

## A Lesser Black-backed Gull in the Central Valley

Steve N. G. Howell, PRBO, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, CA 94970

On 24 November 2003, following the annual Central Valley Birding Symposium, Jon Dunn and I led a gull identification workshop to the Nimbus Fish Hatchery along the American River in Sacramento County. The workshop concluded at 1200, after four hours of watching the various gull species present. We had great opportunities to compare California (*Larus californicus*), Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*), and Mew (*L. canus*) gulls, and to study a few Thayer's Gulls (*L. thayeri*) among the numerous Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*). Because viewing conditions were so good, several people stayed a little longer and, as a result, found a first-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) among the Herring and Thayer's gulls feeding on the opposite bank of the river. We studied the bird with telescopes in excellent light for about an hour, at ranges down to 20 m, and put out the call to local birders, some of whom arrived while we were still watching the bird. Ed Harper and I took some distant record shots while Jon Dunn went for his digital camera and then took digital documentary photos through his Leica telescope. Later, EH and I went around to the opposite bank and took a series of closer-range documentary photos of the bird as it fed with Herring and Thayer's gulls. The bird was seen later that day and through at least mid-December (D. Yee, pers. comm.).

### DESCRIPTION (see Figure 1)

A relatively slender-billed and long-winged "large gull," slightly larger and longer overall than an average Thayer's Gull, slightly smaller and more slightly built than an average Herring Gull; mostly in fairly fresh juvenal plumage but with several postjuvenal scapulars. The main features that drew my attention to the bird were the relatively slender and black bill (which looked slightly deeper at the base than at the gonys); the long and pointed wing projection beyond the tail; and a slightly whiter ground color to the head and underparts than on a Herring Gull — for example, the white vent and undertail coverts, which had relatively sparse dark barring compared to a typical Herring Gull. In combination, these features caused me to call attention to the bird as an apparent Lesser Black-backed Gull. This identification was confirmed when the bird flapped and showed the distinctive upper wing and tail pattern. The primaries were almost uniformly blackish, with the inner feathers only slightly paler and browner. Plain bases to the outer greater upperwing coverts formed a second dark bar in addition to the dark secondaries. Thus the wing pattern recalled a first-cycle California Gull and looked quite different from a first-cycle Herring Gull, which shows a contrasting pale panel on the inner primaries. The uppertail coverts and tail base were fairly bright white with sparse black bars and a

broad, contrasting blackish distal tail band, striking when the tail was spread and very different from the tail pattern of any regularly occurring large gull in western North America. When the bird came out of the water onto a rock, it showed pale, flesh-colored legs, perhaps a shade paler than those of typical first-cycle Herring Gull.

