

AT A GLANCE

February 2003



DAVID LARSON

It is possible to say unequivocally that this month's challenge pertains to some species of gull. While it is true that some gulls in certain plumages may bear a resemblance to certain other seabird species (e.g., shearwaters or jaegers), the pictured bird is unambiguous. Remember the old adage that, "If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck!" In this case, "It's a gull."

Unfortunately, this is where simplicity ends. Most birders would agree that gulls represent one of the most complex and challenging groups to identify of all species that occur in Massachusetts. The identification challenges presented by gulls are the product of a variety of conditions, including 1) a lengthy maturation period (as much as four years in large gull species) that results in a series of highly variable plumages from one year to the next, 2) seasonal plumage and soft part (i.e., leg color) variation from summer to winter, 3) sexual dimorphism (males larger than females), 4) frequent plumage abnormalities (e.g., leucism and albinism), 5) hybridity between one species and another, and 6) complex genetic changes taking place within rapidly expanding gull populations or between closely related species (e.g., Western and Glaucous-winged gulls on the Pacific Coast, or Herring and Yellow-legged gulls in Europe). Having offered this caveat, we can now address the gull in the photograph.

Several things should be immediately apparent about the gull in the picture. First, the fact that it has a strongly bicolored bill and that the back and wings have a finely checkered appearance indicate that the bird is not an adult. The size, shape, and pattern of the bill, along with the absence of a prominent dusky spot behind the eye tell us that the bird is not one of the small, hooded species (e.g., Laughing Gull or Bonaparte's Gull). The bill is obviously quite long and heavy and shows a prominent gonydeal angle near the distal end of the lower mandible. This suggests that this is a really large gull, especially when combined with the flat-headed appearance and overall bulk of the bird. The fact that the bill is neatly tipped with black with an extensive pale area at the base is also an important feature. In the east the only large gulls which regularly show such a distinct dark tip to the bill at certain ages are Herring and Glaucous Gulls.

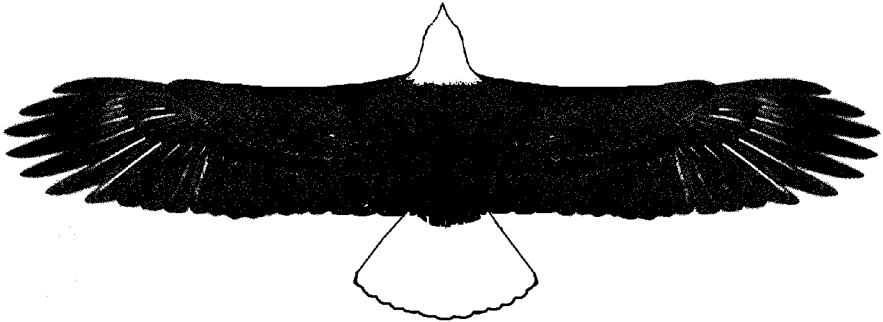
Armed with the knowledge that the mystery gull is probably either a Glaucous Gull or a Herring Gull, other characteristics need to be examined. Since Glaucous Gulls are one of the "white-winged" gulls, one would expect that the primaries and wing tips should be immaculately white, in fact, *whiter or paler* than the rest of the wing and body of the bird. In the image shown, however, the folded primaries are *darker* than any other feathers visible in the picture! Interesting? Indeed, particularly since the back feathering looks extremely pale like a Glaucous Gull, as does the barring on the wing coverts, even though the greater primary coverts appear to be a solid, light brown (?) in color! Ordinarily the primaries and greater primary coverts on a Herring Gull are *black, or blackish*, and certainly not brown, or brownish, the way they appear in the photograph.

Practically all gulls with black wing tips can occasionally exhibit brownish flight feathers, particularly immatures during early summer when their plumage is often badly worn. However, in these cases the rest of such a gull's plumage tends to be similarly worn and frowsy, not crisply patterned as in the pictured gull. With this in mind it is fairly obvious that the bird in the picture was probably not photographed in the summer. In fact, it is in first-winter plumage, as indicated by its crisp plumage and lack of any solid gray feathering coming into the mantle on the back. The large, dark-tipped bill, robust structure, flat-headed appearance, relatively short extension of its folded wing-tips beyond the tail, and overall frosty appearance indicate that the bird most closely resembles a Glaucous Gull. However, the presence of primaries and primary coverts that appear brownish, and clearly *darker* than the rest of the bird, are inconsistent with typical Glaucous Gulls.

