

**An Apparent European Herring Gull
(*Larus argentatus argentatus*)
at Old Field Point, Suffolk County, Long Island**

Old Field Point, on the shore of Long Island Sound in northwestern Suffolk County, NY, was a prime place to view wintering gulls in early 2022. A returning Black-headed, multiple Bonaparte's, a bright white Glaucous, multiple Iceland, and two Lesser Black-backed Gulls mingled with the common three: Ring-billed, American Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls. Of the hundreds of gulls present, a few Great Black-backs and American Herring Gulls displayed varying amounts of yellow on their legs, but on 22 Feb at 11:43 a.m. in good light, one gull stood out from the rest to PD and other observers (including Douglas Futuyma, Barbara LaGois, and Peter Osswald).

Its bright yellow legs and slightly darker mantle tone were very unlike the locally abundant North American subspecies *L. a. smithsonianus*, and also the several variants showing some yellow tones on the legs. PD and Barbara shared photos with SSM and Patricia Lindsay, who studied the bird on 23 and 27 Feb and contributed to online discussions regarding its identity. The bird was seen and photographed by many and was last seen by PD on 30 Mar.

Among the identification candidates proposed in early discussions were Yellow-legged Gull (*L. michahellis*) and hybrids between Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus graellsii/intermedius*). SSM was struck by the bird's strong detailed resemblance to Herring Gull in multiple respects and suggested that variant Herring Gulls should also be considered. It is not unusual for *smithsonianus* to show yellow leg color in late winter and spring, as noted by PD at Old Field Point this winter, and as extensively documented by SSM (unpubl. data). Yellow-legged individuals occur even more frequently among nominate *L. a. argentatus* breeding near the Baltic Sea and in northernmost Europe (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003), and, as these populations also show darker mantles than other Herring Gulls, this possibility was considered as well.

Description—The overall size and structure were very much like Herring Gull, with a heavy bill, broad wings, angular nape and fierce countenance; the mantle tone was subtly but quite clearly slightly darker than *smithsonianus* or Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*); field impressions of this trait were noticeably variable according to lighting and angle, as were photos. The legs and feet were bright yellow, lacking drab pinkish or grayish tones. The bill was clear, bright yellow lacking dusky markings, and the red gonys spot was slightly longer than in most *smithsonianus*, though not as extensive as in breeding-condition *L. fuscus graellsii/intermedius*. The irides were clear yellow, not whitish; the orbital ring was described by several observers as red, though this was not discerned by SSM; the nape was coarsely streaked, whereas the crown and face showed finer streaking, forming a squarish panel around the eye and onto the cheek. The wingtips showed lots of white on pp 9-10 and restricted black on pp 6-8, compared

to most local *smithsonianus* (although probably matched by some). Notably, the apical spots on the primaries were definitely larger than in all *smithsonianus* present for direct comparison, a contrast also evident in large series of photos of Herring Gulls from Long Island. See photos, pages 164-165.

Identification—The large white apical spots and relatively restricted black on the primaries are obvious and distinctive features strongly counter-indicative of Yellow-legged Gull, a taxon anticipated as a vagrant but as yet still unconfirmed in NYS. Although some local *smithsonianus* regularly show yellow legs in late winter and early spring, the color is almost never as clear and pure yellow as in this case. Mantle tone is less variable among local *smithsonianus*, and otherwise typical examples never or almost never appear as dark as this bird. Additional features pointing away from *smithsonianus* include the relatively large red gonys spot, the red orbital ring, and, to a much lesser extent, the wingtip pattern, which shows less black than is present in most populations of *smithsonianus* (northeasternmost populations have least black, resembling *argentatus*: Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003).

Many observers and commentators noted that the mantle and soft parts features counter-indicative of *smithsonianus* are shown by Lesser Black-backed Gull, and some concluded that hybrid *smithsonianus* \times *gracillii/intermedius* was the most likely interpretation. But it is important to note that only two of these features are actually intermediate: mantle tone and the size of the gonys spot. Conversely, the red orbital ring color and yellow leg color are like *gracillii/intermedius* and not at all suggestive of *smithsonianus*. The legs of individuals identified as hybrids in eastern North America almost always show drab pinkish/yellowish tones intermediate between non-breeding individuals of the putative parental species (pers. obs.). Similarly, the Old Field Point bird's yellow iris tone, large overall size, and broad-winged and strong-billed structure are like Herring Gull, not intermediate toward the smaller, slighter Lesser Black-backed Gull. Most importantly, the primary pattern, far from being intermediate between the two proposed parents, is actually beyond many *smithsonianus* in the direction away from Lesser Black-backed Gull. In contrast, known hybrids between Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls have shown intermediate wingtip patterns, including black subterminal bars on primary 5 (absent on the Old Field Point bird), and sometimes even on primary 4 (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003).

