

















Tuesday, December 06, 2011

Dear PORC:

I am submitting a record for Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*) in Pennsylvania. It was a first cycle bird seen at Pleasant Hill Park on the Delaware River in Northeast Philadelphia on November 28th, 2011. The bird was observed both on the ground and in the air with my Swift Audubon 10 X 42 binoculars, still in great shape after all these years. I was within 10 yards of the bird at times.

A written account follows, along with a series of 9 photos. The photos were taken with my Nikon P100 camera, which has a 26X optical zoom. Although I did not get any aerial shots, I had great looks at the bird in flight, and will provide a written description. I have e-mailed the photos to Nick Pulcinella, but they can also be viewed at the following URL:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/15846793@N07/>

First of all, this is clearly a first cycle bird. It has no hint of adult coloration starting in on the mantle. The only two ID contenders for this species here are American Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) and Kumlien's Gull (*Larus glaucoides kumlieni*). Once you look at the photos closely, it's fairly straightforward that it's not a Herring Gull, as per the following explanation.

I first spotted the bird on the lawn, where it remained for about 15 minutes. It then flew to the river and landed on a snag just off the shoreline, evident in one of the photos. It stayed there for about 5 minutes more before taking off and heading upriver. I was unable to relocate it. When on the lawn, it was noticeably larger than the Ring-billed Gulls present, but a bit smaller than a single second cycle Herring Gull.

In addition to its smaller size, it had an overall marbled gray and off-white appearance, and was kind of medium gray below. Forget about the possibility of a washed-out young Herring. This bird's plumage looked fairly fresh. First cycle Herrings are brown jobs and NOT crisply marked. Notice the smudge mark around the eye, an atypical pattern for young Herring. Notice the very small, completely black bill. The tertials are mottled gray, not dark brown as in Herring. Even on the folded wing, you can see it lacks the usual brown areas of young Herring. But perhaps most telling are the white tertial crescents, absent in young Herring. Note also how bright pink the legs are in some of the shots.

A more detailed description of the bird in flight will follow, but this bird had a white rump with a contrasting darker tail band, as opposed to a pretty brown rump in Herring. Young Herring above typically has brown primaries and secondaries, with some slightly contrasting paler feathers on the inner primaries. This bird had contrasting darker outer primaries, but there was a distinct sharply demarcated pale gap between the outer primaries and a relatively narrow but solid medium gray band on the secondaries. The

gap was concolor with the rest of the rather pale upperparts. On the underwing, the primaries and secondaries were whitish as in a white-winged gull.

A number of features point to Thayer's Gull as opposed to a very dark Kumlien's. First, if this were a Kumlien's, it would certainly be on the extreme end of darkness. On the sitting bird, note the overall flat medium gray coloration of this bird. You would expect some contrasting white in the plumage on any Kumlien's. The primaries are pretty dark, with contrasting white crescents, perfect for Thayer's. Note the dark smudge around the eye. Note the dark bases to the tertials. The tertials of Kumlien's are much more mottled. In addition, the scapular feathers are dark centered with pale edges. A solid Kumlien's shouldn't approach this pattern. This is subtle, but the face ahead of the eye looks gently sloped and elongated, more like a Herring Gull in this regard. Female Kumlien's at least should show a very round head and steep forehead.

In "Gulls of the Americas" by Steve N. G. Howell and John Dunn, check out photos 36.12 and 36.13 on page 265, which closely approximates the appearance of this bird.

Here is the description of the upperparts that was used in a post to ID-Frontiers, posted by Paul Guris on my behalf but written by me:

"There was quite a bit of contrast on the upperwing. The outer primaries were darker, There was a medium gray secondary bar, several shades darker than the rest of the inner wing. There was a pale gap, concolor with most of the upperwing, between the secondary bar and the primaries. The rump was quite white, contrasting with a solid medium gray tail band. On the underwing, the primaries and secondaries were uniformly whitish like a white-winged gull."

In retrospect, I'm not sure about the "medium gray" on the tail band, only that it was contrastingly darker than the rump. The point is that even a dark Kumlien's would show less contrast above than this bird and other typical Thayer's. This bird in flight closely resembled photo 36.37 on p. 271 of Howell and Dunn but with a more contrasting whiter rump, as opposed to a typical Kumlien's as shown in 35A.36 on p. 258.

Before resorting to ID-Frontiers, I first circulated the photos and my upperparts description locally, and a discussion ensued via e-mail. Here is the gist of the end result of that discussion:

Frank-

It's been a while since I've seen a solid looking Thayer's but I'll dive in with a few comments. First, take a look at BirdFellow's Thayer's Gull account. Go into the ID photos and look at photo #10 taken by Dave Irons who lives in Oregon. I think this bird is a very close match for your bird:

www.birdfellow.com/birds/thayers-gull-larus-thayeri

In addition to the marks that Matt pointed out, there are a few others that I think break

more towards Thayer's than Kumlien's:

a) The scapular feathers are dark centered with pale edges. I don't know that I've ever seen a solid looking Kumlien's approximate this pattern. I think this is a big positive towards Thayer's.

b) The face ahead of the eye looks gently sloped and elongated. I know this is tricky, but if this bird had the very round dove-like head that you can see on female Kumlien's, I'd be leery of it. The bird you found seems to fall well within accepted Thayer's in the West.

