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Spotted On The Hill

The Black-headed Gull (A Rare Bird – Finally!)

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY PETER VANKEVICH

With my 45th consecutive monthly column and after spending most weekend mornings when in town looking to photograph birds on Capitol Hill, I finally came up with a rare bird, i.e. observed far outside of its normal distribution range. In this case, perhaps the story of finding the bird is almost as interesting as its life history. So let's start with the fun stuff first and also explain why these photos that depict a bird with a decidedly not-black head are not a misidentification or photo editor error!

While on a canoe trip out of the Anacostia Community Boathouse up to Kingman Island on the morning of Sept. 20, there were plenty of birds to be seen. Out in the river, several Caspian Terns were doing their typical

feeding behavior by diving into the river, dozens of Forster's Terns and Double-crested Cormorants were in flight or resting on the pilings around the many boats in the mariners. Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons were perched on the trees along the banks of the Anacostia River.

Rather amazingly, a large number of Laughing Gulls – perhaps more than one thousand – were roosting on the docks near the Sousa Bridge. As I scanned them, one gull drew my attention, because it had reddish legs. Laughing Gulls this time of year have dark gray legs. Further looks revealed a reddish bill, definitely a contrast to the dark bills of the Laughing Gulls. Equally important was a dark smudge on the sides of the head suggesting strongly that it was one of the hooded gulls that had molted out of its breed-

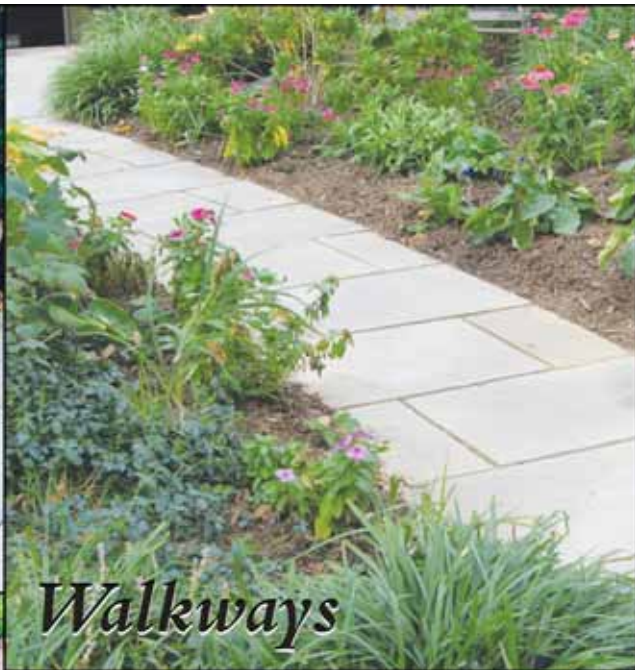


ing plumage. I took several pictures, including catching it with raised wings.

When I got home, I studied the photos and sent some to my friend John Beetham, who runs an excellent website called "A DC Birding Blog" (dendroica.blogspot.com). We concluded that this was a Black-headed Gull. Knowing this would be a rare bird, I checked with the MD/DC bird records committee. This bird has been reported as being observed within the District only four other times.



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So why is this such a rarity? The Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) is found primarily in the Palearctic, i.e., one of the eight ecoregions that divides the Earth's surface and includes Europe, Asia north of the Himalaya foothills, northern Africa, and the northern and central parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Over the past century or so, this gull has been expanding its range east.

First reported in Iceland in 1911, by 1975 the island nation had approximately 10,000 breeding pairs. It was first reported in the United States in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1930. The first nesting record in North America occurred in New Foundland in 1977, and a small population now breeds on some islands of the upper Gulf of St. Lawrence.

It is an opportunistic feeder and will consume fish, insects, worms, seeds and general table scraps. My first encounter with this species was one early spring in the mid-1980s when it was hanging out in the beach parking lot on Chincoteague Island. Had I been inclined, which I was not, I could have fed it popcorn. Humph – rare bird indeed!

In spite of its name, during breeding season it is identified by a dark brown – not black – hood along with a light gray mantle and, importantly as noted above, a red bill and legs. By early August, it begins its seasonal molt to what is referred to as basic plumage, and the head retains just a trace of dark color but is primarily white.

I noted above that there are only four – now five – records of the Black-headed Gull being observed within the District of Columbia. Does this mean that it has been here only four times? Almost certainly not. Noteworthy bird reports require both skilled observers and rare birds being in the same place at the same time. These days the DC area has many outstanding birders who spend a lot of time in the many habitats of the region and is perhaps a primary reason there are more exciting reports of rare birds.

If you have any comments or come across any interesting birds on the Hill that could be a feature for this column, feel free to contact me at petevankevich@gmail.com. ★