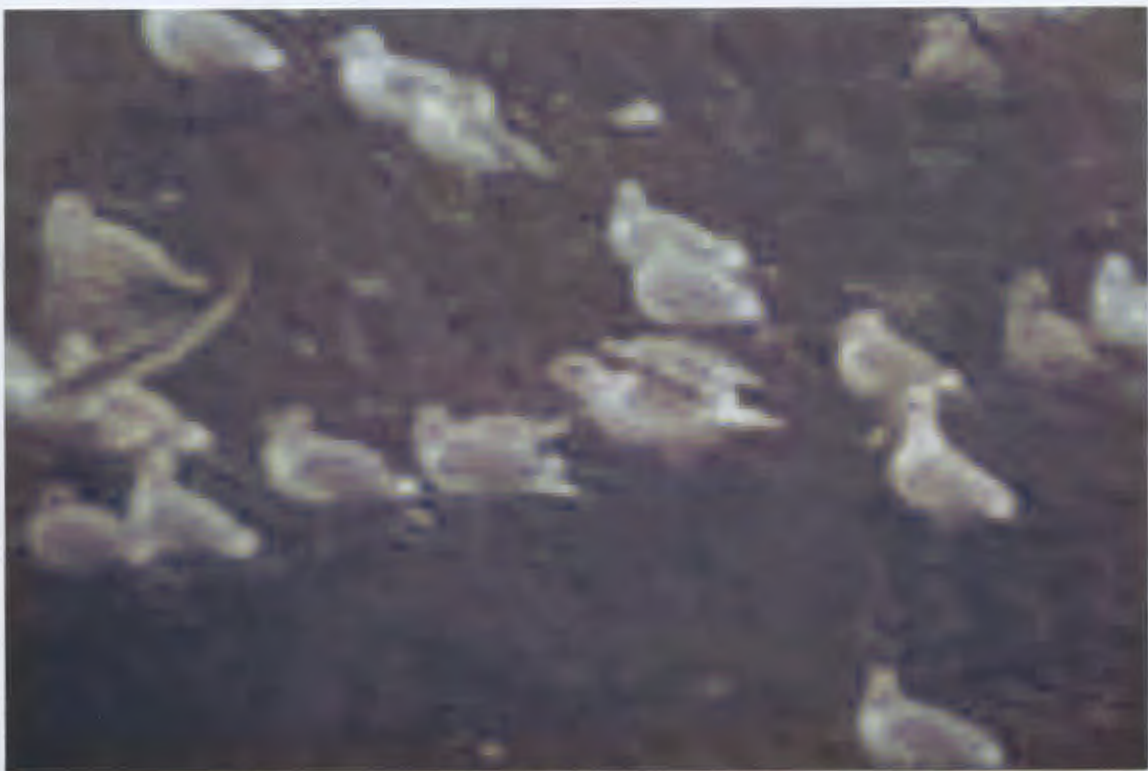




Tullytown, PA



Tullytown, PA



Tullytown, PA



Tullytown, PA



Tullytown, PA



Tullytown, PA



Ithaca (Left)

Ontario (Right)



Ithaca (Left)

Ontario (Right)



Ithaca (Left)

Tullytown (Right)



Ithaca (Left)

Tullytown (Right)



Tullytown (Left

Ithaca (Right)



Ithaca, NY - Winter 2008



Ithaca, NY - Winter 2008



Ithaca, NY - Winter 2008



Ithaca, NY - Winter 2008



Ithaca, NY - Winter 2008

26 November 2008

PORC:

First, I would like to apologize that it has taken me almost a year to submit this record to the committee for consideration – for a potential first state record, that is a long time to wait, but I've been exchanging opinions with fellow birders and learning more about Slaty-backed Gulls during this period.

Attached are several sets of photos/ video grabs/ and scans of field notes that document a Slaty-backed Gull in New York and a Slaty-backed Gull in Pennsylvania. I had the opportunity to study both of these birds (first the Pennsylvania bird, which I discovered, and later, the New York bird found by Jay McGowan). Extreme similarities between the birds as noted in the field and in subsequent examination of photographs suggests strongly that these two birds are in fact one in the same, as detailed in the attached article from *Pennsylvania Birds* magazine published earlier in 2008. The documentation I obtained on the bird in New York is FAR superior to that from Pennsylvania, so most of the "minutiae of identification" notes are supported by the photographs from NEW YORK, not Pennsylvania. However, comparison of the photos and sketches of the gull in Pennsylvania to the better photos from New York should prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the two birds are the same. Therefore, it seems reasonable to me that analysis of and voting on the identification and occurrence of the bird in Pennsylvania can be based on the photos from New York.

In addition to photos from PA and NY, field notes from PA, and the article I wrote that was published in *Pennsylvania Birds*, I've attached some comments from gull experts from North American and Japan regarding the gull.

I'd like to express my personal concern about this record – it is certainly not ideal that the best documentation of this bird came from New York, and may indeed make the record unacceptable to some voting members of PORC. In any event, I'm submitting this report regardless, in the hope that even if it is not accepted, at least the documentation will be archived for future use. I would ask that the committee give the record careful consideration, even under these somewhat novel documentation circumstances, given the strength of the supporting evidence of the PA/ NY gull being one in the same.

Along these same lines, there is the consideration of burden of proof for species "purity". Gulls are birds that hybridize frequently, and in some cases, freely. There are many instances of taxa that are known to hybridize and backcross (Western/ Glaucous-winged Gull, Thayer's/ Iceland Gull, Glaucous/ Herring Gull, etc). In addition, there are many cases of known hybrids or backcrosses that appear phenotypically pure (i.e. Golden-winged Warblers in Ontario). This provides for an interesting debate when discussing birds such as the somewhat pale-mantled Slaty-backed Gull documented here. While nobody debates that the bird is "mostly" Slaty-backed Gull, there is a possibility of past hybridization somewhere in the gull's lineage, evidenced by the slightly paler gray mantle. However, it seems just as (or perhaps more) likely that immature Slaty-backs can exhibit more variation in mantle color than adults (as per Herring Gull, in Howell & Dunn's *Gulls of the Americas*). My personal opinion is that in cases where a bird resembles a typical species in all but one character (in this case, mantle shade), the bird for all intents and purposes (especially the typological purposes of a committee charged with maintaining a list of species in a given region) can be categorized as that species. This position is somewhat traditional, fitting birds into categories, but at the same time I

recognize that many birds defy our taxonomy and have mixed genetic backgrounds – to deny this would be an affront to evolutionary biology.

There is a nice precedent for a committee dealing with a paler immature Slaty-backed Gull. The most recent (2006) California Bird Records Committee annual report discusses this when noting the **acceptance** of a third cycle Slaty-backed Gull that was noted to be paler than *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull, much like the Pennsylvania/New York bird: “*a third-year bird on 4 Feb 2006 (aJ†; lMl†, ePr†, dSS†; 2006-028) was slightly paler than typical for the Slaty-backed Gull, reminding us of the poor understanding we have of this species’ variation in mantle color (see King and Carey 1999).*” Photos of that bird can be found here:

<http://www.coastside.net/chucaogulls/Slatyback.htm#third06>

If I can provide any more details, please feel free to contact me.

Thanks,

Tom Johnson
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Hummelstown, PA 17036

tbj4@cornell.edu
(717) 566-9875

Photo notes:

Included in this report are three sets of images of the Slaty-backed Gull. One is a series of video grabs taken by Devich Farbotnik in Tullytown, PA. One is a series of digiscoped photos I took of the gull during its initial discovery in Tullytown, PA. The last set is a series of photos I took of the gull in Ithaca, NY during late winter 2008.