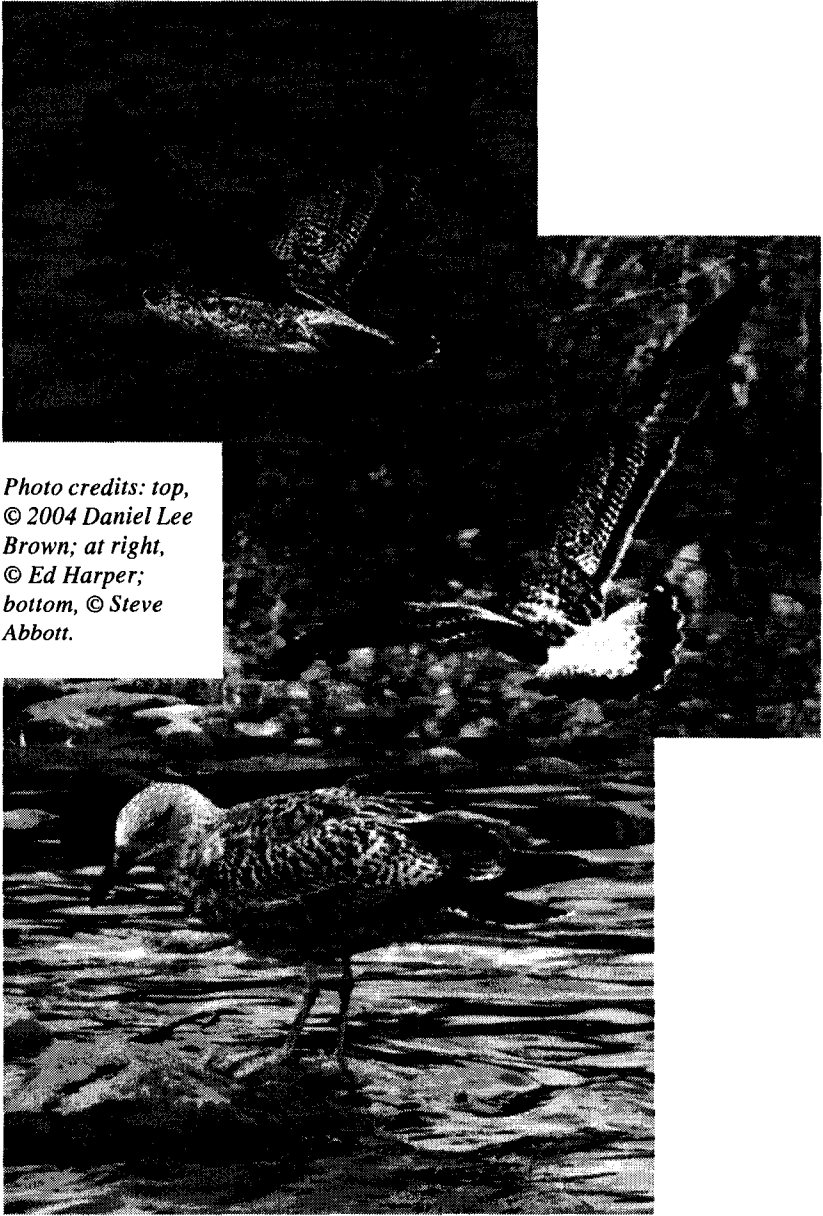
## DISCUSSION

Identification of a first-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull is straightforward relative to that of most other large gulls recorded in North America, such as Herring Gull (see above). Other taxa to consider when identifying a vagrant Lesser Black-backed Gull are western populations of Yellow-legged Gull (*L. cachinnans* of the AOU [1998] but now usually treated as a separate species, *L. michahellis*; see Yésou 2002), which is a Palearctic species accidental in eastern North America (AOU 1998); the Kelp Gull (*L. dominicanus*), a primarily Southern Hemisphere species expanding its range northwards and now recorded from various locations in North America (ABA 2002); and the enigmatic taxon *heuglini*, breeding in north-western Russia and wintering mainly from East Africa to India.

Of the two described subspecies of *L. michahellis*, nominate *michahellis* averages larger, bulkier, and longer-legged than Lesser Black-backed Gull, with a blockier head and stouter bill; an earlier and often more extensive postjuvenile molt (with new feathers often paler gray and barred, similar to Herring Gull); and more extensively and plainer white bases to the outer rectrices. The race *L. m. atlantis*, however, is structurally more similar to Lesser Black-backed Gull, but averages broader wings and a bigger bill (pers. obs.). First-cycle plumages of *atlantis* can also be very similar to those of *L. fuscus*, and study is needed to elucidate identification criteria. Beyond the very low probability of *L. m. atlantis* occurring in California, there may be no single field mark or combination of marks that could eliminate this taxon. The structure of the Nimbus bird, however, including bill size and shape, were all typical of Lesser Black-backed Gull and gave no reason to consider Yellow-legged Gull.

A first-cycle Kelp Gull is similar overall in plumage to Lesser Black-backed Gull but is a bulkier and broader-winged bird with shorter wing projection beyond the tail tip and a bigger bill, the latter typically deeper at the gonydeal angle than at the base. First-cycle birds average a broader black tail band and have duller, duskier flesh-colored legs than are typical of Lesser Black-backed Gull. The Nimbus bird did not resemble Kelp Gull in any of these characters.

The taxon *heuglini* is considered a race of Lesser Black-backed Gull by the AOU (1998), on the basis of the breeding range they ascribe to the latter, but it is increasingly treated as a separate species, Heuglin's Gull (*L. heuglini*; see Yésou 2002). No reliable identification criteria are known to separate first-cycle birds from Lesser Black-backed Gull, but given current



*Photo credits: top,  
© 2004 Daniel Lee  
Brown; at right,  
© Ed Harper;  
bottom, © Steve  
Abbott.*

**Figure 1.** First-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull at Nimbus Fish Hatchery, Sacramento County. Top and middle photos: Note upperwing pattern (blackish remiges only slightly paler on inner primaries, plain dark bases to outer greater wing coverts) and blackish distal tail band contrasting with mostly white uppers and tail base. Bottom photo: Note overall build, bill shape and size, whitish ground color to underparts with relatively sparse bars on vent and undertail coverts; dark bases to outer greater coverts obscured for most part by flank feathers.

AOU taxonomy, this does not affect the species-level identification of a Lesser Black-backed Gull in North America at present.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull is a rare bird in California, with 19 accepted records through 2001 (Garrett and Wilson 2003); of these, only one has involved a first-cycle bird, which was at the Salton Sea from January to March 1998, and only four have been in northern California (California Birds Record Committee, unpubl. data). The Nimbus bird thus represents a first Sacramento County record as well as the first record of the species from the Central Valley.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the staff of the Central Valley Birding Symposium for their hard work and for setting up the workshop; all of the workshop participants; and Jon Dunn and Ed Harper for confirming the identification and helping document the record.

#### LITERATURE CITED

American Birding Association. 2002. ABA Checklist: Birds of the Continental United States and Canada. American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, CO.

American Ornithologists' Union. 1998. Checklist of North American birds. 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.

Garrett, K. L., and J. C. Wilson. 2003. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 2001 records. *Western Birds* 34: 15-41.

Yésou, P. 2002. Systematics of *Larus argentatus-cachinnans-fuscus* complex revisited. *Dutch Birding* 24:271-298.

[Editor's Note: Dates when the photographs shown in Figure 1 were taken are as follows: Top-- 2 December 2003; Middle-- 24 November 2003; Bottom -- 6 December 2003. Additional photographs of this bird (and other species) may be viewed in the photos section of the CVBirds listserv page ([http://photos.groups.yahoo.com/group/central\\_valley\\_birds/1st](http://photos.groups.yahoo.com/group/central_valley_birds/1st)).]