Enter the joker! This is one of those wonderful large gulls that tend to give birders fits, and for good reason! The pictured gull is almost certainly a hybrid – a cross between a Herring Gull and a Glaucous Gull – a combination that is often termed "Nelson's Gull," and probably emanating from either Iceland or somewhere along the coast of the Beaufort Sea in Canada's Northwest Territories. While not common in New England, such individuals do appear from time to time, when they may generally be distinguished by their overall pale, Glaucous-like Gull coloration and robust structure, but with coffee-colored primaries and primary coverts. Needless to say, in hybrids of any sort, variation is considerable, but most "Nelson's Gulls"

tend to show these features to one degree or another. For more discussion about the "Nelson's Gull" problem, readers should see *Bird Observer* 28: 61-62. Note, however, that in that reference, in the final paragraph there is a typo indicating that "Nelson's Gull" is a "Glaucous x Iceland hybrid", which should read, "Glaucous x Herring hybrid." The "Nelson's Gull" in the photograph is a digital image taken in Plymouth Harbor by David Larson during the winter of 2001-2002. 🦅

Wayne R. Petersen



BALD EAGLE BY GEORGE C. WEST

From *Bird Observer* Vol. 1, No. 2 (March-April 1973)

THE GREAT GRAY OWL

On the afternoon of February 3rd, Bob Stymeist, Dick Veit and I were bound for Gill, Massachusetts. Many birders had flocked there in recent weeks to seek the great gray owl that had been playing hide and seek, appearing and disappearing every few days. Though a few people were successful, most came away without a glimpse of the huge owl. Now it was our turn to try our luck.

We arrived in mid-afternoon and drove along the back roads, scanning the fields and woods. We found very few birds but many birders. By dusk, there were at least 30, including some of the most talented enthusiasts in the northeast, assembled at the farm on West Gill Road where the bird had been last seen. But all was to no avail, for night fell with no sign of the owl.

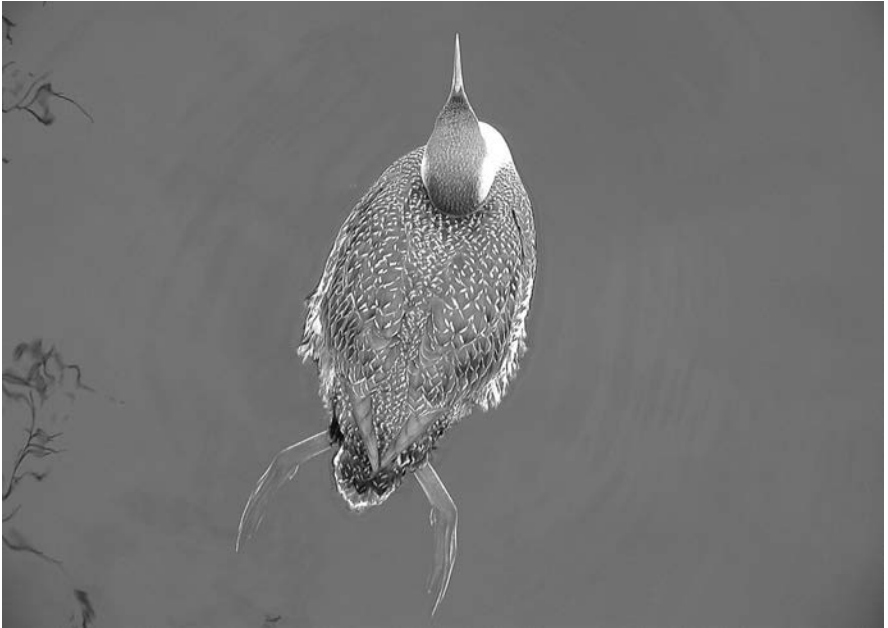
We couldn't give up and decided to stay overnight at a motel. Rising before the sun, we went directly to West Gill Road. Davis Finch (Northeastern Maritime Regional editor for *American Birds*) and Bob Smart were already there and informed us, much to our chagrin and dismay, that they had seen the owl just five minutes before (how often have I heard that story), but that it had flown into the woods. Mr. Smart pointed to the group of pines into which he thought the bird had flown.

Several hours of waiting followed before we obtained permission from the owner to walk on his property. By then at least a score of birders were eagerly waiting on the road. At last we started in, tramping through the snow, jumping a couple of streams, and heading directly for the pine grove. Suddenly, there was the owl, not 25 feet away, looming close to the trunk of a pine. It swiveled its head to stare at us with its small yellow eyes. All I could think of was, "It's so big!" After several minutes, the bird apparently became tired of all the ecstatic people. It ruffled its feathers and launched off on huge but noiseless wings. The great gray owl dipped low, then flopped off and disappeared among the trees.

P.M.

P.M. = PHILIP MARTIN

AT A GLANCE



MARJORIE RINES

Can you identify this bird?

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

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