

The First Audouin's Gull for the Azores Just 1,500 Miles off Newfoundland

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Introduction

The Azores archipelago lies in the North Atlantic, just over one-third of the way from Portugal to Newfoundland. There are nine main islands split into three groups. The largest one is São Miguel, located in the eastern group (Clarke 2000).

The Audouin's Gull (*Larus audouinii*) is endemic to the Mediterranean basin, where it breeds from Iberia and Morocco to Turkey, Cyprus, and Lebanon (Martínez Vilalta and Oro 2003). This medium-sized gull winters on the coasts of northwestern Africa south to Senegambia, at least 1,800 miles from the nearest colony and including the Canary Islands (Cramp and Simmons 1983, King and Shirihai 1996). So far, there are no records from North America (AOU 1998, Banks et al. 2006, Pranty et al. 2007). As recently as 1966, the total population was estimated at 800–1,000 pairs, but by 1997 the numbers had risen to 18,500–19,000 pairs (del Hoyo et al. 1996, Martínez Vilalta and Oro 2003). This huge increase in the world breeding population has led to speculation that the occurrence of the species in the Nearctic may

be imminent (Brinkley 2000). The present record aims to fuel that speculation and to make American gull watchers more aware of this possibility.

Circumstances

On the morning of 9 September 2005 at São Miguel Island, conditions included a slightly clouded sky, a mild temperature, low tide, and a light breeze. After scrutinizing the Vila Franca do Campo fishing harbor, the authors decided to move west along the waterfront, examining all birds present in the narrow strip of beach below. Birds observed were mostly Little Egret, Ruddy Turnstone, Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull (*L. michahellis atlantis*), and British Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus graellsii*).

It was at that time that Gordinho found a smaller, slender, darker, and gray-legged juvenile gull that was immediately identified as an Audouin's Gull.

In spite of the natural way in which the identification was first established, mostly because of the observers' considerable previous experience with the species, half an hour (12:30 to 1:00 p.m.) was spent collecting written and photographic evidence to support the record.

Gordinho's previous experience with Audouin's Gull was acquired from studying hundreds of birds in Portugal and thousands in Spain since 1995. He also was very familiar with Mediterranean Gull (*Larus melanocephalus*), Yellow-legged Gull, and Lesser Black-backed Gull, and was familiar with Mew Gull and Ring-billed Gull.

Special attention was given to make sure that the bird was



This juvenile **Audouin's Gull** (*Larus audouinii*) was the first Azores record for the species. Vila Franca do Campo, The Azores, Portugal; 9 September 2005. © Luís Gordinho.

not a juvenile Laughing Gull, a species with which the authors had no field experience at the time. Since most European field guides do not illustrate the juvenal plumage of Laughing Gull, relevant literature was consulted (e.g., Enticott and Tipling 1997, Sibley 2000, Olsen and Larsson 2003).

The bird was watched from as close as 33 yards with very good visibility. Ten low-resolution pictures were obtained by digibinning with a Nikon Monarch 10×42 binocular and HP Photosmart 318 camera.

General Shape and Appearance

The Audouin's Gull was slightly smaller and much more elegant than the accompanying Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Although there was no Ring-billed Gull present, our subject looked clearly larger than a Ring-billed, suggesting it was no Laughing Gull.

Compared to the Lesser Black-backed Gulls present, the Audouin's Gull presented a shorter and "taller" bill, a longer and more sloping forehead, lore feathering running farther toward the nostrils, a longer neck when alert, proportionally longer and narrower wings, and a typical posture for Audouin's, including the bill often held pointed slightly downward.

Plumage

The Audouin's Gull was similar in plumage to the juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gulls present, except for the following:

- Head, neck, chest, and belly were even, dense, and finely spattered/speckled brown, lacking the dark ear covert mark and the clearly blotched chest typical of Lesser Black-backed Gull, and lacking the white throat and belly of Laughing Gull.
 - Scaly look to the scapulars, resulting from thin and even buff fringes to the darkish brown feathers (the pattern is less clear on Laughing Gull due to the paler feather centers).
 - Contrasting underwing pattern, including dark-barred lesser and median coverts and blackish remiges separated by a large white panel across the center of the wing (corresponding approximately to the greater underwing coverts).
 - Dark rear flanks.
 - Dark rump contrasting with white upper-tail coverts to form a clear "U."
 - Rectrices blackish from the base but with small white tips.
- Note that the absence of gray, first-winter (first-basic) feathers in the mantle and scapulars indicates that this bird was in juvenal plumage.

