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# First Slaty-backed Gull for Minnesota

Philip C. Chu

On a Lake Superior beach in Grand Marais, Cook County, during the early evening of 21 July 2006, Ken and Molly Hoffman found a large adult gull that was dark above. Because its large size (similar to that of a Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*) and dark upperparts were combined with deep pink legs and a broad white trailing edge to the upperwing, the Hoffmans identified it as a Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*), Minnesota's first.

On the strength of the Hoffmans' report, additional observers arrived on 22 July, and more characteristics supporting the identification were recorded.

(1) Six outer primaries — P10 (the outermost primary) through P5 — were either mostly black or had black marks near their tips (Figure 1).

(2) P10 had a large white subterminal mirror (*sensu* Grant 1978) that occupied both the inner and outer webs of the feather, and that was separated from the feather-tip by a narrow but complete black strap (Figure 1).

(3) P9 had no white subterminal mirror (Figure 1).

(4) For P8 through P5, the tongue (Dwight 1925) — the gray (in this case, dark slate gray) area occupying the proximal portion of each feather — was tipped with white, so that, for each, a white area separated the gray of the feather base from the black near the feather-tip (Figure 1). The white tongue-tip on P8 was narrow, whereas those on P7, P6, and P5 were broad. (The series of white tongue-tips was dubbed a "string of pearls" by Goetz *et al.* [1986], and is arguably the



Slaty-backed Gull, 22 July 2006, Grand Marais, Cook County. Photo by Anthony X. Hertzell.



**Figure 1. Slaty-backed Gull wingtip pattern, Grand Marais, Cook County, 22 July 2006. Photo by David A. Cahlander.**

best-known field mark for an adult Slaty-backed.)

(5) The irises were yellowish — whitish yellow for the right iris and a darker yellowish-olive for the left iris. (The darker left iris was associated with disheveled feathers in the ocular region on the left side of the head, and both were commonly attributed to an injury inflicted by a Herring Gull on 22 July.)

(6) The narrow ring of bare skin surrounding each eye was pink with a purple tinge.

All of the above features and more were documented in the photographs and written reports submitted to the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, and after reviewing that documentation and discussing it at the committee's 30 July 2006 meeting (Svingen 2006), the committee voted unanimously to accept the record (Svingen 2007a).

Characteristics like the ones noted above were easy to see because of the Slaty-backed's unexpectedly passive behavior. It permitted observers to approach to within about ten yards; closer approaches prompted a more active response, but even that often consisted of

little more than walking or running away for a short distance. Moreover, when interacting with other birds, the Slaty-backed was usually nonaggressive. For example, when observers tried to attract it using bread, popcorn, and the like — incidentally attracting Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) and Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) as well — the bird typically ate only those pieces of food for which it did not have to compete. If another bird pursued a piece of food, then the Slaty-backed made no obvious attempt to obtain the item in question.

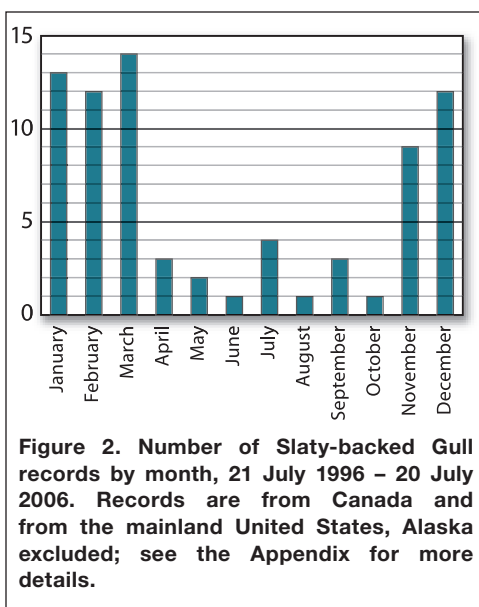
The Slaty-backed was seen continuously through 14 August, and during that time its passive behavior, together with the dark external (ecto-) parasites that were often plainly visible on its face, led to speculation that it was in poor condition. Given that speculation, few were surprised when Richard Franta found the bird dead on the beach on the morning of 15 August. The salvaged carcass was donated to the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History, where it is presently in preparation.

