986](#)), others have recognized Kamchatka Gull as a separate species and placed Short-billed and Mew (*canus* group) gulls as 1 species ([Johansen 1961](#)). Despite these opinions, morphological evidence suggests that it is best to consider all Eurasian taxa as more closely related apart from *L. c. brachyrhynchus*. Within Eurasia, individuals that appear intermediate between *L. c. kamtschatschensis* and the *canus* group (through subspecies *L. c. heinei*) are known from about the Lena River region east to the Indigirka and Kolyma Rivers in ne. Asia ([Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951](#), [Vaurie 1965](#); specimens in Zoological Museum of Moscow, according to [Devillers \[1982\]](#)). This apparent intergradation along with overall similarity in wing pattern of

adults (e.g., extensive black in outer 3 primaries) and several plumage characteristics of Juvenal and Basic I plumages (bold dark tips to whitish under wing-coverts, dark bar across underside of secondaries, underside of primaries, whitish pattern around base of bill and forehead on Juvenal) suggests all Eurasian taxa are more closely allied and perhaps distinct from *L. c. brachyrhynchus*. Indeed, 2 species were recognized along these lines (Eurasian vs. North American) by Sibley (1996), who based this chiefly on limited genetic comparisons by Zink et al. (1995). Overall, the most dramatic difference in size and appearance is between *L. c. kamtschatschensis* and *L. c. brachyrhynchus*. Using restriction fragment length polymorphisms (RFLP) to compare the mitochondrial DNA of these taxa (1 specimen from Kamchatka and 2 from Washington), Zink et al. (1995) found *L. c. kamtschatschensis* and *L. c. brachyrhynchus* highly differentiated relative to other avian taxa (percent-age nucleotide divergence, $p = 0.02$). Comparison of genetic samples across Eurasia (especially in zone of intergradation between *L. c. kamtschatschensis* and *L. c. heinei*) as well as between North American and European (*L. c. brachyrhynchus* vs. *L. c. canus*) are needed to better elucidate evolutionary relationships and possible specific status of these forms.

Geographic Variation

No geographic variation described within North America, which populations are the smallest and most delicately built among all Mew Gull subspecies. Following based on [Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951](#), [Glutz von Blotzheim 1982](#), [Cramp and Simmons 1983](#), and examination of specimens at Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) by LRB. Size increases more or less clinally from west to east across Eurasia, with birds breeding in ne. Siberia being largest, having proportionately larger bills and consistently pale yellow irides. On adults, wing-tip pattern and mantle color all vary geographically. Mantle color apparently palest in w. Europe and Iceland, becoming darker gray eastward across Eurasia, with darkest in central and e. Asia; North American birds are dark gray, being most similar to e. Asian populations in this regard. Reported differences in darkness of mantle in the literature are conflicting, however. For example, [Dement'ev and Gladkov \(1951\)](#) state that e. Siberian populations (*L. c. kamtschatschensis*) are darkest in Eurasia, being darker than those populations immediately to the west (*L. c. heinei*); [Johansen \(1961\)](#), however, reported that North American birds (*L. c. brachyrhynchus*) were similar to European birds (*L. c. canus*) and that *L. c. kamtschatschensis* and *L. c. heinei* were most similar. No study has evaluated mantle color using objective methods (e.g., reflectance spectrophotometry), although some visual comparisons have been made with limited sample sizes (e.g., [Shepard and Votier 1993](#), [Tove 1993](#)). Amount of black in outer primaries varies geographically, with least amount of black on North American birds and most on European to central Asian birds (difference most dramatic on primary 8 [P8], which is extensively gray on North American birds, but mostly black on Eurasian birds). Size and distribution of white markings in wing-tips, and differences in extent of gray and white borders to black primary-tips exist, with North American birds showing the most white (appearing as a band of spots between gray base of primaries and black tips); ne. Asian birds most similar in this character to North American birds, but typically lack white spot between gray and black on P8; European birds usually lack any white between gray and black of primaries, but may rarely show narrow white markings there. In addition to size and structure, differences in plumage pattern exist in all Predefinitive (subadult) plumages among the 3 groups of subspecies.

Subspecies

Four subspecies, following [Vaurie 1965](#); these divided into 3 groups by Am. Ornithol. Union (1998). One subspecies breeds in North America (*L. c. brachyrhynchus*), 2 others (*L. c. kamtschatschensis* and *L. c. canus*) are casual to rare visitors.

Short-Billed Gull

Includes 1 subspecies. *L. c. brachyrhynchus* Richardson, 1831; type from Great Bear Lake, Fort Franklin, Mackenzie (Northwest Territories). Breeds in North America as described above under Distribution. Occurs casually east to Great Lakes region, with sight records east to w. New York and Massachusetts (identification as *brachyrhynchus* not verified) and with specimens reported from s. Quebec and Massachusetts ([Veit and Petersen 1993](#), [Guthrie et al. 1999](#); specimen from Massachusetts reported as *L. c. brachyrhynchus* by Peters [1937], could be this race or *L. c. canus*); casual to e. Asia at Hong Kong and probably Japan ([Carey and Kennerley 1996](#)). More study needed to verify easternmost distribution in North America. A sight report thought to pertain to this race was described by Shepard and Votier (1993) for Norfolk, England. Smallest race, with relatively thinner bill; adults have P9 and P8 mostly gray with small black tip, P1–P8 with broad white spot between gray and black (rarely lacking; S. Perkins pers. comm.), mantle medium gray, and eye generally dark but variable.

