The Pink-Legged Gulls

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"Oh, no"..."Why didn't I stay home and watch the game?"..."But I'm saving them for my old age..." These are some of the more typical reactions from people on birding trips when it comes time to identify a few gulls. They are tough to identify! Many of them are impossible. But by remembering a very few generalizations and by not expecting to name every individual at first, gulls really can be fun.

Typical gulls, or those gulls with entirely white bodies and gray mantles (back and upper wing surface) as adults, may be quickly broken down into two groups: the large, pink-legged types and the smaller, non-pink-legged types. The smaller ones are slimmer than the large ones and have relatively longer wings and distinctive shapes by which many individuals may be identified. California Gulls quite often assume what I call the 'California slouch' when standing at ease. The head is held high, the shoulders are jauntily thrown back, and the wings practically drag on the ground. Ring-billed and Mew gulls usually stand with the bodyline more parallel to the ground. Their small heads and very long flight feathers give them a streamlined look. Facing into the wind they look so many sleek little jet planes ready to take off. Californians can sit like Mews and Ring-bills, and the latter two sometimes slouch. So, as with most things, this is a clue, not a diagnostic fact.

Although leg color is definitely not reliable as an identification character for immatures (for example, first winter Californias usually have entirely pink legs and feet, and second winter Californias often have pink legs with powdery blue knees and toes) it is reliable for adults and, when seable, is the first thing to look at after overall shape.

GENERALITIES

Don't let all those intermediate plumages intimidate you. Begin with adults, those with entirely gray mantles and entirely white tails. Identify some by compiling details of field marks; then back off. Look at their shape and attitude and remember their faces for future use with immatures. After adults, learn the first-winter plumage also by a combination of physical characters, noticing that their shapes are similar to the adults'.

Don't bother with second and third winter plumages. They will automatically fall into place after fourth and first become familiar. In addition, the birds in second and third-winter plumage make up only a small percentage of the species as a whole, which makes the whole business much simpler than it may otherwise seem. Explanation: since these pink-legged gulls attains adult plumage going into their fourth winter (Ring-billed and Mews have it going into their third), all birds from three-and-one-half years old through twenty years old, or however long they live, are in adult plumage. First-winter or juvnal plumage clothes all new young from the past summer. In early winter, before the trials of survival in a harshly competitive world whittle down their numbers, there should be as many or more of these than there are adults. As heavy mortality continues to reduce the numbers of young, there are many fewer second-winter birds and hardly any third-winter birds.

In these pink-legged gulls there are three distinctive plumages prior to adult plumage, one in each of three years of growth.

First-winter birds are mottled all over with browns and cays.

Second-winter birds are variously white on the underparts, have grown-in gray feathers on the back, a dark band across a lighter tail, but still have brown, mottled wings.

Third-winter birds are much like adults, being almost entirely white below and gray above. The bill is mostly yellow, usually with a dark smudge on the distal one-third. There are few or no white apical spots in the black primaries, but there are usually some black spots near the end of the otherwise white tail.

By the fourth winter the birds assume adult plumage and cannot be distinguished from older individuals.

Identification is complex if all ages and molts are included, but by emphasizing first-winter and adult plumages this all becomes easy. The field guides are very helpful, although misleading in some cases, and designed with strong eastern biases, so refer to our list of pink-legged gulls with comments when Birds of North America by Robbins, Brown, and Zim is lacking or in error.

CLASSIFICATION

In addition to hybrids mentioned below, geographical races of a single species differ slightly. In California, only the Western Gull need be mentioned in this light. There are two races of Western Gull. One is
Glaucous Gull

Very rare in California—mid-winter only. In all ages, it is very robust with relatively short wings and large, squared head with huge bill. Immatures have striking pink bills that are sharply black-tipped. The plumage of first-winter birds is tan (not pink, as it appears in some editions of Robbins), and becomes whiter as winter proceeds. The upper surface of the tail (reticres) is motled. Most California records are of first-winter individuals.

Glaucous-winged Gull

Common along coastal California September through mid-April and otherwise rare. Large but relatively longer-winged than Glaucous Gull, with a flat forecrown but rounded hind crown. Immatures have entirely black bills. The plumage of first-winter birds is paler than in the book and may become very white by early spring. The upper tail surface is largely unpatterned. Adults have very streaky crowns and hind necks in winter, and some are hooded with heavy streaks. When the bird perches, the wingtips can look blackish, as a result of the overlaying and shadowing of gray feathers. The iris usually appears dark.

Herring Gull

The book seems to be adequate except in its failure to compare with Western Gull. The mantle of west coast Herrings is barely off-white, like the Ring-billed Gull, and lighter than Glaucous-winged Gulls. Mantle color for both Herring and Ring-billed species should be illustrated as much lighter, like the mantle of Black-headed Gull in Robbins, page 139. The iris of adult Western Gull adults (and late second-winter on) is very light, even white, giving the face a special look.