Preparation has thus far yielded the following information (A. Kessen, pers.

comm.). The bird was a female. Its stomach was empty, except for some of the small stones that birds often swallow to provide hard surfaces for grinding ingested food; additionally, it was emaciated, with no fat evident and the flight muscles wasted — the latter an indicator that those muscles were being broken down to provide energy. Finally, though ectoparasites were visible in the field, none were noted during specimen preparation, perhaps because the members of some ectoparasite groups quickly abandon a dead host in order to search for a new one (e.g., Clayton and Walther 1997).

Svingen (2007b:531) wrote that the Slaty-backed Gull was “long anticipated in Minnesota,” and, indeed, speculation to that effect was published 20 years ago (Eckert 1987). Anticipation of a Minnesota Slaty-backed was based largely on records in nearby states and provinces: preceding the Minnesota record were three records from Ontario (Bain 1992, Yukich and Varella 2000, Wormington 2007), three from Illinois (Snetsinger *et al.* 1984, Robinson 1989, Petersen 1992), and one record each from Iowa (Fuller 1989), Wisconsin (Frank 2006), Indiana (Brock 1994), Michigan (Reinoehl 2000), and Manitoba (Koes and Taylor 2002). The Iowa record and the second Illinois record pertain to the same bird, recorded in both states as it moved about their mutual border, the Mississippi River.

While noting that the Slaty-backed Gull was an expected addition to the Minnesota bird list, Svingen (2007b:531) also stated that it was “predicted by no one to appear in late Jul[y].” Indeed, a review of published accounts for 21 July 1996 through 20 July 2006 — i.e., for the ten years preceding the Minnesota record — revealed that, of the 75 *schistisagus* records from Canada and the mainland United States (Alaska excluded), 60 (80%) refer to birds that were discovered between the beginning of November and the end of March (Figure 2). July records that predate Minnesota’s do exist, but there are just four, and all of them, as well as the single records from June and August, are from the



**Figure 2. Number of Slaty-backed Gull records by month, 21 July 1996 – 20 July 2006. Records are from Canada and from the mainland United States, Alaska excluded; see the Appendix for more details.**

northern Canadian territories — Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon.

Given the above, one could argue that a Slaty-backed Gull found in Minnesota in July has no geographic precedent; however, the bird in question was found during 2006, a year with an unprecedented number of records for the species. For the period between January and mid-July 2006, i.e., for the half-year before the Minnesota bird was found, there are 17 published *schistisagus* records east and/or south of Alaska, nearly double the maximum of nine reported in any previous full year.

### Acknowledgments

Ann Kessen kindly provided the information that she recorded during her ongoing preparation of the Slaty-backed Gull specimen, and pointed out that, once a host dies, its ectoparasites often leave the carcass; Anthony Hertzler prepared Figure 2; Steve Dinsmore, Jim Frank, Don Gorney, and Alan Wormington provided information about the Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ontario records, respectively; Dinsmore, Frank, Gorney, and Wormington, together with Janet Hinshaw and Peder Svingen, helped to identify literature that I could cite; and David Cahlander

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### Appendix

Published records of Slaty-backed Gulls for the period 21 July 1996 – 20 July 2006 were compiled primarily from seasonal surveys in *North American Birds*. Records compiled from *North American Birds* were then supplemented by information from several additional sources: seasonal surveys in *Birders Journal*; Frank (2006); the Ontario Bird Records Committee (A. Wormington, pers. comm.); and the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (Brogie 2003). The latter two were used to identify published reports that had not been not accepted; once identified, such reports were removed from the compilation.

Note that the search for published records from Canada and the mainland United States excluded Alaska. Alaska was excluded because the number of Alaskan records cannot be determined from *North American Birds* seasonal surveys: in Alaska, Slaty-backed Gulls occur often enough that the surveys list only high counts, reports from unusual locations, and so forth.

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