

# **Nikon**

## ***Photo Quiz***

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Yet another gull stares out at us from the photo quiz page. And clearly, it is an immature gull as the plumage is quite dark throughout. Moreover, the bird seems quite small and daintily proportioned in comparison with the rocks in the foreground. Size estimates must be done with caution, however, as gulls vary considerably in size and it is always difficult to determine accurately the size of a single bird.

The quiz bird is so uniformly

dark that it must be in juvenal plumage. Moreover, all the feathers are crisp, fresh and new. Every back, scapular, tertial, and wing covert feather has a clean white margin and the folded primary tips are without wear. This plumage is usually retained for just the first few months of life, and is replaced through molt with the first basic plumage. This is generally attained by late fall or winter, although a few individual gulls retain juvenal

plumage through their first winter.

So, we need to consider all gulls that are mostly dark as juveniles. The small gulls such as Bonaparte's, Black-headed, Little, Franklin's, Ross's and Sabine's, and Black-legged Kittiwake have boldly marked upperparts and heads, and white underparts. This still leaves quite a few candidate species, given the limitations of using size without comparison to other birds.

Shape and proportions are easier to determine and most often are more reliable than size. Note that the quiz bird has a rather delicate rounded head. The bill is short, being only about equal to the distance between the bill-base and the rear of the eye, and it is slender, having no apparent gonydeal angle. These features are important in eliminating smaller individuals of some juvenile gull species.

Several large gulls are mostly dark in their first year of life. Juvenile North American Herring Gulls are uniformly dark in plumage, and "runts" do occur. Even a small Herring Gull should have a longer, stouter, all-dark bill with a definite angle at the gonys. Also, the head should be more angular and the eye proportionately smaller, lending an altogether more "aggressive" look. The plumage would not be so smooth and evenly dark grey. What about Thayer's Gull, which is slightly smaller than Herring? It should still appear larger and stockier than the

quiz bird. The bill, although smaller than Herring Gull's, would never reach the size and shape of the quiz bird. The upperparts of Thayer's are checkered white and dark, and there is a dark shadow on the face through the eye. A small dark juvenile California Gull should still have a much longer bill, with a bulbous tip. The basal half of the covert and scapular feathers are light, giving California Gull a more mottled and far less smooth appearance than the quiz bird. Lesser Black-backed Gull at this age shows much more contrast, with lighter nape and underparts, darker feather centres on the upperparts, darker cheeks and, again, a larger, longer bill.

Intermediate gulls cannot be eliminated by size, and some are dark as juveniles. Among the intermediate gulls which occur or are possible in Ontario are: Ring-billed, Mew, Laughing, Heermann's, and Black-tailed. Laughing Gull is an intermediate gull which is quite uniformly dusky in its first plumage. However, it has a whitish face, chin and throat, white eye crescents, and a large all black bill with a droop at the tip, and black legs. Heermann's Gull is just too uniformly dark, with no light feather margins. It too has a rather large bill, which is bright flesh with a dark tip and black legs. Even Black-tailed Gull, a distinct possibility although not yet recorded in Ontario, is essentially dark brown. It has white eye crescents

and a long, bicoloured bill, pink with a black tip.

Which brings us to the Ring-billed/Mew Gull complex. The trick to gull identification is to thoroughly study the common local species and know all its variations. Take a few loaves of bread to a parking lot at your local reservoir or lakeshore, sit in the car, and study the gulls at close range. Ring-billed Gull is abundant and ubiquitous in Ontario. We are used to seeing the all brown juveniles at parks and shores from July into September.

However, the quiz bird does not look quite like those Ring-billed Gulls. Nevertheless, be aware that some Ring-bills can be quite small and dark. Such birds may have a small bill with little angle at the gonyx. But even a small-billed, dark Ring-bill would not be so smooth, and evenly so, as the quiz bird. On Ring-billed, the head (crown, cheeks, and nape) is finely streaked brown and the breast is blotchier. On the quiz bird, look at five rows of feathers along the side above the flanks. These are the upperwing coverts and they are critical to identification. Note that each feather is solidly dark, with a smooth rounded shape and a narrow U-shaped fringe. On juvenile and (most) first basic Ring-billed Gulls, each of these feathers has a

white base and a dark anchor-shaped centre. This bird cannot be a Ring-billed Gull.

So, the quiz bird is a **Mew Gull** (*Larus canus*). This species has dark centred upper wing coverts with a narrow U-shaped margin. Although not diagnostic, there are other features which support this identification. The bill is more slender than almost all Ring-bills, and it has a duller flesh-coloured base which is not so sharply demarcated from the black distal half. The dark eye seems larger on the small rounded head than does Ring-billed Gull's eye. Moreover, the bird is so uniformly dark-looking, like a diminutive juvenile North American Herring Gull, that it cannot be the "Common Gull" (*L. c. canus*) of Europe. This subspecies, which may be split, has the cheek and crown streaked grey-brown, but the face and nape are whitish, as is the belly. Nor can it be the "Kamchatka Gull" (*L. c. kamtschatschensis*) which, like Ring-billed Gull, is more coarsely patterned, and with varying amounts of white on the head, nape and underparts.

This North American Mew Gull (*L. c. brachyrynchus*) was photographed at Gibsons, British Columbia, on 19 September 1998, by Glenn Coady.

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