

CALIFORNIA GULL

Larus californicus

Observer: Jerry McWilliams

Location: channel, Presque Isle S.P., Erie, Pa.

Date: January 29, 2012

Time: 10:30 to 10:45 AM

Weather: mostly cloudy, wind W to 20 mph, temp. 32 F

Viewing distance: about 100 yards

Optics: Kowa TSN 4 from 30X to 50X

Details: There was a mix of about 300 gulls, mostly Ring-billed Gulls, resting on the south pier across the channel from Presque Isle State Park. I had just started panning through them when I spotted an adult gull with a slightly darker mantle than the nearby Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. Since it was sleeping with its head tucked in over its back and only partially in view because of some other gulls blocking my view, I was unable to see anything more. At first I thought it might be a darker mantled Herring Gull or a Thayer's Gull. After a few minutes the bird lifted his head and revealed a greenish-yellow bill with a red spot at the gony and a thin black band crossing the bill in front of the red spot. The black band was thickest on the lower mandible narrowing as it crossed the upper mandible. The iris was dark and the eyelids were either dark red or maroon. The nape was heavily mottled with brown. At this point I identified the gull as a California Gull. The Herring Gulls standing next to the California had larger heads, obvious pale irises with yellow or yellow-orange eyelids, yellow bills that were thicker at the gony. Eventually the gulls blocking my view walked a bit out of the way, so I could see that the leg color of the California Gull was rather dull gray-green with yellow-green at the joints. It became more alert and within a couple of minutes it flew. I could clearly see the primary pattern, which became quite evident a little later after looking at a photograph I took of it in flight. Even though the legs are hanging down and in full view, the photo does not reveal the color well. The primaries were extensively black with P9 showing a large white spot near the tip and P10 showed most of the primary tip white. Primaries six to eight were gray becoming white then abruptly black producing the look of a short string of pearls.

I suspect that the California Gull was of the Great Plains race *albertaensis*, based upon the pale mantle, large size, and wing pattern.

I have seen many California Gulls in the west, a few at Niagara Falls, and at Presque Isle State Park



