

First records of Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* for Trinidad and Barbados

Floyd E. Hayes, Graham L. White, Martin D. Frost, Bryan Sanasie, Howard Kilpatrick and Edward B. Massiah

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La Gaviota Cocinera *Larus dominicanus* es una especie típica del hemisferio sur, que ya ha sido registrada en algunas localidades de Norteamérica desde 1987, y ha sido encontrada nidificando en Louisiana, EEUU, desde 1990. Se presentan las evidencias fotográficas y descripciones de por lo menos dos Gaviotas Cocineras adultas en Trinidad entre el 8 de julio de 2000 y el 10 de febrero de 2001, y otra adulta en Barbados entre el 6 y 10 de diciembre de 2000. Por lo menos una gaviota en Trinidad pareció ser de la raza nominal con el ciclo reproductivo del hemisferio del norte; la de Barbados pareció ser de la raza *vetula* de Africa. Estos registros, los primeros en una inmensa región con pocos observadores, sugieren que la especie puede ser naturalmente vagabunda, más frecuentemente de lo que se cree actualmente.

Introduction

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* is a large, black-backed gull of the Southern Hemisphere. Two subspecies are currently recognised: the pale-eyed nominate race breeds in southern South America, Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand and Southern Ocean islands, whereas dark-eyed *vetula* is restricted to southern Africa^{2,3,9,11,14,20}. In western South America, it has not been reported north of Ecuador, where breeding was first reported in 1993¹⁰. In eastern South America, it has not been reported north of 10°S in Brazil¹⁶.

Kelp Gulls of the nominate race have recently appeared at various localities in North America, mostly along Gulf of Mexico coasts. In Mexico, Kelp Gull has been photographed in the Yucatán Peninsula (since 1987)¹² and Tamaulipas (since 1998)⁷. In the USA, it has been photographed in Louisiana (since 1989)^{4,19}, Texas (since 1996)¹⁵, Indiana (1996)¹ and Maryland (since 1998)¹³. Moreover, since 1990, a few Kelp Gulls have bred regularly on the Chandeleur Islands, Louisiana, where they have hybridised with Herring Gulls *L. argentatus*^{4,19}. They appear only during the breeding season and disperse thereafter, possibly to Texas and Mexico, where there are winter records^{7,12,15}.

Given the surprising range extension and colonisation of North America, it may be expected to pass through the Caribbean and north-east South America, where gull flocks were seldom monitored until recently. Here we present photographic evidence and descriptions of the first Kelp Gulls for the region, in Trinidad and Barbados.

Trinidad observations

On 8 July 2000, FEH and BS were studying an adult and two second-summer Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus graellsii* among 57 Laughing Gulls *L. atricilla* on a mudflat at Waterloo (10°29'N 61°28'W), when they were joined by a larger, darker backed gull. It was carefully studied at rest and in flight,

from as close as 100 m, between 18h02 and 18h20. FEH suspected it was a Kelp Gull, which he had previously seen in Argentina, but was unfamiliar with the darker races of Lesser Black-backed Gull. Other resident birders were immediately notified. GLW relocated it on the mornings of 9–10 July 2000; on the latter date, he obtained a series of photographs that included direct comparisons with Lesser Black-backed and Laughing Gulls (Fig. 1).

The head, neck, underparts, rump and tail were immaculately white, indicative of an adult. The back and upperwing were black with a slight brown wash, considerably darker than that of the accompanying adult Lesser Black-backed Gull. There was little or no contrast between the mantle and wingtips. The wing's trailing edge was bordered by a comparatively broad, white band on the inner primaries, secondaries and tertials, which was wider than that of the adult Lesser Black-backed Gull, whose flight feathers were heavily worn. No white mirrors or tips could be discerned on the outer primaries; presumably these had worn off. The underwing had extensive black in the primaries and a faint dark secondary bar.