Western Gull

Common year-long resident along the California coast, not inland. See above for racial variation. Though not even mentioned in the field guide, the most difficult identification problem in typical gulls is between Western and Herring in their first winter. The pretty, marbled, brown to buff ones with greater wing covert much paler than the dark brown primaries and a subtle pinkening at the base of the bill should be Herrings (after September). The more sooty-gray, scruffy-looking ones with greater wing covert as dark or darker than the dark brown primaries (forming a dark brown bar on the closed wing), entirely black bills, and square heads should be Westerns. Mostly, they should be admired and entered in the log as Larus spp.

Adult Westerns have black wingtips which contrast with the rest of the gray mantle. This is very misleading in the book, where the mantle is shown as uniform dark gray and causes northern Westerns to be identified as Herrings (see description of Western Gull races above). The iris of adult Western Gull has varying amounts of gold flecking and from a distance may look light or dark but never yellow or white like adult Herring (and Ring-billed).

Thayer’s Gull

Occurs in California only in the winter and, of the pink-legged gulls, this bird is the most delicate-looking. The bill is relatively small (like California Gull), the head is quite rounded, and the large eye is usually dark, giving a gentle look to the face. The primaries are quite long, suggesting good buoyancy while swimming and in flight. Perched, they resemble Mew Gulls, only larger. The mantle color is darker than Herrings and lighter than California. The black wingtips are smaller in area than Herrings’s and only show on the dorsal surface, while the ventral wingtip surface is white. Thayer’s adults circling above would be most easily confused with Glaucous-winged. First-winter Thayer’s are also most like Glaucous-winged. They have the delicate shape of adults, but are finely motiled throughout except the wingtips, which are Hershey-bar brown. These contrast with the rest of the plumage but are not black. The dorsal surface of the tail (like Glaucous-winged but unlike Glaucous and Iceland) is largely unpatterned. It is not dealt with at all in the field guides.

Thayer’s and Herring gulls are found most commonly offshore or slightly inland, perhaps because of confrontation avoidance with larger and more aggressive Western and Glaucous-winged gulls.

Larus occidentalis occidentalis, which nests from Santa Cruz County north to northwestern Washington. It is slightly larger than the southern race, slightly lighter mantled with more contrasting black wingtips, and its white head remains year around. Larus occidentalis semenitnus, which breeds from Point Lobos, Monterey County to Pacific coastal Baja, is the southern race. It is smaller and darker mantled than the northern race and acquires light gray streaking on the hind neck in winter. Both races under slightly, seeking forage, in winter.

Larus livern, recently split from Western Gull and now called Yellow-footed Gull, occurs only in the Sea of Cortez and at the Salton Sea, California.

Thayer’s Gull, an enigma to many birders, is also an enigma to researchers and to taxonomists. Long considered a race of Herring Gull, it was recently split in accordance with studies of the two populations in Arctic Canada. Later, some problems with the research developed and there were threats to lump it again. The question now seems to be: what to lump it with, Herring or Iceland? The committee that decides (AOU) can’t decide. In any case, whether it is its own species or part of Iceland, at least all of this finally broke it away from Herring.

Soft Parts

Leg and foot color is of little use to identify any age “pink-legged” gull, as they are all pink. Thayer’s legs, however, tend to be brighter pink and even tend towards reddish or purple. Bill color of adults is similarly useless since they are all yellow with a red spot. Each adult California, Ring-billed, and Mew gull may be identified by the bill markings, however. Bill color in first-year Glaucous-winged, Herring, Western, and Thayer’s is mostly black. Only in the Glaucous Gull within this group is bill color of value. So, in dealing with five species of pink-legged gulls, first-winter and adult plumages only, forget soft parts and stick to feathers.

Wear

Melanin is an abrasive substance in black feathers which is rigid and resists wear. Many white birds, including most
Pink-Legged Gulls
Continued from page 9

gulls, have black flight feathers probably for this reason. Despite this theory, most gulls become more paler the longer they have worn a set of feathers, even the primaries. A cream and tan mottled Glaucoous-winged Gull in October will be chalky white with a much reduced pattern by March. It is uniform through the species and ages. The closer to spring, the lighter the bird, and some individuals can barely be identified. But then they molt and have a fresh set of feathers. However, a few unhealthy birds which stay on their wintering grounds through the summer generally fail to molt. Therefore we can assume that very light-colored gulls here in summer are simply common species with very worn feathers and not the Glaucoous or Iceland gull sightings that are sometimes reported.

