

## *Photo Quiz*

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Examination of the photograph reveals a medium to large-sized gull with a relatively small, rounded head and only a moderately sloped forehead. The bill is certainly not massive, appearing slim and rather short, although the apparent length may be partly due to foreshortening. There is some slight thickening at the gonys (the ridge along the lower surface of the lower mandible, near the tip). Although the wings and the legs look short, I am hesitant to trust these impressions, again due to the angle

between the bird and the photographer. The back and visible wing coverts are pale to medium gray and the wingtips are black with prominent white tips. While the head and neck are heavily streaked with dark, the forehead and chin are comparatively clean. The neck streaking is particularly heavy at the base, where it forms a collar, and some streaking extends onto the breast. Aside from these streaks, the ventral body looks to be all white. Some of the tail is visible on the near side of the wingtips and

there are no dusky markings to be seen. Although a black and white reproduction prevents us from determining the colour of the bare parts, we can at least tell that the legs and feet are not dark. Similarly, the bill is mostly pale but there is a dark spot on the gonys with a thin line of dark extending from there to the culmen. Lastly, but importantly, the eyes are dark.

Now take a second look at the bill. It is too big for any of the two-year species, that is to say the gulls that reach their first adult plumage in their second calendar year. On the other hand, it lacks the sharp gonydeal angle shown by some of the larger gulls. The back and wing coverts do not appear very dark in tone, and also, these areas lack any apparent dark markings. These observations eliminate the blackish-backed gulls as well as most immature plumages of the three and four-year gulls. We are left with about 14 species that have occurred in North America. Essentially, these are the gray-backed three and four-year gulls, and we can further limit our discussion to adults and near-adults. Furthermore, the obvious head and neck streaking puts the bird in basic (winter) plumage, as all adult and near-adult gulls would look cleaner in those areas in alternate plumage.

We can now whittle away the choices. The head pattern and pale legs and feet rule out Franklin's and Laughing Gulls and Black-legged

Kittiwake. Second basic and adult Ring-billed Gulls would show pale eyes and a thicker band of dark on the upper mandible. Glaucous Gulls never have black on the wingtips, and the amount as well as intensity of the black is too much for even the darkest "Kumlien's" Iceland Gull. Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls and their hybrids would show a larger bulbous-tipped bill. In addition, the primary tips are unicolour with the rest of the upperwings in the former species and the mantle colour of both races of Western Gull is probably too dark for our bird. Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls can be removed from the list of contenders as they have pale eyes, larger less rounded heads, and longer thicker bills which usually have a stronger gonydeal angle. Black-tailed Gull has pale eyes and a black tail band, unlike our bird.

We are left with three possibilities: Mew, California, and Thayer's Gulls. In addition, we need to consider three of the four subspecies of Mew Gull: the European race or "Common Gull", the Siberian race or "Kamchatka Gull", and the North American race or Mew Gull. "Common" and "Kamchatka" Gulls often show a blackish ring on the bill in basic plumage and Mew Gull can also show a dusky ring. However, Mew and "Common" Gulls are smaller and slimmer than the quiz bird with a very fine bill that is often described as "weedy".

The bill is particularly thin at the tip. Also, they show an even smaller more rounded head than this bird. Although “Kamchatka Gull” is heavier and larger-billed than the other two races, I doubt that its bill would quite approach that of the quiz bird. In addition, it has somewhat pale eyes. Although all three of these races of Mew Gull can be fairly heavily marked on the head and neck, the markings tend to be more spotted and not as coarsely streaked as on the quiz bird. Based upon these distinctions I believe it is safe to consider these three races of Mew Gull ruled out. A fourth race, *heinei* of central Asia, is unknown from North America and has not been considered here.

Both Thayer’s Gull and especially California Gull can appear very round headed and small-billed, like the quiz bird. Also, adult California Gulls in basic plumage normally have black and red marks on the bill. However, with a black and white photo, we cannot tell the colour of the bill markings. Besides, immature gulls also have dark marks on the bill. In fact, even adults of several species will occasionally show black markings on the bill, in addition to any red that might normally be present. Adult or not, we can still rule out Thayer’s Gull by looking at the underside of the far wingtip. Although Thayer’s Gull can show black primaries on the upperside of the wings, the undersides should appear white

except at the very tips. The black showing on the underside of the far wing indicates that this is not a Thayer’s Gull. Even the black showing on the upperside of the near wing is too extensive for Thayer’s Gull. We would expect to see more gray nearer the base of the visible primaries.

We have eliminated all possibilities except California Gull. Even though we did not need to know, we can tell that this bird is an adult by the prominent white apical spots on the primaries. These spots are less evident or absent on immature birds. Although the size of these spots is variable, when they are as large as shown on this bird, we can assume that it is a full adult. And although we did not use the bill markings to help in the identification, we can use them as a confirmatory feature. The thin black ring going from the lower mandible up to the culmen, with an adjacent red spot on the gonys is highly characteristic of adult California Gulls. This **California Gull** in definitive basic (adult winter) plumage was photographed near Gibsons, British Columbia by Glenn Coady on 19 September 1998.

Had the photograph been in colour, the solution would have been much simpler. We would have seen the red on the gonys and Mew Gull would never have been considered. And the greenish yellow legs and feet would have eliminated Thayer’s Gull from consideration.

The photo quiz is not meant to

be overly difficult, but it is meant to be instructive. Out in the field, our chances of identifying this bird would probably be better than with the black and white reproduction in this quiz. In all likelihood, we would have other gulls to compare it with. We could then see, for example, that it is smaller than a Herring Gull or larger than a Ring-billed Gull. We could also see that the mantle is slightly darker than on those species. If the bird took to the air, we could see that the long wings made it appear closer in size to a Herring Gull. We would look for more extensive black in the wingtips than on Herring Gull and also two prominent mirrors.

In the field, however, viewing conditions are often less than ideal. This is usually the case when California Gulls are seen on the Niagara River, where birds are seldom as close as the quiz bird. This species has been seen every fall on the river since it was initially discovered there in 1992. Elsewhere in Ontario, it is very rare and not recorded every year. Distance and dim lighting, or worse, strong contrasting lighting, make things like eye colour, bill markings, leg colour,

and mantle shade difficult to record accurately. In addition, California Gulls are variable in the darkness of their mantle such that darker individuals can even be confused with pale Lesser Black-backed Gulls. In that case, it is necessary to see the bill markings and the eye colour. The most difficult challenge, however, remains those deceptive aberrant Herring Gull-like birds, a few of which appear on the Niagara River every year. These birds are typically slightly darker than a normal North American Herring Gull, immediately bringing to mind the possibility of California Gull. They may be smaller than a Herring Gull and they may have extensive black in the wingtips, with large mirrors. They may even have yellow legs! As yet, none of these different birds has had dark eyes, though given that the odd Herring Gull shows fairly dark eyes, that also seems like a possibility. One character I have never seen on these birds, and I suspect I never will, is the unique bill pattern of the adult California Gull. Unfortunately, that field mark is only present in fall and winter but, fortunately, that is when most of us are studying the gulls.

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