

Adult American Herring Gull on Flores, Azores, in December 2005

Pierre-André Crochet & Peter Adriaens

During the autumn of 2005, Pierre-André Crochet's parents decided to spend the next Christmas in French Polynesia. To replace the usual familial events, he thought of a better place to spend Christmas' eve than alone at home. Ignoring offers from friends to join their own family events, he decided to opt for Corvo, Azores, where visiting birders kept reporting long-staying American vagrants after Peter Alfrey's groundbreaking visit in October 2005 (Alfrey 2005, Hering & Alfrey 2006). After this decision, he hastened to find himself a companion. He turned to Eric Didner and, after a round of difficult negotiations with his parents, ED agreed to come along. Plans were to spend c 12 days in the Azores, with a few days on Corvo and visiting as many of the other islands as possible. Among the target species, gulls were high on the list. Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan* (a potential new species for PAC and ED) is remarkably rare in the Azores (see <http://azores.seawatching.net>) but at least two had been reported repeatedly during the autumn alongside much larger numbers of Laughing Gulls *L atricilla*. This unusually high number of rare gulls made PAC expect that the trip would be a good opportunity to find and study American Herring Gulls *L smithsonianus* (hereafter *smithsonianus*); several first-winters had been reported earlier that year on Flores and São Miguel. Besides, PAC was keen to study Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull *L michahellis atlantis* (hereafter *atlantis*) and amass photographic documentation. Of course, he was also expecting some additions to his Western Palearctic list...

The day after their arrival on Faial, PAC and ED found an American Coot *Fulica americana* on Pico. Then they visited Graciosa, a seldom visited island where Joël Bried, a French ornithologist residing in the Azores, had found a Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon* in early December. PAC and ED relocated the bird, providing a second lifer for both. The diversity of American gulls, however, was still limited to Laughing Gulls, with two on Faial, two on Graciosa and one found on Terceira when they arrived there. PAC managed to lure ED into long sessions of gull watching in Terceira harbour and persuaded him to take many photographs of immature *atlantis* and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L fuscus graellsii* but the only rewards were Great Black-backed Gulls *L marinus*. Even at the Terceira landfill, a renowned gull hot spot, the only scarce gulls were two first-winter European Herring Gulls *L argentatus* (of *argenteus* type).

After Terceira, JB joined PAC and ED and they headed west toward Corvo and Flores. Corvo has little to offer for gull watching, apart from the pet Laughing Gull kept by the owner of the local guesthouse. Even

rarities were more difficult to see than expected: ED never managed to see the Ovenbird(s) *Seiurus aurocapilla* that made an unexpected Christmas present to JB and PAC. Except for this (or these) Ovenbird(s) they could not find any leftover from the autumn American passerines, and had to satisfy themselves with the long-staying Hudsonian Whimbrel *Numenius hudsonicus* on the airport runway.

Flores is a larger island and has several harbours and a small landfill next to Lagoa Rasa. The first day (26 December) was typically dull: fog, rain, and a near-empty Lagoa Branca instead of the expected Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*. A male American Wigeon *Anas americana* bonding with a pair of European Wigeons *A penelope* was the only reminder that Flores is nearly half way between Europe and North America. The first visit to Lagoa Rasa (where the gulls gather to bathe and roost after feeding on the landfill) did not produce anything better than Great Black-backed Gull and, far down the bottom of the nearby Lagoa Funda, an adult 'herring gull-type' of which the pale mantle gave it away immediately as either American or European Herring Gull. The next day (27 December) started much better: the sun was shining from time to time, the Great Blue Heron was back, the male American Wigeon had found a conspecific female and there was a small flock of several hybrids American Black Duck x Mallard *A rubripes x platyrhynchos* (of various introgression levels) plus one or two Black Duck look-alikes that were unfortunately too far to identify with certainty. At Lagoa Rasa, PAC soon located an interesting second-winter bird: clearly a 'herring gull-type', with a large size, powerful structure and faded, uniform-looking plumage somehow suggestive of a hybrid Glaucous Gull *L hyperboreus*. It looked a bit pale at first sight for *smithsonianus* but careful examination of its plumage features soon confirmed that it was one: wholly dark brown tail, densely barred uppertail-coverts, dark brown outer tertials with reduced subterminal pale markings, rufous-brown underparts with reduced pale mottling and wholly uniform coloration from the legs towards the undertail-coverts which were largely dark and with the longest undertail-coverts wholly dark rufous brown except for a reduced pale tip. It was a classic example of a second-winter *smithsonianus*, the only point deviating slightly from the sets of characters established by Lonergan & Mullarney (2004) being the lower hind neck that was very densely streaked like the upper mantle but not uniformly dark.

