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Photo: Juliana Coffey

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Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada

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Abstract We describe the first record of Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and two additional records for Grenada.

Keywords Grenada, Grenadines, *Larus fuscus,* Lesser Black-backed Gull, seabirds, vagrant

Resumen *Larus fuscus* en San Vicente y las Granadinas y Granada • Describimos el primer registro de *Larus fuscus* para San Vicente y las Granadinas y dos registros adicionales para Granada.

Palabras clave aves marinas, Granada, *Larus fuscus*, Las Granadinas, visitante accidental

Résumé Le Goéland brun (*Larus fuscus*) à Saint-Vincent-et-les-Grenadines et à la Grenade • Nous décrivons la première mention de Goéland brun (*Larus fuscus*) à Saint-Vincent-et-les Grenadines et deux autres mentions à la Grenade.

Mots clés erratique, Goéland brun, Grenade, Grenadines, *Larus fuscus*, oiseaux marins

Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) typically breed on the Atlantic coasts of Europe, but in recent years, their population has been significantly increasing and their breeding range expanding (Hallgrimsson *et al.* 2011, BirdLife International 2020). Today, they commonly breed in Greenland, which they colonized in the 1980s (Boertmann and Frederiksen 2016). An increased frequency of sightings in eastern North America, the Caribbean, and northeastern South America is believed to be related to the increase in population size and range expansion in western Europe (Post and Lewis 1995, Olsen and Larsson 2004, Boertmann 2008, Rutt 2009). Of all the large European gulls, this species is specifically known for long-distance migrations and high levels of vagrancy, particularly of immatures (Lee 2009, Hallgrimsson *et al.* 2011). The vast majority of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in North America and the Caribbean are reported as the subspecies *L. f. graellsii*, characterized by a lighter gray mantle than other subspecies (Post and Lewis 1995, Smith and Smith 2000). However, the subspecies *L. f. intermedius* may also be possible due to an overlapping wintering range in southwestern Europe and northwestern and western Africa and mantle gradient with *L. f. graellsii*, whereas the darker-mantled and declining *L. f. fuscus* overwinters in mid- and eastern Africa (Hallgrimsson *et al.* 2011).

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While formerly described as "very rare" in the West Indies (Raffaele *et al.* 1998), Lesser Black-backed Gull is now considered to be a fairly common non-breeding visitor to the northern Bahamas and an uncommon, local species in the southern Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and in most of the larger Lesser Antilles between September and April (Gerbracht and Levesque 2019, Kirwan *et al.* 2019, Raffaele *et al.* 2020). At least one individual has now been reported for each country in the Lesser Antilles, with the exception of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Montserrat (eBird 2020, iNaturalist 2020). The species was described as an uncommon winter and rare summer visitor to Trinidad, a rare winter visitor to Tobago (Hayes *et al.* 2002b), and a vagrant to Barbados (Buckley *et al.* 2009). Trinidad appears to host the highest reported numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the Caribbean and South America, where they are the second-most common gull species observed, the majority of which are immatures (Hayes *et al.* 2002a, 2002b). In recent years, this species has additionally been sighted along the Atlantic and Caribbean coasts of northern South America (Fairbank 2002, Salaman *et al.* 2008, Almeida *et al.* 2013, Claessens *et al.* 2014, Willems *et al.* 2017), as well as in the western Caribbean along the coasts of Mexico and Central America (eBird 2020).

Observations

On 21 October 2019 at 1316, four observers, including two of the authors (JC and RC), observed and photographed a large gull at 12°30'28.7"N, 61°26'58.7"W from a 6-m motorized vessel during a coastal excursion. Upon noticing feeding activity, the

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observers approached a gathering of approximately 50 seabirds on a breakwater just north of Hillsborough, Carriacou (Grenada), for better observation (Fig. 1). Amongst the mixed flock resting on the breakwater were Laughing Gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla)* of various age classes, Royal Terns (*Thalasseus maximus*), Sandwich Terns (*T. sandvicensis*), Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*), and a large gull in immature plumage (Fig. 2). The individual was larger in comparison to the surrounding tern species and Laughing Gulls, but less significantly so and less robust than a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus).* Wings extending far beyond the tail, a pale head, heavily patterned back, thin black bill lacking a bulging tip, and an overall "slenderness" distinguished the individual from slightly larger gulls, such as Herring (*L. argentatus)* and Kelp (*L. dominicanus*). Critical analysis of the photographs, and consultation with others skilled in identification and aging larids (F. Hayes, B. Mactavish, and L. Cheng), confirmed the individual as a Lesser Black-backed Gull, likely in its second cycle.

