

## SHORT NOTE

### First record of laughing gull (*Larus atricilla*) in French Polynesia

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On 6 March 2003 at 0800 h and again at 1300 h, while preparing for biological surveys in the Tuamotu and Gambier archipelagos of French Polynesia, we observed an immature gull flying in Rikitea harbor on Mangareva in the Gambier Islands. On both occasions we observed the gull for several minutes at distances as close as 20 m while it flew around the waterfront. It was a medium-sized gull, with long, pointed wings. The head was white with dark streaks and smudging on the nape. The bill was dark and of moderate length and thickness. The back and inner secondaries were dark grey, and the outer secondaries and primaries were a mottled dusky grey-brown. There was a complete, broad, dark band across the tip of the tail. These characters, particularly the long, pointed wings and broad tail band, led us to conclude that the bird was a laughing gull (*Larus atricilla*) in first winter

plumage. Franklin's gull (*L. pipixcan*) is similar in appearance and has been reported previously in several Pacific island groups (King 1967; Pratt *et al.* 1987), but can be distinguished from *L. atricilla* by its slightly smaller size, smaller bill, and narrower, incomplete tail band (Sibley 2000).

Laughing gulls breed in eastern North America and locally in western Mexico; non-breeding birds occur primarily on both coasts of the Americas south to Brazil and northern Chile (Harrison 1987; Howell & Webb 1995). There are records of laughing gulls from many areas of the Pacific, primarily during the non-breeding season (September–April), indicating this species has a propensity for long-distance vagrancy. One or more laughing gulls occur almost annually in the Hawaiian Islands (Pratt *et al.* 1987; E.VanderWerf pers. obs.), and there are several records, mostly of single birds, from the Line Islands (King 1967 and references therein), and three records from Palmyra in 1992 and 2001 (B. Flint pers. comm.). Other records include two single birds from Samoa (Muse *et al.* 1980, Hake *et al.* 1998), and one each from Johnston Atoll (Pratt *et al.* 1987), the Phoenix Islands (King 1967), Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands (Garrett 1987), Pitcairn (Wragg 1994), and even the eastern coast of Australia (Fisher & Fisher 1988). Although this appears to be the first record of a laughing gull in French Polynesia, its occurrence there is not at all surprising given the widespread records from surrounding island groups. Laughing gulls and other gull species may reach many Pacific islands more often than the scarcity of records suggests, but most individuals may go unnoticed because there are very few observers in this vast area.

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