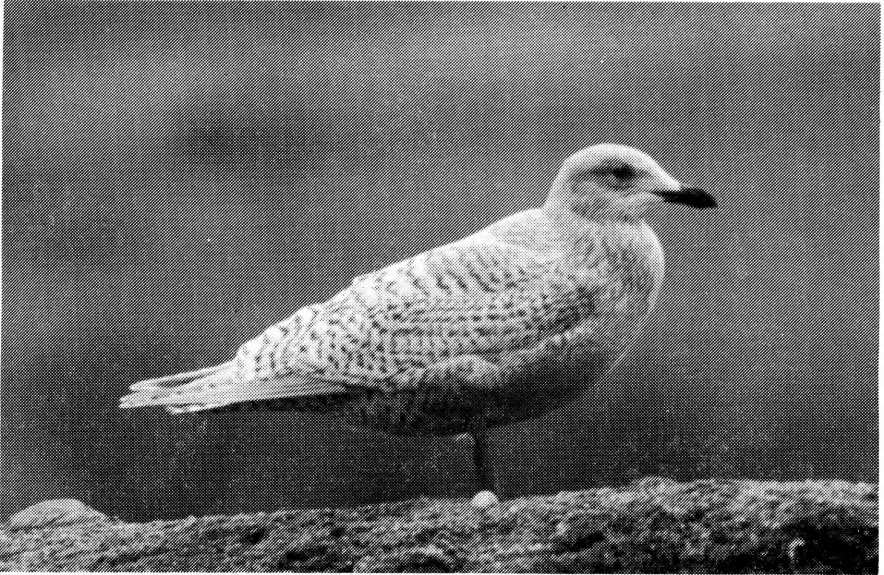


Photo Quiz

by
Bob Curry



One of the aspects I like about our photo quiz as compared to some others is that ours generally shows an entire bird in a not unusual pose and not obscured by vegetation or other birds. The task for reader and analyst alike is then to review what one understands about a species group in comparison to the subject rather than play some kind of detective game in which, it is my sense, the analyst is able to "see" things on the bird because she/he has been told the identity even though it frequently requires an unusual stretch for the reader to see some of said features.

About the only thing unusual about this large larid is that there are no congeners present for direct comparison. Nonetheless, there are

plenty of structural and plumage features on this bird to make a definite identification. Doubtless, most readers will immediately recognize that this is a white-winged gull in which the folded primaries are much lighter than the remainder of the upper parts. This, essentially, limits the choice to Glaucous or Iceland Gull.

Our bird is off-white or greyish white overall, most back and wing feathers have a blackish bar or spot resulting in a speckled appearance and the underparts are washed with a slightly darker shade of grey. These features together with the dark bill indicate that this is a first basic plumaged bird or a first winter bird to use the older term which,

especially in the case of gulls, I cling to anachronistically. The plumage appears to be extremely fresh with no feather wear or fraying of primary tips which suggests that it is early in the winter. Both Glaucous and Iceland have this general colour and pattern in their first winter.

Overall, this bird appears rather neatly proportioned and tapered elegantly from a moderate bill and head in smooth lines to the wing tips. Glaucous Gull is chesty and the secondaries and tertials are bulkier so that there is more abrupt and less tapered extension of primaries beyond this.

When observing animals we are drawn inexorably to the head and eyes as this is how we all interface with the environment. In these features our two species are diagnostically different. Glaucous Gull has a long stout bill which has a considerable hook to the upper mandible at the tip. Bill length (measured from the farthest extension of feathering on the upper mandible) is at least half head length in Glaucous and at most half head length in Iceland. In addition to being not as long, the bill on Iceland Gull is less robust than on Glaucous. In first winter Glaucous Gull, the basal two-thirds of the bill is pale pinkish and the distal third is black. In similarly aged Iceland Gull the bill appears almost entirely black, although there may be some lightening to dark brown near the base. On Glaucous Gull the forehead and crown are

flatter; on Iceland these features are more rounded and consequently the eye is more centred - all of which lend Iceland a more gentle visage and Glaucous a more aggressive one.

Two features about the folded primaries are diagnostic in the photo bird. The primary extension beyond the tail tip is greater than bill length; in Glaucous the tail extension is at most equal in length to bill length and usually is shorter. Secondly, a close examination of the folded primaries shows darkish subterminal spots. Glaucous Gull never has these. So our bird is an **Iceland Gull**, apparently of the subspecies *L. glaucoides kumlieni*. The bill seems quite robust for Kumlien's Gull and the head not as rounded and domed above the eye which suggests that this is a male.

The nominate subspecies of Iceland Gull *L. g. glaucoides*, breeds in Greenland, winters mainly in the western Palearctic, and is extremely rare in Ontario (see Ontario Birds 10: 24-26). It is worth noting that grey markings on the primaries of lightly pigmented Kumlien's Gulls, both immatures and adults, are often notoriously difficult to detect. At the end of the cline, darkly pigmented Kumlien's Gulls overlap, in many ways, Thayer's Gulls — but perhaps that is a matter for a later photo quiz.

(Editors' Note: This Iceland Gull was photographed by Doug McRae at Washburn Dump near Kingston, Ontario in late November.)

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