PHOTO SALON: First Cycle **Slaty-backed Gulls** in Japan

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Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) has had an interesting trajectory in modern North American birding. It has gone from a vagrant found regularly in Alaska and with a few sightings in the Pacific Northwest to a species that now shows up annually somewhere in the Great Lakes region or even east to the Atlantic Coast. There are now multiple records from Newfoundland, and multiple individuals an-



Figure 1. In winter, adult Slaty-backed Gulls are a typical, large, white-headed gull. They have a yellow bill with red gonys spot and sometimes a green-toned base to the bill. The legs are pink, but a vivid pink like a Thayer's Gull (*Larus glaucoides thayeri*). The mantle tone is variable, based on what one sees in Japan. This would be the typical shade, just a tad paler than the black of the primaries. Eyes are pale. Streaking on the head and neck is often warm, cinnamon toned, rather than blackish or brown; typically the streaking concentrates around the eye, a "mascara" look. Structurally, they tend to be a large-billed gull, with a deep breast and keel, with relatively short legs. They can look long-necked at times, and this imparts a structure that suggests a small goose, like a Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*). 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

Figure 2. In flight, the go-to feature for an adult is the "string of pearls," which are pale tongue tips (white, subterminal crescents) on the mid-to-outer primaries. The extent of this pattern varies, but as a standard, P8 should show a pale tongue tip. This individual shows a tongue tip to P7; we cannot see if P8 has a pale tongue tip on this adult with a reduced "string of pearls" pattern. The primaries are darker than the dark-slaty of the upperparts. Structurally, this is a typical bird with a large bill and somewhat long-necked appearance. The wings are broad, somewhat like a Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*). 5 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

nually in California. The overwhelming majority of these vagrant records are of adults or of birds in at least their second cycle, when they begin to show the distinctive slaty mantle coloration. We are still in the learning stages of understanding the variation within first-cycle birds. By showing and discussing a multitude of photos from Japan in February (from multiple years), this photo salon aims to illustrate some of the different looks that first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls can show in winter from an area where they are common. These images may help in assessing identification within this difficult age



Figure 3. First-cycle Slaty-backed Gulls are variable. Perhaps this is due to individual variation, or there may be a geographic element. Sometimes an individual is particularly worn and faded, suggesting it hatched earlier and is more likely from a southern breeding population. Those birds will be noted in the following. These two individuals are quite different but are both Slaty-backed Gulls. Their bulky, deep-bodied structures are typical. Both the dark and pale bird do share some elements of plumage. The greater coverts are largely pale and show little barring or patterning. Median and lesser coverts have dark centers, without complex patterns. Similarly, the tertials are dark with pale tips, and there's a narrow pale edge. Slaty-backed Gulls in their first cycle have brownish flanks and bellies; paler birds less so, but the pattern is still there. The rear flanks, near the leg bases, are typically solidly brown. 25 Feb 2020, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 4. [TOP LEFT] Two first cycle Slaty-backed gulls, again a paler and a darker bird. The dark bird suggests a *smithsonianus* Herring Gull as it is so brownish on the body, including the belly. However, look at those greater coverts, which are largely pale with little barring. Similarly, the median coverts have dark tips and pale bases rather than being dark with a narrow pale fringe or "holly leaf" pattern as in *smithsonianus* or *thayeri*. The pale bird has paler coverts, but still there is some dark-tipped pattern on the lesser and medians. Although entirely different, the similarity of the tone of the primaries, as well as pattern and color of the tertials of these two birds, is notable. On the dark bird, notice that new scapulars and back are very dark and solid; when this is present, it is a key feature to see in a vagrant bird in North America. Streaking coalescing around the eye, a dark post-ocular line, and a slightly darker ear spot are the norm. The bill is often largely dark, with a variable amount of pale at the base; (strongly) bicolored bills are not the norm. Pink legs are often bright from the first cycle, and they tend not to show dark on the shins. 21 Feb 21 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

Figure 5. [BOTTOM LEFT] Five first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls. On these birds, the generally pale-frosty look shows up; and in most birds, the tail, primaries, and tertials are contrastingly darker. The greater coverts have a weak pattern and are largely whitish. The tertials are dark with pale tips and narrow pale edges. Lesser and median coverts are variable, but they don't usually look unicolored; rather, they have dark tips and paler bases These birds show a rather consistent head streaking pattern, with dark around the eye, a darker ear spot, and densest streaking on the hindneck; the back of the mid-neck is less streaked than the lower neck or the crown. 20 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

category, especially inthe context of multiple hybrid combinations of North American gull species.

As shown in this set of photos, first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls are variable. So how does one identify them?

1 • First of all, note the structure: thicker-bodied and wider-winged than "American" Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) yet slimmer-billed and sometimes longer-necked than Western (*Larus occidentalis*) and Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) gulls.

2 • In flight, Slaty-backs have a dark tail that contrasts with a pale rump and uppertail covert region.

3 • The wings are pale below.

4 • Above, in general, there is a paler greater covert panel and contrastingly darker marginal and lesser coverts.

5 • The belly is dark, contrasting with a paler neck.

