

Variation in First Year Ring-billed Gull

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The ubiquitous Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) offers larid fans splendid opportunities for plumage study in Ontario. Yet, perhaps due to its abundance, familiarity and invariability in adult plumages, it is ignored. Contrary to most of the standard birding literature, however, Ring-billed Gull is highly variable in first and second year plumages.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate and discuss just some of the myriad variations in first basic birds, using photographs of individuals still in their first calendar year. A secondary purpose is to focus on a particular aspect of molt, essentially overlooked in the literature. Of all the standard guides examined, only Jonsson (1992) mentions the random replacement of juvenile secondary coverts with adult-like grey feathers, although he does not illustrate it.

Figure 1 shows a particularly advanced November bird that has molted many juvenile greater, median and lesser coverts, along with three tertials, replacing them with adult-like grey feathers. Only a few bleached outer median and lesser coverts, as well as a few brown tertials remain from juvenal plumage. Otherwise, visible characters are typical first basic with a

well streaked head and nape, black-tipped pink-based bill, grey scapulars and blackish primaries. Figure 2 is of a late November Florida bird. It is similar to the bird in Figure 1, but has retained more faded juvenile greater coverts.

The molt strategy employed by the birds in Figures 1 and 2 may be described best as an "extension" of the first prebasic molt, in which brown juvenal back and scapular feathers are replaced by grey adult-like feathers. This advanced first basic plumage appears to represent a minority of the first calendar year population, probably less than 10 percent. Observations by Jean Iron (pers.comm.) in 2001 show that up to 80 percent of first basic birds have replaced some juvenal coverts and tertials by October.

It appears that this molt is not confined to this species in North American medium-sized gulls. Observation of Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) in Florida in November 2000 revealed extensive replacement of juvenal coverts and tertials with adult-like grey feathers in many first calendar year birds (Jean Iron, Ron Pittaway, pers. comm.). See Figure 3. Overall variability in appearance is greater in Ring-billed Gull, however, due to more variegated plumage barring,



Figure 1. Basic I Ring-billed Gull, Van Wagners Beach, Hamilton, 4 November 2000. Photo by Barry Cherriere.



Figure 2. Basic I Ring-billed Gull, Fort DeSoto, Florida, 24 November 2000. Photo by Jean Iron.



Figure 3. Basic I Laughing Gull, Fort DeSoto, Florida, 24 November 2000. Photo by *Jean Iron.*



Figure 4. Basic I Ring-billed Gull, Port Stanley, 27 October 2000. Photo by *Barry Cherie.*



Figure 5. Basic I Ring-billed Gull, Burlington, November 2000. Photo by *Barry Cherriere*.



Figure 6. Basic I Ring-billed Gull, Van Wagners Beach, Hamilton, 15 November 1998. Photo by *Barry Cherriere*.

head streaking and tail band, along with greater variance in bill structure and colour, and body size.

Figure 4 shows a more normal or perhaps "average" first basic bird. Juvenal tertials are brown with pale tips, although one grey inner is growing in. The greater coverts are faded grey with brown on a few inners. Some median and lesser coverts still exhibit the characteristic diamond-shaped brown centres. Also evident are the grey scapulars, with subterminal chevrons which have faded from brown to dark grey. Underpart barring is moderate on this bird.

Another plumage extreme is depicted in Figure 5. Striking in this photo are the exceptionally dark brown coverts with very little pale fringing. The greater coverts are very dark, even on the outers, which tend to be pale grey on most birds. This bird resembles a bird present at Van Wagners Beach, Hamilton, in November–December 1999. Not only were the upperwing coverts dark on that bird, but so too were the underwings, thus causing the flying bird to have a unique appearance.

Figure 6 is that of a "runt" type bird. The bill is quite short, with close to 50 percent black distally.

The head and nape are heavily streaked and there are many dark chevrons present on the breast and flanks. The median and lesser coverts are very worn and faded to whitish. The greater coverts are darker brown than on most birds. As on the bird in Figure 5, there is no evidence of juvenal covert or tertial replacement with adult-like feathering.

All of this serves to remind observers that field guide depictions showing only one plumage type in first basic Ring-billed Gull are misleading. Indeed, this species is a mid-sized gull with plumage variations in first year matching some of its larger congeners. It can be fairly said that no two first year Ring-billed Gulls look exactly alike.

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Literature Cited

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