It appeared 10–15% larger than the accompanying adult and one immature Lesser Black-backed Gull, but similar in size to the other immature Lesser Black-backed Gull. The wingtips extended slightly beyond the tail. There were no apparent differences in wingtip extension among the four large gulls present. The bill was bright yellow with an apical red spot, indicative of an adult; it was notably larger and bulkier than the Lesser Black-backed Gulls, with a more pronounced gonyx. FEH described the legs as 'slightly longer' than those of the accompanying Lesser Black-backed Gulls, though this is not apparent in the photographs. The legs and feet were clearly yellow, though GLW described a 'hint of greenish yellow', supported by the evidence of several photographs, in which the legs appear to have a greenish tinge,

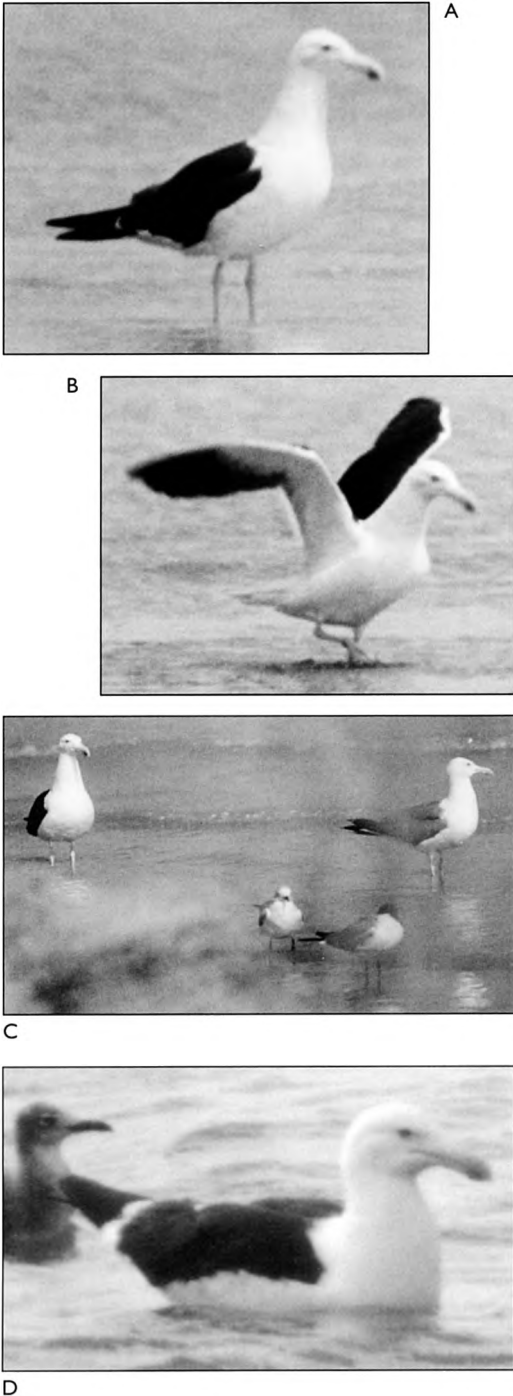


Figure 1. Adult Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* (A–C) at Waterloo, Trinidad, 10 July 2000, with adult Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus graellsii* and Laughing Gulls *L. atricilla* (C; partially obscured by vegetation in foreground) (Graham L. White), and at San Fernando, Trinidad, 10 February 2001, with Laughing Gull (D) (Floyd E. Hayes)

and were slightly duller than the bill. Examination of the photographs clearly revealed a pale iris and reddish orbital ring. The gull walked toward a Lesser Black-backed Gull on several occasions and once gave a long-call (not described). These interactions were presumably aggressive rather than courtship.

Subsequent efforts to relocate it were unsuccessful until 18 September 2000, when HK found what appeared to be a different adult Kelp Gull perched on a boat with Laughing Gulls at San Fernando (10°18'N 61°28'W), 25 km south of Waterloo. Several outer primaries were tipped white and the legs were described as 'halfway between green and yellow'. On 23 September and 1 October 2000, GLW briefly observed an adult in flight just south of Waterloo. On the latter occasion, large patches of white on the upper wings indicated that the coverts were moulting.

