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### Status of Iceland/Thayer's Gull in Kansas

Chuck Otte

*K-State Research and Extension, Geary County, PO Box 28, Junction City, KS  
66441 (otte2@cox.net).*

#### TAXONOMIC HISTORY

When the American Ornithological Society (AOS) published the 58th Supplement to the Check-list of North American Birds (2017), the AOS region including Kansas "lost" a species, the Thayer's Gull, formerly *Larus thayeri*. While disappointing to many bird watchers, this was not a surprise in ornithological circles.

Thayer's Gull, now considered a subspecies of Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides thayeri*), has a long history of taxonomic uncertainty surrounding it. Pittaway (1999) gave an excellent account of its taxonomic history, summarized below. Thayer's Gull was first described in 1915 based on a few specimens collected in 1901. It was compared to Kumlein's Gull (then a full species, *Larus kumlieni*) and Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*). Based on studies by Dwight (1917), Thayer's Gull was treated as a subspecies of Herring Gull. Dwight (1925) also felt that Kumlien's Gull was a hybrid between Thayer's and Iceland Gull (*L. glaucoides*). Numerous additional studies of both specimens and of birds on the breeding grounds failed to clarify the taxonomic status. Thus, Thayer's Gull was considered a full species, a subspecies of Herring Gull, and a subspecies of Iceland Gull by various ornithologists based on morphological traits and behavioral characteristics prior to the advent of genetic analysis tools and techniques.

From 1915 to 1960, it was generally accepted that Thayer's Gull was a subspecies of Herring Gull so it drew very little interest from birders or researchers. The turning point came when Macpherson (1961) showed that Herring Gull and Thayer's Gull did breed sympatrically without interbreeding, concluding they were distinct biological species. The American Ornithologists' Union gave Thayer's Gull full species status in 1973. With Thayer's Gull now a full species, both birders and researchers

were now giving it much more attention, though for different reasons. Many researchers still questioned the validity of Thayer's Gull as a full species. Weber (1981) concluded that Iceland-Kumlein's-Thayer's Gulls were a strongly interrelated complex, probably a single polytypic species.

Gaston and Decker (1985) reported random interbreeding between Thayer's and Kumlein's Gulls in the Hudson Bay region. The resulting offspring had an extensive mix of eye color and wingtip pigmentation and patterns. Godfrey (1986) in *The Birds of Canada* went into extensive explanation of why Thayer's Gull should be treated as a subspecies of Iceland Gull. Snell (1989) described non-assortative breeding between Thayer's and Kumlien's Gulls at Baffin Island. Zimmer (1990) described the difficulty in identifying Thayer's Gull due to the confusing variability of plumage. Weir et al. (2000) gave a very extensive review of the extreme variation in plumages amongst suspected Thayer's, Kumlien's and Iceland Gulls. Extensive details were given for all body characteristics and plumage measurements as well as breeding distribution and interbreeding of the three races. They strongly asserted that there were rapidly changing dynamics with the three races due to extensive interbreeding/hybridizing which led them to feel that the three races were one species.

In the 58th Supplement to the AOS Check-list (2017), the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature – North and Middle America, determined that Thayer's Gull should be considered a subspecies of Iceland Gull specifically citing Macpherson (1961), Weber (1981), Godfrey (1986), Snell (1989, 2002) and Weir et al. (2000).

## STATUS IN KANSAS

Both Thayer's Gull and Iceland Gull were relatively recent additions to the Kansas Check-list. David Rintoul photographed a Thayer's Gull on the Big Blue River below Tuttle Creek Reservoir Dam in January 1985 (Cable and Rintoul 1985). At that time there were questions on the validity of the status as a species. Iceland Gull was added to the Kansas Check-list in 1997 based on a record submitted to the Kansas Bird Records Committee (KBRC) in 1995 that had originally been rejected due to insufficient details to separate it from Thayer's Gull. The record was later reconsidered and accepted (Pittman 1997).

At the time of the AOS 58th Supplement's (2017) publication there were well over 100 records for Thayer's Gull from 27 Kansas Counties (Figure 1). There had been 17 records of Iceland Gull accepted from 10 counties (Figure 2, Thompson and Ely 1989, Thompson et al. 2011). As all of the counties where Iceland Gull had been confirmed are counties where Thayer's Gull had been confirmed, Figure 1 now represents the known occurrence of Iceland Gull in Kansas.

Thayer's Gull had been removed from the KBRC Review List several years ago but Iceland Gull still remained as a review species. Given the "lumping" of the two species, it is expected that the KBRC will reconsider whether Iceland Gull will stay on the review list.

Gulls, perhaps more than any other Kansas bird family, are an identification challenge. Additionally, there seems to be a great deal of evolutionary flux occurring with a great deal of gene flow and gene mixing occurring in many species. As genetic studies and technologies advance, birders should expect additional revelations, and check-list changes, in the years ahead.

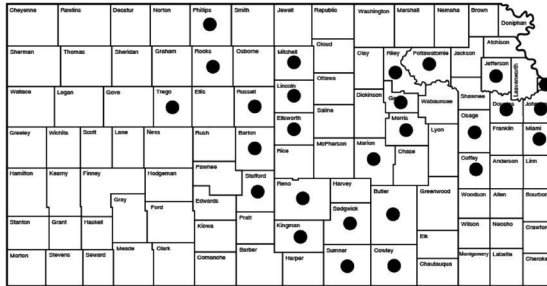


Figure 1. Known occurrence of Thayer's Gull in Kansas prior to being considered a subspecies of Iceland Gull. This now also represents the known occurrence of Iceland Gull in Kansas.

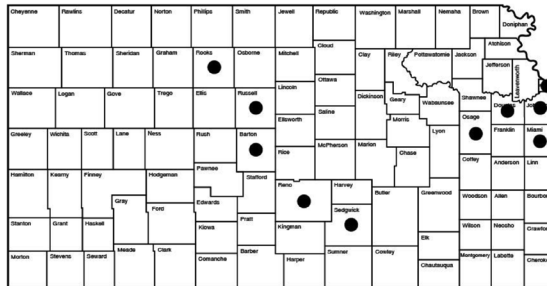


Figure 2. Known occurrence of Iceland Gull in Kansas prior to Thayer's Gull being classified as a subspecies of Iceland Gull.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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