Three of the images (*sbcomposite.jpg*, *sbcomposite2.jpg*, and *sbcomposite3.jpg*) are composite images consisting of a photo taken of the gull in Ithaca overlaid by an inset photo taken of the gull in Pennsylvania. These serve to demonstrate extreme similarities in structure, coloration, patterning, etc.

Two of the images (*ottawaithacacompositesbgu.jpg* and *ottawaithacacompositesbgu2.jpg*) were made by pasting an image taken of the Slaty-backed Gull in Ontario, Canada, where it was first documented in November 2007, onto similar images taken of the bird in Ithaca, NY. In each of the below files, the inset photo is the one taken in Ontario. These prove quite nicely that the bird from Ontario was also seen in Ithaca.

Slaty-backed Gull – Tullytown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania – annotations for field notes (c)

These field notes/ sketches were made in the field during and immediately after observation by Tom Johnson. Though they are certainly poor artistic renderings of the gull, they preserve relevant information regarding the specifics of primary pattern not available from photographs taken in Pennsylvania. Specifically, they demonstrate the “string of pearls” primary pattern as well as the odd primary gap between p7 and p8 seen on the sitting gull in both Pennsylvania and New York (demonstrated in NY with photographs). Specifics of bill pattern and head streaking are also detailed in the field notes; these details help link the Pennsylvania sighting to the long-staying and well-documented New York occurrence (i.e. compare the field notes from PA to the photographs from New York).

Pages 1-3 pertain to the 21 Dec 2007 sighting at Tullytown, PA
Pages 4-6 pertain to the 16 Jan 2008 sighting at Tullytown, PA

12/21/07

Bucks Co., PA

Island View Crossing 7:50-8:10

- 13 GRGU
- 1 COLO
- 1 COME
- 1 MODO
- x HERG
- x RBGU

Franklin Cove, Tullytown 8:20-12:00

- 7+ ICGU
- 1-2 GLGU (2nd cycle)
- 1 prob. GLGU x HERG (first cycle)

1 PEFA
1 RTHA
1 AMGO 15 FICR
2 SOS P

- 30+ LBBG x RBGU
- x GRBG
- x HERG

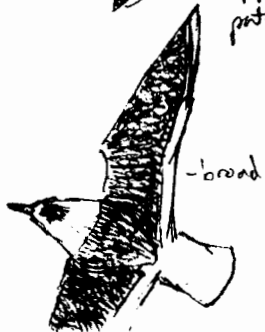
adult Slaty-backed Gull - 10 minutes, ~300m

- mantle intermediate HERG - LBBG, closer to LBBG
- wide tertial crescent white
- dark pink legs
- size slightly > HERG
- head/neck white w/ "black eye" some neck streaking
- deep belly/short legs
- on landfill.

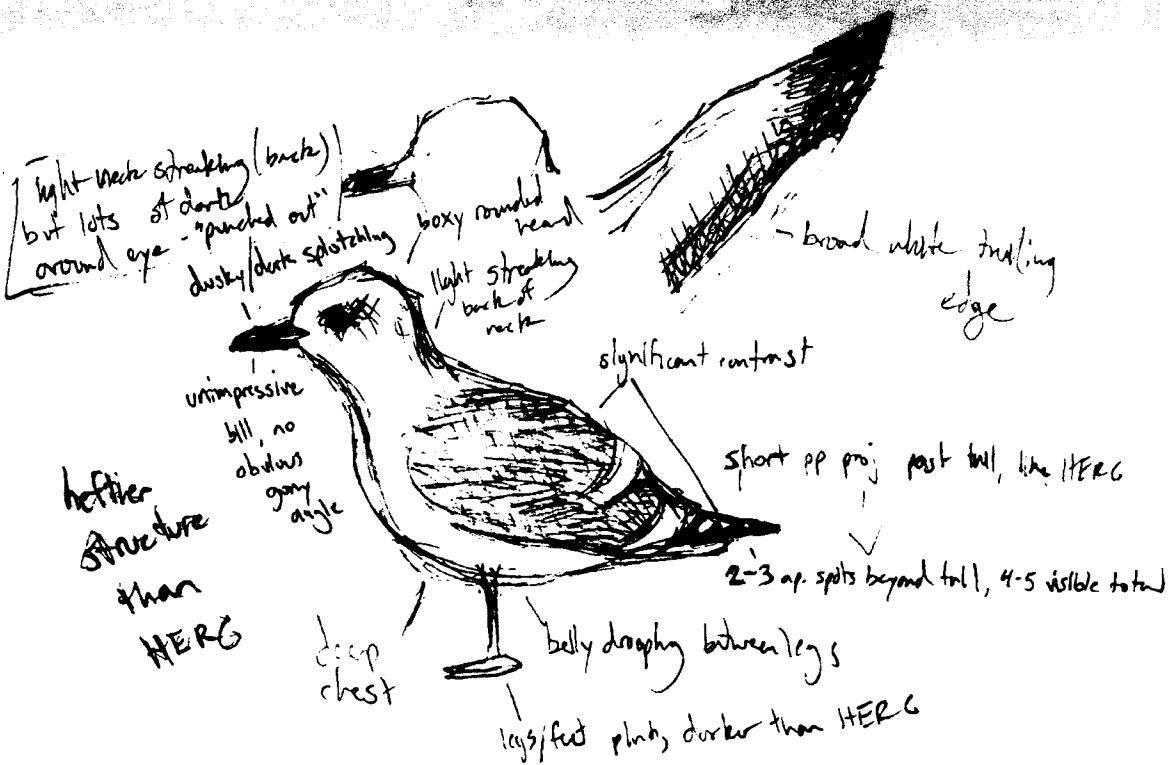
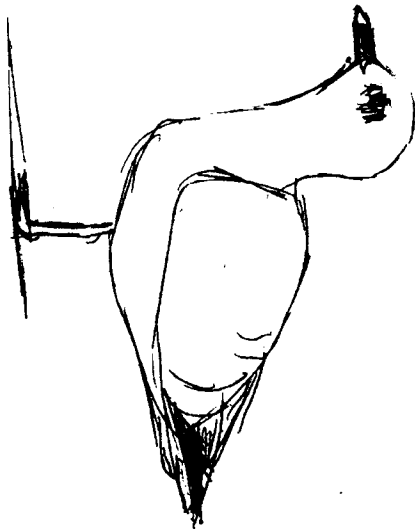


through
p10-p6, maybe p5
biggest sun-ann wing unsure

pp pattern

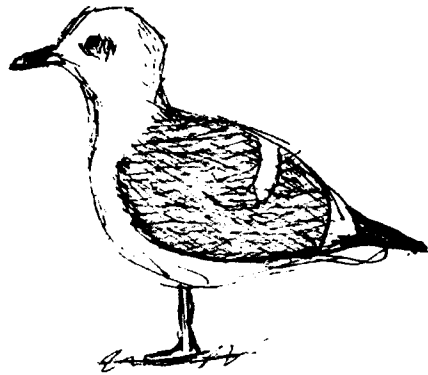
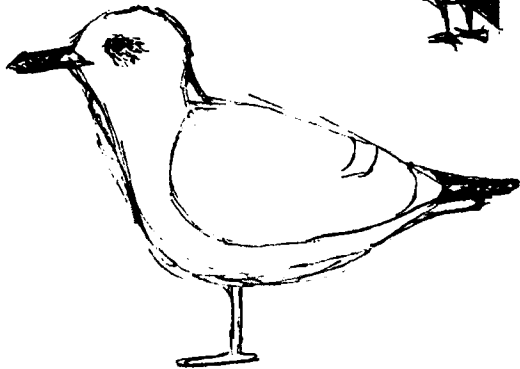


