

## WINTER GULLS IN MASSACHUSETTS

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Everyone knows a "seagull". They are numerous and probably the most conspicuous birds of our coast. But, what people call "plain old seagulls" may be any number of different kinds; as may as nine species regularly winter in Massachusetts. This article is intended to provide the basic information required to sort out these birds. Two terms are often used to describe gulls: the mantle or the upper surface of the wings as well as the large portion of back between the wings, and the primary feathers, which are the large feathers on the trailing edge of the outer wing (see illustration).

The Herring gull is the most abundant and widespread. Adults have a white head and neck, white tail, gray mantle; their black wing tips have a few spots of white. The bill is yellowish with a red spot, and the legs are pink. The bird is familiar to most people.

But, to confuse matters, gulls have different plumages depending on their age. Young Herring gulls in their first winter are mottled gray-brown over the entire body, but with the tail and the primary wing feathers slightly darker. In its second winter, the Herring gull's underparts, throat, and forehead become whitish, though often streaked or mottled with brown; the back becomes grayer and the rump lighter. Between the second winter and adult status, the head, neck, underparts, rump, and tail grow even lighter as the back becomes grayer. Then, in the fourth autumn, the bird attains full adult plumage, as described above.

Not all gulls take four years to mature; many of the smaller species take only two. One must remember that in all gulls there are intermediate plumages so many individual birds do not fit exactly the descriptions, but if one knows the sequence he can figure out the in-betweens. Once you have become familiar with Herring gulls in the field, they can be used as a basis for comparing other species.

The adult Great blacked-backed gull is unmistakable. It is much larger than the Herring gull and its white underparts conspicuously contrast the dark slate mantle even at great distances. The immature Great black-back follows roughly the same plumage sequence as the Herring gull, but with less brown and a mantle that noticeable contrasts with the rest of the body. This dichotomy grows until the fourth year, when the Black-back attains its striking adult attire. In all stages, the head and beak of the Great black-back is stouter than the Herring's.

The adult Ring-billed gull has basically the same pattern as the Herring gull. However, when both species are seen simultaneously, the Ring-billed is conspicuously smaller with a black ring around its yellow bill. Also, in contrast to the Herring gull, Ring-bills have greenish-yellow legs. In flight, the Ring-bill shows more dark on the under-side of the primaries. The immature is much like the second winter Herring gull, but it has a narrow (approximately one-inch wide) band near the end of the tail while the immature Herring gull's tail terminates in a broad dark band. Leg color is not reliable to distinguish young Ring-bills from young Herring

gulls since young Ring-bills can have pinkish legs.

These three gulls are permanent residents in our state - they are found throughout the year. Two gulls that breed mainly in the Arctic, the Glaucous and Iceland, can be found in Massachusetts from about the end of November through the third week of May. Known collectively as the "white-winged" gulls, their plumage sequences are very similar.

In their first winter they are a mottled, very pale buff, almost cream color, with whitish primaries. The first winter Herrings, remember, are dark with slightly darker primaries. By their second winter the Glaucous and Iceland gulls carry a striking nearly pure white over their entire body. Adults also have a white body, though with very pale grey mantle and whitish primaries. To tell these two apart, one must rely mainly on size, by comparison with other gulls. The Iceland is the size of a Herring, while the Glaucous is usually the size of a Great black-backed. A few Glaucous gulls, however, match the size of Icelands. In this case one must look at the head and bill, which on the Glaucous are large in relation to the body, a characteristic not found in the Iceland. If the bird is at rest, look at the relation of wing tips to the tail: in the Iceland the wings extend beyond the tail, and vice versa in the Glaucous. Since the Iceland is usually far more common here, one should "count" only typically large Glaucous gulls, at least until familiar with both of these white-winged gulls.

Another gull that comes to us from its nesting grounds in the north is the Black-legged Kittiwake. This ocean-going gull can be seen any time between September and March, most often when strong easterly winds blow it close to shore, although I have seen Kittiwakes skimming low over the ocean on calm winter days from places like Andrew's Point, Rockport. The adults resemble small Herring gulls except that the black wing-tips are in the shape of a sharply defined triangle and lack the white terminal spots of the Herring gull, giving the Kittiwake's wingtips a distinctive appearance often described as "dipped in ink." The immature Kittiwake has a bold wing pattern, with a black leading edge of the outer wing and a dusky bar running from the forward bend diagonally back to the center of the wing's base, forming a zig-zag pattern. It also has a black "collar" on the back of the neck.

