

The bird is in flight feather molt and one or two outer secondaries have been dropped, P1-P6 are new, P7 is growing (~1/2 - 2/5 grown), and P8-P10 are old.

The bird is obviously one of the very-dark-backed large gulls, as the mantle looks, in all except a minority of light conditions, to be as black as the wingtips. Even in the light conditions where the mantle looks SLIGHTLY paler than the wingtips, the color is still, as Chris called it, "inky," not the slaty color of Great Black-backed (GBBG) and Slaty-backed (SBGU) gulls. The darkness of the mantle easily rules out all but GBBG, SBGU, KEGU, fuscus Lesser Black-backed Gull (LBBG or fuscus, which is the southern form least likely to turn up in the New World), and the Australian taxon, Pacific Gull.

We can easily eliminate Pacific Gull from consideration on a number of aspects, not the least of which is range. However, that taxon sports a wide, black subterminal tail band in adult and adult-like plumages, which our bird lacked. Also, though our bird had a substantial bill, Pacific Gull's bill is truly ridiculous in its massiveness.

We can also easily rule out any and all LBBG taxa, as the bird was at least Herring Gull sized (though we never saw it near a Herring Gull - there was only one on the reservoir) and dwarfed even the California Gulls. Additionally, the bill on the thing was larger than any LBBG would have. The white trailing edge to the wing was also much wider than is shown by LBBG. Finally, the head was, as far as we could tell, unstreaked, despite having conducted quite a bit of its Pre-Basic molt - in that stage of molt, I would expect LBBG to show at least some darkish head streaking.

Okay, now things get a bit harder. In general, we can eliminate both GBBG and SBGU on leg color alone, as the bird had legs that looked, depending upon the light, somewhat palish yellow-green to a medium-intensity yellow (with the slightest hint of orange). However, soft-parts color can be unreliable, as there are weirdo individuals in all gull taxa, so we will push on.

At this point, we need to age the thing and try to determine which plumage it is sporting. So, the black mantle and upper wing coverts indicate that it is at least in its third plumage year, as do the adult-like secondaries and inner primaries (dark-based with wide, white tips) and the spotless, white tail. However, there are features that suggest that the bird is not a full adult: the smattering of brownish upper wing coverts and the unmarked (that is, no white tips, no white mirrors) outer primaries. However, upon examining the poor in-flight photos I got, two of them show that the outermost primary (P10) on the left wing, has a small, indistinct mirror that we definitely did not note in the field. So, I would guess that the bird is either molting from Alternate III (or Alternate IV, if it's a laggard) to Definitive Basic.

In these near-adult plumages, both GBBG and SBGU usually sport obvious P10 mirrors, with GBBG often showing an extensively-white tip to P10. Both can also sport small P9 mirrors at this point.

The mantle coloration is also too dark for SBGU and, possibly, even for GBBG. The gull in question also has a very wide, white trailing edge to the secondaries and inner primaries formed by large white tips to the individual feathers. SBGU also displays this feature, but GBBG does not. The primary projection (the length of the longest primary extending beyond the tip of the tail) is quite long. GBBG has fairly short primary projection. SBGU has strong head streaking in Basic.

So, the various features - leg color, wingtip pattern, primary projection, head pattern, and width of trailing edge - combine to eliminate both GBBG and SBGU. Though any

particular individual GBBG or SBGU might show one aberrant feature (e.g., yellow legs), the likelihood of any particular individual of these species sporting aberrations in ALL of these features is infinitesimally miniscule (that means, "small"). All of these features, as displayed on the bird in question, are consistent with an identification as KELP GULL.

One additional comment: Dick Newell, one of the best gull people in the world, has seen Steve Messick's pictures on the Surfbirds website and responded, "All aspects of structure and soft part colour (except the iris of course) seem spot on. The Colorado gull seems to lack a mirror on P10, explained because it is growing a primary so the outer primaries are of a subadult."

Enoy,

Tony Leukering
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