

FIRST RECORD OF GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*LARUS MARINUS*) IN
NEVIS, WEST INDIES

MARK MICHAEL LUDLOW^{1,2}

¹PhD Candidate, Ornitho-Archaeology, University of Wales, Lampeter, United Kingdom; E-mail: MMLBird@aol.com; ²Current addresses: 501 Slaters Lane #1022, Alexandria, Virginia 22314, USA; & Blue Roofed House (Blue Monkey), Oualie Lane South, Oualie Bay, Nevis, West Indies

Abstract. --- I observed and photographed a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) daily from 12 through 20 March 2007 at Oualie Bay, Nevis, The Federation of St. Christopher & Nevis, West Indies.

Key words. --- Caribbean, Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*, Nevis.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*LARUS MARINUS*)

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) is rare on Puerto Rico from October to March and a vagrant elsewhere in the West Indies where recorded from the Bahamas, Cuba, Hispaniola, St. Martin, St. Barthelemy and Barbados (Raffaele *et al* 1998; Brown and Collier 2004). It is cited that, 'wanderers to the West Indies tend to be subadults' (Raffaele *et al* 1998: 289). In this note I photographically document the first record for the Caribbean in Nevis.

Great Black-backed Gull breeds in North America and the Palearctic. In North America it breeds along the Atlantic coast from northern Quebec, northern Labrador and Newfoundland south to the St. Lawrence River, Anticosti Island, and along the coast to North Carolina. It also breeds in southern Ontario (Lake Huron and northern Lake Ontario), New York (Lake Oneida, casually, and northern Vermont (Lake Champlain) (AOU 1998: 193). In North America, this species is known to winter along the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland south to Florida and Bermuda (AOU 1998: 193). This species winters inland in North America on the Great Lakes, rarely on the Gulf coast of Florida, and casually west to southern Texas (AOU 1998: 193). In the Caribbean it is casual south to the Bahamas (Abaco and San Salvador) and the Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, Mona Island, Puerto Rico, St. Martin, St. Barthelemy, and Barbados) (AOU 1998: 193; Brown and Collier 2004).

Since the publication of Raffaele *et al* 1998 and AOU 1998, the following additional sightings in the Caribbean have been reported:

Documented Sightings of Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) in the Caribbean & Bermuda
Noted In *North American Birds* (NAB) Since 1973.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Record</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>No. of Birds ()</u>	<u>Source</u>
-------------	---------------	-----------------	-------------------------	---------------

Summer 2007	---	Bermuda	(1)	NAB. Vol. 61. No. 4
11-20 March 2007	1st record	Nevis (This report)	(1)	NAB. Vol. 61. No. 3
14 February 2007	---	Arawak Cay, New Providence, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 61. No. 2
17 December 2006	---	New Providence, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 61. No. 2
2 March 2006	---	Bimini, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 60. No. 3
12 March 2006	---	Great Stirrup Cay (Coco Cay), Berry Island, Bahamas	(3)	NAB. Vol. 60. No. 3
29 March 2006	---	Taino Beach, Grand Bahama Island, Bahamas	(2)	NAB. Vol. 60. No. 3
Early March 2005	---	Tarpum Bay, Eleuthera, Bahamas	(2—first winter)	NAB. Vol. 59. No. 3
14 January 2005	---	Great Salt Pond, St. Martin	(1)	NAB. Vol. 59. No. 2
25 November 2004	---	Bimini Harbor, Bahamas	(3)	NAB. Vol. 59. No. 1
25 November 2004	---	Rockwell Beach, Bimini, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 59. No. 1
25 November 2004	---	Tarpum Bay, Eleuthera, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 59. No. 1
February 2004	---	St. Martin	(4-5)	NAB. Vol. 58. No. 2
6 February 2004	---	Grand Bahama Island, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 58. No. 2
25 January 2004	---	Dog Island, Anguilla	(1)	NAB. Vol. 58. No. 2
27 February 2004	---	Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Coco, Cuba	(1)	NAB. Vol. 58. No. 2
16 December 2003	---	Grand Bahama Island, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 58. No. 2
April 2003	2nd record	Salt Pond, St. Maarten	(1)	NAB. Vol. 57. No. 3
3 February 2003	---	Green Turtle Cay, Bahamas	(1-imm.)	NAB. Vol. 57. No. 2
12 January 2003	1st record	St. Maarten	(1)	NAB. Vol. 57. No. 2
3 October 2003	---	Nassau Sailing Club, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 57. No. 1
30 November 2002	---	Gibara, Holguin, Cuba*	(1)	NAB. Vol. 56. No. 2
Summer 2000	---	Bermuda	(1)	NAB. Vol. 54. No. 4
7 December 1999	---	Abaco, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 54. No. 2
5-19 December 1999	---	New Providence, Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 54. No. 2
30 December 1999	---	Bermuda	(1)	NAB. Vol. 54. No. 2
13 December 1999	6th record	Barbados	(1)	NAB. Vol. 53. No. 2
22 December 1998	---	Bermuda	(21)	NAB. Vol. 52. No. 2
5 November 1998	---	Grand Bahama Is., Bahamas	(1)	NAB. Vol. 52. No. 1
13 February 1997	---	West End, Grand Bahama, Bahamas	(1-first winter)	NAB. Vol. 51. No. 2
2 October 1996	---	Bermuda	(1)	NAB. Vol. 50. No. 1

8 December 1995	---	North Point, Barbados	(1)	NAB. Vol. 49. No. 2
25 February 1985	---	Mayaguez Harbor, Puerto Rico	(1-imm.)	NAB. Vol. 41. No. 2
6 February 1985	---	Abaco, Bahamas	(2)	NAB. Vol. 39. No. 2

 *Cited as apparent with caution.