Identifying a Slaty-backed Gull does depend on whether it is a paler bird or a darker bird. Those darker birds (which look like *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls) have contrastingly pale, unmarked, and even-





Figure 6. It is difficult to choose what a "typical" first cycle Slaty-backed Gull looks like, but this gull may be close, especially in structure. There is a pale, frosty look to them, suggesting a "white-winged" gull, but with contrastingly dark primaries, tail, and tertials. Greater coverts often show no pattern, a weak pattern, or if barred, the pale areas between the dark bars are more extensive than the dark bars. The lesser to median coverts are darkest sub-terminally; the paler bases create parallel lines of spots on the folded wings, a distinctive pattern once you focus on it. Darker birds lose this pattern. I won't mention these features again for fear of sounding like a broken record, but look at: 1) dark tertials with broad white tip and narrow pale edge, 2) darker area on flanks above leg, 3) streaking on head coalescing around the eye, a slight ear spot, and strongest on lower neck and crown, 4) pink legs without dark shins, 5) dark bill with variable and irregular pale base. 9 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 7. A common appearance in some first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls is an obvious white ground color, giving a frosty look, yet a high-contrast appearance. The dark-tipped coverts form distinctive parallel lines of spots, and the greater coverts are largely pale and unmarked. This individual has some dark second-generation feathers on the upperparts. 11 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 8. This individual shows muted contrast: notice how the primaries do not contrast much with the tertials. One could propose that this bird has Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) genes, as the two species hybridize on occasion. However, it really does not look intermediate in other respects, and note how dark the second-generation scapulars and back feathers are. One would predict these would be paler if this were a hybrid. The belly and the rear flanks are quite brown, typical of Slaty-backed Gull. 11 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 9. A classic first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. One pattern that I have not pointed out yet is that many show a paler neck, with a clear whitish background color, contrasting with the brown belly (as this bird does). Note the typical pale and uniform greater coverts, and medians with pale bases and dark subterminal areas. Dark around the eye, ear spot, and a band of streaks over the eyes are the norm as well. 11 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 10. The individual on the right is more worn than others. Given that these photos were all taken in early to mid-February, the difference in wear is likely because this bird hatched earlier. As such, it probably is from the southern edge of the distribution. Not much can be made of the covert patterns. The second-generation scapulars and back are quite dark; thus, this may be a key feature to use in Western North America, where hybrid Herring × Glaucous-winged gulls occur. These hybrids do not show dark second-generation back and scapulars. Note that the bird on the left is a darker first cycle Slaty-backed Gull, highlighting how variable this species can be. 11 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



colored greater coverts. Paler birds often show dark-tipped median and lesser coverts. Also look for simply-patterned tertials: dark in the center with a narrow pale fringe and a wider pale tip.

One of the aims of this photo salon is to make it clear that this is a difficult identification, but to also shed light on some recurring patterns. (Keep in mind, however, that some hybrid combinations may show some of these features.) Still, it would be highly unlikely that multiple features and patterns that are common or regularly-occurring in Slaty-backed Gull would occur in a hybrid. Looking at multiple plumage features, in addition to structure, is essential, and a certain number of individuals should remain unidentified based on current knowledge.

Figure 11. Some first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls suggest the brown uniformity of many *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls, such as this one. I believe these darker birds may be more difficult to "key into" in North America, but once seen may be easier to confirm as a Slaty-backed Gull because their appearance is so unlike the confounding issue of Herring × Glaucous-winged hybrids. The key is to see the low contrast or even entirely pale greater coverts of Slaty-backed Gull; *smithsonianus* will show well-defined barring, particularly on the inner coverts, and it will often show distinct, dark-brown bases to the entire set of greater coverts. The pale basal areas on the median coverts are classically Slaty-backed, and the noticeable white scapular tips on the longest feathers would be an unusual pattern in *smithsonianus*. Notice the short wing projection and "duck butt" behind the legs. This look is also shown by both birds in Figure 4. 10 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 12. This first cycle Slaty-backed Gull shows a different greater covert pattern, with solid-dark bases, and paler terminal areas. As such, it resembles the pattern seen in Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) and Western × Glaucous-winged hybrids. From that perspective, birds like this one may be hard to pick out in western North America. However, the median coverts with paler bases and darker terminal areas, the dark new second generation back and scapulars, as well as the tertial pattern will help. As well, the primaries are very dark on this bird, unlike in the above-mentioned hybrid. Such hybrids will very often show a bulbous bill tip, as opposed to Slaty-backed's rather even-shaped bill. 5 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

Figure 13. Like the previous individual, this first cycle Slaty-backed Gull shows dark bases to the greater coverts. But the median coverts have noticeable pale bases, as is typical on so many Slaty-backed Gulls. The primaries and tail are very dark, unlike a Western × Glaucous-winged gull hybrid. 5 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*