- broad



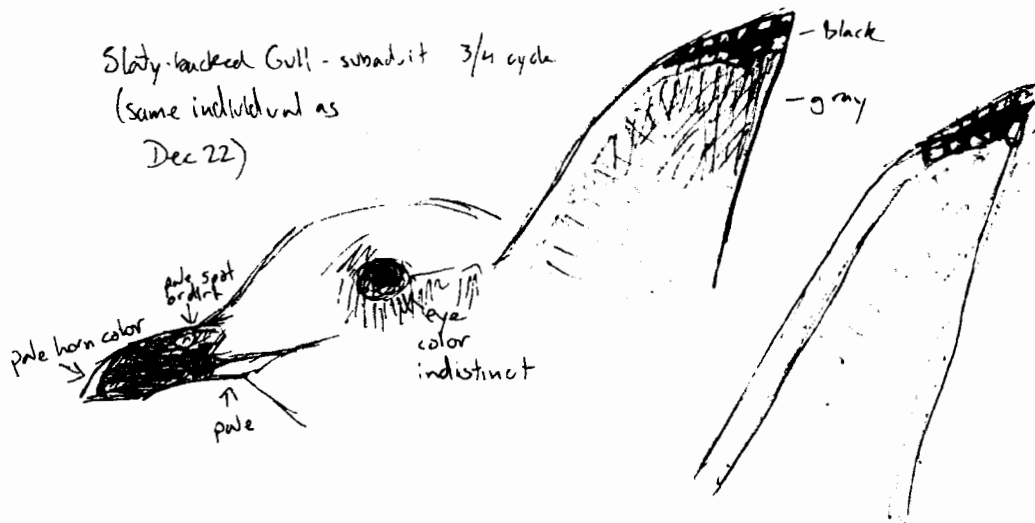


- view from back of scapular crescents



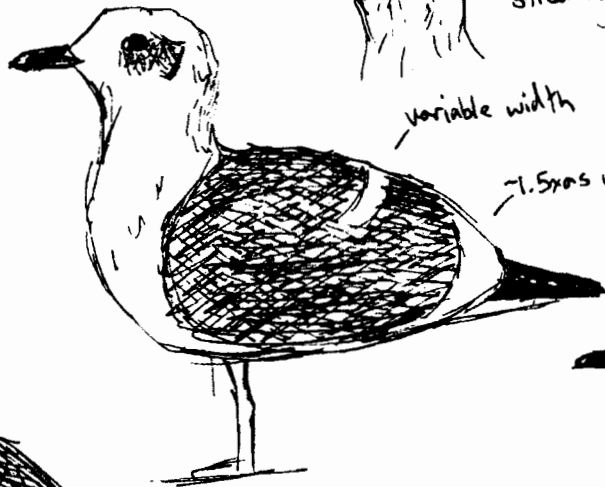
1/16/08 Tullytown, PA
Franklin Cove

Slaty-backed Gull - subspecies 3/4 cycle
(same individual as
Dec 22)





1/16/08
Tullytown, PA

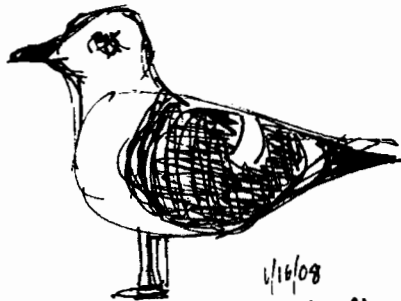


back of head

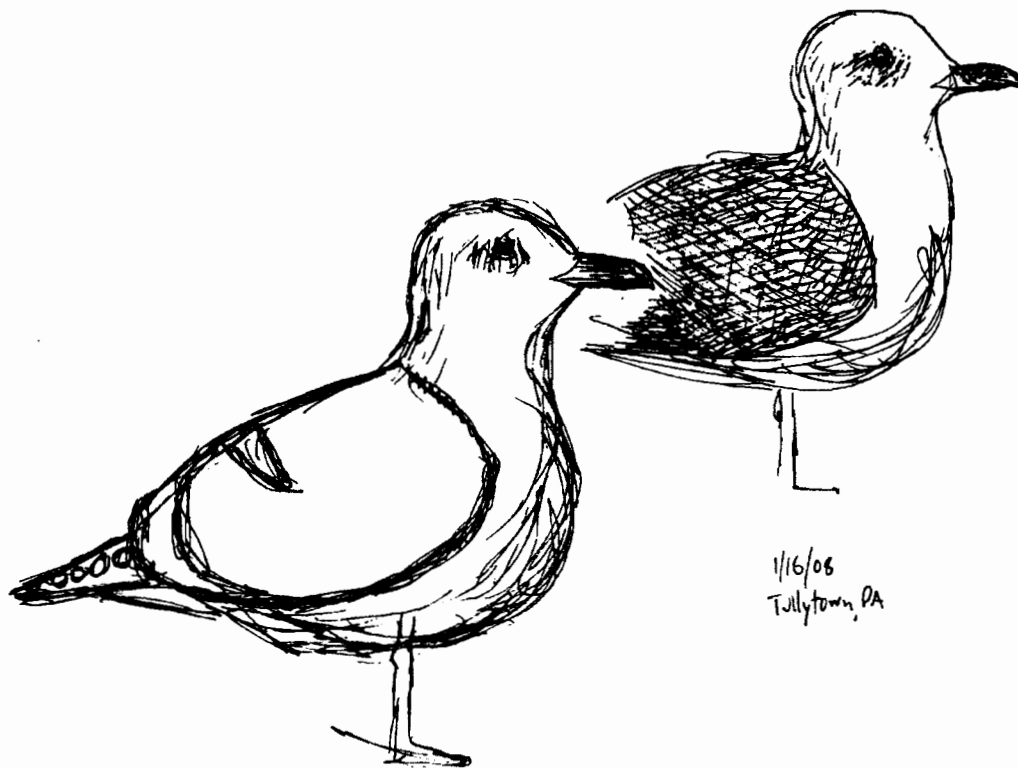
pale brown
streaking

variable width

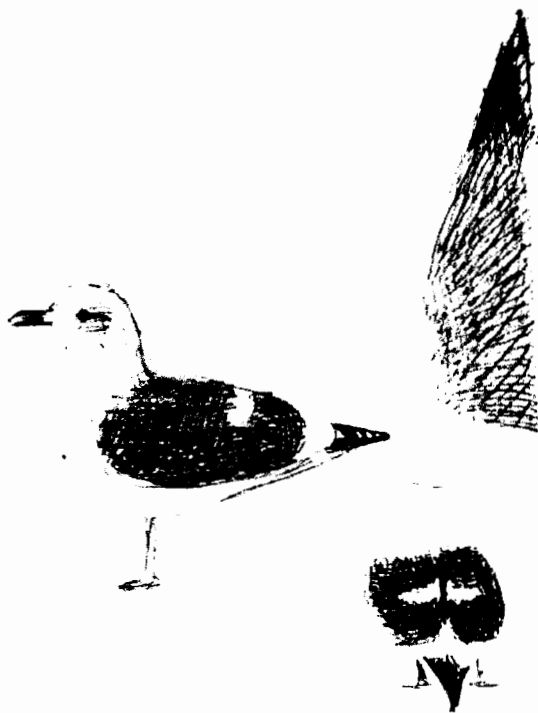
~1.5x as wide as HERG



1/16/08
Tullytown, PA



1/16/08
Tullytown, PA



1/16/08 Tullytown, PA

A Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus shistisagus*) in Pennsylvania [... and Ontario, and New York...]

