

NOTES

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**FIRST CERTAIN RECORD OF CALIFORNIA GULL
(*LARUS CALIFORNICUS*) IN FLORIDA**

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The status of California Gull (*Larus californicus*) in Florida, prior to this record, is unresolved. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) placed California Gull on their unverified list, while Stevenson and Anderson (1994) placed it on their accredited list (see Woolfenden et al. 1996). I follow the criteria of Robertson and Woolfenden (1992). Gulls in their third winter were photographed in Pinellas County in 1978 and 1979; species identification was not considered certain although the birds probably were California Gulls (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Following the ambiguous photographs, six sight observations of California Gulls have been reported. The Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC) rejected two reports; two undetailed reports never reviewed by the FOSRC lack documentation (Baker 1991a, b; Stevenson and Anderson 1994); and two detailed reports (a bird seen in late October 1982 [Stevenson and Anderson 1994] and an adult in February 1983 [Powell 1986, FOSRC]) are valid, although formal documentation is lacking for each. Both valid reports occurred on the peninsula, one on Gulf coast (Pinellas County), the other on the Atlantic coast (Brevard County).

I discovered a first-winter California Gull at Apalachicola, Franklin County, on 26 September 1998, when Hurricane Georges was more than 300 km offshore. Sustained winds at Apalachicola were about 50 km. The bird was associated with a mixed flock of gulls, terns, and skimmers resting on a partially flooded vacant lot at the tip of a small peninsula at the mouth of the Apalachicola River. Large numbers of larids occur at this site during severe storms. I compared the California Gull to a first-winter Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) and two Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*). I approached the California Gull to within 8-10 m on numerous occasions from 0815-0915 hr. The bird rested on its breast several times, suggesting it was tired, but otherwise it appeared to be healthy. It flew short distances (< 50 m) when flushed, which afforded excellent views of its plumage, especially the wings. The bird finally flew out over the river and bay and was not seen again.

The predominantly brown California Gull appeared considerably smaller and slimmer than the Herring Gull, and somewhat larger than the Ring-billed Gulls, although photographs (Tall Timbers Research Station Photo Collection [TTRS] P17-19; TTRS P20, Fig. 1) only document its size and proportion compared to Laughing Gulls (*L. atricilla*). The proportionally slender bicolored bill of California Gull was sharply defined, the basal two-thirds to three-quarters pink, the tip blackish (TTRS P17-19; TTRS P20; Fig 1). The eye was dark, the legs and feet pale pink. The bird lacked any gray plumage. The rear crown, nape, and hindneck to the foreneck was brown streaked with white. I repeatedly observed the double-secondary bar, the anterior bar fainter, when the bird flew. A portion of the double-secondary bar was also visible on the closed wing of the sitting bird (Fig. 1). The primaries and primary coverts were entirely dark brown above and below except for a touch of white on the inner primaries, unlike first-winter Herring Gull which had large whitish patches near the wrist. The tail of California Gull was entirely dark brown and contrasted sharply with strongly barred upper- and undertail coverts. Some broken barring was present on the lower flanks. The bird was silent.



Figure 1. California Gull in first-winter plumage at Apalachicola, Franklin Co., Florida, 26 September 1998 (middle foreground of photograph; TTRS P20). See text for description. Note the relatively large size (in comparison to Laughing Gull), slender bicolored bill, and double secondary bar. Photo by D. B. McNair.

Although some first-winter Herring Gulls have bicolored bills (Harrison 1983), the small size, proportionally slender bicolored bill, and a portion of the double secondary bar indicate that the bird I observed was a first-winter California Gull. I did not observe any intermediate characters, which eliminates the possibility that the bird was a hybrid (Harrison 1983, Chase 1984). This record was unanimously accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (99-392).

The California Gull that I observed was present one month earlier in autumn than the other autumnal report in Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994), which was also a first-winter bird. The majority of juvenile California Gulls disperse from the breeding grounds soon after fledging and before adults, often arriving on their winter range (Pacific coast) in July (Winkler 1996). Most California Gull populations have been increasing (Conover 1983, Jehl et al. 1988, Paul et al. 1990, Yochem et al. 1991; J. R. Jehl unpubl.; see Winkler 1996 for an alternative explanation); therefore, it seems likely that dispersing individuals, especially immatures, have probably been overlooked during autumn in Florida. During winter in the Southeast, California Gulls have occurred regularly in coastal North Carolina (usually at Cape Hatteras) since 1993 (Tove et al. 1998) and first reported in Alabama in 1996 (Duncan 1996).

In summary, the California Gull at Apalachicola is the first certain record for Florida, and the California Gull in Florida, therefore, should be elevated to the verified list (cf., Robertson and Woolfenden 1992).

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