

Food For Thought  
Thayer's Gull Identification: A Hoax?

Tom Kemp

Ornithologists have long recognized the taxonomic difficulties existing within the family Laridae. These difficulties are compounded by wide variations in size and plumage within a species, geographic races of some species, and frequent hybridization between species. Recently, many field ornithologists have pronounced "sure-fire" ways of identifying these most-difficult-to-identify gulls. There appears to be weighty evidence that these identifications can indeed be made under most field conditions and with a good knowledge of this problem family. I present this piece as a caution and as a possible alternative to calling all gulls one sees.

Thayer's gull (Larus thayeri) was once thought to be a distinct species, then considered a subspecies of the Herring gull (L. argentatus), and now recognized as a separate species again. Some workers now feel it may be a race of the Iceland gull (L. glaucoides), at the dark end of a cline from the light nominate race (L. g. glaucoides), to L. g. kumlieni ("Kumlien's" gull), to thayeri (Lehman 1980). It would therefore be known as L. g. thayeri.

In light of this possibility, an examination of the North American breeding ranges of these three forms (glaucoides, kumlieni, and thayeri) is interesting. Glaucoides breeds in Greenland, kumlieni in eastern arctic Canada (Baffin Is.), and Thayer's largely in western arctic Canada. Thayer's does breed east to western Greenland and Baffin Is. (Lehman 1980, Peterson 1980). It is interesting to note that where kumlieni and Thayer's occur together on their breeding grounds, eye color seems to act as an isolating mechanism. That is, kumlieni shows a light iris in Thayer's dark. Where kumlieni and Herring gull breeding areas overlap, kumlieni shows a dark iris and Herring light (Smith 1966).

Let us now consider some characteristics of Thayer's gull that are widely accepted as being the best ways of distinguishing this species in the field. The following were gleaned from Gosselin and David (1975), Lehman (1980), and Hannikman (1980). These authors agree that no single characteristic can be used to identify this species; several in combination must be observed in order to ensure a "postive" identification. Since, in our area, Thayer's gull is most easily confused with Herring gull and "Kumlien's" gull, I will limit my discussion of field marks primarily to these three forms.

From reading the works cited above, I came up with several field marks that, if considered collectively, might lead one to conclude one was looking at an adult Thayer's gull. They are as follows: (1) shape and size of bill and head (bill short, slim; head more rounded; more "pigeon-like"), (2) dark irides (some have light eyes), (3) limited amount of black on upper surface of primaries, and (4) light lower surface of primaries. Contrast those marks with these of the Herring gull: (1) shape and size of bill and head (bill longer, stouter; head flatter); however, female Herring gulls may exhibit the round-headed and short-billed appearance of typical Thayer's gulls, (2) light irides (but see above), (3) more extensive black on upper primary surface (but not always), and (4) extensive black on underside of primaries (Thayer's gull never has this characteristic but may show a thin line of black on the trailing edge of the primaries). Evidently, this last character alone may be used to separate

Herring and Thayer's gulls in the field. Now let us consider kumlieni: (1) shape and size of bill and head similar to Thayer's, (2) irides usually light but may be dark, (3) upper surface of primaries with varying amounts of gray, in some individuals almost black; usually, but not always, with dusky subapical spots, (4) underside of primaries light. Typical kumlieni are easily distinguished from Thayer's by their overall lighter color. However, a very dark kumlieni would be indistinguishable from a Thayer's.

We may now turn to mantle color. If we have nearby Herring gulls to compare the individual with and find the mantle color is darker than that of the Herring gulls (but see Hannikman 1980), we can safely assume we have a Thayer's gull. Or can we? A further caution: Mantle color of gulls is very tricky and varies tremendously depending on the angle of light on the mantle. I have seen a lot of "black-backed" or "white-winged" Herring gulls -- then they changed position thereby changing the angle of light on their mantles and therefore their color. (The gull in question could be a Herring X Iceland hybrid, not entirely impossible, although I know of no records of this situation.) If the gull in question has a mantle color similar to or a bit lighter than local Herring gulls, we may have a Thayer's or a kumlieni. In many cases (possibly most) we will have to let the gull go unidentified.

Consider all the field marks of Thayer's, Herring, and kumlieni and you will be hard pressed to find any combination of them that tells you beyond a shadow of a doubt you have one species or the other. There is simply too much variation in each species. For that reason, I chose to ignore the immature plumages of the birds in my discussion. We run into even more problems with young birds. I have rarely seen two young Herring gulls that looked exactly the same (in fact, most seem to be in some mid-term molt) and note that molt sequence in Thayer's gull is probably similar to that of Herring gull (Lehman 1980). Keeping this in mind, distinguishing young Thayer's (with all their intermediate plumages) from young Herring would seem an impossible task.

In my admittedly brief perusal of the literature existing on Thayer's gull, I have encountered the words "usually", "sometimes", "often", "but not always", etc., when field marks are advocated. What this says to me is that there seems to be no clear cut field marks or even combinations of field marks that determine a Thayer's gull. I submit that there is no "sure-fire" way to tell the above forms apart and furthermore that Thayer's is, in fact, a dark Iceland Gull so there is no need to distinguish them!

I offer this as a closing thought: Are we, as birdwatchers, building a case for ourselves in order to identify a difficult species such as the Thayer's gull? Are we grasping for things that don't really exist? Are we advocating "sure-fire" field marks that are, in reality, highly inconsistent? I can think of no other species that presents so many indefinite field marks as the Thayer's gull.

The Thayer's gull enigma may well end up again in the hands of the A.O.U. Checklist Committee (as will other Larids) and they, I predict, will again reduce it to subspecific rank, this time Larus glaucooides thayeri.

#### Literature Cited

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Tom Kemp  
7327 Jeffers Road  
Whitehouse, Ohio 43571

### Status of Ohio Bobwhite

Everyone knows that the winters of 1976 - 1977 through 1979 drastically reduced Ohio's bobwhite population. So apparently does the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Wildlife and they are trying to do something about it. The Chief of that Division, Carl Mosley, stated in an article in the Cincinnati Enquirer in January of this year that the state's fall quail population in 1979 was less than 500,000. He said there was no quail in 32 counties and another 40 counties had extremely poor populations. The quail hunting season was closed in 1978 and has not reopened. Three hundred pair of wild quail have been trapped from Ohio's remaining population and moved to a wildlife propagation unit at Urbana to use as breeders for a stocking program. "Without assistance, our figures indicate it would take 10 to 15 years for the quail population to recover to the 1976 level," Mosley said according to the paper. The quail will be released first in counties that have no signs of recovery by natural production, but have good quail habitat.

He further explained to the reporter that wild quail are hardier and adapt better to the habitat than those pen-raised. Artificial lights causing constant reproduction stimulus and incubator hatching were producing 1,000 eggs per week. This is up to 100 eggs per quail per year compared to 12 or 13 eggs per year under natural conditions.

The facility now has 3,000 chicks and 400 one-year old adults.