Tom Johnson

During the past few years, sightings of Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus shistisagus*) have increased across Canada and the Lower 48 United States (hereafter, the Lower 48), and finding this species has been near the front of many birders' minds in Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the eastern US. The winter of 2007-2008 saw an unprecedented number of reports of Slaty-backed Gulls in North America outside of Alaska, including Pennsylvania's first documented sighting detailed in this paper. Photographic evidence suggests that the individual gull that others and I observed during its fleeting visit to Pennsylvania was actually reported before in Ontario (in November 2007) and afterward in New York (in January-March 2008).

The Pennsylvania Sighting

I was birding with Andy McGann, Justin Bosler, and Devin Bosler on 21 December 2007 in Tullytown (Bucks County), easily the best site to watch gulls in Pennsylvania and probably the entire eastern United States. Upon arriving at Franklin Cove adjacent to the Tullytown Landfill, we were all very pleased to see a large number of gulls standing on an ice sheet, and a much larger number of gulls up on the side of the landfill. A few scans through the closer gulls on the ice revealed high numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a handful of "Kumlien's" Iceland



Plate 1: Slaty-backed Gull at Tullytown, PA (21 Dec 2007), in profile, showing deep-bellied structure, head smudging, mostly dark bill, spacing of primary apical spots, darker mantle relative to nearby Herring Gulls, and broad tertial crescent, all consistent with closer observations/photos from Ithaca, NY (Tom Johnson)

and Glaucous gulls among the standard legions of Herring, Great Black-backed, and Ring-billed gulls.

I began to search through the gulls resting on the side of the landfill across the cove, and soon settled on a bulky gull with dark upperparts and large white tertial crescents on the folded wing. This bird was larger than Herring Gulls around it and had dark pink legs and upperparts coloration similar to some nearby Lesser Black-backed Gulls. I recognized it as a Slaty-backed Gull. Andy, Justin, and Devin quickly got on the bird in their scopes; I took a few digiscoped photos and we all took field notes, further noting dark feathering around the eye, light head and neck streaking, and a smudgy dark bill with a pale tip. The gull obligingly stretched its wings while I was viewing it through the scope, showing off white tips and subterminal "moons" on its outer primaries. After sitting in view for about 10 minutes, the gull flew off the side of the landfill toward us, banked over Franklin Cove and showing its wings nicely, including the pale gray undersurfaces of the primaries and the broad white trailing edge to the secondaries, and landed back near where it had been sitting originally.

Other birders that came looking for the gull that day were unsuccessful in relocating it; shortly after I phoned in the report to other birders, the gull disappeared back into the swirling matrix of white, gray, and black that is the Tullytown gull flock. Fortunately, Devich Farbotnik relocated the bird the next day (22 December 2007) at a nearby lake and was able to show it to several other birders. Devich obtained video of it both on the water and taking off in flight.

I made several return visits to the Tullytown area looking for the gull without success. To my knowledge, no

one saw the Slaty-backed Gull until 16 January 2008 when I refound it at Franklin Cove. During this observation, lighting conditions were somewhat better and the bird appeared darker-mantled, but time of observation was limited. This was my last opportunity to study gulls in Bucks County before returning to college for the start of the spring semester, so I said goodbye to the Slaty-backed Gull and headed off to school.

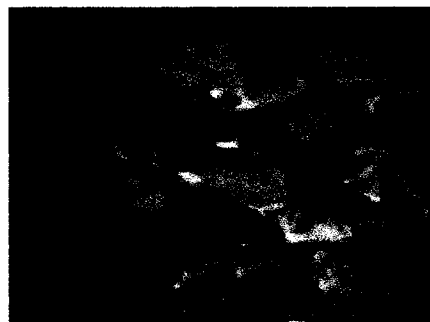


Plate 2: Slaty-backed Gull at Tullytown, PA (22 Dec 2007), spread wing suggesting "string of pearls". (Devich Farbotnik)

The New York Sighting

However, it turned out that I had not seen the last of this Slaty-backed Gull. Two days after I returned to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York (22 January 2008), Jay McGowan discovered a Slaty-backed Gull at the university composting site. I was able to observe, photograph, and draw the gull that day at close range and many times thereafter; this bird eventually proved to be very cooperative over its one-and-a-half month stay in Ithaca (22 January – 5 March 2008). One morning I even saw the gull cruising over my apartment between its roost at the south end of Cayuga Lake and its favored feeding area at the Cornell compost site!

Due to the reduced amount of white in the primary tips, a notable amount of pale streaking in the wing coverts and tertials, and the amount of black on the bill, it is likely that the Ithaca gull was in its third plumage cycle, and after extended observation, I concluded that the Ithaca gull was actually the same individual that I found earlier in the winter in

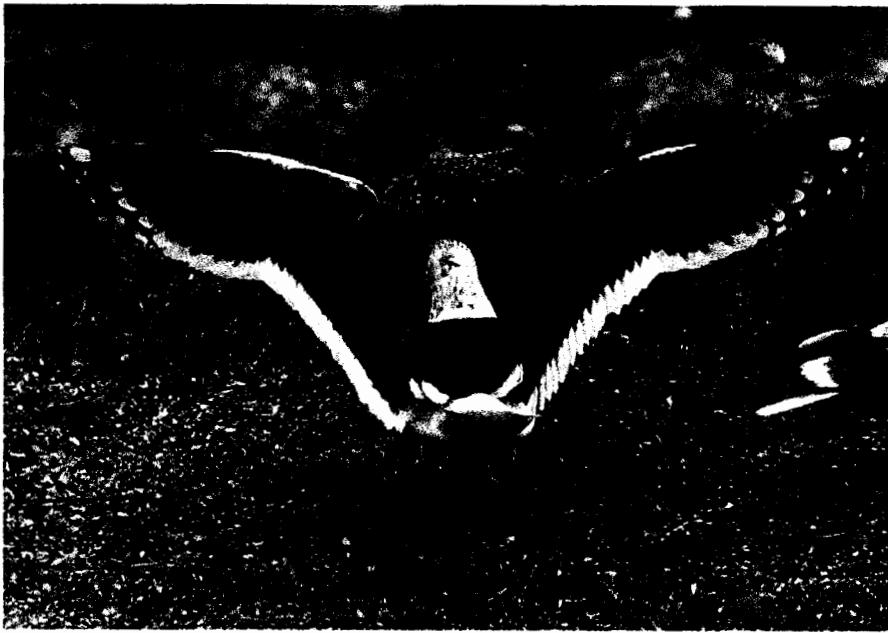


Plate 3: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), spread upperwing showing "string of pearls", gray inner vanes on primaries, wide white trailing edge of secondaries, pale brownish wash to some wing coverts. (Tom Johnson)

Pennsylvania.

This conclusion is based on documented similarities in wing condition (cleanly dark and adult-like but with pale streaking through the coverts and tertials), overall coloration (similar to *graelisi* Lesser Black-backed Gull, lighter than most adult Slaty-backed Gulls), primary pattern (evidenced by photos and sketches from PA and close-up photos from Ithaca), bill pattern (mostly dark with pale tip and mandible base), and facial pattern (dark area around/below eye and bordering the auriculars).

