

# Nikon

## Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada



- .clearer, brighter image
- .highest quality materials
- .heavy duty construction
- .superb handling

*Naturally*  
BETTER!

# Nikon

[www.nikon.ca](http://www.nikon.ca)

## December 2003 Quiz

Glenn Coady

In late fall and early winter, many Ontario birders turn their thoughts to the challenges presented by the abundant concentrations of gulls to be found at our favourite birding haunts after their post-breeding dispersal to wintering areas. Twenty gull species have been found in Ontario thus far, and at least a handful of additional species are good candidates to be added to our checklist yet. Add to this the fact that all of these gulls exhibit a sequence of often subtly unique plumages and soft part appearances

as they proceed from juvenile to adult age classes, and you have a group of birds that may serve as an excellent learning tool for honing identification skills for the beginner and intermediate birder, as well as a constant source to challenge any tendency toward complacency in even the most expert birder.

Our quiz presents a lone gull for analysis without any gulls of easily determined identity with which to make basic comparisons for an assessment of overall size and proportions.



Wild Birds Unlimited

### *“Looking for that Special Christmas Gift”*

**We are Binocular Specialists**  
**Come see us before you invest in a new pair.**  
**Swarovski, Eagle, Bruton, Swift, Bauch & Lomb, Celestron, Pentax & Nikon Also Scopes Swarovski, Kowa, Eagle & others optics.**  
**Have you seen the new additions To the Eagle Optic’s Line?**



**3350 FAIRVIEW ST.  
 BURLINGTON ONT.  
 1-905-634-7700  
 E-Mail: wbu@cogeco.ca**

**951 GORDON ST.  
 GUELPH, ONT.  
 1-519-821-2473  
 E-Mail: wildbirds@sympatico.ca**

Wild Birds Unlimited



Even without having a good reference for the size of this bird, we can tell from its rather short, thin and distinctly pointed bill and its delicately rounded head shape, that this bird is not likely one of the larger, white-headed gulls that take four years to reach maturity. These gulls, even as juveniles, all present a much thicker bill structure, with a culmen that curves sharply downward near the end, presenting a much duller, flatter, more hooked tip. They also tend to show a more prominent gonydeal angle than this bird. Hence, based on these structural clues alone, we can quickly and intuitively eliminate California Gull, Herring Gull, Thayer's Gull, Iceland Gull, Glaucous Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Slaty-backed Gull and Great Black-backed Gull, without even so much as a look at plumage characters. Conversely, this bird's bill is both far too long and too thick for that of a Ross's Gull, the most diminutive-billed gull, which we also may eliminate easily.

One of the first things we notice about this bird is that it has a uniformly light grey mantle which contrasts with the more brownish lesser coverts and the dark brown tertials. Among the small to medium-sized gulls left to consider, this pattern should let us confidently age this as a first basic (first winter) bird that has mostly completed its first prebasic (postjuvenile) molt. Knowing this, we can now eliminate several other Ontario gull species.

This gull is definitely not dark enough for a Heermann's Gull in first basic plumage, and the light grey mantle at this age is sufficient to easily exclude Ivory Gull.

The quiz bird shows mostly brownish legs with some orange tones, and a predominantly orange-pink bill with a dark tip. A first basic Black-legged Kittiwake would show all black feet and legs and an all-dark bill, and can thus be eliminated from further consideration. Similarly, Sabine's Gull is very unlikely to ever be found in Ontario in first basic plumage; it usually completes its first prebasic molt on its southern hemisphere wintering grounds. In any event, both juvenile and first basic Sabine's Gull would show an all-black bill and a darker nape than our quiz bird, thus ruling it out as well. First basic individuals of both of the medium-sized hooded gulls, Laughing Gull and Franklin's Gull, would demonstrate a considerably darker mantle than the quiz bird and would have much more uniformly darker bills and darker legs. Additionally, Franklin's Gull would show a partial hood. Both of these gulls thus can be dismissed also.