Soon after, PAC relocated a pale adult, probably the individual from the previous day, roosting on the far bank of Lagoa Rasa, at medium range. It was now easy



298-299 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult, with Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull / Atlantische Geelpootmeeuw *L. michahellis atlantis*, adult, Flores, Azores, 27 December 2005 (Eric Didner). Note broad necklace of brown, dense and transverse texture contrasting with pale grey upperparts. In plate 299, also note pale bill colour, thin dark smudge in front of eye and flat forehead.

to note its large size and powerful structure which, together with very pale *argenteus*-like upperparts, pale, pinkish bill with contrastingly yellow tip and densely streaked head and neck, quickly suggested a bird of North American origin. The observers knew they would need to carefully check a number of fine details of its primary pattern and PAC dug out his copy of Adriaens & Mactavish (2004) to assist in the process. Fortunately, the bird moved closer and began to preen in the middle of the lake. It was soon confirmed that it had a long, square-ended, pale grey tongue on the underside of p10 (primaries numbered descendantly): a good start. With two of the three characters 'that may be helpful when used in combination' now established (pale grey upperparts and suitable pattern on the underside of p10), attention turned to p5, to establish if the black band was complete or not. At that moment, the bird chose for a very timely meal and flew straight towards the dump. This was the chance! PAC stayed at the lake in case the bird would return and sent ED and JB to get photographs – of the spread wing! ED and JB came back 15 min later, mission accomplished: ED had a clear shot of the open left wing. Unfortunately, what could be seen of the wing-tip pattern on the small camera screen looked interesting but not fully convincing: nice bayonets on p8 and p7 and white tongue-tip on inner web of p8 were good *smithsonianus* characters but the black band on the tip of p5 did not seem fully complete and the white mirror on p9 seemed to reach the outer web.

Back in France, PAC had to wait a few weeks before ED sent him two CDs with his photographs. When PAC viewed them on his computer, he realized the pattern on p5 was better than he had thought before: both webs were dark with at most a very small gap near the shaft. He could also check the pattern of p6: there was a broad black band sharply pointed along the outer edge of the feather and the shaft. PAC was now almost

convinced that it was an adult *smithsonianus* but still uncertain whether it was 'clean' enough for full acceptance due to the possible gap along the black band of p5 and the apparent extension of the white mirror on the outer web of p9. The same day, PAC emailed the photographs to Peter Adriaens who quickly responded that it was a classic *smithsonianus*! The matter was settled and the occurrence of adult American Herring Gull in the Western Palearctic was finally confirmed.

Description

The following description is mostly based on a series of 12 photographs taken on the dump alongside adult and immature *atlantis* and first calendar-year Lesser Black-backed Gulls, completed by field notes for characters that are not apparent on the photographs.

GENERAL IMPRESSION Fully adult grey-mantled large white-headed gull, immediately told from *atlantis* by much paler grey upperparts, pinkish legs and very different head and neck pattern.

SIZE & STRUCTURE Similar to *atlantis* but slightly more bulky with shorter-looking and thicker neck, shorter legs and flatter and longer head shape accentuated by slightly longer-billed impression. Primary projection rather short, with four visible primary tips and primary extension beyond tail-tip shorter than between tail-tip and tip of tertials.

PLUMAGE Whole neck and breast down to lower breast/upper belly densely marked with grey-brown blotches, most of these areas being predominantly dark. Head distinctly paler, with rather sharp demarcation between head and upper neck. Head white, extensively streaked grey-brown, with denser streaking on back of head, nearly unstreaked area below gape (chin) and above bill base, and distinct dark grey smudge around eye bordered by half moon grey crescent around anterior edge of eye. Mantle coloration difficult to evaluate in absence of other similarly coloured gulls but mantle coloration giving impression of being even slightly paler than western European *argenteus*. White tertial crescent wide, well marked.

