FEATURED PHOTO

This feature new to *Western Birds* aims to illustrate and discuss subjects of interest to field ornithologists, using unpublished material whenever possible. It is not a "photo quiz" but, rather, will use good-quality photos to explore topics including (but not limited to) individual plumage variation, molt, geographic variation, hybrids, aberrant plumages, and behavior. We welcome contributions from readers. Please send material for possible inclusion to Robert A. Hamilton, P. O. Box 961, Trabuco Canyon, California 92678; e-mail robbham@flash.net.

TAIL-PATTERN VARIATION IN FIRST-YEAR HERRING GULLS

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As is often mentioned, a key to good field birding in to become thoroughly familiar with variation in common species. Large gulls, with their inherent plumage variability and propensity to interbreed, provide almost limitless potential for observation and learning. How many of us can say we really look that hard at one of the most widespread North American gulls, the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)?

To identify any gull, a critical first step is to determine its age. Large "brown" gulls, such as the one shown on the back cover, can generally be considered safely as first-year birds. (The specifics of gull molts and plumage sequence, even for common species, are not well understood, so "first year" is a safe if imprecise term.) Features that, in combination, point to a first-year Herring Gull are contrasting pale panel or "window" on the inner primaries, the size and shape of the black-tipped pink bill, and the effect of a "clean-cut" whitish head. Most birders, if they take the time to look at immature gulls, tend to walk way after an identification has been made to the level of species, but this is the point at which things can become even more interesting.

Tail pattern can be a critical species-level identification feature for immature gulls, but *only* if we understand the variation within any given taxon (species or subspecies). Ask any of the best birders in North America (or Europe) the following and see what happens: "How variable is the tail pattern in first-year Herring Gulls of the North American subspecies *smithsonianus*?

In his seminal work, Grant (1986) noted that *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls have an "almost wholly uniform dark tail," and this seems to have been accepted, with little comment, as conventional wisdom. Thus, writing recently in a comparison to European forms of the Herring Gull, Dubois (1997) repeated this belief: "Probably the best feature to consider when identifying first-winter *smithsonianus* is the tail. This appears all-dark, only the outermost feathers showing fine white notches at very close range (and brownish ones at the base of the outer tail feathers, visible usually only in the hand)."

Many first-year *smithsonianus* do indeed show this pattern, but many, like the one in this issue's Featured Photo, show a quite different tail pattern, one more reminiscent of the typical, banded pattern of a first-year Thayer's Gull (*L. [glaucoides?] thayeri*). When we first noted Herring Gulls with this "banded" tail pattern (spring

migrants at Bolinas Lagoon, Marin County, California), we wondered if they might be of a subspecies other than *smithsonianus*, perhaps the Siberian form *vegae*. Continued observations, in both California and New England, plus examination of museum specimens, showed the "banded" tail pattern to be quite frequent in *smithsonianus* Herring Gulls. Interestingly, a specimen of *vegae* collected in Japan shows a very similar tail pattern. Most *vegae*, however, appear to have a largely white tail with a narrow blackish distal band.

The Herring Gull featured on the back cover was off Monterey, California, on 24 May 1997; we thank Debra Shearwater for her willingness to stop the boat and Steven R. Emmons for his willingness to photograph "just a Herring Gull." We also thank Chris Corben, whose insights and photos have been pivotal to our learning about Herring Gulls, and the staff of the Ornithology Department, American Museum of Natural History, New York, for permission to examine specimens in their care. This note benefited from the comments of Dave Shuford. This is contribution 753 of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

LITERATURE CITED

Dubois, P. J. 1997. Identification of North American Herring Gulls. Br. Birds 90:314–324.

Grant, P. J. 1986. Gulls: A Guide to Identification, 2nd ed. Academic Press, San Diego.