

# Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

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## Identifying the Common Black-headed Gull

**...I think of the companies of black-headed gulls that flow over the housetops of Geneva, dipping and rising together, their wings moving to the rhythm of a dance. By comparison, the spectacle of the ballet-dancers at the Grand Théâtre of Geneva, trying to take off like birds, is awkward and pitiful.**

**—Louis J. Halle,  
from *The Appreciation  
of Birds***

NOT LONG AGO I SPENT A MONTH watching birds at Beidaihe, on the coast of China. One of the most numerous birds there was the Common Black-headed Gull. Almost every day I would search through the flocks of Black-headed, looking for the odd rarity like Relict Gull or Saunders's Gull. But after some two weeks, I realized that I had not even looked at the Black-headed Gulls themselves—I had looked *through* them, in a sense, while looking through the flocks. In

other words, I had failed to heed the influence of the great scholar-naturalist Louis Halle, who had always

advocated an appreciation of the common birds. Belatedly, and a bit sheepishly, I took some time to study and sketch these abundant gulls.

What was ironic about my previous neglect of them was that I had spent many an hour looking for this very species—in North America, where it is an uncommon visitor in most areas. Back in North America, I had combed through flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls, ignoring the Bonaparte's themselves while hoping for a Black-headed. So it often goes with birders, seduced by the lure of rarity, failing to take note of the wonderful birds that happen to be common.

Over most of North America, the Common Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) is definitely not a common bird. As a straggler from Europe, it was first recorded in 1930 at that remarkable gull-watching center of



**Figure 1. Adult Bonaparte's and Common Black-headed Gulls in summer. Which one is the Black-headed Gull? The one with the brown head [upper right]. It was named by the British in a simpler era, when they had to consider only that this was the one gull in Britain that did not have a white head in summer—and never mind the fact that various other gulls around the world really do have blackish heads, like the Bonaparte's Gull [lower left]. Either species will look like it has a black head at a distance, but the shape of the dark hood is consistently different, with the white extending up to the rear edge of the crown on Black-headed Gull. Bill color also differs; but on some Common Black-headed in summer, the bill is such a dark red that it looks black at a distance.**



**Figure 2. Adult gulls in Basic (winter) plumage, to show flight pattern. Left: Common Black-headed Gull. Right: Bonaparte's Gull. The difference in underwing patterns is obvious with any reasonably good view, as the dark inner primaries of the Black-headed stand out in contrast to the rest of the wing and the rest of the bird, while Bonaparte's looks very white-winged below. However, the appearance of the upperside of the birds is also different, in more subtle ways. The gray of the upperparts is a shade paler on Black-headed than on Bonaparte's, making a little less contrast to the white triangle on the outer edge of the wing. The slightly darker gray of the Bonaparte's extends forward farther onto the nape, helping to emphasize its smaller-headed proportions.**

Newburyport, Massachusetts. In recent years it has been found breeding very locally in Newfoundland and New England, and it becomes rather numerous in winter around the harbor in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Still, most North American birders can regard the Black-headed Gull as a rarity, something to be underlined in our daily notes.

In its habitat preference and general behavior, the Common Black-headed is more like Bonaparte's Gull (*L. philadelphia*) than any other North American species, and stray Black-headed are most often found associating with flocks of Bonaparte's. This *Practiced Eye* compares these two small and beautiful gulls.

Bonaparte's and Common Black-headed gulls are often discussed as if they were very similar, differing in only a few field marks. Actually, they differ in many ways. The more you know about their distinguishing marks, or the better you know your local Bonaparte's Gulls, the easier it will be for you to spot a stray Black-headed.

The Common Black-headed Gull is distinctly larger than Bonaparte's Gull, perhaps halfway between Bonaparte's and Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*). (It is thus only slightly smaller than Laughing Gull [*L. atricilla*], although the heavy bill and

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longer legs of Laughing Gull can make a lone individual of that species seem larger than it really is.) Therefore, with a careful scan, a Black-headed can be picked out among a flock of Bonaparte's by size alone.

Because flying birds are molded, in an evolutionary sense, by the laws of aerodynamics, no two birds of different sizes can ever have exactly the same *shape*. In addition to being larger than Bonaparte's, the Black-

headed is a bit more stocky, with slightly wider wings. It usually looks longer-necked, and when standing it looks longer-legged. Flight behavior differs as well. A Black-headed in flight looks like a scaled-down version of a medium-sized gull, such as Ring-billed. Bonaparte's has more delicate and fluttery wingbeats, sometimes suggesting a tern more than a gull.