Kamchatka Gull

Includes 1 subspecies. *L. c. kamschatschensis* (Bonaparte, 1857); substitute name for *Gavina Kamtchatchensis* Bonaparte, 1854; type locality Kamchatka. Breeds ne. Siberia from Lena River east to Anadyrland and Koryakland, south to Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and Kuril Is.; winters coastal e. Asia (China, Taiwan, Japan, and islands south of Japan). Vagrant to w. Aleutians (Attu, Shemya), St. Lawrence I., and Pribilof Is. (St. Paul), based on photographs and specimens ([Gibson and Kessel 1997](#)). Other reports along west coast of North America remain uncertain. Largest race, with relatively more robust bill that is thicker and more parallel-sided than other races; adult differs from *L. c. brachyrhynchus* in having black extending basally to near tips of primary-coverts on P8–P9; P1–P7 usually with white spot between gray and black; mantle medium gray; eye generally pale yellow.

Mew Gull

Includes 2 subspecies. *L. c. canus* Linnaeus, 1758; type locality restricted to Sweden. Breeds Iceland and British Isles east to White Sea, Russia; winters across Europe to n. Africa east to Persian Gulf; rare in winter (Sep–May) along Atlantic Seaboard, with a few summering records in recent years from Quebec attributed to this race. Specimens of *L. c. canus* have been taken in Greenland and Massachusetts ([Veit and Petersen 1993](#), [Boertmann 1994](#)). Occurrence along Atlantic coast of North America also supported by many sight reports supported with identifiable photographs showing characters of this subspecies; most records are from Newfoundland and e. Quebec (B. Mactavish unpubl., Quebec regional summaries in *North American Birds* and predecessors), whereas scattered records exist from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and N. Carolina ([Godfrey 1986](#), [Veit and Petersen 1993](#), [Guthrie et al. 1999](#), LRB). One specimen, from Lock's Cove, Newfoundland, 19 Apr 1956 was of a bird banded as a chick on the White Sea ([Godfrey 1986](#)); another individual banded as a chick in Iceland returned to Newfoundland for at least 6 winters (B. Mactavish pers. comm.). So far, all records identifiable as *L. c. canus* are from the immediate coastal region, but with increasing populations in Iceland and consequent increase in records in recent decades along the east coast, records from farther inland in e. North America might be expected. Medium size, similar to *L. c. brachyrhynchus* but perhaps slightly heavier and with slightly bigger bill; adult differs from *L. c. brachyrhynchus* in having black extending to near tips of primary coverts on P8–P9; usually lacks white spot between gray and black on primaries, although this highly variable, and many specimens show some small white spots similar to *L. c. brachyrhynchus* (LRB); mantle medium to pale gray, with w. European birds averaging paler than *L. c. brachyrhynchus* (some almost as pale as Ring-billed Gull); eye generally dark (averages darker than *L. c. brachyrhynchus*).

L. c. heinei Homeyer, 1853; type locality based on wintering bird from Greece (synonyms *L. c. var. major* Middendorff and *L. c. stegmanni* Brodtkorb). Breeds across a vast region from

central Russia (Kanin Peninsula and Moscow region) east to w. and central Siberia (Lena River); winters Baltic Sea, se. Europe, Black and Caspian Seas, Persian Gulf, and, to lesser extent, e. Mediterranean basin, n. Red Sea, and perhaps also se. China. Diagnosability of this taxon from *L. c. canus* needs to be reexamined; many birds not certainly identifiable (e.g., see [Devillers 1982](#)). Birds showing wing characters of this race reported over 1,200 km east of Lena River on Omolon River ([Carey and Kennerley 1996](#)). Similar to *L. c. canus*, but averages larger and darker on mantle; tends to be whiter-headed in Basic plumages, being more sparsely marked on head and neck; intermediates with *L. c. canus* frequent in Israel ([Shirihai 1996](#)).

Related Species

Most authorities consider Ring-billed and Mew gulls closely allied, based on comparisons of morphology and behavior (e.g., [Dwight 1925](#), [Moynihan 1959](#), [Schnell 1970](#), [Chu 1998](#)). Based on phylogenetic analysis of mitochondrial DNA sequence data, Mew Gull emerges basally with Ring-billed Gull in a clade of "white-headed" *Larus* species, the relationships of which are otherwise unresolved due to apparently rapid radiation ([Crochet et al. 2000](#)).

Hybridization

Individuals thought to be hybrids between Mew Gull (*Larus c. canus*) and both Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*) and Mediterranean Gull (*L. melanocephalus*) have been reported and photographed in w. Europe ([Staab 1988](#), [Hein 1994](#), [Oddie 1994](#)).

Migration Distribution

Recommended Citation

Moskoff, William and Louis R. Bevier. 2002. Mew Gull (*Larus canus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/687>

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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Mew "Common" Gull Larus canus canus

Date of Sighting: 13 March 2011 to 13 March 2011

County : BEAVER

Location : MARYSVILLE BOAT LAUNCH

Observer(s): Mark Vass, Geoff Malosh, Dave Wilton, Shannon Thompson

Date of Submission: 2011

Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

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	
D. DeReamus	X							
A. Guarente	X							
T. Johnson					X			
B. Coulter				X				
R. Koury	X							
D. Weber	X							
G. Malosh	X							
TOTALS	5			1	1			
DECISION								

Comments:

AG - accepts as Mew/Common Gull

5/2

BC - Accept as Larus canus type

7/0 - Mew/Common Gull

RK - Accept as Mew/Common Gull

TJ - Accept as Mew Gull

Signature (Secretary) Nick Pulcinella

Date: 1/22/12