I think if this bird was seen on the West Coast nobody would look twice at it as anything but Thayer's. Unless somebody could point to something that breaks more towards Iceland, I'd say that this bird is as good as you can ask for in a first-cycle Thayer's in the East. – Paul Guris

Hey Frank

Just for the record your comments pasted below pretty much seals it for me as good for Thayer's. But I have an almost pathological affinity for uncertainty so I am not totally ready to drop an "almost definitively" qualifier. But that is my problem not yours - and bottom line is I think your bird is as good as it gets for thayer's, even w/out flight shots. – Matt Sharp

And...here are comments made on ID-Frontiers:

Although not from the west coast, I'd call this a Thayer's from a Lake Michigan perspective. Best, Amar Ayyash Frankfort IL

This looks like a perfectly stereotypical juv. Thayer's Gull. Upper parts coloration, tertials, primaries, and bill all look totally middle of the road. Cheers, Tom Johnson

I agree, from a California perspective, looks perfect. Steve Hampton Davis, CA

Hi all

If we saw this in Britain we would be very excited. No indication of hybrid features - in contrast to some recent examples over here. Best wishes, Tim Vaughan, Seaforth, UK

Since Paul Guris posted for me on ID-Frontiers, he received the following private e-mails:

Everybody seems to view this as good for Thayer's – Paul Guris

Here's some other replies that came straight to me (Paul) rather than ID-Frontiers:

Steve Mlodinow (West Coast):

That looks like an absolutely typical THGU. I have not doubt as to its ID. Can't even try to make it into a Herring x GW Gull

Nick Lethaby (West Coast):

Nothing wrong at all from a W. coast perspective. Obviously there is the issue of whether there is anything wrong for a dark Kumlien's but I am not well-qualified to comment on that.

Dave Brown (Newfoundland):

I typically stay away from the Thayer's/Kumlien's Gull conundrum but occasionally I feel compelled, given that I see thousands annually in Newfoundland from all ranges of the spectrum from the palest to the darkest birds. Since we get to see the full variation of Kumlien's Gull we tend to be very conservative when identifying Thayer's and most birds remain as probable Thayer's or are just photographed and left to be looked at again when we know more (if we ever know more).

Overall, this bird looks pretty good for THGU to me. The traits that tend farthest away from Kumlien's Gull are

1) **overall darkness of the underparts** (this can possibly be matched by the darkest 1st winter Kum's)

2) **darkness of the primaries**- the primaries seem a little beyond the darkest possible Kum's and more extensively dark to the wing tips with a narrower more THGU like pale tip. Darker Kum's often have broader pale tips to the primaries. However, we've seen birds that have had primaries that matched this bird were left unidentified because structurally they were tiny and very Kumlien's- like.

3) **darkness of primaries in relation to tertials**- I think this is still a good THGU character. The darker Kum's often do not show as much contrast between the primaries and tertials as real THGU's do.

4) **extent of dark centers of scapulars and median coverts**- the extensively dark centered scaps and wing coverts lend a more HERG- like look and definitely would be at the extreme end (or beyond) what is possible in Kumlien's.

More Kumlien's Gull type features.

I feel there are a couple of things about this bird that look familiar to me namely the size of the bill and head shape and the tertial patter.

head and bill- this birds head and bill look quite tiny and look as though they would not stand out among a group of Kumlien's Gulls. However, what's most reminiscent of Kumlien's Gull is the rounded head shape combined with an apparently shortish bill. This bird looks quite round-headed to me lacking the more sloping forehead that I tend to look

for when searching for THGU candidates among Kumlien's Gulls. Also the bill coloration although fine I'm sure for THGU looks to already be showing signs of paleness on the inner 2/3'd and might be fairly bi-colored prett early in the winter. this is speculative but I think of THGU's as keep a black bill longer than Kumlien's.

tertial pattern- maybe this birds tertials are well within range for THGU, I can't comment on that since I don't know THGU nearly as well as others. However, I can say that the tertials are also within range for a dark Kumlien's Gull as well. They have large white notches and overall considerable marbling which can be shown by dark end Kumlien's.

So, while this bird shows many features typical of THGU there are also some that are within range for Kumlien's as well. Maybe this doesn't mean much and just is merely an indication of the blurred boundaries between these two species but individuals like this are typical of the challenges that we face every winter here in Newfoundland. Before I swayed one way or another on this bird I'd want to see flight shots or shots that allowed comparison with other species. I'm planning on writing something about dark 1st winter Kumlien's on my blog in the near future. If you'd like I can send you a note when i have it completed.

I believe that this is a solid Thayer's Gull. I respect the opinions of your committee on these matters.

Respectfully submitted,
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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Thayer's Gull Larus thayeri

Date of Sighting: 28 November 2011 to 28 November 2011

County : PHILADELPHIA

Location : PHILADELPHIA

Observer(s): Frank Windfelder

Date of Submission: 2011

Submitted by: Frank Windfelder

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	6							
DECISION	6							

Comments: 6/0/1

Signature (Secretary) Nick Pulcinella

Date: 7/11/12