While trying to learn more about other Slaty-backed Gull sightings in the Lower 48 and Canada this winter, I was perusing some photos and reports online when I noticed some interesting photos of a now familiar-looking Slaty-backed Gull from Ontario, Canada taken in November 2007. Indeed, upon closer inspection, it was obvious that this was the same gull that had appeared in Ithaca, NY. The Ithaca Slaty-backed Gull showed a small aberration in wing pattern - a small white mirror on its left P9 (second outermost primary feather on the left wing) that was not present on its right P9. Comparing photos from Ithaca to the photos from Ontario shows the same quirk in primary pattern, as well as identical pale streaking through the wing coverts, and identical bill and facial pattern. Chris Michener had found the gull on 20 November 2007 at

the Ottawa Valley Waste Recovery Centre near Pembroke, Ontario, and it had remained there until 27 November 2007.

In summary, it seems that this Slaty-backed Gull turned up in Ontario in late November, traveled to Pennsylvania and was seen from late December through mid-January, and then traveled to Ithaca where it was seen from late January through early March. But perhaps most interestingly, while this one individual gull has certainly garnered a lot of attention, there is almost certainly a much broader and increasing trend of wintering Slaty-backed Gulls in the Lower 48 and Canada.

Slaty-backed Gull: Status in North America

The Slaty-backed Gull, an Asian bird, usually occurs in North America only in western Alaska. In the winter of 1983-1984, the first North American Slaty-backed Gull outside of Alaska and British Columbia showed up along the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri (Goetz et al. 1986). Until recently, the species has remained an extremely rare visitor to the Lower 48 and Canada, most often in the Pacific Northwest.

Recently, however, the species' wintering status has changed. I tracked Lower 48 and Canada reports of Slaty-backed Gulls for the winter of

2007-2008, and found reports of 29 different sightings of the species (these were reports deemed acceptable by the author, not necessarily records endorsed by regional bird records committees). This total was much higher than the 11 found in winter 2006-2007 (Ilf and Lovitch 2007), which at the time was a huge total. All winter 2007-2008 reports of Slaty-backed Gull in the Lower 48 and Canada were of birds found between 35 and 50 degrees north latitude. Though not particularly surprising, it is worthwhile to note that this latitude zone is mirrored in the core winter range of the species in eastern Asia (Howell and Dunn 2007).

At present, I am not aware of any particularly compelling theories that explain why Slaty-backed Gull records are increasing so dramatically in the Lower 48 and Canada. Investigation into potential population size changes and potential changes in wintering distribution, or migration phenology in Asia, would be needed to draw any solid conclusions about this phenomenon. I do suspect that, to at least some extent, a contributing factor is the ever-increasing interest in gulls among the birding community, as well as increased awareness of Slaty-backed Gull occurrence and identification.

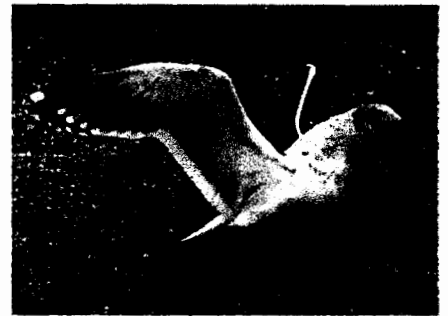


Plate 4: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), underwing showing gray/white/black tri-tone effect caused by the gray inner vanes of the primaries, "string of pearls" obvious. (Tom Johnson)

Identification

The general topic of Slaty-backed Gull identification is still not completely solved, mostly due to uncertainty regarding the status of hybridization between Slaty-backed Gull and other northern Pacific taxa such as Glaucous-winged and Vega gulls. It has been suggested that hybrids might constitute some of the records from the Eastern United States which were of fairly pale-mantled adults (King and Carey 1999). As of

this writing, I have found no references describing the variation of mantle color in subadult Slaty-backed Gull; therefore, at present I find it reasonable to consider the Ontario/Pennsylvania/New York bird a pure Slaty-backed Gull even though its mantle would be considered suspiciously pale (and thus suggestive of hybrid ancestry) if it was an adult.

Thoughts on upperparts coloration in adult Slaty-backed Gulls have varied considerably over time. Gustafson and Peterjohn (1994) suggest that the mantle shade of adult Slaty-backed Gulls varies from slightly darker than California Gull (light end) to darker than wymani Western Gull (dark end). However, more recently, King and Carey (1999) reported that they could not find significant variation in upperparts coloration of adult Slaty-backed Gulls in the field, and that paler birds observed out of range should be scrutinized carefully for signs of hybridization.



Plate 6: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), in flight showing head streaking and "string of pearls". (Tom Johnson)

However, the bird in question is clearly not an adult since it shows a combination of pale-marked wing coverts and tertials, reduced apical spots on the outer primaries, blackish spotting on the tail, and a bill with considerable amounts of black. Without considerable field experience with the species, and a lack of published description of variation in upperparts coloration of subadult Slaty-backed Gulls, I find it difficult to know what to think of the Ontario/Pennsylvania/New York bird's upperparts coloration, which appeared at times slightly lighter or very similar to nearby *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull, certainly lighter than typical adult Slaty-backed Gulls. So, though I thought the bird to be a Slaty-backed



Plate 5: Slaty-backed Gull (right) at Ithaca, NY (23 Jan 2008), profile in comparison to Herring Gull showing bulky structure with deep belly, bright pink legs (in original color photo), and fierce look; note the primary step (gap) between P7 and P8, also noted on bird at Tullytown, PA. (Tom Johnson)

Gull from the outset, I decided to be safe and take King and Carey's advice, and have studied the bird carefully for any other phenotypic signs of hybridization aside from mantle coloration.

Physical Description of the Gull

Size & structure: large; intermediate between Herring and Great Black-backed Gull with proportionately small head and large chest and belly; medium-length wings for a large gull, with 2-3 primary tips extending beyond the tail at rest.

Head: pale with dark brown smudging around eye, especially below eye; another dark smudge along frame of auriculars, and lighter brown streaking on crown and down the back of the neck; also brown streaking extending down along breast, forming breastband of spotting pointed at the center.

Bill: fairly long and sturdy without strong gonydeal angle; extensive pale horn-colored mandible base, tip of maxilla and mandible, and spotting around nares; rest of bill dark brown to blackish; at distance, appears black with pale tip.

Eye: irides straw colored, flecked with brown/black.

Legs: dark pink/purple; medium length with a short length of tibia exposed below feathering when standing.

Tail: white with several small, barely noticeable black spots near tip.

Tertials: wide white tips forming broad white crescent at rest, bases dark gray with pale mottling and small amounts of black mottling.

Upperwing coverts: dark gray streaked with low-contrast pale markings suggesting subadult plumage.

Scapulars/Mantle: uniformly clean dark gray, rear/lower scapulars tipped widely with white, forming a second crescent on the folded wing.



Plate 7: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), profile showing the details of folded primaries well, including underside of left P10. (Tom Johnson)

Primaries: on folded wing, 4-5 primary tips visible beyond tertials, with a noticeable gap between the tips of P8 and P7; P5-P10 with small, isolated white tips and variable black subterminal markings, ranging from a small black subterminal band across P5 to extensive black on the majority of the outer vanes of P8-P10; inner vanes



Plate 8: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), in profile showing upperparts tone, pink legs (in original color photo), wide white tertial crescent, light blotchy streaking on head/neck. (Tom Johnson)

of all primaries gray except for white/black near tips; large white mirror on P10 on both inner and outer vane; white “moons” or tongue tips on P5-P8, “forming string of pearls”; left P9 has small round white mirror, but this is absent on right P9; otherwise, primary pattern is symmetrical; underside of primaries mostly pale gray except for subterminal black and white forming obvious “string of pearls”.