All subsequent observations were at San Fernando, where two different adults—one with white-tipped primaries and the other without, though never seen together—were accompanied by up to 1,000 Laughing Gull, five Lesser Black-backed Gull, two Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan* and a Ring-billed Gull *L. delawarensis*. On 7 October 2000, one resting on the water appeared to have worn wing and tail feathers, lacked white-tipped primaries and had large white patches on the upper wings visible

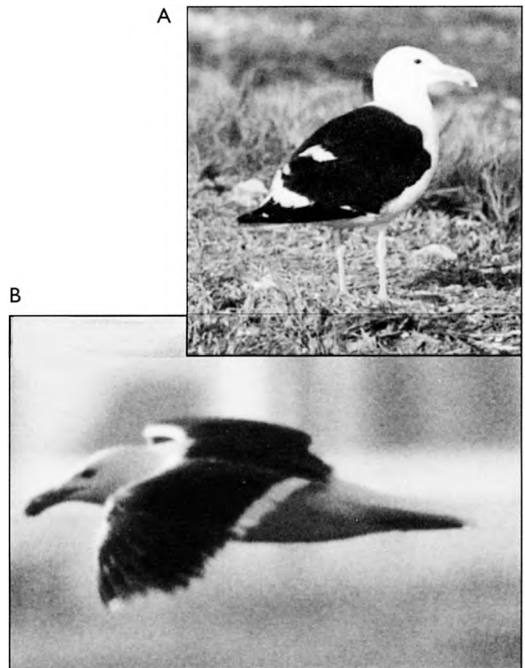


Figure 2. Adult Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* in flight (A) and at rest (B) at North Point, Barbados, 6 and 10 December 2000 (Martin D. Frost)

in flight (FEH; photographed); clearly this was the same individual noted south of Waterloo on 1 October. On 10 November, an adult perched on a boat had a red orbital ring, a pale iris distinctly darker than that of nearby Lesser Black-backed Gulls, only one visible white-tipped primary (p6), extending just beyond the tertial crescent, and distinctly yellow legs only slightly tinged green (FEH; photographed). A distant individual was seen briefly on the water on 9 December (FEH) and 11 December 2000 (HK). On 21 January 2001, one resting on the water had a pale iris and white-tipped outermost primaries, with the tail level with the third visible primary tip (p7) and wing projection shorter than that of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls (FEH); presumably the same bird with white-tipped primaries was seen resting on the water on 22 January (M. Kenefick pers. comm.) and 27 January 2001 (FEH, BS). Finally, on 10 February 2001, one resting on the water definitely lacked white-tipped primaries (FEH, HK; photographed, see Fig. 1).

Barbados observations

On 6 December 2000, MDF found an adult Kelp Gull resting on the ground in a 'shooting swamp' atop coastal cliffs at North Point, St. Lucy (13°20'N 59°37'W). It was observed between 06h45 and 07h15 from 35 m and photographed in flight (Fig. 2a). It was relocated in the same place on 7 December (EBM) and on 10 December 2000 (EBM, MDF; Fig. 2b), but not seen subsequently. No other gulls were present for comparison. Based on the paucity of guano at its favoured site, it was surmised to have arrived recently.

The head, neck, underparts, rump and tail were immaculately white, indicative of an adult. The mantle was black with a slight brown wash, contrasting little with the blacker wingtips. In flight, a broad white band was present on the trailing edge of the inner primaries, secondaries and tertials. A white mirror was visible near the tip of the outermost primary and two white primary tips were visible at rest. It was in fresh plumage with only a few slightly worn primaries.

The large, heavy bill was yellow with a pronounced gonys, apical red spot and yellowish-green tip. No orbital ring could be discerned through a telescope at close range. The iris was dark amber. The legs were greyish green, distinctly greener than the hind leg coloration of a nearby Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*.