PRIMARY PATTERN (primaries numbered descendantly): P10: underside judged in field (while bird was preening) to have



300 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult, Flores, Azores, 27 December 2005 (Eric Didner). Note distinctive wing pattern with long grey tongue on all primaries (although not visible on p10 here), broad white tongue-tip on p8, small mirror on p9, obvious black 'bayonet' on p7-8, complete black subterminal band on p10, and W-shaped black marking on p5-6.

long pale grey tongue, reaching close to mirror and square-ended (near 90° angle). Upperside with long white mirror (c 1/5 of primary length), separated from white primary tip by thin, complete, black band. P9: black limited to outer half of feather along outer web, slightly less on inner web (limited grey tongue). Small white mirror, wider than long, situated at c 1/5 of feather length from tip, and reaching onto outer web of p9. P8: extensively dark outer web (3/5 of feather length) and long bayonet reaching up to 4/5 of feather length along outer edge of outer web. Inner web extensively grey with reduced black tip (less than 1/5 of feather length) and broad white crescent separating grey and black elements of feather. P7: similar to p8 but with much less black on outer web (about 1/3 of feather length) and shorter bayonet. Also less black on inner web and with narrower, more curved white crescent separating black and grey elements. P6: broad black subterminal band, with curved inner edge and narrow white divide between black and grey on inner web. On outer web, inner edge of black band with pointed wedges along shaft and outer edge of feather. P5: complete or near complete dark band formed by **1** elongated black spot with U-shaped inner edge, separating white tip and grey part of outer web, and **2** narrow U-shaped long dark grey band across white area of inner web, reaching near middle of black spot of outer web and creating 'double U' pattern with U-shaped band on inner web joining near U-shaped inner edge of black spot of outer web. Other primaries grey with white tip, narrower on inner primaries.

SECONDARIES Grey with broad white tip forming broad white trailing edge to wing.

BARE PARTS Iris pale cream, orbital ring apparently rather pale (orange). Bill bicoloured, pale greenish-grey from base to gony, with brighter pale yellow distal part and very pale (whitish) tip. Red gonydeal spot reduced, restricted to lower mandible, diffuse, rather pale, with indistinct dark smudge on upper part. Leg pink with grey tinge (not bright pink).

MOULT Nearing end of complete moult, as indicated by outermost primary and outermost secondary being almost but not yet fully grown.

Identification

The combination of pale grey upperparts and very obvious, brown blotches on neck and breast immediately drew attention. The pale grey upperparts pointed to a 'herring gull', either *argenteus*-like or a *smithsonianus*, while the pattern on the neck and breast was so obvious and extensive that, in itself, it strongly pointed to *smithsonianus*. While head and neck streaking is tremendously variable in European Herring Gulls, it was so strong in this bird that it turned into horizontal bars on the lower hind neck and upper-breast, almost creating the impression of a woolen shawl between the paler head and pale upperparts. Such a strongly horizontal pattern is, at best, (very) rare in European Herring Gulls, which normally show a more vertical, streaked pattern.

The identification was confirmed by the primary pattern. Although not visible in the photographs, the pale tongue on the underside of p10 was long and rectangular, as in adult Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans*. There was a complete, black subterminal band between the white mirror and tip. The combination of a long, *cachinnans*-like tongue and uninterrupted, black subterminal band on p10 is very rare in European Herring Gulls. The second thing to look for in the primaries is the pattern of p5. A complete, symmetrical, black 'W' across both webs is typical for *smithsonianus*. However, in this bird, the pattern, though rather U-shaped on both the inner and outer webs, was not symmetrical, since the amount of black was largest on the outer web. It was therefore absolutely necessary to check the other primaries carefully as well. Fortunately, these were all rather typical. The grey tongue on p9 was long (covering well over half of the length of the inner web) and the black pattern on the outer web did not reach the primary coverts. Even though the white mirror reached onto the outer web, it was still clearly small (smaller than the black subterminal band, for instance). On p8, the grey tongue was very long, being of the same length as on p7, which only rarely occurs in *argenteus*. In addition, there was a very broad, white tongue-tip, which is not normally this extensive in pure *argenteus*. There were obvious black 'bayonets' on both p8 and p7. Such 'bayonets' are rather uncommon in European Herring Gulls, and only very rarely occur on both p7 and p8. On p6, the black pattern was clearly pointed along the outer edge, the shaft and the inner edge, creating a sort of drawn-out 'W'.