Secondaries: dark gray with broad white tips clearly wider than any other local taxa (Herring, Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Ring-billed), especially obvious in flight.

Elimination of other species/hybrids:

Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) [Unrecorded in Pennsylvania]: Though mantle color is similar to paler Western Gulls, this gull had stronger head streaking and a slimmer bill than is typical for Western Gull. Furthermore, the large amount of white in the primaries eliminates Western Gull, as does the degree of gray on the underside of the primaries, where Western Gull would show much darker coloration.

Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*) [A common wintering gull in eastern Pennsylvania]: The gull was noticeably smaller than Great Black-

backed Gulls in the immediate area with a significantly paler mantle than all Great Black-backed.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) [An uncommon to locally common wintering gull in eastern Pennsylvania, uncommon on Lake Erie, and casual to accidental elsewhere in the state]: This gull was significantly larger than Lesser Black-backed Gull but had a similar mantle tone compared to birds seen in eastern North America—the western Lesser Black-backed Gull, (*L. f. graellsii*). Most adult and near-adult Lesser Black-backed Gulls show yellowish legs, though some apparently pure birds have pinkish legs (the Slaty-backed showed dark pink/purple legs). This gull showed a shorter wing point in relation to the tail, wider trailing edge to the secondaries, thicker bill, and much more white in the primaries than Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Vega (Herring) Gull (*L. argentatus vegae*) – [unrecorded in Pennsylvania; still considered by the AOU to be a subspecies of Herring Gull but regarded by many authorities to be a separate species, *L. vegae*]: Though this gull (and Slaty-backed Gull in general) has a “string of pearls” primary pattern similar to Vega Gull, its mantle is darker than found in Vega, which itself is darker than American Herring Gull, *L. a. smithsonianus*, and the bird’s

thick, deep-bellied structure is atypical for Vega.

Western Gull x Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. occidentalis* x *L. glaucescens*) [Unrecorded in Pennsylvania]: Western Gull x Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids are very common on the west coast of the United States and outnumber pure birds in some locations. Due to apparently clinal phenotypes ranging from paler birds in the north (where Glaucous-winged is common) to darker birds in the south (where Western Gull prevails), this hybrid is quite variable in appearance. Though many characters of these hybrids can approach Slaty-backed Gull in appearance (primary pattern, upperparts coloration), the combination on the subject bird of a thinner, less angular bill, deep-bellied structure, dark upperparts—darker than many Western x Glaucous-winged hybrids, and a classic “string of pearls” primary pattern showing no gray bleeding into areas that should be black, eliminates this hybrid combination.

Lesser Black-backed x Herring Gull (*L. fuscus* x *L. argentatus*) [Rare in winter in eastern Pennsylvania]: Lesser Black-backed Gull x Herring Gull hybrids are probably only safely identifiable in adult plumage. Most individuals of this hybrid combination show characters intermediate between the two parent species, with upperparts lighter than *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull, and pink or pinkish legs. However, these hybrids come nowhere near matching the bulk, size (hybrids are generally smaller than Herring Gull, much smaller than Slaty-backed Gull), primary pattern, or wide white secondary bar seen on the subject bird.



Plate 9: Slaty-backed Gull at Ithaca, NY (27 Jan 2008), showing straw-colored eye (in original color photo), dusky smudging around eye and along auricular frame; also showing stout dark bill with horn-colored tip and spots. (Tom Johnson)

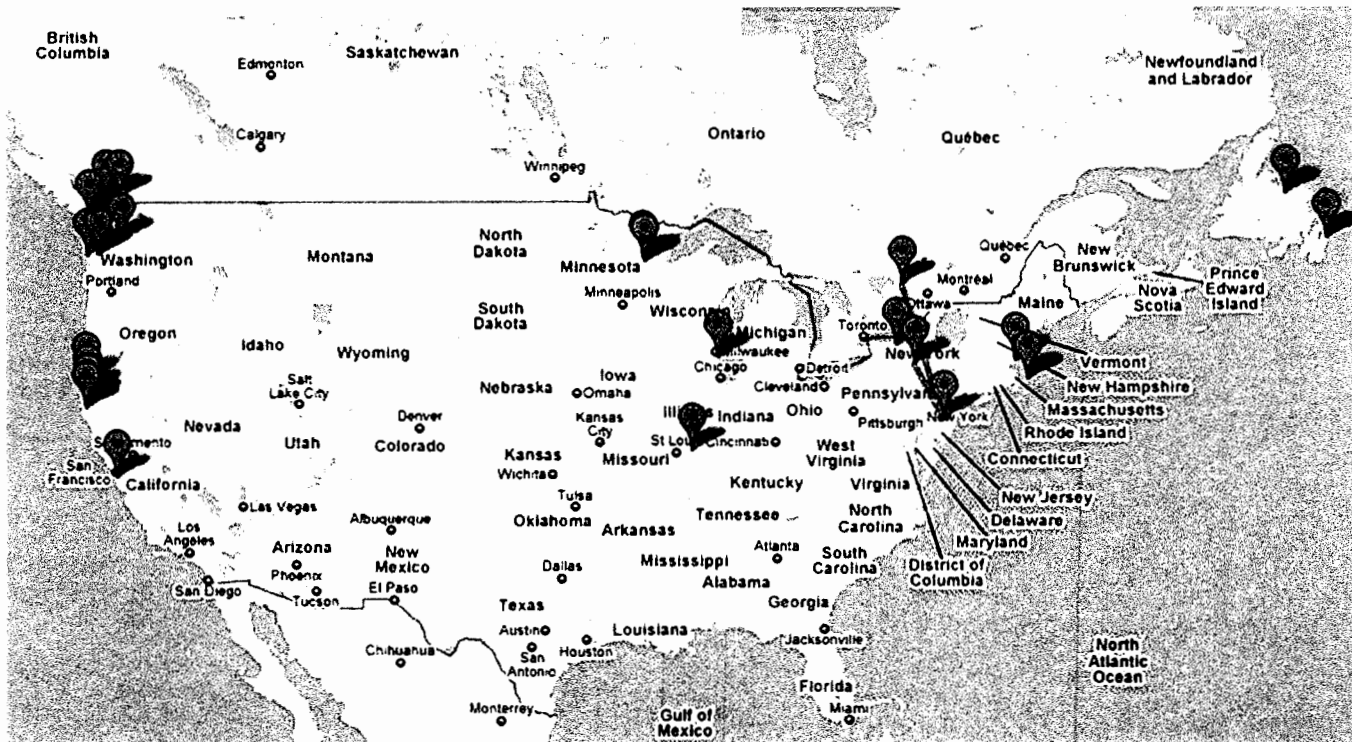


Plate 10: Locations of Slaty-backed Gulls in the Lower 48 and Canada during winter 2007-2008. Created using Google Maps <<http://maps.google.com>>.

Conclusion

Careful study of the subject gull in Pennsylvania and New York has convinced me that it is a pure Slaty-backed Gull and that other species and various hybrid combinations can be ruled out with a high degree of certainty. If accepted by the respective regional bird records committees, this individual would represent the fourth or fifth record for Ontario (Ian Richards, Ontario Bird Records Committee, pers. comm., 20 February 2008), the fourth or fifth record for New York (Jeanne Skelly, New York State Avian Records Committee, pers. Comm., 21 February 2008), and the first record for Pennsylvania. The photographic documentation of an individual vagrant gull at three sites in separate states/provinces is likely a novel case, and certainly highlights positive effects of modern photography and the communication of bird reports and photographs via the internet.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Bruce DiLabio, Mike Harvey, Marshall Iliff, Alvaro Jaramillo, Paul Lehman, Bruce Mactavish, Andrew McGann, Jay McGowan, Kevin McGowan, Chris Michener, Nick Pulcinella, and Osao & Michiaki

Ujihara for sharing their thoughts on Slaty-backed Gulls.

