

Thayer's Gull and You

Finding Your Own Field Marks

Anyone you ask on the street could probably tell you these quiz birds are gulls, or seagulls, so what's the problem? And the sharply patterned gray-and-white plumage means they're adults. Furthermore, by looking at the pink legs and red bill spots you can figure out that these are all larger gulls. These birds are what gull aficionados—known as larophiles—refer to as the “Large White-headed Gulls,” or LWHGs for short.

With only about a dozen species of LWHGs in North America, how hard can it be? What's so funny about rhetorical questions? Now if you don't “do” gulls, you may already have stopped reading, but stay tuned and perhaps some light will glimmer. Conversely, if you are a card-carrying larophile, maybe you thought that this quiz wasn't too difficult? But there might still be a lesson here, for anyone. Let's get started. By the way, I photographed all of these birds in Marin County, California, on 16 December 2006.

Let's start with **Quiz Photo A**, showing three birds together. And that's a great thing about gulls: They stand there in the open, with different species and plumages side-by-side for comparison. None of this flitting-in-the-treetops warbler nonsense, or skulking-in-the-grass sparrow stuff. You can actually see and study gulls. But which one to

start with? That can be an intimidating thing about gulls, or any gregarious birds. There are lots of them, so which one do you look at? What's that one? Hey, that one looks different... Let's just do one at a time, which is how everyone

should start learning gulls. If you are new to birding, or just intimidated by gulls, forget the immatures (anything with brown on the wings and tail) and look only at adults. And here we have only adults, photographed in early winter, when they should be in fairly fresh non-breeding plumage.

Given that you have an adult LWHG, what do you look for? A warbler? But seriously, on first glance check the leg color (pink or yellow) and the wing-tips (black, gray, or white). Then the gray tone of the upperparts, the overall structure, bill size and shape (and, to a lesser degree, pattern), and wing-tip pattern; oh, and eye color can be useful but is rarely if ever diagnostic. “Whoa, that's a bunch of things!” I hear some of you cry. Not really. The legs and wing-tip usually take a split second to evaluate. Crudely speaking, gray on the upperparts is either pale gray (e.g., Herring Gull), medium gray (California Gull), slaty gray (Western Gull), or blackish (Great Black-backed Gull)—and you soon get good at judging this. Structural characters are best evaluated in comparison with other species or individuals, and gulls wear their wing-tip patterns on the ends of their sleeves so they are easily seen.

First, the left-hand bird. It has pink legs and black wing-tips (as do all of our quiz birds) on slaty-gray upperparts. It looks bulky overall, and it has a stout bill. What else? Well, especially in comparison to the other two birds, its bill looks brightly colored and its head and neck have virtually no dusky markings. Check the field guide and, hey, it's an adult **Western Gull**. Nothing else fits. Great Black-backed Gull has blacker upperparts and more white in the wing-tip. Slaty-backed Gull should have extensive dusky markings on the head and neck, larger white tips to the primaries, and in winter a usually dull pinkish bill base. Wow, that was nice—an “easy” big gull. In particular, the bright bill of Western in winter is a good field mark, and also note the broad white line along the bottom of the closed wing. This line, often called a “skirt,” is formed by the white tips to the secondaries. On broader-winged (and usually less migratory) species, the white skirt is often visible and merges into the white tertial crescent. On narrower-winged (and usually more migratory) species, the skirt is often concealed.

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Quiz Bird A—mid-December.

How about the middle bird? The upperparts look fairly pale-gray, which, along with pink legs and black wing-tips, means Herring Gull or Thayer's Gull. See, you're already down to one of two species. When many people hear the words "Thayer's Gull," they get excited or nervous. Relax. This bird has a fairly small, slender bill (compared to its colleagues) and a dark eye. Both of these features favor Thayer's over Herring, but it's always good to check the wing-tip pattern. There's a lot of white on the upperside of the primaries, and, just as importantly, the *underside* of the far wing-tip looks mostly pale, without any contrasting black. And, if we look carefully, the ground color of the wing-tip isn't jet black like the Western Gull, but more of a slaty black. So this looks like a "textbook" Thayer's Gull. That wasn't too difficult, was it?

And the last bird. Structurally it looks like the Western Gull, but it has paler (medium gray) upperparts and dark gray wing-tips, extensive dusky head and neck smudging, and a duller bill. The only LWHGs with gray wing-tips are Glaucous-winged and the Kumlien's race of Iceland. Kumlien's is generally smaller and smaller-billed than Thayer's, and its upperparts are pale gray, similar in tone to Thayer's. So, not a Kumlien's. However, the upperparts of Glaucous-winged are pale gray, also similar in tone to a Thayer's—which we conveniently have for comparison; and the wing-tips of Glaucous-winged are not this dark either. Consulting the field guides, we find that Glaucous-winged Gull hybridizes regularly with other species. This bird, with darker upperparts and wing-tips than a pure Glaucous-winged, is a typical Glaucous-winged × Western Gull hybrid, and it looks pretty similar to the adult hybrid portrayed in *The Sibley Guide*.

In case you think hybrid gulls are esoteric rarities, I have

bad news if you live on the West Coast. Hybrid Glaucous-winged × Western Gulls are common, and you'll just have to get used to them. And in winter on the West Coast we also have to deal with hybrid Glaucous-winged × Herring Gulls, but that's another issue. The bottom line: Along with the "easy" Western Gull, you've just identified a Thayer's Gull and a hybrid. Maybe gulls aren't so bad.

