

Nikon

Photo Quiz

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Gulls have always been preferred subjects of bird photographers. Their reasonable tolerance of encroaching humans armed with various types of optical equipment has also played a key role in the precipitous rise in popularity of gull study over the past two decades.

The essentially brown plumage and checkered look of the upperwing coverts of this photogenic bird point to it being an immature of

one of the medium- to large-sized, dark-winged species. I will divulge first off that it is a regularly occurring North American species, photographed in the autumn of its year of hatching.

Of the small- to mid-sized species, only juvenile Sabine's, Franklin's, Laughing, and Heermann's Gulls have substantially brown upperparts, and none of these have any of the whitish spot-

ting or barring so evident on the folded wings of our subject bird. Juvenile Ring-billed Gull needs to be considered, as freshly fledged individuals are rather brown overall. Such a sharply marked, black-tipped, pink-based bill, coupled with dark body plumage, would be a most unusual condition for that species. Quite importantly, a juvenile Ring-billed Gull would lack the uniformly spotted appearance on the upperwing coverts of our bird. There would be a contrast between pale-fringed, dark-centred median coverts and greyer greater coverts. Any barring present would be found on the inner greater coverts, diminishing on the outers, those next to the belly. Much the same can be said of juvenile Mew Gull, which also would possess a strikingly petite bill, lacking the bright pink base shown on this bird.

We are left with a still sizable list of candidates, those being Yellow-footed, Western, Glaucous-winged, Lesser Black-backed, Great Black-backed, Thayer's, California, and Herring Gulls. We will focus on combinations of bill structure and colour to promptly discount the first six species. They all have bills which are more or less solid black up to the end of the first calendar year. The markedly two-toned bill on our bird also is much too slender and lacks the bulbous distal portion shown by the three exclusively western species and Great Black-backed Gull.

We are now left with only two species to consider. Herring Gull is abundant in Ontario and is highly variable in appearance. The resident population of southern birds, in various stages of first pre-basic molt, are joined in late fall by fresh, dark, northern juveniles. California Gull has appeared annually in Ontario, usually in late fall and winter, since the early 1990s. Most records are from the Niagara River, and nearly all of them pertain to birds in definitive basic plumage. Juvenile and first basic plumages are almost unknown in Ontario, with no photographic records existing, to my knowledge. Thus, a Great Lakes observer, encountering a bird resembling our quiz bird, is presented not only with an identification dilemma, but with a significant rarity to document.

Noting the bill pattern and structure, along with the round-headed, long-winged "jizz", many readers already will have identified our bird as a California Gull. However, caution must be exercised. An occasional Herring Gull, in its first calendar year, will exhibit an essentially identical bill pattern, including the "hook-back" of black towards the tip of the lower mandible. There is at least one well documented case of a runt first year Herring Gull in the literature, showing a small bill, head, and physique, including an attenuated rear end (Buckley 1998). The general pattern on the wing coverts is so

similar in the two species that this is a shaky separating feature. Leg colour is of no value either, as both species will show pink legs in the first year. How do we know that we are not dealing with a somewhat aberrant Herring Gull here?

Two characters, evident in the photo, are determinative. One strongly suggestive feature is the white subterminal patch on the tertials. To me, this white area occupies a greater amount of the tertial, extending toward the base. In fresh juvenile Herring Gull, it appears as more of a subterminal bar, not covering as much of the feather, and the tertial has two clearly separated white spots on the outer edge. The other trait shown in the photo involves the scapulars, and is quite diagnostic. A number of fresh first basic scapulars have emerged just above the inner lesser coverts. Their pattern consists of a pale greyish feather centre, a very thin dark shaft streak, along with a thin, dark subterminal line, and a narrow whitish fringe. This character, which has only recently been depicted in the literature (National Geographic Society 1999), is rather akin to the upperpart pattern possessed by a quite unrelated species, juvenile Red Knot. First basic scapulars in Herring Gull are somewhat variable in appearance, largely due to the effects of wear. They consist of a dark basal "anchor", the distal por-

tion of the feather whitish with a thin dark shaft streak, thin dark subterminal bar and white tip. With wear, the tips of many scapulars become a whitish patch, ahead of a dark base. This pattern differs from that shown by our quiz bird.

For an excellent photograph showing the first basic plumage of California Gull, see Lethaby and Bangma (1998). A fresh juvenile California Gull, still retaining a largely all-dark bill, is shown standing and in flight in Bain and Shanahan (1998).

This **California Gull**, in first prebasic molt, was photographed in Gibsons, British Columbia, on 19 September 1998, by Glenn Coady.

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