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The Large Gulls of North America. A video from the Advanced Birding Video Series hosted by Jon Dunn and produced by John Vanderpoel. Peregrine Video Productions (1997) DVD.

Slaty-backed Gull – expert comments based on photos from NY

In addition to my documentation of the gull, I've attached some personal emails I received in regard to the identification, several of which were written by experts with lots of experience with gull identification including Slaty-backed Gulls. These comments were made upon viewing the set of photographs I took in New York and which are included with this documentation of the gull in Pennsylvania.

Alvaro Jaramillo (California birder, tour guide, responsible for finding and documenting many Slaty-backed Gulls in CA): *I would have no trouble accepting your bird as a fine Slaty-backed if I was on a committee that would have to deal with this record.*

Bruce Mactavish: *I know birders in British Columbia and I know someone who works summers in western Aleutian. Both people report pale SBGU that they assumed were hybrids of some sort. The paleness of the Ithaca might be enough to indicate hybrid. However the shape, structure, patterns all look classic for SBGU.*

Osao & Michiaki Ujihara (Japanese gull aficionados): *We feel the mantle of your bird is within the range of Slaty-backed Gull, and other features (overall structure, leg color, wing pattern etc.) also seem good for Slaty-backed Gull. In our experience, mantles of Slaty-backed Gulls are not as dark as American birders often expect. We attached some photos of Slaty-backed Gull we took at Sakawagawa-river Kanagawa prefecture yesterday. Those don't look quite dark, but are normal individuals.*

Jon Dunn (co-author of Gulls of the Americas, editor of National Geographic field guide): *I certainly would have been inclined to call this a Slaty-backed, with some reservations, namely the mantle seems a bit pale. Also, the bill seems a little thick tipped and the eye is perhaps not as strikingly as pale as I would like. So, perhaps it could have some glaucous-winged genes in it. But who knows?*

PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM

SPECIES (common and scientific name): **Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*)**

Subspecies, if known: **N/A**

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS: **1** SEX(ES): **unknown**

AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S) (e.g. immature; adult in breeding plumage; year for gulls; basic or alternate if you prefer those terms; state of molt if applicable: **winter (basic) adult/near-adult**

DATE OF OBSERVATION: **21 December 2007** TIME: **9:15-9:25 am EST**

LOCATION (city, borough, township):

Tullytown, Tullytown Borough, Falls Township, Bucks County

EXACT SITE (e.g. name of park, lake, road): **Franklin Cove, Waste Management- Tullytown Landfill**

OBSERVER REPORTING:

Name: **Justin Bosler**

Address: **2074 Jarvis Road**

City: **Lancaster** State: **PA** ZIP: **17601**

e-mail (optional): **jebybo1@lsu.edu** phone (optional): **717-475-9998**

OTHER OBSERVERS (only those who saw and identified the bird with you): **Tom Johnson, Andy McGann, Devin Bosler**

HABITAT (e.g. mowed field, woodland edge, any other details): **open pit of landfill adjacent to Franklin Cove and Delaware River**

DISTANCE TO BIRD: **~500 meters**

VIEWING CONDITIONS (sky, weather, position of sun relative to you): **Relatively overcast with a few breaks in the clouds allowing sunlight through. Sunlight or angle of sun was not a problem given the cloud cover, and the ceiling was relatively high providing plenty of light.**

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT: **Zeiss Victory FL 8x42 binocular and Nikon Fieldscope 60ED w/ 45x optical zoom**

DESCRIPTION (Include as much detail as you observed size relative to other species present; "jizz"= e.g. posture, body shape, and proportions; colors and patterns of plumage; bill, eye, and leg characteristics; other features relevant to this individual):

A large, dark-mantled gull comparable in size to a larger Herring Gull, however, stockier with a barrel-chested, relatively short-legged appearance. Noticeably larger than nearby Lesser Black-backed Gull (LBBG), but smaller-bodied, even shorter, than Great Black-

backed Gull (GBBG). The dark mantle was several shades lighter than GBBG, and very similar to that of *graellsii* LBBG, except the bluish-gray tinge made it appear a shade or two lighter than that species. Most notable features on the dark grayish mantle were the broad, white scapular and tertial crescents. A combination of these two marks were boldly recognizable at a distance, and the extensive white on the posterior upper-surface of the folded wings when the gull was facing away was striking. Although mostly white below, a fair amount of dark streaking was evident on the head and nape, but appreciably less so than LBBG. The diffuse dark streaking on the head was densest around the eye, a coalescing effect. Wingtip projection relatively short, not long as in LBBG, or even HERG, but the primary projection was particularly obvious with 4 bold, white primary apical tips visible beyond the wide tertial crescents. Poor, unsatisfactory looks were had at the extended wings, so I was unable to pin down the white subterminal tips in the outer 5 primaries, which is useful in separating a possible GBBG x HERG hybrid. Possibly late in fourth calendar year, given the dark smudging on the distal 1/3 of the bill, however, the base was pale yellowish/flesh. Overall, the bill appeared thick, but fine details invisible at distance. The tail appeared wholly white, which is typical of near-adults/adults.

(Please use an additional page if necessary.)

BEHAVIOR (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing): **The gull was seen resting near the crest of the landfill for several minutes and then took flight with other nearby gulls. However, it remained close to the open pit during the entire observation. I only viewed this gull at rest, and lost it amid the hundreds of gulls once it took flight.**

VOCALIZATIONS: **No voice was heard.**

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE IF ANY: **No supporting evidence obtained.**

Photograph _____ Video recording _____ Audio recording _____ Drawing _____

Photographer/recorder/illustrator:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

e-mail (optional) _____ phone (optional) _____

Please include a copy of the photograph or recording with your report, and accompany it with a complete written

documentation if the identification is obvious to you. If you made a drawing, please include it.

IF THIS IS A DEAD BIRD:

General condition: N/A

If collected (by permit), location of specimen if known: N/A

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES (how you eliminated others):

Separated from GBBG by overall smaller size (not as tall or hefty); lighter shade of mantle; dark streaking on head coalescing around the eye; more rounded head; broad, white scapular and tertial crescents; bright pink legs; and smaller, less angular bill.

Separated from LBBG by slightly larger size (clearly more barrel-chested); bluish-gray shade of mantle; reduced amount of dark streaking on the head; broad, white scapular and tertial crescents; 4 bold, white primary apical tips beyond the tertials; bright pink legs in wider stance (more squatty). 'String of pearls' feature was not assessed due to insufficient looks at extended wings.

Dark bluish-gray shade of mantle and upperwings eliminated HERG and HERG x LBBG hybrid. Additional notes in description above.