Other characters were also typical of *smithsonianus*, such as the bulky body on short legs, the angular head shape with rather flat forehead, the fairly parallel-sided and dull-coloured bill and the dark smudge in front of the eye, contrasting with the pale iris, as well as the late moult.

All of the above characters, when combined, allow for safe identification of the bird as an adult *smithsonianus*.

Status

Up to 2006, there have been three records – and many reports not submitted – of *smithsonianus* in the Azores.

Adult American Herring Gull on Flores, Azores, in December 2005

TABLE 1 Records of American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* in the WP / gevallen van Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus* in het West-Palearctische gebied

<p><i>Azores (3)</i> 19-21 February 2003, Praia da Vitoria, Terceira, two first-winters (Gonçalo Elias pers comm) 21 February 2003, Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, first-winter (Gonçalo Elias pers comm) 26-27 December 2005, Flores, adult (this paper) There are over 30 reports that have not yet been submitted (see http://azores.seawatching.net/lists/pomarine%20jaeger.xls). Some concern adults but none of the adults so far met the criteria required for acceptance (see above).</p> <p><i>Britain (12)</i> 12 records have been accepted so far, all first-winter birds (Fraser et al 2007).</p> <p><i>France (9)</i> 24 January 1993, Villeneuve-la-Garenne, Hauts-de-Seine, first-winter 9 June 1994, 30 km south-south-west of Penmarch, Finistère, second-summer 3 August 1997, Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, juvenile 11 January to 9 February 1999, Arcachon, Gironde, second-winter, then 27 December 1999 to 9 February 2000, third-winter 7 February 2001, Paris, second-winter 9 March 2001, Douarnenez, Finistère, first-winter 9 March 2001, Douarnenez, Finistère, second-winter 29 January-7 April 2002, Ouessant, Finistère, then 22 April 2002, Molène, Finistère, first-winter 15 March 2002, Le Relecq-Kerhuon, Finistère, first-winter (www.oiseaux-nature.com/oiseaux_chn/goeland_amerique/goeland-argente-smith.html); Aurélien Audevard pers comm) Several French records fall outside the typical pattern of occurrence in Europe, or concern difficult age classes at a time when identification of <i>smithsonianus</i> was not fully understood. In addition, for at least one record (at Arcachon in 1999) published photographs are unconvincing. A review of the French records is therefore highly warranted. See also the discussion by Hoogendoorn et al (2003).</p> <p><i>Germany (1)</i> 11 December 2002, Oldenburg rubbish dump, Niedersachsen, second-winter (Gottschling 2006) The published photographs, however, show atypical</p>	<p>features for <i>smithsonianus</i>. A review of this record therefore seems warranted.</p> <p><i>Iceland</i> There are no records yet but several reports (probably 10-15, no adults) are pending, some of which are anticipated to be accepted. The Icelandic Rare Bird Committee is expected to reach a decision on these soon (Yann Kolbeinsson pers comm).</p> <p><i>Ireland (62)</i> There have been 62 records up to 2004, on average about five per year since the first in 1986 (Paul Milne pers com). Most were first-winters apart from a few returning or semi-resident individuals, such as a bird in Galway, which was in its fourth winter in early 2007 (www.birdwatchireland.ie/bwi/irbc/A1A2Jan07.xls). At least one possible adult has been observed and photographed, at Killybegs, Donegal, in February-March 1998 (cf Millington & Garner 1998).</p> <p><i>Norway (4)</i> 11 November 1999, Kiberg, Finnmark, first-winter 3 March 2001, Vadsø, Finnmark, first-winter There is also one pending record (Vegard Bunes pers comm).</p> <p><i>Portugal (4)</i> 30-31 December 1992, Faro, Algarve, first-year (Moore 1994, de Juana et al 1995) 30 March 2001, Matosinhos, Porto, second-winter (Gonçalo Elias pers comm; Hoogendoorn et al 2003) 31 March 2001, Canidela, Porto, juvenile (Gonçalo Elias pers comm; Hoogendoorn et al 2003) 1 April 2001, Santa Marinha, Porto, first-winter (Gonçalo Elias pers comm; Hoogendoorn et al 2003)</p> <p><i>Spain (3)</i> November 1937, north-west of Cape Finisterre, Galicia, second-winter. This bird came aboard a ship; it had been ringed as a chick in New Brunswick, Canada, on 13 August 1936 (Cramp & Simmons 1983) 3 January 1991, Gijón, Oviedo, first-winter (de Juana et al 1995) 28 January to 19 March 2006, Getxo, Bizkaia, first-winter (www.rarebirdspain.net/arbsr603.htm)</p>
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Of these, this is the first accepted adult. However, there have been at least nine other good candidates for adult *smithsonianus* in recent years (see, eg, <http://azores.seawatching.net/lists/pomarine%20jaeger.xls>), namely one in February 2003 (see plate 26-27 in Adriaens & Mactavish 2004), four in February 2004 (Peter Alfrey pers comm), one on 6 April 2004, one from 28 February to 4 March 2005, one on 8 February 2006 (see http://azores.seawatching.net/bigpic.php?filename=lar_

