

A Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* in Maranhão: the second Brazilian record

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ABSTRACT: Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* are being recorded with increasing frequency in the Neotropics, a change in status reflected both in changes of observer behavior and awareness and their westward range expansion in the Northern Hemisphere. The first Brazilian record concerned an individual photographed on the coast of Ceará in November 2006. Here we present details of the second Brazilian record of Lesser Black-backed Gull: a photo-documented record from the state of Maranhão obtained in November 2011.

KEY-WORDS: vagrancy, pseudo-vagrant, Ceará, Old World, Charadriiformes.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Linnaeus, 1758, is a member of the large white-headed gull complex, which breeds in northwestern Europe and winters from central and southern Europe south to West Africa (Harrison 1985, Olsen & Larsen 2004). The taxonomy of this species has long been in a state of flux, but three parapatric taxa are currently recognized (subspecies, *fuscus*, *intermedius* and *graellsii*) which differ subtly in their morphometrics, plumage coloration and molt patterns (Sangster *et al.* 1998, Liebers & Helbig 2002). Of these subspecies, populations of *L. f. graellsii* have increased in Western Europe since the early 20th century with subsequent changes in migratory behavior (Baker 1980). The species has subsequently colonized Greenland (Barnes 1961, Boertmann 2008), probably the source of a nominal 'pseudo-vagrant' (*sensu* Gilroy & Lees 2003) wintering population in North America, which has seen a strong surge in records since the first in 1934 (Edwards 1935 *apud* Hallgrímsson *et al.* 2011, Calladine 2004, Hallgrímsson *et al.* 2012). This change in status in the USA and Canada has been followed by a steady trickle of vagrants to Central and South America. The first report of vagrancy to the New World concerned a specimen reported from Argentina (Steullet & Deautier 1939), but this record was subsequently questioned by Post & Lewis (1995). Away from Brazil there are South

American records from Ecuador (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001), Colombia (Salaman *et al.* 2008), Venezuela (Fairbank 1999, French & White 1999), French Guiana (Devilleers 1979) and Trinidad and Tobago (Kenefick & Hayes 2006). Despite this upsurge in records along Atlantic-facing coastlines, the first Brazilian record of Lesser Black-backed gull came as late as 2005 (Girão *et al.* 2006) when a single near-adult was photographed on a beach at 4°28'04"S; 37°44'31"W, near the mouth of the Jaguaribe river in the State of Ceará on November 15th. Here we present documentation for the second occurrence of *L. fuscus* in Brazil.

Between 5 and 11 November 2011, B. A., R. R. and D. M. were carrying out shorebird surveys in coastal Maranhão. On November 5th they observed a dark-mantled gull from the ferry between São Luís and Pinheiro cities at 2°31'38.04"S; 44°26'23.49"W (Figure 1). Knowing that no large gulls are regularly present in the region, they obtained a series of images to document the event (Figure 2 and 3; Almeida 2011). The individual formed part of a mixed species feeding flock of Charadriiformes taking advantage of feeding opportunities in the boat's wake. Other species present included Gull-billed (*Gelochelidon nilotica*), Common (*Sterna hirundo*), Roseate (*S. dougallii*) and Royal (*Thalasseus maximus*) Terns; and both Grey-

headed (*Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus*) and Laughing (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) Gulls.

On completing the expedition, D. M. emailed the images to A. C. L. who suspected that the bird was a subadult *L. fuscus*. A. C. L. conferred with gull experts A. Amarillo and P. Adriaens and a consensus was reached that the bird could safely be identified as *L. fuscus*. The only regularly occurring dark-backed gull in Brazil is the Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*), a vagrant on the Atlantic coast north of Espírito Santo, although there are recent photo-documented records of vagrants from Bahia (Patrial 2012) and Fernando de Noronha (Silva & Olmos 2006, Pinto 2010). Besides *L. fuscus*, the only other dark-mantled gull thus far recorded in Brazil is Olrog's Gull (*L. atlanticus*) which is a rare visitor to Rio Grande do Sul (Dias & Maurício, 1998, Pacheco *et al.* 2009) and can be readily ruled out by the presence of a broad black subterminal tail band.

The São Luís gull can be aged as a 3rd cycle bird by the combination of a generally dark mantle (with black outer primaries lacking a white mirror), some retained brownish juvenile scapulars, pale pinkish legs, dark flecks on the belly, head and particularly nape, and a pale grey-green bill with a black subterminal band (*e.g.* Howell & Dunn 2007). This individual was clearly younger than

the individual photographed in Ceará (Girão *et al.* 2006), which had obtained near-adult plumage. Separation from *L. dominicanus* is not straightforward but can be achieved by the following characteristics: 1) 3rd cycle *dominicanus* are consistently whiter bodied and tend to lack substantial streaking on the head and underparts; 2) the bill better fits *fuscus*, as *dominicanus* tends to lose the black on the bill earlier; and 3) the nature of the 5th primary (P5) – in *fuscus* there is at most a narrow little crescent dividing the grey of the base with the black of the tip, whilst *dominicanus* has a large white crescent on P5 (A. Jaramillo *in litt.*). The lighter grey mantle suggests this individual is probably of the race *L. f. graellsii*, which is also the more likely vagrant, considering its more western European distribution.

