

AT A GLANCE

August 2005



DAVID LARSON

Ah, yes! Another of those birds so many birders love to hate — a gull. Well, before moving on to another project, give this one a chance. It doesn't have to be as bad as many folks seem to think. Just keep your wits about you, ask yourself the right questions, and look carefully at the gull in front of you (along with all the others that are often nearby). Whatever you do, *don't panic!*

Let's try this one together, just to show you how easy gull identification can be — at least occasionally. First, consider shape and overall impression, jizz if you will. For gulls, this useful, though somewhat intangible, characteristic can sometimes be very helpful when one is confronted with an unidentified individual. Notice, I did not say, “unfamiliar” gull. In the case of the mystery gull, the bird clearly appears delicate in structure rather than large, full-chested, and chunky. Notice the long primaries, giving the bird a somewhat tapered appearance at the stern end. Similarly, note that the head is not particularly angular or anvil-shaped; instead it is more gently rounded, especially on the back. Also, the bill is decidedly fine, hardly showing a notch at the gonys that is so prominent in many large gulls.


If we concentrate on plumage characteristics, it is obvious that the bird in the photo is decidedly pale to whitish on the underparts, rather than uniform, dusky-brown. Likewise, the back pattern is not coarsely marked and checkered in appearance. These two features are quite important in that, by themselves, they can eliminate at two of the most viable identification possibilities. But let us not get ahead

of ourselves. We need to address another important question first: the age of the bird. If we can place an unidentified gull into an appropriate age class, then some things become easier. It may be useful to remember that gulls take anywhere from two to four years before reaching fully adult plumage. Besides changes in plumage as a gull matures, there are also attendant changes in soft part colors such as bills, legs, and orbital rings. Most gulls start out with black or dark bills that generally become lighter as they mature. Likewise, most species have pinkish or grayish legs and dark eyes as juveniles; however, as they mature, the color of their eyes and legs may change. The leg color of most common gull species is either pinkish or yellowish by adulthood, and the eye color is frequently yellowish.

Armed with this information, the fact that the bill and eyes of the gull in the picture appear to be mostly dark suggests that the gull is a young bird. Reinforcing this impression is the fact that there do not appear to be any white spots (i.e., mirrors) within the black primary tips, and the bird is prominently marked with dusky spotting and barring on the underparts. An adult gull would be pure white underneath and would not display the distinctive pale, scalloped edges to the wing coverts and tertials (i.e., the long feathers lying on top of the primaries) shown by the mystery gull.

Returning to the overall coloration, if the bird was a young American Herring Gull, it would be noticeably more uniformly brown on the underparts. Likewise, if the bird were a Great Black-backed Gull or a Lesser Black-backed Gull, its back pattern would be coarsely checkered with black and white, even though it would be whiter than a Herring Gull on the head and underparts. Even a very dark Iceland Gull would never exhibit such dark (black) primaries. Furthermore, in all of these large gull species the bill would be noticeably heavier and would have a decided angle, or notch, at the gonys. Given the overall slim appearance of the bird, and having eliminated the other medium and large gull species that regularly occur in Massachusetts by plumage characteristics, the bird in the photo can only be a young Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*).

Because Ring-billed Gulls only require three years to acquire their adult plumage, they generally begin to show obvious signs of increasing maturity by their first autumn. In the pictured gull it is possible to see that there is a contrast between the uniform, gray-colored feathers on the scapulars and the scalloped wing coverts and tertials. As autumn progresses, the back will increasingly take on a gray-saddled effect, the bill will become lighter at the base, and the dusky marks on the underparts and nape will start to disappear. This combination of features tells us that this is a bird in juvenal plumage that is gradually starting to molt into its first-winter plumage. While this conclusion may not be obvious at first, it's actually quite logical once a few critical alternatives are carefully considered, evaluated, and integrated.

Ring-billed Gulls are common to abundant migrants and winter visitors in Massachusetts, and large numbers also occur inland and as non-breeding residents during summer. David Larson captured the splendid image of this juvenile Ring-billed Gull at South Beach in Chatham in mid-August. 

Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE



DAVID LARSON

Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

Western Mass Editor Wanted

Bird Observer is looking for an editor or co-editors to contribute and solicit articles and field notes from the western part of the state on a regular basis.

If you are interested in joining our editorial staff, please contact Carolyn Marsh at cmarsh@jocama.com.

