

# *Photo Quiz*

by  
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When confronted with a "different looking" large gull standing on the shore, it is good to review the variety of features to examine with the goal of identification. One should consider overall size, shape and proportions, overall impression of shade/colour, wing length, head shape, soft parts structure and colour, and the details of pattern and plumage of the upperparts. It is important to remember with large gulls that few features are by themselves diagnostic, but rather they are relative and comparative. The sum total of features, rather than one or two criteria, compared with other similar species must tilt the case in favour of identification. This implies, of course, that the observer is intimately familiar with the commoner species of gulls, which requires that many hours be invested in gull study before one should attempt the identification of the more subtle of the rarer birds.

Spending time with gulls enables one to understand age and molt sequence, which is crucial for gull identification. This bird is a juvenile. Its plumage is exquisitely crisp with no wear on any feather margins. The contrast between dark centres and light margins also indicates no sunlight bleaching of feathers. Identification in this plumage is actually more difficult than later when molt of body contour feathers results in greater differences among several species which at this age all tend to be uniformly dark.

In Ontario, four or five species of large larids need to be compared, as they are essentially overall dark or dusky in juvenal plumage: Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*); Western Gull (*L. occidentalis*), for which there is no Ontario record; California Gull (*L. californicus*); Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*);

and Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*). I am essentially eliminating Great Black-backed from the mix as it is much larger and more robust than these five, with a massive bill, coarser black and white upperparts, and greater contrast between dark upperparts and essentially white head, neck and underparts. Such a bird can be seen directly behind the subject bird in the second photograph.

Let's examine our bird closely. It is really quite dark on the upperparts, especially the scapulars. On close examination, this is seen to result from the shade of feathers which, on these black and white images, are a shade approaching black, and the very limited neat white fringes with few internal markings or bars except on some of the greater coverts, especially inner ones. There is a noticeable dark eye-crescent or patch on the side of the head. We can't tell in this plumage just how many primaries extend beyond the tail as they lack white apical spots, but there is a long extension and the entire bird is elongated or attenuated. The bill is entirely black and not particularly thick at the gonydeal angle. It is difficult to make true comparisons with the other gulls in the photos as none is at the same distance from the camera. Having said this, I think the subject bird is a little slimmer in body diameter and sleeker overall than the gulls to the left. It has a smooth rounded head with a slightly domed profile.

Slaty-backed in juvenal or first basic plumage would be an extremely difficult bird to identify and I don't believe it has been reported out-of-range in North America. It should appear more uniformly dusky, and have light-fringed primary tips as in Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*). It should have a huskier bill than this bird, and