

## SHORT NOTE

### First record of Franklin's gull (*Larus pipixcan*) in New Zealand

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A black-headed gull was observed feeding in a flooded paddock next to Tomahawk Lagoon, Dunedin (45°54'20" S, 170°32'13" E) on 2 July 2002 by David York. We both observed this bird on that day and again the following day under good light conditions. The bird was easy to find and was approachable to within about 30 metres. It spent most of the time feeding amongst red-billed gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*), which made assessment and comparison of size, shape and colours simple.

The bird was first seen by Dave York on 2 July 2002 and last seen by Peter Schweigman on 3 July 2002. The landowner informed us that it had been in the area for about a week and a half.

Slightly smaller and slimmer than a red-billed gull, appearing more pointed at the back end (due to longer folded wings), legs slightly shorter than red-billed gull, bill about the same length but slimmer especially towards tip.

Head an intense black, with the clearly demarcated hood not extending far down the nape. Prominent thin white crescents above and below the eye. Underparts white with a faint pink blush on the lower breast.

Back, scapulars and wing coverts slate grey, distinctly darker than red-billed gull and separated from the black hood by a white hind neck. Folded primaries white tipped with a narrow black subterminal band and one or two white mirrors. White primaries with black spot just visible before they merged with broad white ends to the folded secondaries.

Flight graceful, almost tern like, the wings appearing long and narrow especially in comparison with red-billed gull. In flight, upper wing grey with a broad white trailing edge. Outer primaries white at tip with black sub-terminal band distinctly separated from grey by white

band. Underwing white, appearing much paler than Red-billed Gull. The underwing tip pattern was not noted. Rump, upper and under tail white.

Leg colour recorded as dark and the bill "dark, slightly red" and "dark red". Both legs and bill could well have been muddy.

There are 14 gulls that have dark heads during the breeding season (del Hoyo et al 1996), 10 of which are similar in size and shape to our bird: Franklin's gull (*L. pipixcan*), brown-headed gull (*L. brunnicephalus*), brown-hooded gull (*L. maculipennis*), black-headed gull (*L. ridibundus*), Bonaparte's gull (*L. philadelphia*), Saunders' gull (*L. saundersi*), Mediterranean gull (*L. melanocephalus*), laughing gull (*L. atricilla*), Sabine's gull (*L. sabini*) and relict gull (*L. relictus*).

All except Franklin's gull and relict gull can be eliminated by upperwing pattern alone although most have other obvious differences as well. Information about relict gull is scarce and somewhat contradictory (Harrison 1987, Enticott & Tipling 1997, del Hoyo et al 1996), but as far as we could determine the wingtip pattern of relict gull is similar to Franklin's, but the upper wing appears to be paler, the white trailing edge less distinct and the black wingtip less clearly separated from the grey upper wing by a band of white. In addition relict gull appears to be larger: one of the "medium sized gulls" with a length of 44 cm (del Hoyo et al 1996). This is larger than the published length for red-billed gull (Heather & Robertson 1996, Harrison 1983) which in turn seemed to be slightly larger than our bird. The hood of relict gull is described as dark chocolate brown on the forehead and base of bill, only becoming black further back (Enticott & Tipling 1997). Our bird's hood was strikingly black all over.

We checked several other references (Kaufman 2000, Lewington et al 1991, National Geographic Society 1988, Pringle 1987, Sibley 2000, Tuck & Heinzel 1978) and they confirmed our conclusion the bird was a Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*) in full breeding plumage. The OSNZ rare birds committee unanimously accepted this as the first confirmed record of the species in New Zealand.

Franklin's gull breeds during April to August in inland North America, mainly in the Canadian states of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and across the United States border into Montana, the Dakotas and Minnesota. It moves south in winter to the Gulf Coast, Mexico and the Pacific coast of Peru and Chile (Endicott & Tipling 1997, Sibley 2000). Vagrants have occurred along the eastern Atlantic coastline from western Europe to South Africa, and traversed the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii and eastern Australia (Enticott & Tipling 1997,

Higgins & Davies 1996, Lewington et al 1991, Pringle 1987).

Many of these extralimital records have been of immatures or adults in winter plumage. An adult in full breeding plumage at the height of the nesting season, half a world away from its breeding grounds, in the wrong hemisphere, seems extraordinary. But perhaps, at the time, it was not quite so unusual? Birds in similar plumage were recorded near Adelaide, Australia on 22 July 2002 (Stafford 2002), Hungary in 5-16 June and 20 July 2002, Sicily on 18 and 22 June 2002, the Netherlands, on 5 July 2002 (Van den Berg 2002). At least seven Franklin's gulls were found in late June and early July 2002 in South Africa. (Van den Berg 2002).

There is also evidence that the species has occurred in New Zealand before. Most convincing is a photograph, held at Te Papa, taken by Mike Fraser in the mid 1980s of a black-headed Gull sitting on Crater Lake, Raoul Island, Kermadecs, New Zealand. "Several people have seen the photo and agreed it was a Franklin's gull". (S. Bartle, pers. comm.)

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