Quiz Photo B. Pink legs, pale gray upperparts, black wing-tips—already you've narrowed the choices to two species: Herring Gull and Thayer's Gull. Let's see what the field guides say. Well, Herring Gull is typically larger and bigger-billed, with a staring pale eye and more black in the wing-tip—like the left-hand bird. Thayer's Gull typically has a rounder and "gentler" head, a dark eye, and more white in the wing-tip—like the right-hand bird. **Thayer's Gull and Herring Gull** side by side. Could it be that easy? There must be a trick. Nope. Despite all the hype about hybrid gulls, problem gulls, weird vagrants, and the like, *most adult gulls can be identified fairly easily*—if you take a little time. Most people don't really take that time—and who has any these days? What part of "attention span" do you not...

Now, rather than move on from this (admittedly very sat-



Quiz Bird B—mid-December.

isfying) identification, let's linger. Pull out your powers of observation and really start to watch birds. What else can we see? For starters, neither bird has a well-defined white skirt, unlike the broad-winged and largely resident Western Gull (and the hybrid) from the previous photo. The Herring Gull's upperparts perhaps look a little darker than those of the Thayer's—the opposite of what “should” be. But these birds are standing at slightly different angles, and that's all it takes to confound such subtle differences. Also notice that any difference in the ground color of the wing-tips (jet black on Herring vs. slaty black on Thayer's) is not really appreciable in this photo. From what we can see, the legs of the Herring may be brighter pink, again the opposite of what “should” be. This is just individual variation. The white tertial crescent of the Thayer's looks a little broader, and the white on its wing-tips isn't simply formed by bigger white tips to the individual primaries, but by some sort of complex pattern that's hard to resolve—it's almost as if the wing-tip is banded with black and white. Regardless of exactly how this pattern is formed, it's different from the straightforward white triangles on the overall black wing-tip of Herring Gull.

How about the bills? It's dangerous to generalize based upon two birds, but we have to start somewhere. Big samples start with single birds. The lower mandible of the Herring looks a little pinkish, and there's a small blackish mark in the top of the red spot. The basal two-thirds of the Thayer's bill looks tinged with greenish, not pinkish, and the red spot doesn't have any blackish mark in it. And we could go on about the quality of the dusky head markings, and perhaps other things I haven't even considered. This is where birding really can be fun—you can find your own field marks just by “simple” observation. Don't walk away as soon as a bird has been identified to species. What age and sex is it? How do its plumage patterns match up to the field guide? What about its behavior?

Lastly, **Quiz Photo C**. Even without other species for comparison, this bird is a pink-legged LWHG with fairly pale gray upperparts and black wing-tips—so it's a Herring or a Thayer's. And it's hard to get past that staring eye. People are instinctively tuned into facial expressions and eye contact—when we look at a bird it's usually the head and face we key into. A staring pale eye like this is typical of Herring Gull, but it's always good not to rely on a single field mark. And remember, eye color isn't diagnostic for any LWHG.



Quiz Bird C—mid-December.

The field guides do caution about pale-eyed Thayer's, but I'm pretty sure one is not illustrated in any North American field guide—although I haven't checked this week's edition of the *National Geographic* guide.

Structure isn't always so easy to judge on a lone bird, but the head looks rather rounded, and the bill is relatively small and slender. The white in the wing-tip looks intermediate in extent between the two birds in Quiz Photo B. What else? Do our additional observations from Quiz Photo B help? Well, this bird has a broad white tertial crescent, and there's more white visible in the wing-tip than just the white tips to the primaries, which all fit better with Thayer's (at least with the birds in Quiz Photos A and B). The bill has no black mark in the red spot—again more like our Thayer's sample of $n=2$. In the field, and depending on where you live, you could gather a larger sample and see how reliable these differences might be. In fact, based on hundreds of adults I've checked, the closed wing-tip pattern and bill color seem to be pretty good marks, but I honestly hadn't noticed the possible difference in tertial crescent width until I started writing this quiz! I'll have to look at more birds next time I go out... Maybe it's helpful; maybe it isn't. That's part of the uncertainty and fun of discovery.

On this bird we can also see the underside of the far wing-tip, which looks whitish overall—perfect for Thayer's. On a Herring Gull (especially in winter on the West Coast and in much of the Interior) the underside of the closed wing-tip is blackish with a well-defined white spot or oval. Visible in the field and in the original photo, but



Supplemental Photo 1. On this adult non-breeding Herring Gull (the same bird as in Quiz Photo B), note the solidly black wing-tips (without the white streaks of Thayer's), the small white mirror on only the outermost primary (which is not quite fully grown, as this bird has not quite completed its molt), and the relatively narrow white trailing edge to the secondaries. This wing-tip pattern is typical of Herring Gulls on the West Coast and in much of the Interior, but East Coast Herring Gulls often have more white in the wing-tip, including mirrors on the outer two primaries.

perhaps not in this reproduction, is a purplish-pink orbital ring, typical of Thayer's. Note, though, that the yellow orbital ring of breeding Herring Gulls can shrink and darken in winter, when it simply looks "dark" with no obvious hue, or it may even look pinkish! Again, always take into account as many features as you can. Then, when you find a bird that isn't a "textbook" example, like this Thayer's Gull, you'll have more things to work with.



Supplemental Photo 2. On this adult non-breeding Thayer's Gull (the same bird as in Quiz Photo C), note the subterminal white tongues, or streaks, which extend out through the outer primaries, and the white mirrors on the outer two primaries. The dark wing-tip markings are not jet black but more of a slaty blackish, and the white trailing edge to the secondaries is relatively broad.

The wing-tip patterns in flight are also very helpful, as shown in the accompanying supplemental photos, p. 000. The Herring in the first supplemental photo is the same individual as in Quiz Photo B; the Thayer's in the second supplemental photo is the same individual as in Quiz Photo C. I also now wonder about the width of the white trailing edge to the secondaries—might this be another clue we could use?