Brazilian birders should be alert to the possibility that *L. fuscus* could be an annual vagrant to the Atlantic coast and to the possible occurrence of other vagrant larids such as Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*), Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*), Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*) and Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*) particularly during the northern winter (October-March) and principally in areas with large concentrations of foraging or loafing gulls and terns such as estuaries and sewage outfalls.

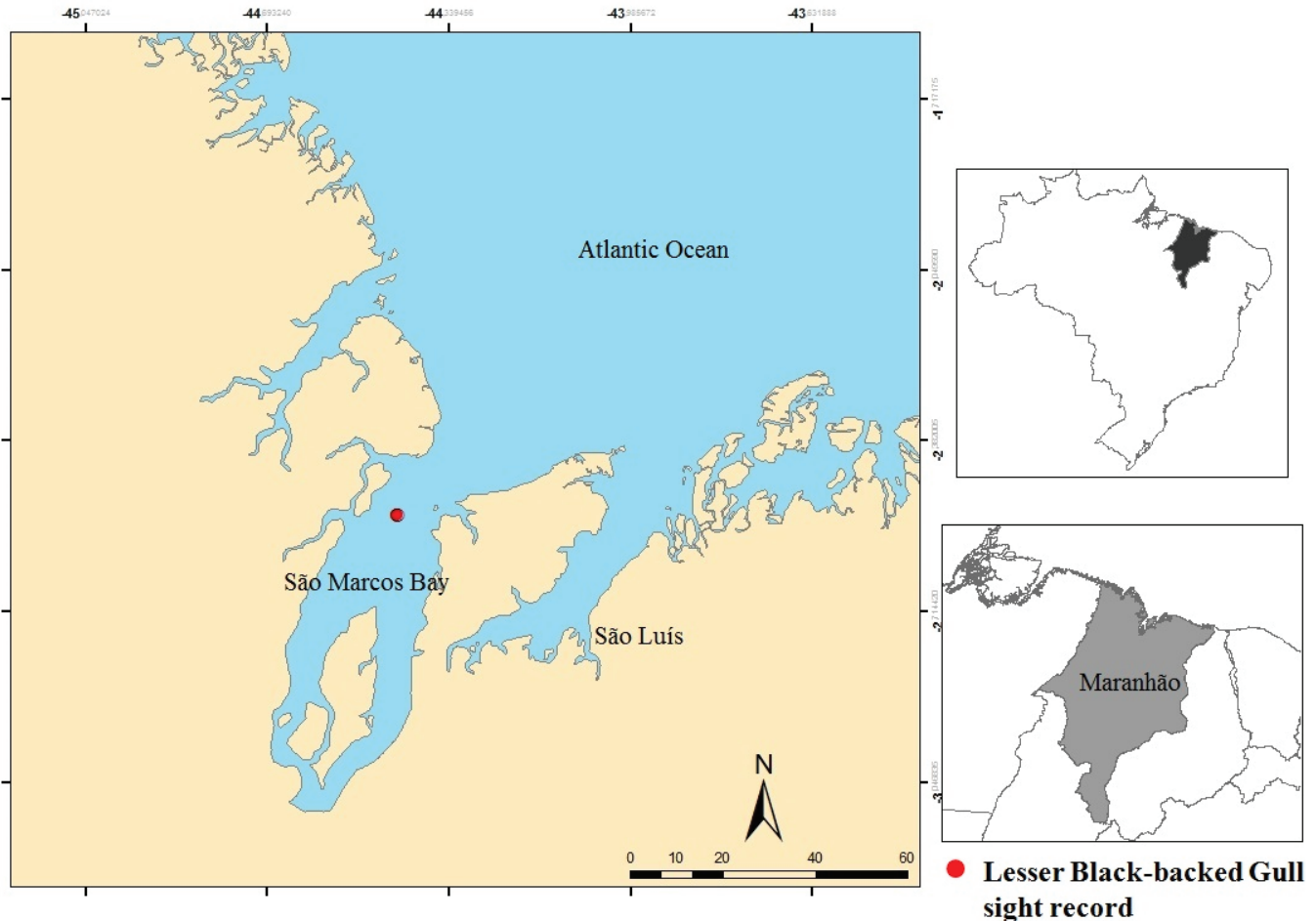


FIGURE 1. Site of the observation of the Lesser Black-backed Gull at São Marcos Bay, Maranhão, Brazil.



FIGURE 2. Field photographs of the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) at São Marcos Bay, Maranhão on 5 November 2011 (B. J. M. A.).

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