DISCUSSION Anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

SBGU sightings are increasing in frequency across North America, and particularly so outside of Alaska from central CA to NL. As vagrancy to the continental U.S. becomes more of a pattern (successful winter returnees) the sightings will continue to increase. There has been a considerable up-tick in the occurrence of SBGU over the past three years. Possibly the result of increased awareness, but more likely portraying a small invasion of this species into the Lower 48. As of late winter 2007, two decades after the second Lower 48 record, no fewer than eleven Slaty-backed Gulls were found (Iliff and Lovitch 2007). Over half of the accepted regional records (Northeast to Mid-Atlantic) came from last winter (2006-2007). Recent SBGU reports (Dec 2007) come from Wisconsin, Illinois, and New York. [Postscript note: 3 separate adult/near-adult SBGUs photographed in MA (first state records) between 23-24 Dec 2007].

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND/OR SIMILAR SPECIES: Previous experience with SBGU limited to a single (long-staying) summer adult on Lake Superior, Grand Marais, MN on 5 August 2006. Experience with GBBG and LBBG extensive on Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

ARE YOU POSITIVE OF YOUR IDENTIFICATION ? (why or why not):

Yes, 100% positive. Similar species were easily separated and appearance matched solidly with current taxonomic description of this NE Asian species.

REFERENCES CONSULTED:

During observation: None

After observation: 2004. H. Larsson and K. M. Olsen. Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia.

2007. M. J. Iliff and D. Lovitch "The Changing Seasons: Foods for thought" North American Birds 61, No. 2: 213-215.

DATE OF THIS REPORT: 21 December 2007

SIGNATURE OF OBSERVER: Justin Bosler

PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM

This form is presented as a convenience and guide. It can be used if desired, but is not necessary for submitting a report. Species requiring documentation are those on the Review List or not on the Official List of Birds of Pennsylvania. Send documentation to:

Nick Pulcinella, Secretary
Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee
613 Howard Ave.
West Chester, PA 19380
nickpulcinella@comcast.net

SPECIES (common and scientific name): **Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*)**

Subspecies, if known:

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS: **1**

AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S) (e.g. immature; adult in breeding plumage; year for gulls; basic or alternate if you prefer those terms; state of molt if applicable): **basic (winter) 4th cycle adult/near-ad.**

DATE OF OBSERVATION: **21 December 2007** TIME: **9:15 AM EST**

LOCATION (city, borough, township): **Bucks County: Tullytown, Falls Township**

EXACT SITE (e.g. name of park, lake, road): **Industrial park at Franklin Cove, nr. Delaware River, adjacent to landfill**

OBSERVER REPORTING:

Name: **Devin Bosler**
Address: **2074 Jarvis Road**
City: **Lancaster State: PA** ZIP: **17601**
e-mail (optional): debybo1@lsu.edu phone (optional): **(717) 203-1795**

OTHER OBSERVERS (only those who saw and identified the bird with you): **Tom Johnson, Andrew McGann, Justin Bosler**

HABITAT (e.g. mowed field, woodland edge, any other details): **Open pit of landfill w/ surrounding freshwater impoundments and river.**

DISTANCE TO BIRD: **ca. 500 meters**

DURATION OF OBSERVATION: **~5 min.**

VIEWING CONDITIONS (sky, weather, position of sun relative to you): **Overcast w/ patches of sun, 36 degrees F, wind ENE at 5-15 mph. Sun angle low and to the left of the gull; sun not a factor due to low ceiling.**

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED: **Nikon Fieldscope 60ED 40x optical zoom, Zeiss Victory FL**

DESCRIPTION (Include as much detail as you observed – size relative to other species present; “jizz”= e.g. posture, body shape, and proportions; colors and patterns of plumage; bill, eye, and leg characteristics; other features relevant to this individual): **At rest, the gull appeared large and bottom-heavy, substantially larger than surrounding American Herring (AMHG) and Lesser Black-backed Gulls (LBBG). Approaching the size of Great Black-backed Gull (GBBG), but slightly less robust. Scope views aided in assessing the shorter-legged appearance relative to other gulls. The mantle**

was a dark slate blue-gray, much lighter than GBBG and even a shade or so lighter than LBBG. A broad white scapular and tertial crescent was very conspicuous at a distance, which initially made this gull suspicious. A short wing-tip projection was evident, giving the gull a short-winged appearance, much shorter than LBBG. On the primaries, were noticeable white apical spots, which are rather subtle or absent on adult LBBG. The tail appeared entirely white w/ no black markings. A smooth, rounded-head appearance was noticeable on the gull, not square-headed like GBBG. The head and breast were largely clean white with fairly noticeable darker streaking on the rear of head, nape, and neck. Denser streaking/smudging was concentrated around the eye revealing a 'sunken-eye' appearance. Iris color was difficult to assess from the distance. The strong bill showed dark subterminal smudges, which may have been a 'retarded' third-winter trait. The legs appeared bright pink, evident at a distance, not yellow or pale as with LBBG. In the brief flight observation that followed, the extensive white mirrors on the outer primaries were evident. The diagnostic wing-tip pattern was apparent, though only glimpsed a few times on the extended wing. Also distinctive was the broad white trailing edge to the secondaries.

(Please use an additional page if necessary.)

BEHAVIOR (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing): **Observed at rest on berm of landfill and seen briefly in flight.**

VOCALIZATIONS: **N/A**

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE IF ANY:

Photograph: **Unfortunately no, but Tom obtained a few diagnostic photos**

Video recording: **No** Audio recording: **No** Drawing: **No**

Photographer/recorder/illustrator:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

e-mail (optional) _____ phone (optional) _____

Please include a copy of the photograph or recording with your report, and accompany it with a complete written documentation if the identification is obvious to you. If you made a drawing, please include it.

IF THIS IS A DEAD BIRD:

General condition

If collected (by permit), location of specimen if known

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES (how you eliminated others): **See description above.**

DISCUSSION – Anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it: **The gull was seen well at a distance by all four observers. Over the past few years, Slaty-backed Gull has become an annual vagrant to the Pacific Northwest and California. Since then, SBGU has been turning up with increased regularity throughout the Midwest and Northeast. SBGU is now an almost expected/highly anticipated winter vagrant to major gull aggregations in the NE, such places as Tullytown in PA. All observers were aware of this recent trend in SBGU vagrancy, and therefore prepared for the identification in advance, if ever presented with this rare opportunity.**

(Please use an additional page if necessary)

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND/OR SIMILAR SPECIES: **Familiar only from an alternate adult observed in Grand Marais, MN on 5 August 2006.**

ARE YOU POSITIVE OF YOUR IDENTIFICATION? (why or why not): **Yes**

REFERENCES CONSULTED:

During observation: **Gulls of N.A., Europe, and Asia (Olsen and Larsson 2004)**

After observation: **Gulls of N.A., Europe, and Asia (Olsen and Larsson 2004) and National Geographic Complete Birds of N.A. (Alderfer et al. 2005)**

DATE OF THIS REPORT: **22 December 2007**

SIGNATURE OF OBSERVER: **Devin Bosler, 12:00 PM EST**

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Slaty-backed Gull Larus schistisagus

Date of Sighting: 21 December 2007 to 16 January 2008

County : BUCKS

Location : TULLYTOWN

Observer(s): Tom Johnson, D Farbotnik, D. Bosler et al

Date of Submission: 2008

Submitted by: Tom Johnson, D Farbotnik, D. Bosler et al

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

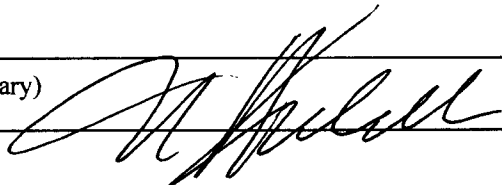
Specimen: No

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							
B. Coulter	X							
E. Rutt K. Fayburger	X							
J. Heller	X							
G. Malosh	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/10

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

7/11/09