NAB includes *North American Birds* (Vols. 53-64 / 1973-1994) and its predecessor publications, *National Audubon Society Field Notes* (Vols. 48-52 / 1994-1998), and *American Birds* (Vol. 27-48 / 1999-2010).

NEVIS

Nevis is a compact oceanic island of volcanic origin with an area of circa 93 km², situated in the northern Lesser Antilles. Politically it is a portion of the two island country, the Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis. The island rises gradually from the shore to a central peak of circa 985 meters and exhibits a range of natural and secondary habitats which include: elfin woodland, montane forest, palm brake, grassland, coastal scrub, dry woodland, and farmland (Robinson and Lowery 2000).

THE RECORDED SIGHTING

I observed and photographed a Great Black-backed Gull from 12 through 20 March 2007 on rocks within ten meters of shore, on the beach, and in the air at Oualie Bay (Mosquito Bay on older maps), Nevis (17°, 12.00' N, 62°, 37.30' W; WGS-84). The gull was studied through binoculars (Swarovski, 10x42 EL) at close range (5-15 m) in morning light and in a variety of lighting conditions for approximately five minutes or more, multiple times a day for approximately nine days. The gull was photographed by Margot Anfinson Britton and Mark Michael Ludlow, on the morning of 20 March 2007 with a Nikon Coolpix 4800 containing an 8.3x zoom feature.

The bird (Figs. 1 & 2) was a worn first winter Great Black-backed Gull (Olsen and Larsson 2004: 128-140).

Identification of gull plumages is not without difficulty and assistance was given for proper identification of this bird (see Acknowledgements). The characteristics of this particular species, exhibited by this particular worn first winter (Basic I Plumage) bird, are as follows: a large gull; the head, neck, and underparts are whiter than in the juvenile plumage of this species; the bill is brownish-black with a white tip (characteristic of the first winter plumage is some pink at the base of the bill but it is not visible); the eyes are dark; the legs are bluish-gray with pink tones; the chest is whitish with fine streaks; the coverts are checkered; the back and underwings are strongly checkered with dark brown and white and the back is grayer brown than in the juvenile plumage; the primaries are blackish-brown; the tail is white with zigzag bars and with spots at the base; there is a broken blackish brown band near the tip of the tail; and a white rump which contrasts with the back (not visible in Figs. 1 and 2) (Sibley 2000; Good 1998).

The gull was always solitary and never in the company of any other birds. It was frequently observed standing on small rocks in the water approximately 5 meters from the sand beach and occasionally standing on the beach at water's edge approximately 10 to 15 meters in front of the restaurant and bar of the Oualie Bay Beach Hotel & Resort.

John Yearwood, co-owner of the Oualie Bay Beach Hotel & Resort, indicated that the gull had been present for quite some time that winter tourist season and that he had never seen its like in the circa forty years of his intermittent residence at Oualie Bay, Nevis.

The photo-documentation represents the first record of a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) in Nevis.

The significance of this sighting remains undetermined. Combined with past and future records, fuller patterns may become clearer. Caution is in order, in that ship assistance may be a factor in the repeated presence of Great Black-backed Gulls at certain Caribbean locations. Nevis is not visited by seasonal cruise ships because of the shallow waters surrounding the island but shallower draft commercial shipping is known to regularly visit Nevis from Florida and cruise ships do visit other islands in proximity to Nevis. The origins of certain seasonal cruise ships and their Caribbean ports of call are worthy of future analytical consideration. As in this case, and in the future, increasing numbers of bird watchers and researchers, on comparatively remote and under frequented islands, for sustained periods of time, may account for an increasing number of documented reports. Until then, the truer frequency of Great Black-backed Gull appearances throughout the West Indies will otherwise remain poorly documented and understood.

This Great Black-backed Gull is thought to be the 147th species of bird documented for the island of Nevis, West Indies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Margot Anfinson Britton for her assistance in continuously relocating the gull, as well as photographing the gull, and to John Yearwood for his enthusiasm and for impressing upon us the uniqueness of the gull. I particularly thank Tony White for establishing and confirming the identity of the gull in consultation with Paul Lehman, Jon Dunn, Ned Brinkley, Rob Norton, and Andrew Dobson.

LITERATURE CITED

- AOU. 1998. Check-list of North American birds. 7th Edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Brown, A.C. and N. Collier. 2004. New and rare bird records from St. Martin, West Indies. Cotinga. No. 25: 52-58.
- Good, T.P. 1998. Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*). In Birds of North America, No. 330. (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- NAB. 1973-2010. North American birds (and predecessor publications). Vols. 27-63. Colorado Springs, Colorado, American Birding Association.
- Olsen, K.M. and H. Larsson. 2004. Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

Raffaele, H., J. Wiley, O. Garrido, A. Keith, and J. Raffaele. 1998. A guide to the birds of the West Indies. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Robinson, D. and J. Lowery. 2000. The natural history of the island of Nevis. Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, Charlestown, Nevis, West Indies.

Sibley, D.A. 2000. The National Geographic Society the Sibley guide to birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York.





Figs. 1 & 2. Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*), Oualie Bay, Nevis, West Indies. 20 March 2007. Photographs by Mark Michael Ludlow & Margot Anfinsen Britton.