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This gull portrait appeared on the rear cover of the October 1979 *C.B.*, labeled only as a late September photograph from somewhere over North American waters. Can you identify the bird?

## Answer to Snap Judgment 5

WAYNE HOFFMAN



This obviously is a subadult of one of the large *Larus* gulls. It is much too dark to be a Glaucous *L. hyperboreus*, Iceland *L. glaucoides*, or Glaucous-winged *L. glaucescens* gull, and the heavy bill, large head, heavy shoulders, and broad rounded wings all point to a bird of at least Herring Gull *L. argentatus* size; California Gulls *L. californicus* and all smaller species can be forgotten. The saddle of grey adult plumage on the back, the heavily marked tail, and the primary pattern together identify the bird as a second winter subadult (second basic plumage). Possibilities include Great Black-backed *L. marinus*, Lesser Black-backed *L. fuscus*, Herring, Western *L. occidentalis*, Slaty-backed *L. schistisagus*, and Thayer's *L. thayeri* gulls, and various hybrid combinations. The Slaty-backed, Great Black-backed, and Lesser Black-backed gulls would all have much darker dorsal saddles, so they can be

eliminated. The wings and tail are much too dark for Thayer's Gull, which would have narrower wings and would appear less robust. The gray of the saddle is rather pale for a Western Gull (although those from Oregon and Washington are much paler than California birds) and the banded appearance of the tail, the pale inner primaries, and the extraordinary pattern of the secondaries all point against Western Gull. This leaves as possibilities Herring Gulls and several hybrid combinations. Herring X Glaucous, Herring X Glaucous-winged, Herring X Great Black-backed and Western X Glaucous-winged have been reported in North America in recent years. Lesser Black-backed X Herring is known from Europe and one Slaty-backed X Glaucous-winged pair was found recently in Siberia.

The contrasty tail and wing patterns argue against subadults of Herring X Glaucous-winged, Herring X Glaucous, and Western X Glaucous-winged, which all have pale, obscurely marked tails and relatively pale primaries. Herring X Great Black-backed should have a darker saddle and more heavily marked upper wing coverts. Herring X Lesser Black-backed is possible but should appear less robust and might be expected to show more white in the tail. Nothing is known about the appearance of subadult Slaty-backed X Glaucous-winged hybrids.

Actually, there is little about the bird that is outside the range of variation of the North American Herring Gull. The dark marks on the secondaries are more prominent than on most North American individuals, and the tail shows much more contrast. Although the possibility of a hybrid cannot be ignored, the photo matches United States National Museum specimens of the large Siberian race of Herring Gull, the Vega Gull *Larus argentatus vegae*. The bird was photographed in the northern Gulf of Alaska in late September 1975.

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## News and Notices

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE FRONT — In the preceding issue ("News from the Field Guide Front," *CB* 1 (5): 127) we mentioned a new field guide in the works under the aegis of the National Geographic Society. Our timing was unfortunate, because by the time that issue was printed a shuffling of personnel on the Geographic guide had already occurred. Rather than making another definitive statement here which might be subject to further revision, let us simply say that not all of the luminaries mentioned are still involved with the project; but (despite some ruffled feathers) work on the book continues.