

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Gulls of North America, Europe and Asia, by Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson.** 2004. Princeton University Press. 608 pages, over 800 color photographs. Hardback, \$55. ISBN 0-691-11997-X

Many of us started identifying gulls with the aid of Peter Grant's classic *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*, and for over two decades that work has remained our main reference for tricky identifications. Malling Olsen and Larsson's new gull book (hereafter *Gulls*) aims to replace Grant. The authors state that *Gulls* is a guide to the identification and distribution of the gulls of the Holarctic and should be judged only as such; I will concentrate on these aspects of the book.

*Gulls* begins with 25 pages of introduction, including many sections commonly included in most identification guides, plus some well-picked photographs illustrating oddities and several plates comparing profiles of adults and wing-tip patterns of all large white-headed taxa treated. This schematic visual approach allows for easy comparison and is a wonderful asset. You may want to copy these plates, laminate them, and take them out into the field. The bulk of the book consists of the species accounts addressing all gull taxa recorded in the Holarctic. Taxonomy follows the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, except for a few taxa split without much discussion (more advanced aspects of taxonomy are considered beyond the book's scope). I commend the authors for treating taxa such as American Herring Gull and Mew Gull separately from their counterparts in the Old World, but why make poorly documented taxonomic decisions—particularly after mentioning that these are issues outside the scope of the book? This makes navigating the already complex and volatile sea of gull taxonomy even more confusing.

Each species account begins with sections on identification by age class, voice, and molt, followed by a more detailed description of all age classes, and finishing off with sections on distribution, migration, and measurements. Interspersed within each account are one to several paintings illustrating the various age classes, plus well-marked subspecies or hybrids if applicable. These wonderful plates are accompanied by a facing-page summary of key characteristics. Larsson is an incredibly talented artist: not only does he capture subtle differences between gulls, but his understanding of structure is uniformly excellent. A section with generally good to excellent color photos (rarely poor as for the Red-legged Kittiwake) of the species at various ages concludes each account. Photo captions note the bird's age, summarize important illustrated features, and give the location (sometimes vague, such as "California, USA" for some Thayer's Gulls), date (sometimes only month), and photographer. Photos of North American birds appear to be identified correctly, although I might have called the Thayer's Gull in photo 288 a hybrid Herring  $\times$  Glaucous-winged. Each account also includes a color map showing breeding and nonbreeding distributions and sometimes more detail, such as migration routes and areas of less frequent occurrence. A nice touch is a small colored box that summarizes the main characteristics of each age group, often with comparisons to similar species.

I found *Gulls* to be both informative and frustrating. I was quite impressed with the artwork, quantity of information, and photos, but dismayed by lack of attention to details, poor information on North American taxa, and various other issues. My initial dissatisfaction came in the introduction as I read the sections on age and molt. I wish the authors had used the Humphrey-Parkes system, or plumage cycles (first cycle, second cycle, etc.) instead of the classic juvenile, first-winter, first-summer scheme. This latter system causes confusion and does not allow one to compare apples with apples. The authors themselves note that "first summer" is an artificial term in large gulls, as it is the plumage during the early transition from the first cycle to the second cycle. Why name plumage stages not defined by a molt? This terminology also leads

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to confusing photo captions, as for the Great Black-backed Gull. Photo 135 shows a bird labeled as molting into second winter plumage in late July. But first summer plumage is defined in *Gulls* as the plumage of a first-year gull that has started but not completed the molt to second winter plumage. Doesn't that make photo 135 of a first-summer bird? And photo 137 shows two birds in mid-May, one labeled first winter and the other second summer; why isn't the former a first-summer bird? The authors do state that "first summer" is unscientific, which does not trouble me; what troubles me is that the term is applied inconsistently, is confusing, and tells you little. For the Kelp Gull, breeding in the southern hemisphere, it gets even more confusing if one is unaccustomed to summer being December to February.

The identification and description sections are good, although sometimes the writing is awkward. There is a lot of useful information here, and I commend the authors for putting this all together. A problem for the user, however, is insufficient synthesis; the summary box helps but is not enough. I realize that gulls are not simple, but the identification sections are long and not structured to highlight the mix of features that are diagnostic, or nearly so. One ends up reading a lot, flipping to photos and plates, and, after considerable time and effort, arriving hopefully at a pretty good understanding of what to concentrate on. The detailed descriptions are fine but dense, and my guess is that most readers will concentrate on the identification sections, the superb plates, and the photos.

The North American edition of this book is based on the European version, entitled *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. The title should have been left alone, as I found many examples where it was clear that the authors were less familiar with North American taxa. Furthermore, many key references are missing, such as the *Birds of North America* series! More obscure references, such as Birgit Braune's great paper on Bonaparte's Gull migration, and most important regional North American works were also missed. North American species are covered in less detail than European ones (e.g., 24 pages for the European Herring Gull, 15 for the American Herring Gull), particularly in the distribution and migration sections and on the maps. There are also many inaccuracies in the North American maps and distribution sections. For example, the entire Great Lakes breeding range of Great Black-backed Gull is omitted from the map, although the text notes that breeding in the Great Lakes started in 1954. This species is a common breeder on Lake Ontario and has been moving west rapidly, but no details are given for this well-known range extension. Greater detail is given for European populations of the same species, however. Thayer's Gull is another good example: the total population is noted as 4000–6000 pairs (with no reference), but then the Pacific winter population is reportedly 20,000 birds. Northern Baja California is wrongly noted as a site with one of the large winter concentrations (flocks purportedly up to 120 birds!), but no information is given on the much more significant concentrations in the San Francisco Bay area; surprisingly, a maximum of 1000 Thayer's Gulls is reported for Lake Michigan, which seems ridiculously high. It does not take long to find many more examples like this. This level of oversight and lack of attention to detail is unfortunate, and makes one wary of all information in the book.

I have enjoyed using this book during some very exciting gull watching during winter 2004–05. It has taught me a lot, but I have been equally frustrated by it. Nonetheless, I do think the book succeeds in its summary of many new developments in gull identification and distribution since Grant, and furthermore it has color photos. On the other hand, a book dealing with issues as complicated as gull identification must invariably fall short in some aspects. *Gulls* does disappoint in its lack of synthesis and the poor attention to detail of North American distribution. Gull aficionados will need this book for the new information, but they will also have plenty to critique and discuss—and there is nothing a gull watcher likes to do more than that.

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