Looking at our quiz bird's head pattern, we can note that it shows a mostly white head with a light grey "ear spot" and dark plumage around the eye. These are more characteristic of one of the small hooded gulls rather than the pattern of overall fine streaking on the head, nape and upper breast

expected on first basic individuals of the smaller white-headed species such as Mew Gull and Ring-billed Gull.

We are left with only three small hooded gulls from the species found in Ontario: Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gull and Black-headed Gull.

Of these species, we are able to eliminate Little Gull most easily as a possibility. Little Gull should have a much finer and shorter, all-black bill in comparison to the quiz bird. In first basic plumage, it should show a darker and more solid and extensive carpal bar in the lesser coverts, and unlike our quiz bird, it should demonstrate a dark cap. A Little Gull with wings folded would

not show as much of the primaries beyond the tertials as the quiz bird, which easily shows fully five primaries beyond the tertials, a character very unlikely to be seen with the shorter and rounder-winged Little Gull.

As far as the soft parts of our quiz bird are concerned, they are a better match for Black-headed Gull than Bonaparte's Gull. The latter generally has an all-black bill and should not show such a pale orange-pink base to the bill or such a two-toned effect. Also, Bonaparte's Gull has a slightly finer bill than the quiz bird. First basic Bonaparte's Gulls tend to have lighter pink legs than Black-headed Gulls (although this is variable and



# EAGLE OPTICS.CA





Great Optics





Great Guarantee

Great Value: 8x42: \$529 \* 8x32: \$499 \* 10x50: \$589 (other models available).

Come see the exciting  
Ranger Platinum Class Binoculars.

You'll see why Bird Watchers Digest  
reviewers said:

*"These are excellent instruments... They made both our Favorites list and Best Buy list. It is really a wonderful glass to use in the field, and backed with an excellent warranty..."* (Nov-Dec 2003, pg 65)

**www.eagleoptics.ca \* 1-800-710-4185 \* 3-951 Gordon St., Guelph, ON**

*Eagle Optics Products are also available at Wild Birds Unlimited stores:*  
 Burlington (905-634-7700) \* Guelph (519-821-2473) \* London (519-657-0745)  
 Ottawa (613-521-7333) \* Thornhill (905-709-3775) \* Toronto (416-233-3558)

# The Dovetail Directory



The world's largest catalogue  
of complete birding and  
nature tour itineraries

Forty-five independent operators  
Several hundred itineraries  
Truly, your one-stop shop!

[www.dovetaildirectory.com](http://www.dovetaildirectory.com)

prone to lighting artifacts) and usually considerably shorter legs as well. The quiz bird's orange-brown legs appear quite long also and are likely a better match for Black-headed Gull. Bonaparte's Gulls tend to have darker "ear spots" than Black-headed Gulls. Our quiz bird shows a fairly pale brown ear spot much lighter than the eye, a feature supporting Black-headed Gull. First basic Bonaparte's Gull has a slightly darker grey mantle shade than that of Black-headed Gulls of the same age. The grey

extends up onto the nape in Bonaparte's Gull normally, whereas usually Black-headed Gull in first basic shows a distinct contrast between the grey mantle and its whitish nape. Once again, the pattern on the quiz bird is more consistent with Black-headed Gull rather than Bonaparte's Gull for these features. Indeed, our quiz bird is a first basic **Black-headed Gull** that was photographed by Roy Smith on 27 March 2001 at Chew Valley Lake, England.

If we could examine this bird in flight, or at least with outstretched wings, additional points of confirmation would be Black-headed Gull's dark undersides to the primaries, its all-dark secondaries and inner primaries (these are dark-tipped only in first basic Bonaparte's Gull), and its generally browner carpal bar through the lesser coverts.

Black-headed Gull breeds as close as the Magdalen Islands in Quebec and in western Newfoundland, and is a species that could potentially appear anywhere in Ontario. Although sightings on the lower Great Lakes predominate, so does coverage. However, it should be more expected, probably, on the lower lakes via the seaway, and it occurs annually in very small numbers.

Glenn Coady, 604-60 Mountview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6P 2L4