On 30 October 2019, at approximately 1530–1630, JC and VT observed and photographed a large gull in similar plumage for approximately 1 hr in the same bay near the main jetty in Hillsborough, Carriacou (12°29'01.2"N, 61°27'28.8"W), less than 3 km from where an individual had been sighted 9 days prior (Fig. 1). This individual was flying around the main jetty, nearby boats, and the Hillsborough waterfront with a mixed flock, comprised predominantly of Laughing Gulls. JC and VT observed this bird at close range, both in flight and standing. The small bodied individual had slender wings and was less stocky than either Herring or Kelp Gulls. The dark underwings, darkish inner primaries, and dark wing bars formed on the inner wings, combined with the visible blackish tail band contrasting with a paler rump, contributed to the identification of the individual as a Lesser Black-backed Gull, likely in its first year (B. Mactavish pers. comm.).

During the morning of 7 November 2011, JC spotted and photographed a large gull in Clifton Harbour, Union Island (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), at 12°35'43.7"N, 61°25'02.6"W (Fig. 1). JC observed and photographed this individual for approximately 1 hr near the rocky shoreline of the Clifton waterfront (Fig. 3). Although initially assumed to be an immature Herring Gull, careful analysis of the high-quality photographs and consultation with others (B. Mactavish, C. Sharpe, and F. Hayes) confirmed it as a first-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull. For size comparison, JC photographed this individual alongside an adult non-breeding and an immature Laughing Gull, as well as two Royal Terns in non-breeding plumage. Although this sighting is listed in Coffey and Collier (2020) and Coffey and Ollivierre (2019), it has yet to be formally described.

Discussion

While the Union Island sighting represents the first record for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, two additional immature Lesser Black-backed Gull sightings were recorded on the Grenada mainland near Saint George's Harbour, Grenada, on 28 December 2018 and 30 March 2019, respectively (eBird 2020). Reports of Lesser Black-backed Gulls from adjacent island nations indicate that this species is not unexpected for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines nor Grenada. The remote geography of the Grenadines has precluded consistent research and monitoring,

Fig. 1. Map of Lesser Black-backed Gull sightings in the Grenadines. Map credit: Alison Ollivierre.

Fig. 2. Immature Lesser Black-backed Gull among a mixed flock of Laughing Gulls and terns on Carriacou, Grenada (Juliana Coffey).

Fig. 3. Immature Lesser Black-backed Gull at Clifton Harbour, Union Island, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (Juliana Coffey).

as the high cost of getting to and around the Grenadines prevents researchers from frequently accessing remote islands in the archipelago. However, local fisherfolk often visit these remote islands, which host globally and regionally important seabird populations, and thus provide rationale for investing in citizen-science training programs. Hayes *et al.* (2002b) attributed the increased records of Lesser Black-backed Gull in part to increased presence of knowledgeable observers and scrutiny of Laughing Gull congregations. Fisherfolk in the Grenadines who are highly familiar with Laughing Gulls indicate that they occasionally observe "large gulls," which may represent additional sightings of Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Coffey and Ollivierre 2019, Coffey and Collier 2020). While Great Black-backed, Herring, and Kelp Gulls have not been recorded in Grenada or Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, increasing records from throughout the region suggest they may be encountered in future surveys (Hayes *et al.* 2002a, Buckley *et al.* 2009, Raffaele *et al.* 2020).

Lesser Black-backed Gulls are known to gather near fishing boats and fishing activity and to congregate with other species of gulls and terns. In the Caribbean, they are frequently observed in association with Laughing Gulls (Latta *et al.* 1998, Smith and Smith 2000, Hayes *et al.* 2002b). If Lesser Black-backed Gulls regularly associate with Laughing Gulls and fishing activity, then surveys in the Grenadines may yield more sightings of the species, given the dependency on fisheries by residents of the Grenadines (Staskiewicz and Mahon 2007), and that the archipelago hosts more than 60% of the Lesser Antilles' Laughing Gull breeding population (Lowrie *et al.* 2012).

The colonies of origin for Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the Grenadines are unknown, though Hayes *et al.* (2002b) hypothesized several routes for Trinidad: birds may travel southwards along the North American Atlantic coast into the Caribbean, arrive in the region through transatlantic movements from Western Europe and Africa, or travel southward through Central America and eastward along the South American Caribbean coast. These theories, although presented in absence of the increased reports available since 2002 for the Lesser Antilles and western Caribbean, may also be true for the recent sightings in the Grenadines.

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Title Page Illustration

Immature Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) and adult Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) on Union Island, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Photograph taken on 7 November 2011 by Juliana Coffey.

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