Hybrids
In San Francisco we see a fair number of Western x Glaucoous-winged gulls and a very few Glaucoous-winged x Herring. There are not enough of them to be of significant concern. Western x Glaucoous-winged (jokingly called Larus pugnetensis, the Puget Sound Gull, by some birders in Washington and British Columbia because their crossing appears to be completely random in spots there) look mostly like Westerns but have noticeably lighter mantles, reduced black in the wingtips and abundant dusky streaking on the hind crown and neck (northern Western Gulls keep clean white heads throughout the year and Glaucoous-winged are often heavily hooded with streaks in winter). Glaucoous-winged x Herring are very pale, like pure Herring, but with much reduced black in the primaries. These may look vaguely like Thayer's Gulls but are much too large in the head and bill and too pale mantled.

Attempts to distinguish sub-adult hybrid gulls is asking for madness.

Albinism
Albinos and partial-albinos (leucistic) gulls are rare but appear with enough frequency to be of concern. Pure albinos will be all bright white. Even the palest Glaucoous Gull will show some subtle cream-colored or tan marbling on the dorsal surface of the tail and the undertail coverts as well as a black-tipped bill. Partial albinos tend to exhibit uniform or, at least, symmetrical whitening in the mantle and other normally pigmented areas. This albinism can cause big problems, and probably the odd bird which doesn’t fit any category because of its unusual whiteness is albinistic or is displaying the result of wear.

Thanks to Dave Shuford for making helpful comments on this article.

Gull Dispersal
Continued from page 4

Although many fledged young moved north that summer, they were found more frequently around Monterey and San Francisco bays, and were more often seen at such man-provided food sources as garbage dumps and fishing ports. Again, they moved into more southern regions for the winter.

The young Farallon gulls followed what seems to be the normal dispersal pattern in 1979 and 1980: northern California and Oregon in the late summer, southern California in the winter. What the young of the lean year of 1978 had done when they moved south during the late summer was to move early into their winter distribution. Considering the poor productivity in the California Current during 1978, we might have expected this southerly movement. But it is amazing that in each of the 3 years the newly fledged young, without prior foraging experience or knowledge of coastal geography, could respond so quickly and accurately to the existing conditions over such a wide area as the Oregon and California coasts.

During the spring of all three years the subadults (gulls less than 4 years old) tended to move north. Although many remained in the San Francisco and Monterey bay areas and moved only short distances, or even became sedentary, a few moved far into the Pacific Northwest. In fact, it was at this time that they apparently moved the farthest from Southeast Farallon Island. During the spring and early summer these subadults were common along the Washington coast to Neah Bay at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the northernmost site I censused. For some reason, these long distance movements were flown primarily by females.

876-16626

It was also during the subadult years that many individuals developed distinct patterns of movement, particular foraging habits, and preferences for certain locations. Many had a "summer home" and a "winter home." Gull number 876-16626 was such a bird and was also a long distance mover. She was hatched in 1979 and was not seen by me during her first summer. But she spent her first winter in the San Diego area where I regularly saw her at the Otay dump near Chula Vista. The following spring (1980) she resided at Winchester Bay just south of Reedsport, Oregon. During her second winter and spring this movement pattern was repeated. I was not able to look for her at the Otay dump last winter, but this spring and summer (1982) she has been at the Farallones on several occasions. She may not be spending much time at Winchester Bay, but such a change is normal for a three-year-old approaching adulthood, as I have observed a major change in the movement patterns of many Farallon gulls during their third spring. Instead of moving away from the Farallones as they had during the preceding two springs, they moved closer.

Of course spring is the time of breeding, and a look at these gulls' activities on Southeast Farallon Island tells us at once that at this age they are no longer content with gorging their "bottomless maws." Obviously they are now being driven by a very powerful and demanding impulse—they must reproduce.

Limited Breeding Sites

Large gulls of all species build their nests on the ground. With snow-white feathering over much of their bodies, they are very conspicuous while they incubate their eggs. Once hatched, the gull chicks cannot fly well until they are 7 to 8 weeks old. Therefore the gulls are especially vulnerable to large terrestrial predators (for example, dogs, foxes, coyotes, and man) during the breeding season, and must nest on islands or in other places that are uninhabited by these predators. Because predator-free breeding locations are scarce along our coast, gulls and other seabirds tend to be very concentrated at the places nesting is possible. The Farallones are a prime example.

The result is that for young adult Farallon gulls even to be in the running as breeding individuals, they must first establish themselves as territory holders in a very dense colony where competition for nesting space is severe. They must also practice courtship and breeding activities, as coordination is important for pairs to reproduce successfully. Because of these factors, they spend a considerable amount of time on Southeast Farallon Island. The result is a