Discussion

Only four large *Larus* taxa share such dark mantle coloration: Great Black-backed Gull *L. marinus*, the dark-backed *intermedius* and *fuscus* races of Lesser Black-backed Gull, and Kelp Gull⁹. Both dark-backed races of Lesser Black-backed Gull average smaller than paler backed *L. f. graellsii*, though *in-*

termedius and *graellsii* overlap¹⁸. Great Black-backed Gull is the largest, being approximately twice as large as Lesser Black-backed Gull⁹. The intermediate body size, structure and bill size of the Trinidad gulls were most consistent with Kelp Gull, which has relatively longer legs and larger feet than Lesser Black-backed *L. f. graellsii* and Great Black-backed Gulls⁴; this was noted in one of the Trinidad individuals. The size and structure of the Barbados gull could not be directly compared with other gull species, though the mirror restricted to the outermost primary (p10) eliminates Great Black-backed Gull^{8,9}.

The red orbital ring of one of the Trinidad gulls is shared by all four candidate gulls⁹. The apparent absence of a red orbital ring on the Barbados gull is suggestive of the African race *vetula*, whose orbital ring during the non-breeding season is pale yellow and hardly noticeable¹⁴. The pale iris of at least one Trinidad gull is indicative of the nominate race^{9,14}. The dark iris of the Barbados gull is diagnostic for *vetula*², but South American birds often have a dark iris¹⁴. Lesser Black-backed Gull typically has yellowish legs, Great Black-backed Gull pinkish legs and Kelp Gull mustard-yellow legs that are brighter when breeding, but become greyer in the non-breeding season^{8,9,12,14}. The bright yellowish leg coloration of one of the Trinidad gulls is consistent with both Lesser Black-backed and breeding Kelp Gulls, though the greenish tinge is more consistent with Kelp Gull. The wingtips of Lesser Black-backed Gull (especially the darker backed races) normally extend farther beyond the tail than in Great Black-backed and Kelp Gulls^{9,14}; the Trinidad gulls appeared relatively shorter winged. The greyish-green legs of the Barbados gull eliminates Lesser Black-backed Gull and is consistent with non-breeding Kelp Gull^{9,14}.

The origin of Kelp Gulls in North America has been the subject of much speculation, yet the recent range expansion north to Ecuador¹⁰, absence of known escapees from the few collections of live birds in North America (D. L. Dittmann pers. comm.) and occurrence of multiple birds in widely scattered localities suggest a naturally expanding population. None of our birds demonstrated evidence of hybrid origin⁴. In Trinidad, the worn primaries and brightly coloured bare parts in July and moulting of wing-coverts in October suggest that at least one was an alternate-plumaged bird^{4,8,9,14} that had been in the Northern Hemisphere for some time, rather than a recent vagrant from the Southern Hemisphere. The dark iris, dull orbital ring and dull leg coloration of the Barbados gull indicate it was a basic-plumaged bird possibly representing a transatlantic vagrant of *vetula* from Africa^{2,14}. Such vagrancy is plausible given the recent range expansion of *vetula* along the west coast of Africa, where nesting occurred well north of the equator in Senegal in 1980⁵ and 1983⁶,

and in Mauritania in 1997 when one hybridised with a Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis*¹⁷.

Our documented records of Kelp Gull from a vast region with few observers, combined with scattered recent records from North America and north-west Africa, suggest that natural vagrancy is more frequent than previously recognised. Given the recent breeding attempts by Kelp Gull at similar latitudes in tropical west Africa^{5,6,17}, breeding could eventually occur in colonies of Laughing Gull within our region. The nearest Laughing Gull colony is at Little Tobago, which is often visited by birders, but no large gulls have been reported there. On 22 April 2001, we visited a seabird breeding colony at Soldado Rock, 10 km off south-west Trinidad, but no gulls were present. Resident and visiting birders should be aware of the possibility of encountering this species and be careful not to mistake it for other dark-backed gull species.

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Floyd E. Hayes

Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

Graham L. White

c/o Caroni Ltd., Waterloo Estate, Waterloo Road, Carapichaima, Trinidad and Tobago.

Martin D. Frost

Featherbed Lane, St. John, Barbados.

Bryan Sanasie

Department of Biology, Caribbean Union College, P.O. Box 175, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Howard Kilpatrick

Aquila Semita, 321a San Francique Road, Penal, Trinidad and Tobago.

Edward B. Massiah

c/o Dr. Nelson, Johnson Road, Fitts Village, St. James.