

Maryland Ornithological Society



Maryland / District of Columbia Records Committee Skins Workshop March 27, 2004

1. General

On March 27, 2004, the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) held a Skins Workshop at the Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Our hosts were Roger Clapp and Mary Gustafson, both with the US Geological Survey – Biological Resources/Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Roger is resident at the museum and Mary is with the Bird Banding Lab in Laurel. The committee thanks Roger and Mary for the time they dedicated to our workshop. All images are by Phil Davis, 2004.

2. Attendees

Committee members in attendance were Paul O'Brien (Chair), Phil Davis (Secretary), Jonathan Alderfer, J.B. Churchill, Barry Cooper, Matt Hafner and Sherman Suter. Gail Mackiernan also attended.



Fig

Figure 1. Attendees looking at Common and Ring-billed Gull specimens: (left to right) J.B. Churchill, Barry Cooper, Paul O'Brien, Jonathan Alderfer, Gail Mackiernan, Matt Hafner, and Sherman Suter.

3. Skins Studies

We began the workshop after our 9:45 am following security check-in. We assembled in the Bird Division specimen case area on the 6th floor. Our objective was to study specimen skins related to sighting reports that are currently in review or are expected to be reviewed over the next year or related to other potential identification problems for Maryland and DC. The following cases were examined:

(a) “Common” Gull (*Larus canus canus*) vs. Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*)

Background: “Common” Gull is the common name for the nominate subspecies of Mew Gull. Maryland has one record and another potential report of a Common Gull, both from Conowingo Dam on the Susquehanna River on the Harford/Cecil county border. Both are first winter birds and are from the January timeframe. The accepted record is MD/1995-033 (from January 1994) and the report (not yet reviewed) is MD/1998-017 (from January 1998). First winter Common and Ring-billed Gulls are similar and present an identification challenge. Most of the literature on this problem is from Europe where birders have the opposite challenge; separating first winter Ringed-billed Gulls from the more common, “Common” Gull. In preparation for a review of MD/1998-017, the committee decided to examine the variability of upperwing coverts and tail patterns on first-winter birds of the two species using the specimens available in the USNM collection.



Figure 2. Overall comparison of first-winter Common Gulls (left) and Ring-billed Gulls (right).

Findings: The committee revisited the study of these two species that was begun at the 2003 Skins Workshop. On the question of the extent of variability in the tail patterns of the two species, a thorough study of 35 Ring-billed Gulls revealed that the outer web of the outer rectrix

always exhibited some discrete blackish markings, if only in the sub-terminal portion of the web. These markings were numerous and widespread in some specimens or as few as two, restricted to the subterminal part of the web, but always appeared as bulges or bars that extended from the shaft toward the outer edge of the web. The members felt that these marks should be apparent in flight if the bird were relatively near and the tail was fanned, and that the marks could be captured in photographs under these conditions. Of the seven Common Gulls studied, only one exhibited any blackish markings in the outer web, consisting of a small intrusion of black near the tip of the web that appeared to bleed outwardly from the shaft to no more than 1/3 of the width of the web and was not a discrete bulge.



Figure 3. Tail comparisons: Common Gull (left) and Ring-billed Gull (right).

The upperwing coverts were a soft, uniform gray-brown in Common Gull, but paler with greater contrast in Ring-billed Gull.



Figure 4. Comparison of upper wings: Ring-billed Gull (top) and Common Gull (bottom)

A question prompted by Lauro and Spencer (1980), is the usefulness of the tertial pattern as a field identification aid. The difference was quite apparent in the specimens and could be useful in the field. In Common Gull the tertials are a soft gray brown with noticeably broad, off-white fringes, especially at the tips. In Ring-billed Gull the tertials had generally darker centers with narrow white fringes. Again, good field photographs should capture this rather distinctive character.

There was obvious overlap in body size as well as bill size, rendering those characters useful only on birds at the extremes of measurements.

Armed with these criteria, it should be possible to distinguish these two very similar species in the field, given good looks and, especially, good photographs.

(b) Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*) vs. Manx Shearwater (*P. puffinus*) vs. Little Shearwater (*P. assimilis*)

Background: The committee has a report of an Audubon's Shearwater in the upper Chesapeake Bay (MD/2003-109) that is in the review process. The committee wanted to compare specimens of the two species and also the theoretical Little Shearwater.



Figure 5. Members studying shearwater specimens.