Whereas the appearance of the Old Field Point bird poses multiple obstacles to each of the interpretations considered thus far, it is consistent in every respect with northern European populations of *L. a. argentatus*. Compared to other Herring Gulls, these have darker mantles, large apical spots and restricted black in the primaries, and often show red orbital rings and extensive red on the gonys (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003). Interestingly, the very features that render the Old Field Point bird most unlike *smithsonianus*—darker mantle, bright yellow legs and bill, red orbital ring, and extensive red on the gonys—co-occur together

within some populations of *argentatus*, for instance near the Baltic Sea and in northernmost Fennoscandia (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003; Gull Research Organization 2013).

Conclusions—Although acknowledging the points above in a general way, some commentators preferred the hybrid Herring x Lesser Black-backed hypothesis, based on three points: that a northern European origin is improbable for a gull on Long Island; that hybrids between Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are frequent in eastern North America, based on the occurrence of birds appearing intermediate between the two species; and that the present bird's many non-intermediate features are plausible for a hybrid, in view of the sometimes large and unpredictable variability of hybrids in other contexts. We question all three of these points. First, migration and vagrancy from northern Europe to the coastal northeastern United States is well documented among multiple species of gulls and waterfowl, including, ironically, Lesser Black-backed Gull itself; the paucity of records of European Herring Gulls here is surely at least partly a function of the extreme similarity of many adult *L. a. argentatus*, and almost all adult *L. a. argenteus*, to local *smithsonianus* (and also the similarity of immature European Herring Gulls to Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls). Second, the perception that hybrids between Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are frequent in eastern North America is based on records of intermediate-looking birds whose actual identities are almost always unknown. Ironically, the very few documented examples of hybridization have involved multiple combinations of taxa of both species: *graellsii* x *smithsonianus* at Appledore Island, Maine (Ellis 2014); *graellsii* x *argenteus* in Iceland, Britain, and France; intergrade *graellsii/intermedius* x intergrade *argenteus/argentatus* in Belgium and the Netherlands; and *intermedius* x *argentatus* in Denmark (Malling Olsen and Larsson 2003). The intermediate-looking birds presumed as likely hybrids in North America might easily include birds of disparate ancestries, not only from these pairings, but potentially also hybrids of Lesser Black-backed with Thayer's or Kumlien's Iceland Gulls. And some might actually be vagrant Yellow-legged Gulls, or, as we suspect in this case, vagrant *argentatus* Herring Gulls. Finally, arguing that intermediate-looking birds must be hybrids, and that non-intermediate-looking birds are also probably hybrids, does not advance the problem beyond the truism, "it is never possible to rule out a hybrid with certainty."

The Old Field Point bird originated somewhere, in a population of *Larus* gulls. Individuals sharing all of its features occur regularly in northern European populations of *L. a. argentatus*, and these ought to be regarded as the most likely origin for this individual.

Acknowledgments—We thank Ian Davies, Barbara LaGois and Jay McGowan for permission to reproduce their photos and Doug Futuyama for comments on drafts of this note.

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LITERATURE CITED

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Unidentified *Larus*, Old Field Point, *Suffolk*; top: 23 Feb 2022 © Barbara LaGois; bottom: 22 Feb 2022, © Patrice Domeischel. See next page.



Presumed hybrid Lesser Black-backed x Herring Gulls, Stevenson Road Game Farm and Compost, *Tompkins*; left: 20 Mar 2016 © Ian Davies; right: 9 Mar 2022 © Jay McGowan.



Unidentified *Larus*, Old Field Point, *Suffolk*, 22 Feb (left) & 23 Feb (right) 2022, © Patrice Domeischel. Based on overall structure, mantle tone, and wingtip pattern, this bird is thought possibly to be a European Herring Gull (*L. a. argentatus*), northern populations of which have darker mantles than other Herring Gulls, reduced black in the wingtips, and frequently show yellow legs. Presumed hybrids between Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls are similar but typically show more black in the wingtips, duller legs, and other differences. See Note on pp. 136-139.