The smallest of our common gulls is the Bonaparte's, which can be seen in Massachusetts at any time of year, except the latter three weeks of June when it nests in Canada. In the adult's non-breeding plumage, (breeding plumage is the same except that the head is black), the Bonaparte's has a white head with a dark spot behind the eye, gray mantle except for conspicuous white triangular patches on the leading part of the wingtips, and a white rump and tail. The immature has a head pattern similar to the winter adult, but the white triangles on the wings are less sharply defined and are broken with dark marks. There is also a dusky diagonal bar across the wing similar to the immature Kittiwake's and a thin black band across the tail close to its tip.

In addition to these seven native gulls there are two Old World species that are uncommon though surprisingly regular visitors in their favored spots such as Newburyport harbor. These are the Black-headed and Little gull. They are often found in association with the Bonaparte's and like that species, the adults acquire dark hoods in summer, (absurdly, the Black-headed is the only one that gets a dark brown not black head), but we seldom see them in this plumage.

The rarer of the two is the Little gull. It is noticeably smaller than a Bonaparte's, the adults having solid light gray mantle--no black on wingtips--and striking dark gray over the entire undersurface of the wings. These marks are diagnostic. The immature can be identified by its small size and Kittiwake-like wing pattern.

The black-headed gull is very similar to the Bonaparte's in appearance. In the adult the bill is red, in contrast to the black bill of the Bonaparte's in all plumages. Furthermore, the under surface of the primaries is conspicuous dark smoky gray, which, under decent light conditions, can be seen at a fair distance. The immature Black-headed is extremely similar to the immature Bonaparte but note the following differences: the bill is proportionally larger, being yellow with a black tip; there is a black band at the very end of the tail whereas Bonaparte's has a tiny white terminal band beyond the black band; in flight the white triangles on the wings do not contrast as much with the rest of the Black-headed's lighter wings; the under surface of the primaries in an immature Black-headed is at first as light as Bonaparte's but later darkens. Both adult and immature birds exhibit these helpful characteristics: the Bonaparte's wingbeats are more rapid like a tern's; also, in proportion to the body, the wings of the Bonaparte's are slimmer than the Black-headed, again tern-like.

Some of these last field marks might seem to be quite subtle. Certainly, there are times when poor viewing conditions preclude the certain identification of some individual gulls. Hence, don't be afraid to write question marks in your records. As you gain experience, the subtleties will become more obvious. Once you know the common species, keep an eye out for any of the really rare gulls that have been seen on the New England coast: the Ivory, Sabine's, Franklin's, Mew (or Common as it is known in Europe) and Lesser black-backed.\*

Now get out in the field and take a second look at those seagulls. You might discover a bird you've never seen before.

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For further information on these and all other gulls discussed here, see:

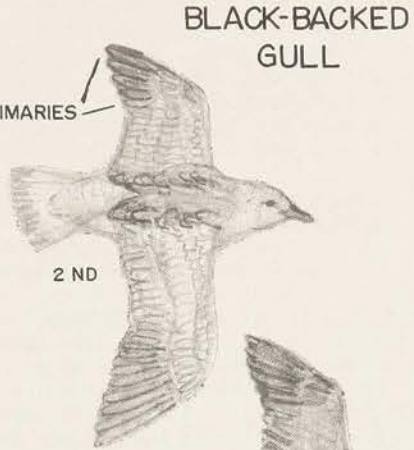
Peterson, Roger Tory. A Field Guide to the Birds, 1947; A Field Guide to Western Birds, 1961; Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Robbins, Chandler S., Bartel Bruun, and Herbert S. Zim. Birds of North America. New York: Golden Press, 1966.



1 ST  
WINTER

HERRING  
GULL



PRIMARIES

2 ND

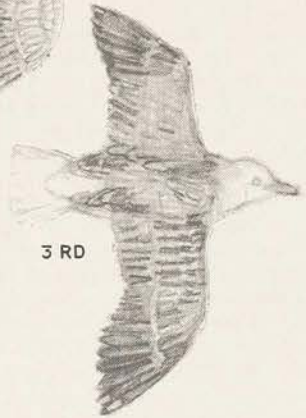
BLACK-BACKED  
GULL



2 ND  
WINTER



3 RD  
WINTER



3 RD



IMM.

RING-BILL

KITTIWAKE



IMM.

LITTLE  
GULL



IMM.

BONAPARTES



IMM.

BLACK-  
HEADED



IMM.

ADULT  
(WINTER)