Bare Parts

The bird's legs were gray and not very dark. The bill was "tallest" around the gonydeal angle and was bicolored, with

a blackish tip and brownish-gray coloration on the basal two-thirds. Laughing Gull's bill is thinner and all-blackish until second-winter plumage.

Behavior

The bird spent most of the time roosting in the sand and over the rocks, always with its bill exposed and its eyes opened. It pecked the sand twice, but it was unclear if any items were collected. A few short flights were observed, mostly during the authors' approach, but the bird was tame and generally reacted only with the alert posture that can be seen in several of our photos.

No agonistic behaviors were noted between this and other birds beyond a slight tendency for the Audouin's Gull to stand near the edge of the largest gull flock.

Concluding Remarks

Since the occurrence of Audouin's Gull in the Azores is not referenced by Bannerman and Bannerman (1966), Le Grand (1983), CPR/SPEA (1996), Clarke (1999), or Rodebrand (2007), the authors' observation is thought to be the first record for the archipelago. For that reason, both authors have provided a full description and elucidative photographs to the Portuguese Rarities Committee. The record was accepted in December 2007 (Gordinho and Martins 2007), becoming the westernmost Palearctic record to date. Because of its potential interest to the Nearctic birder, this record has been previously advertised in *Birding* (Gordinho 2008). However, in that short letter it was not possible to document and discuss the record properly, leaving room for this longer article.

Predicting the occurrence of new vagrant species to a given region is an old wish of many birders on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Robbins 1980, Roberson 1988). Even when elaborate mathematical methods are used (e.g., McLaren et al. 2006), predicting species occurrence is no exact science. The present record brings to mind the possibility of Audouin's Gull arriving to North America from southwestern Europe via the Azores and Newfoundland. The scarcity of records from northern Europe suggests that the arrival via Iceland and Greenland may be less likely.

Audouin's Gull is known to specialize in catching fish, mostly at night, and to depend on fishery discards (Paterson et al. 1992). In the Azores region, ship-attending Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls are known to travel up to 700 miles away from land (Moore 1996). This kind of behavior may encourage Audouin's Gull to fly across the Atlantic, not just to the Azores, but farther west, as the relevant Exclusive Economic Zone extends to 42°00' west longitude (FAO 2001). Furthermore, in 2006, 46 boats from continental Portugal (mostly Aveiro and Leixões, north of Audouin's Gull's normal range) and 107 boats from the Azores fished in International Waters.



Audouin's Gull is a candidate "Next New Bird" for the ABA Area, and North American birders can prepare themselves for a possible encounter by having good knowledge of the morphology of the species, especially in juvenal plumage. On this juvenile, note the scaly upperparts, the "long nose" (loral feathering extending onto the bill), the pale rear ear-coverts, and the plain upper breast. *Lagoa de Albufeira, Sesimbra, Portugal; 16 August 2008.* © Luís Gordinho.



When one is confronted with an "odd" gull, it is always beneficial to compare size and structure with nearby gulls. In this photo, the juvenile **Audouin's Gull** (center) shows important structural differences from smaller Black-headed Gulls and larger Yellow-legged Gulls (see text for details). *Lagoa de Albufeira, Sesimbra, Portugal; 16 August 2008.* © Luís Gordinho.

In that year, the Portuguese fleet harvested 14,000 tons of fish in the Northwest Atlantic (FAO Major Fishing Area 21), mostly redfish (*Sebastes* spp.). Specifically, out of 150,000 tons of fish caught in Newfoundland in 2006—mostly Greenland turbot (*Reinhardtius hippoglossoides*) obtained by dredge fishery (DFO 2008)—2,000 tons (1.33%) were captured by Portuguese vessels (DGPA 2007). Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls have been known to occur in Newfoundland since 1985 (Wilds and Czaplak 1994).

Regarding the Portuguese and Azorean Audouin's gulls, many birders agree that they must be part of a general exodus from the Mediterranean after breeding (R. Gutiérrez, A. Paterson, and D. Mitchell, personal communication). In the case of northwestern European birds, though, there may be other scenarios. According to Gutiérrez and Guinart (2008), dispersal of second-summer birds presents the most likely source of vagrants to northwestern Europe. These authors present direct evidence that some of the Audouin's Gulls that reach the west coast of Europe are derived from small populations breeding in the central and eastern Mediterranean, rather than from the larger Iberian colonies. Central and eastern Mediterranean populations of Audouin's Gulls may therefore be more predisposed to westward vagrancy than their Spanish counterparts.

Gull watchers from eastern North America are encouraged to scan flocks of large gulls in coastal areas from late summer to early autumn in search of the odd immature bird of this beautiful species, especially after long periods of strong easterly winds.

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