FIRST RECORD OF THE
GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (LARUS MARINUS)
IN VENEZUELA

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ABSTRACT

The Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus) was observed at the Los Olivitos estuary, Western Venezuela, on 20 March 1990, and constitutes a new record for Venezuela. Because this species has been extending its range southward in North America, and has recently been observed on the Island of Aruba, Netherlands Antilles (1970's), and in Colombia (1985), it may be a new arrival to Venezuela.

Key words: Great Black-backed Gull, Larus marinus, Laridae, Larini, range expansion, distribution, Lake Maracaibo, Venezuela.

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RESUMEN

PRIMER REGISTRO DE LA GAVIOTA 
*LARUS MARINUS* PARA VENEZUELA

*Larus marinus* fue observada en la Ciénaga de Los Olivitos, costa occidental de Venezuela, el 20 de Marzo de 1990, y constituye el primer registro para Venezuela. Esta especie ha ampliado su rango de distribución hacia el Sur de los Estados Unidos y ha sido vista recientemente en la Isla de Aruba, Antillas Neerlandesas (1970’s), y en Colombia (1985), lo cual hace suponer que es una especie recién llegada a Venezuela.


On 20 March 1990, I observed the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) at the Los Olivitos estuary, located on the eastern shore of El Tablazo Bay, 27 km Northeast of Maracaibo, Western Venezuela (10° 50’ 17” N; 71° 21’ 43” W). Two individuals were seen standing together on an open mud flat, about 14 km South of the coast of the Gulf of Venezuela (Fig. 1). The mud flat was covered with brackish water about 4 cm deep, with algae and small bivalves on the bottom. Upon approaching, the birds flew off but landed a short distance away, where they were observed with 7 x 35 binoculars for about 3 minutes, before they flew off again and out of sight. Because *Larus marinus* is not known to occur south of Aruba on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus, this sighting constitutes a new record for Venezuela (Voous 1977, 1985; Hilty and Brown 1986; Phelps, Jr, and de Schauensee 1994; Naranjo and Franke 1995).
Identification.- Their tremendous body size, massive yellow bill, pale pink legs, and typical adult plumage (black above with a white head, tail, and underparts) identified them as *Larus marinus*. The subterminal reddish-orange spot on the bill was very intense, and the body plumage immaculate, suggesting they were in fresh breeding plumage. In flight, the extended wing showed only a few white spots at the tips of the outer primaries, and along a narrow edge of the back of the wing.

**Figure 1.** Locality of *Larus marinus* sighting at the Los Olivitos estuary, Western Venezuela.
The only other large gulls previously recorded in Venezuela are the Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) (Phelps, Jr. and de Schauensee 1994), and an Old World species, the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) (John L. Swallow, Phelps Coll. Records). Adult *Larus delawarensis* are much smaller in body size, have a gray mantle, yellow bill with a black ring, and yellow legs. Adult *Larus argentatus*, like *L. marinus*, have a yellow bill with a subterminal red spot, and pale pink or flesh-colored legs, but they are smaller in body size, and the mantle and wings are gray, with only the wing tips black. Adult *Larus fuscus* are especially similar in mantle color to *Larus marinus*, but are much smaller in body size (slightly smaller than *Larus argentatus*), and leg color is pale yellow, instead of pale pink (Binford 1978, Farrand, Jr. 1983).

Other similarly colored gulls that could be casual visitors to Venezuela, include the Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*), and the Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*). *Larus dominicanus* (considered by some a subspecies of *Larus marinus*) breeds in southern South America and migrates northward to Ecuador and to 10° South on the Atlantic coast during the austral winter (Blake 1977), and could possibly occur in Venezuela. It is the only South American gull with a black back and wholly white tail, but it is smaller in body size, and with greenish yellow legs. Also, the 20 March observation does not correspond with the austral winter period. *Larus occidentalis*, from the west coast of the United States, is more similar in color to *Larus marinus*, but is unlikely to occur in Venezuela. However, it is also smaller in body size, with a medium to dark gray mantle that merges into black wing tips (Farrand, Jr. 1983).

According to the AOU Check-list (1983), *Larus marinus* is only known to winter as far south as Florida and Bermuda, with casual or accidental records for the Bahamas (San Salvador), and Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, Mona Island, Puerto Rico, St. Barthelemy and Barbados), but there are also reports for Aruba Island, Netherlands Antilles (Voous 1977, 1985), 235 km Northeast
of Los Olivitos, and for Buenaventura, Pacific coast of Colombia (Naranjo and Franke 1995) (Fig. 2). In Aruba, *L. marinus* was seen on 24 November 1971. The bird stayed until February 1972, and was in nearly if not complete adult plumage. Another (or same individual?) was seen from 1 October 1972 to 28 January 1973. In Colombia, an immature in first winter plumage, was seen on 28 January and again on 18 February 1985. Thus, the range expansion of this species to Venezuela is not surprising.

![Map of South America with locations of *Larus marinus* sightings](image)

**Figure 2.** Locations of *Larus marinus* sightings: Aruba Island, Netherlands Antilles (1971-1973); Buenaventura, Colombia (1985); Los Olivitos estuary, Venezuela (1990).

Whether *Larus marinus* is a regular or casual visitor to the Venezuelan coast is still unknown. Although there are still few observers to see any species, especially in Western Venezuela, perhaps this species is a recent arrival, because it has been expanding
its range southward in the United States; and by 1981, was considered a rare but regular visitor to the Gulf Coast (Duncan 1981).

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LITERATURE CITED


