

Nesting of the Glaucous-winged Gull east of the Washington Cascades

John W. Weber and Richard E. Fitzner



Figure 1. Glaucous-winged Gull on nest in Benton County, Washington. Note the blackish wing tips, evidence of introgression (gene flow) between Glaucous-winged Gull and Western Gull.

THE A.O.U. CHECK-LIST (1983) DESCRIBES the Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) as breeding in North America from the south Bering Sea and southern and southeastern Alaska along the Pacific Coast to northwestern Oregon. In a departure from the A.O.U. Check-list which treats the Glaucous-winged Gull as *Larus glaucescens*, the authors follow Weber (1981b) by merging *glaucescens* with the Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*), to become *L.o. glaucescens*. Although almost exclusively a salt-water nester, the Glaucous-winged Gull has been recorded breeding in Alaska on freshwater

at Iliamna Lake and along the Stikine River (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959), and on Lake Whatcom, a freshwater lake along coastal Washington (Wahl 1972).

A previous report (Rogers 1981) of the Glaucous-winged Gull breeding on Miller Island in the Columbia River in eastern Washington (about 235 kilometers inland from the Pacific Ocean) is presumptive, lacking conclusive evidence of breeding. Gilligan (1981) maintains that the Glaucous-winged Gull has been found to breed along the Columbia River east of the Cascades at one location, but fails to offer conclusive evidence.

In 1981 Fitzner received a report that two adult Glaucous-winged Gulls were seen among a breeding colony of California (*L. californicus*) and Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*) gulls at Island Number 18 (Hanson and Eberhardt 1971 study area) in the Columbia River at Richland, Benton County, Washington, but that no evidence of breeding by Glaucous-winged Gulls was found. Intrigued by this report, the authors and W.H. Rickard visited Island Number 18 on June 8, 1982, to search for a Glaucous-winged Gull nest, which was found and photographed (Figs. 1, 2, 3) by Weber in a colony of nesting California



Figure 2. The same nesting Glaucous-winged Gull shown in Figure 1 among nesting California Gulls.

Gulls. The nest contained two eggs and was the only Glaucous-winged Gull nest found.

Island Number 18, in south-central Washington's Upper Sonoran Zone, is 375 kilometers inland from the Pacific Ocean. The island, 1125 meters in length and 92 meters at its widest point, has a substrate of cobblestone and sand, with *Artemisia absinthium* as the dominant plant species. At the time an estimated 3000 pairs of California Gulls were nesting on the highest ground available (the central part of the island); approximately 2800 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls were also nesting on the periphery of the *californicus* colony, generally closer to the river and at lower elevations than the California Gulls—a typical nesting pattern when breeding *californicus* and *delawarensis* share an island in the Columbia River. On the downstream tip of the island was a nesting colony of approximately 85 pairs of Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*). All nesting birds, with the exception of the Glaucous-winged Gull pair, were segregated by species.

The Glaucous-winged Gull nest was 12 meters from the island's south shore near the midpoint of the island and 1.5 meters above the highwater

mark. The distance to the nearest *californicus* nest was 1.2 meters, and the nearest *delawarensis* nest about 115 meters distant.

No check was made subsequently to determine the nesting success of the Glaucous-winged Gull pair.

Since 1954, the year Glaucous-winged Gull was first recorded (appar-

ently as a spring transient) in eastern Washington, this species eventually established itself in this region as a regular winter visitor in small numbers (Weber 1981b). A breeding record from south-central Washington represents a further step in the establishment of the Glaucous-winged Gull in the interior of the Pacific Northwest.



Figure 3. The two-egg nest of the Glaucous-winged Gull in Figure 1.

Glaucous-winged Gulls usually have gray wing tips, but as a result of extensive interbreeding between Western and Glaucous-winged gulls along coastal Washington, intergrades between the two forms are common. Many Glaucous-winged Gulls approach Western Gulls in wing-tip darkness, and Figure 1 shows that the nesting Glaucous-winged Gull on Island Number 18 was probably not a pure Glaucous-winged Gull.

Note the massive bill of the pictured bird, its robust size and mantle coloration relative to the California Gull in Figure 2, the angular rather than rounded head shape, and the dark eyes. Typical Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) of the race *smithsonianus* (the race occurring in North America) have pale or yellow eyes, relatively lighter mantles than the pictured Glaucous-winged Gull, and more slender bills (Weber 1981b). Robust overall size, stout bill, and angular-shaped head eliminate Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*). In a further departure from the A.O.U. Check-list, which treats Thayer's Gull as *Larus*

thayeri and Iceland Gull as *Larus glaucoides*, the authors here treat Thayer's Gull as a race of the Iceland Gull (Weber 1981b, Ratti 1984), to become *L. glaucoides thayeri*. The pictured bird most closely resembles Western Gulls; however, typical Western Gulls have darker mantles than California Gulls which in turn have darker mantles than Glaucous-winged Gulls. Also, typical Glaucous-winged Gulls have lighter colored eyes than the bird pictured and identified as Glaucous-winged Gull. Although not evident in the photographs, leg coloration of the bird in question was pink. These field characters rule out the possibility that the pictured gull is either a Herring or Thayer's gull.

LITERATURE CITED

AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Check-list of North American Birds. Sixth edition. Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas.
 GABRIELSON, I. N., and F. C. LINCOLN. 1959. The Birds of Alaska. Stackpole Co., Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

GILLIGAN, J. 1981. [Untitled]. in published comments to the editors. *Continental Birdlife* 2:126.
 HANSON, W. C., and L. L. EBERHARDT. 1971. A Columbia River Canada Goose Population, 1950-1970. Wildlife Monographs No. 28. The Wildlife Society.
 RATTI, J. T. 1984. Selected avian systematic problems in the Northwest: The 1983 A.O.U. Check-list. *Northwest Science* 58: 237-242.
 ROGERS, T. H. 1981. Northern Rocky Mountain-Intermountain Region. *Am. Birds* 35:960-963.
 WAHL, T. R. 1972. Glaucous-winged Gull nesting at Lake Whatcom, Bellingham, Washington. *Murrelet* 53:51.
 WEBER, J. W. 1981a. The *Larus* gulls of the Pacific Northwest's interior, with taxonomic comments on several forms. Part 1. *Continental Birdlife* 2:1-10.
 ———. 1981b. The *Larus* gulls of the Pacific Northwest's interior, with taxonomic comments on several forms. Part 2. *Continental Birdlife* 2:74-91.
 ———. Dept. of Civil and Mechanical Engineering, Texas A & I Univ., Kingsville, TX 78363 (Weber); Ecosystems Dept., Batelle, Pacific N.W. Laboratory, P.O. Box 999, Richland, WA 99352 (Fitzner)



Glaucous-winged Gull flying right. North Pacific Ocean. Photo/Ron Naveen.