

February's mystery bird represents a member of the group of birds, both popular and unpopular among field observers, commonly called "sea gulls"—family Laridae. In this age of ornithological enlightenment, most birders now acknowledge the grim reality that "indeed, a gull is not just a gull." Gulls traditionally challenge, frustrate, or delight serious birdwatchers, and there is nothing like a motley immature gull to cause consternation among the most avid devotees. Mercifully, the pictured gull need not create such ambivalence.

As with all gulls, an important starting point in the identification process is to determine the age of the individual in question. In this case, the task is simplified by the presence of an unmarked yellow bill on the mystery bird. Because immatures of virtually all North American gulls have dark or bicolored bills, the pictured bird is clearly an adult. At this point, the choices are limited to three species: Mew Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Red-legged Kittiwake. The Red-legged Kittiwake is essentially confined to the Pribilof and Aleutian islands in Alaska and can therefore be dropped from the list of viable possibilities. The mystery gull is apparently a Mew Gull or a Black-legged Kittiwake.

A comparison between an adult Mew Gull and an adult Black-legged Kittiwake requires examination of bill pattern and shape, eye color, head coloration, and primary pattern. The pictured bird appears to have a dark eye and a fairly dark mantle, characteristics shared by both species. More important, therefore, is the presence of the dusky spot behind the eye and the absence of streaks on the head and nape. These two features are typical of a kittiwake in winter plumage and, when combined with solid black primary tips with no internal white spots (mirrors) and a stout, unmarked bill with no suggestion of a notch on the lower mandible (gonys), the identification of the mystery photograph as a Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is assured.



Black-legged Kittiwake

Photo by Roger Everett

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

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

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