Figure 14. Let's look at a feature that may be much easier to pick up on the other side of the Pacific. This bird is a classic, frosty first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. Even though there is a lot of white background, there is substantial contrast with the darker primaries and tertial centers. The nearly solidly whitish greater coverts are a feature unlikely to be found on other species of large gulls. Some bold, dark centers to new back and scapular feathers are another feature to look for, as well as the paler neck contrasting with darker belly, and the classic facial pattern with dark around the eye, ear spot, and band of crown streaking. 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 15. Another type is the white-headed pattern. These birds lack the classic streaking pattern on the face, although enough may be there to suggest the standard pattern. While pale on the front end, this individual is quite dark on the primaries and tail. The greater coverts are classically pale and lacking bold patterns, and this bird has some dark centered back feathers coming in. 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

Figure 16. This first cycle Slaty-backed has a classic wing and the white-necked look, but it also shows anchor-shaped second-generation scapulars. The overall pattern resembles the Mongolian Gull (*Larus* [*argentatus*] *mongolicus*), although that species differs in its tail pattern and covert pattern. Crisp and distinct anchors like on this bird would be entirely unexpected in pale-bodied hybrid combinations we may see in North America. 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 17. Let's look again at a darker-type, first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. As in Figure 11, this bird suggests a *smithsonianus* Herring Gull—but look at those coverts, quite different from what you would see in *smithsonianus*. This individual is essentially in juvenal plumage in February, and perhaps that means it is from the northern part of the distribution. Vega (*Larus* [*argentatus*] *vegae*) and Black-tailed (*Larus crassirostris*) gulls are visible in the background. 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 18. A very pale, first cycle Slaty-backed Gull, suggesting it may be a hybrid with a Glaucous-winged Gull, based on the pale and faded primaries. However, the wear state suggests this bird is a southern breeder, therefore located well away from where Glaucous-winged Gulls breed. The new back and scapulars are nicely dark centered, and the bird's body is quite dark. I think that this is a pale-winged variant of Slaty-backed Gull, and this variant was seen frequently in the flocks in Japan. 21 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 19. Switching to flying birds, pictured is a classic first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. The tail is largely dark, without an extensive white base; yet the uppertail coverts are noticeably pale compared to the rest of the upperparts. The pale greater covert panel is noticeable, and the inner primaries are pale as compared to the outer primaries. Most show noticeably darker marginal coverts, so the inner forewing is darker than the rest of the coverts. 24 Feb 2020, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 20. A flying first cycle Slaty-backed Gull with a largely dark tail and noticeably paler uppertail coverts. The leading edge of the inner wing is darker than the paler panel of the coverts. Inner primaries are paler than the outers, but they do have dark subterminal patterning. 5 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 21. This nearly perfect classic first-cycle Slaty-backed Gull has uniformly-colored and coverts that are paler than the leading edge of the wing. The inner primaries are paler than the outer primaries and secondaries. The tail is dark and contrasts with pale uppertail coverts. This individual also shows some new and contrastingly dark back and scapular feathers. The face features dark around the eye, a dark ear spot, and a more streaked crown than on the upper neck. 5 Feb 2018, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 22. This bird is a darker individual first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. Even so, the greater coverts are lacking a strong barred pattern. This individual does show more pale at the base of the tail than the others above. Even on these darker birds, the uppertail coverts are noticeably pale. Look for those dark-centered second generation back and scapulars—a very good feature to seek in February first cycle Slaty-backed Gulls. 9 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 23. Wow! This bird is quite a different-looking first cycle Slaty-backed Gull! It is a worn, faded, and pale individual. But it is also a bird that has pattern differences from the classic—in particular, this individual has a pale tail base, and that detail is not due to wear and fading. This bird grew those feathers in that way. This is a variant that exists in Slaty-backed Gulls, but it is not the common pattern. Still, the very pale uppertail coverts are there, contrasting with the rest of the upperparts. This particular individual is showing dark-gray new upperparts, a feature clarifying it is a Slaty-backed, and not a Mongolian Gull. Those pale and uniform greater coverts are the classic pattern in Slaty-backed Gull, although they vary, as we have seen in this photo salon. Note that often the central tail feathers on Slaty-backed Gulls are noticeably paler than the rest. 10 Feb 2019, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

Figure 24. Here's another pale, washed-out individual. The unmarked and pale greater coverts are typical. It has the pale uppertail coverts. And in this individual, the dark new feathers on the back and scapulars are obvious. Paler hybrids in North America are very unlikely to show dark new feathers like this bird. 25 Feb 2020, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Photo 25. A nicely contrasting first cycle Slaty-backed Gull. Greater coverts are pale and uniform—the uppertail coverts are also typically pale and contrasting. The underwings show a dark trailing edge on the outer primaries, extending to the bases on the longer ones. Often the underwings on Slaty-backed look like Thayer's Gull, pale other than on the tips. The dark belly and paler neck pattern show up on this bird. Note the paler central pair of rectrices. 25 Feb 2020, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*



Figure 26. On this first cycle Slaty-backed Gull, look at the underwing. This feature is quite typical—the undersides of the primaries are pale other than the dark tips. This detail recalls Thayer's Gull. The greater coverts with weak patterning are typical, as are the paler inner primaries on the upperwing. 25 Feb 2020, Choshi, Japan. *Photograph by © Alvaro Jaramilo.*

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