Findings: The committee noted that color of the upperparts of Audubon's and Manx can be misleading. Manx are typically thought to be blacker and Audubon's browner but both can appear blackish and at some times of the year; Manx can even be somewhat brownish. The wings of Manx specimens were as long as the tail and often longer. Audubon's wings were even with or almost even with the tail. Manx may show a small whitish crescent behind the ear coverts but Audubon's shows a larger white area behind the eye. Little Shearwater's tail is short and it has more white in the underwing and on the face. There are two subspecies of Little Shearwater but *P. a. baroli* would be the one most likely to be encountered in Maryland since there are records of it in both North Carolina and Nova Scotia. The wing line seen on specimens may be difficult to see in the field (personal comments from Gail Mackiernan and Barry Cooper regarding their recent South Atlantic pelagic experience with this species).



Figure 6. Audubon's Shearwater (left) and Manx Shearwater (right) showing size differences and white vs. black (respectively) undertail coverts.

(c) Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*) vs. Sooty Tern (*S. fuscata*)

Background: There are several Bridled and Sooty Terns in circulation. The committee wanted to compare specimens of these two species.

Findings: Sooty Terns are mostly larger and noticeably darker on the upperparts. Bridled Terns have a medium to pale gray upper mantle that gets darker brown towards the rump. There is typically a noticeable whitish collar on the hindneck. The comparison of the bill (larger and more slender in Bridled Tern) is mentioned in some field guides but may be difficult to observe as are differences in the extent of white on the forehead. The more extensive white on the outer rectrices on Bridled Terns was apparent on many specimens. A lack of contrast in the upperparts of Sooty Terns and a two-toned gray appearance of Bridled Terns that can be seen in the field were difficult to determine from the museum specimens.



Figure 7. Sooty Tern (top) and Bridled Tern (bottom).

(d) Dusky Flycatcher (*Empidonax oberholseri*) vs. Hammond's Flycatcher (*E. hammondi*) vs. Least Flycatcher (*E. minimus*)

Background: A fall 2003 report was submitted to the committee of a Dusky Flycatcher from Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC. This would be a first for the DC and MD jurisdictions. The committee wanted to take the opportunity to review fall Dusky Flycatchers in comparison to other similar *Empidonax* flycatchers, including Hammond's and Least.



Figure 8. "Western" Flycatchers (left) and Least Flycatchers (right).

Findings: Least Flycatcher, Hammond's Flycatcher, and Dusky Flycatcher were examined and comparisons made between these three closely related species. Also, Gray Flycatcher *E. wrightii* and Cordillerian/Pacific-slope Flycatchers *E. occidentalis/difficillus* were examined but in less detail.

Specific attention was given to examining key identification criteria in field separation of Least, Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers, including bill size and shape, the comparative length of wings and tail, primary extension and lower mandible color and pattern. The overall plumage coloration was also noted particularly with respect to age and/or season collected.

While noting some variation amongst the large collection of specimens [no measurements were taken], the following general points were observed:

- **Bill size and shape:** Least, Hammond's, and Dusky all had quite distinctive bill shapes and sizes. Hammond's had very noticeably small, slender bill which lacked any noticeable width

at the base (when viewed from the underside). In contrast, Least had a noticeably broad base to the bill and the bill was broader throughout its length. On average, the Least Flycatcher's bill length was slightly longer than that of Hammond's Flycatcher. The Dusky Flycatcher specimens showed a generally slender bill with noticeably less basal width than a Least Flycatcher and, on average, a slightly longer length than Least Flycatcher and noticeably longer than Hammond's Flycatcher.

- **Lower mandible color and pattern:** Due to likely color fading on soft parts, the focus was on the light and dark patterning [rather than specific colors] to each species' lower mandible. Hammond's Flycatcher displayed a fairly consistent pale basal portion and dark tip. Generally the proportions were about one-third pale and two-thirds dark. Least Flycatcher showed a largely all-pale lower mandible although several specimens showed a small amount of darkness at the tip. Dusky Flycatcher's lower mandible patterning was the most variable. Most specimens showed pale basal and dark anterior portions. The proportions between the dark and pale coloring appeared quite variable with some specimens showing quite a small pale basal area [less than 25 percent of the under mandible] whereas others had more extensive pale areas.
- **Primary extension:** Dusky and Least Flycatchers both exhibited similar short primary extensions. Typically the wing tip on both species extended to or very slightly below the base of the tail. Hammond's primary extension was the longest of the three species and the wing tip extended beyond the tail base to about the basal quarter of the tail.
- **Tail length:** While no measurements were taken, Hammond's Flycatcher's tail length appeared shorter than either Least or Dusky Flycatcher. This may partly have been a function of the long primary extension giving the appearance of a proportionately short tail. The Dusky Flycatcher specimens showed a distinctly long-tailed appearance being noticeably longer tailed than either Least Flycatcher or Hammond's Flycatcher. Finally, Least Flycatcher's tail length appeared mid-way between Dusky and Hammond's Flycatchers appearing longer tailed than Hammond's and shorter tailed than Dusky. In the hand, and recognizing that differences in skin preparation can alter apparent proportions; the Dusky appeared consistently longer than either of its two congeners.
- **Plumage coloration:** This was quite variable amongst all three species. This likely was a function of molt and/or seasonality [fresh or worn plumage] and age [adults or hatching year birds]. Also color fading of the older specimens may have complicated comparisons. We focused most of our attention on birds collected during fall migration period [which is the time when many vagrant flycatchers may be expected to occur in Maryland].
 - **Hammond's.** In general, Hammond's showed the most color with fairly bright yellow olive on lower breast and belly with some specimens showing grayish or olive grayish on the breast. The mantle color was olive and crown and nape tinged grayish. The eye-ring was conspicuously white. Hammond's generally molts before migration and thus autumn-collected birds were in fresher plumage than either Least or Dusky, which molt after reaching their wintering grounds.
 - **Least.** In general, the Least Flycatcher specimens appeared less bright than Hammond's with underparts paler yellow on the lower breast and belly and with the upper breast tinged more of a dirty yellowish-brown. The mantle was pale olive or olive-