There are two main elements of pattern that adults of the two species have in common: both wear dark hoods in summer, and both have a narrow white triangle along the leading outer edge of each wing. (Otherwise they merely look like most other gulls in the world, white below, gray above, with white tails.) The dark summer hood of the "Black-headed" is actually dark brown (although it looks blackish at a distance), and it does not cover the entire head: The white of the nape extends all the way up to the rear edge of the crown. The hood of Bonaparte's in summer is dark charcoal-gray, looking deep black at a distance. It extends slightly



**Figure 3.** First Basic plumage (first-winter plumage) of Bonaparte's Gull (left) and Common Black-headed Gull (right). Both species at this stage show more complexity of pattern than adults. The diagonal bar across the wing, or "carpal bar," is usually browner and less contrasty on Black-headed Gull, and that species more often seems to retain traces of warm brown elsewhere on the plumage. Bonaparte's generally looks neater or cleaner on the wings, lacking all the smeary gray on the inner primaries shown by Black-headed, although it has more black marking to break up the white in the area of the outer primary coverts. The base of the bill on young Black-headed is often pink, as shown, but sometimes it may be yellowish-pink or just dull yellow.

farther down the nape than on Black-headed, and because the neck is shorter, the hood seems to cover the head much more thoroughly. The difference in head pattern on summer adults can be seen from a surprising distance on standing or swimming birds.

As with other dark-hooded gulls, these two turn mostly white-headed in winter. Each shows a blackish spot behind the eye, centered on the ear-coverts. On Bonaparte's, the gray of the upper back extends forward somewhat onto the nape. On Common Black-headed, however, the nape is white, and shades gradually into the paler gray back. This very white neck area may help to emphasize the large-headed or long-necked look of Black-headed Gull.

On the upperside of the wing, both species show a triangle or wedge of white, covering the outer pri-

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maries and primary coverts and extending as a narrow point to the wrist. No other North American

gulls have this mark (although it is shared by some species elsewhere in the world). On the Bonaparte's Gull, this white triangle is strikingly obvious at any distance. It is usually obvious on the Black-headed as well; but on that species the gray of the upperparts is slightly paler, so the contrast is a bit less. Especially in glaring sunlight, I sometimes find that distant Black-headed simply look very pale gray above, with the white wing triangle washed into obscurity. However, no amount of glare can wash out the underwing pattern. The black on the underside of the inner primaries is always obvious on Common Black-headed Gull, contrasting with the paleness of the rest of the wing. Bonaparte's Gull always looks very white on the underwing, with a contrasting narrow black trailing edge.

While larger gulls may take three or four years to reach adult plumage,



**Figure 4. Gulls overhead, in First Basic (first-winter) plumage. Left: Common Black-headed Gull. The white that shows through on the outer primaries is even less extensive than on the adults. At a glance or at some angles, the bird may simply look dark-winged from below. Right: Bonaparte's Gull. The underwing is largely white, bordered by a neat black or dusky trailing edge.**

these two small species are essentially all adult-like after only a year and a half. Therefore, birders seeking Black-headed in winter (the most likely season to find them in most areas) have to deal with only two possible patterns per species, the first-winter (or First Basic) plumage and adult winter (or Definitive Basic) plumage.

First-winter Bonaparte's and Black-headed gulls differ from adults in a number of the same ways. Each has a narrow black band at the tip of the tail, and more black surrounding the white in the outer part of the wing. Each has a diagonal dark bar ("carpal bar") across the wing coverts. However, this bar is blacker and more strongly contrasted on Bonaparte's Gull; and this, combined with a narrower black trailing edge on the flight feathers, helps to give Bonaparte's a neater or cleaner appearance overall. Common Black-headed Gull has a paler and browner carpal bar, and

more extensive dark gray on the inner primaries and secondaries, creating an overall effect that is quite different (see Figure 3).

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Seen overhead, first-winter Bonaparte's and Black-headed gulls are easily distinguished. The young Bonaparte's is very white on the

underwing, with a narrow dark trailing edge. The young Black-headed has even more dark marking on the underwing than the adult; in fact, the narrow white triangle on the outermost primaries may be hard to see from below on some birds, so that they suggest anything but a Bonaparte's.

Although it will help to study pictures such as the ones in this article, the best way to prepare for recognizing the Common Black-headed Gull is to study Bonaparte's Gull whenever you have the opportunity. Familiarity with the common birds is the hallmark of the experienced birder. Besides, Bonaparte's Gull is a beautiful bird in its own right, and well worth getting to know. If our search for a rarity among the flocks leads us to appreciate our local Bonaparte's Gulls a little more, so much the better.