[smi8.jpg](#)), and one on 28 December 2006 (Álex Ollé, Pere Serrano, Toni Mampel & Jordi Martí-Aledo in litt). While all were probably *smithsonianus*, their primary pattern was not photographed or did not seem entirely conclusive. The Flores bird on 26-27 December 2005 is the first adult to be photographed well and to be characteristic in most respects. It constitutes the first record of this age in the Western Palearctic.

The current status of *smithsonianus* in Western

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Palaearctic countries is presented in table 1. There are no records (yet) in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Morocco and Sweden or countries away from the Atlantic or North Sea coast.

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PAC wishes to thank Eric Didner for his patience during this and other trips on which they certainly did more gull watching and lizard photographing than most people would find acceptable, and Joël Bried for allowing him to discover the Azores in more detail than is usually possible. We both want to thank the numerous persons (not all of them are mentioned in the text) who replied to our inquiries about records of American Herring Gull in Europe. Pat Lonergan commented also on this bird and concurred with our identification.

Samenvatting

ADULTE AMERIKAANSE ZILVERMEEUW OP CORVO, AZOREN, IN DECEMBER 2005 Eind december 2005 verbleven Pierre-André Crochet en Eric Didner c twee weken op de Azoren en bezochten verschillende eilanden. Dit leverde waarnemingen op van onder andere twee Amerikaanse Smienten *Anas americana*, enkele hybriden Amerikaanse Zwarte x Wilde Eend *A rubripes x platyrhynchos*, Amerikaanse Blauwe Reiger *Ardea herodias*, Amerikaanse Meerkoet *Fulica americana*, Amerikaanse Regenwulp *Numenius hudsonicus*, ten minste zes Lachmeeuwen *Larus atricilla*, een tweede-winter Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *L smithsonianus*, Bandijsvogel *Ceryle alcyon* en Ovenvogel *Seiurus auropilla*. Op 26 en 27 december zagen ze op Flores een adulte 'zilvermeeuw' die opviel door de bleekgrijze bovendelen, het grote formaat en robuuste postuur, de zeer zwaar gevlekte hals en borst en een vuilroze snavel met gele top. Op de onderkant van de buitenste handpen was een lange, rechthoekige, bleke tong zichtbaar (als bij Pontische Meeuw *L cachinnans*). Dit alles deed hen vermoeden dat het om een Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw ging. Er werden foto's gemaakt, waaronder van de gestrekte vleugel. Het handpenpatroon was

daardoor goed gedocumenteerd en bevestigde de eerdere vermoedens. Dit is de eerste voldoende gedocumenteerde waarneming van een Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw in adult kleeid in het West-Palaearctische gebied. In het afgelopen decennium werden weliswaar 10 exemplaren in dit kleeid gemeld (negen in de Azoren en één in Ierland) maar hun determinatie kon niet bewezen worden omdat het handpenpatroon niet gefotografeerd werd of er niet typisch genoeg uitzag. In dit artikel wordt een uitgebreide beschrijving gegeven, wordt dieper ingegaan op de herkenning van adulte Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw en wordt een actueel overzicht gegeven van alle gevallen van deze soort in het West-Palaearctische gebied.

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