brown and the nape and crown were generally paler brown or grayish-brown. The eye-ring was bold white.

- **Dusky.** Dusky Flycatcher specimens appeared generally drabber with dull grayish olive mantle and slightly grayer nape and crown. The underparts were generally pale grayish-white with many specimens showing slightly darker gray wash to breast. Some individuals showed dull yellowish tinge on belly. Upperparts were principally dull gray with some birds showing a olive cast. The tail was darker than the rump coloration. The head was slightly paler gray. The eye-ring was obvious white. The wing bars (formed by the pale tips to the greater and median coverts) on HY Duskie were buffier or duller than those of AHY adult birds (which were whitish).



Figure 9. Dorsal and ventral views of (top to bottom) Least, Dusky, and Hammond's Flycatchers.

It is important to note that the above comparisons are only a much generalized overview of the three species and there was quite a range of plumage variation amongst individual specimens.

Gray Flycatcher (*E. wrightii*). First winter birds showed a surprising amount of yellow-olive tones to plumage particularly on the lower breast and belly. In general, plumage tones not unexpectedly were the most gray of any of the *Empidonax* flycatchers. The bill was long [appeared longer than any other *Empidonax* flycatcher under review] and relatively narrow. The lower mandible color was largely [more than 75 percent] pale with a small clearly differentiated dark tip.

Pacific-slope/ Cordilleran Flycatchers (*E. difficilis/occidentalis*). This species was reviewed only briefly but showed noticeably broad-based and relatively heavy bills. All of the specimens examined showed completely pale lower mandible coloration, with many retaining a distinct orange tone. Wing bars of hatching-year birds were quite warm in tone.

4. Miscellaneous Studies

(a) Smithsonian Institution Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*). Mary Gustafson retrieved the frozen Rufous Hummingbird specimen that she banded at the Smithsonian Institution gardens on December 04, 2003 [DC/2003-140]. The bird was first identified at the Smithsonian on November 29, 2003 and was then found dead (an apparent window kill) on

January 14, 2004 by a maintenance worker at Williams Valley High School, just west of Tower City, Schuylkill County, PA. The specimen is waiting to be processed by the USNM staff.

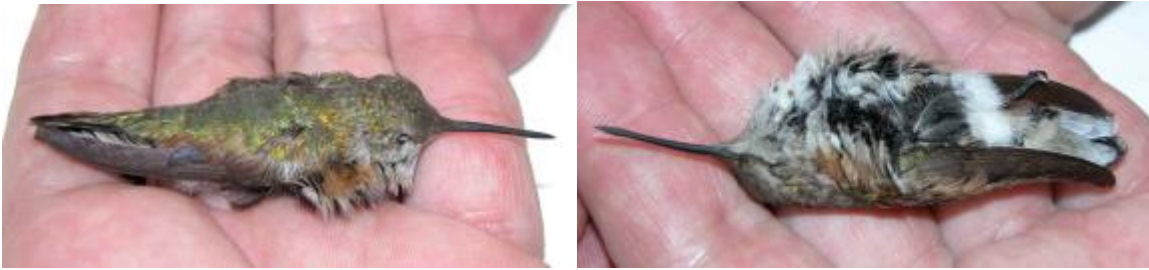


Figure 10. Smithsonian Institution Rufous Hummingbird [DC/2003-140].

5. Adjournment

The Workshop ended at approximately 1:30 pm.

Literature Cited:

Lauro, Anthony J. and Barbara J. Spencer. 1980. A Method for separating juvenal and first-winter Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and Common Gulls (*Larus canus*). *American Birds* 34(2):111-117.

Tove, Michael H. 1993. Field Separation of Ring-billed, Mew, Common and Kamchatka Gulls, *Birding* 25(6); 386-401.

Respectfully submitted,

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