

BOOK REVIEWS

The Large Gulls of North America, with Jon L. Dunn. 1997. The Advanced Birding Video Series. Peregrine Video Productions, 7583 Estate Circle, Niwot, Colorado 80503. 119 minutes viewing time. VHS Stereo. \$34.95 plus \$3.85 shipping and handling.

Two aspects of watching birds are that they move, and that their appearances can be highly variable. Even the best field guides, whether using paintings or photographs, are constrained by trying to cover everything via a limited number of two-dimensional, immobile images. Given such inherent restrictions, books can do a very good job—especially if one takes time to read the text! Nonetheless, the potential for video footage to show moving birds, and to portray more plumages than even a specialized field guide, suggests that the medium will become increasingly common in the field of bird identification. Producer John Vanderpoel has chosen one of the biggest nightmares in North American birding for the first in a series of videos aimed at helping observers identify problem groups of birds. The result is a success.

The video covers 13 species of “four-year” gulls (including the Yellow-footed) that have occurred in North America—all the regulars plus the Kelp and Yellow-legged, and some hybrids. An introductory section discusses gull topography (a useful pull-out card is provided with parts of a gull labeled clearly) and plumage development, and then from 5 to 15 minutes for each species follow. Jon Dunn, the narrator and co-writer (with Larry Rosche), speaks clearly and covers the geographical range and North American status of each species, followed by a discussion of structure and plumage for all species. Most age classes are shown (video was filmed in Siberia, Europe, and South America as well as North America), and footage of moving birds is interspersed frequently with still photographs that help illustrate various points. The quality of the footage ranges from excellent to good, and many birds in flight are “freeze-framed” to highlight wing patterns. The color definition of some pinks and yellows, however, is at times a little weak, e.g., the differences we are told to note between the greenish legs of the immature California Gull and the pinkish legs of the Ring-billed needed faith to discern. Overall, though, it is a dream come true for gull enthusiasts, although future productions might benefit from a few comments.

Large gulls have few if any peers in the field of identification headaches, and a lot of points need to be covered for any analgesic to be remotely effective. Paradoxically, the sheer amount of information packed into 119 minutes may be both the strongest and weakest feature of this work. I found the pace and content so intense that I needed to break for a day or two after the fifth species! Images often seem to whiz by, and the sometimes hurried pace of the narration is not conducive to the prolonged and careful study so critical for appreciating subtle differences. I spent as much if not more time stopping and rewinding than simply watching. A second viewing was easier, but then, as with reading field guides, one probably isn't expected to watch the whole video in one sitting. Nonetheless, more time with still photographs, or longer video of individual birds standing and maybe stretching their wings, would be preferable to lots of fast-moving images. Slower narration also might help; *within* sentences the narration is well-paced, even relaxed, but sentences follow one another so quick and fast that it can be hard to keep up with the flow of information. Background music accompanies some aesthetic flight video, and helps at times to calm the pace, although often it is inappropriate or extraneous. I could live with a bird video that lacked such touches. Similarly, the frequent and sometimes distracting spinning and fading of images might be a little overdone and unnecessary for an educational video.

One thing I urge to be considered for future videos is that the date and location be provided for all cuts, with time to read the information and relate it to details of a bird's plumage; such a step would immeasurably increase the value of the video as a tool for serious birders and even researchers.

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Beyond these concerns, there is not much to criticize. Gulls offer so much potential for discussion, and even heated argument, that I will refrain from trying to pick too many nits, and besides, I didn't find many to pick. I would have preferred a longer introduction though, covering more aspects of gull identification. More emphasis might have been made of the amazing variation in plumage that gulls exhibit, or of the often striking size differences between the sexes (covered in passing in a few species accounts). Environmental variables, such as lighting and its effect on perception of gray tones (touched upon in some accounts), also could have had greater exposure.

In the introduction, the examples chosen to show differences in the gonydeal angle were, unfortunately, underwhelming, and while the narration talked about "primary projection" as primaries beyond the tertials, the on-screen pointers showed "primary projection" beyond the tail; this feature was also called "wingtip projection" in the video. A single, consistent definition might help. On several occasions the narration and images were not compatible, e.g., the "barely evident pale window" on the wings of the first-year California Gull shown looks barely different from the "prominent" window of the Herring Gull used for comparison. Closer attention to such discrepancies, of which there were several, might lessen rather than compound the feeling of bewilderment that some birding friends of mine have for gulls. Another cut at editing also might have removed phrases such as "with which it superficially resembles."

In general, well-marked examples were chosen for each species. It would be hard at best, however, to distinguish one of the first-year Glaucous-winged Gulls from a Glaucous \times Herring hybrid on the brief view available, and one of the still photos of a flying Kelp Gull looks like a Dolphin Gull (note the long tail, very broad white trailing edge to the wings, and apparently smoky gray head and dark bill). Mention might have been made of the regular occurrence of apparent Herring \times Glaucous-winged gulls south to California and of their disturbing similarity to Thayer's Gull. Indeed, the problem of hybrids, especially for west-coast observers, could have benefited from longer and less hurried treatment.

The overwhelming benefits of this video far outweigh any negative comments, though, and in particular I was impressed by how it makes manageable what might seem an almost impossible task: clearly covering the identification points of large gulls in North America. But before you feel too confident, the video ends with the very responsible caveat that not all gulls are identifiable!

This video was an ambitious undertaking, and it provides a wealth of information that seems certain to teach expert and beginner something new. I commend the producer and all involved for providing a highly educational tool. Anyone who looks at gulls, at any level, would do well to own this video, and to watch it many, many times.

Steve N. G. Howell

A Guide to the Nests, Eggs, and Nestlings of North American Birds, 2nd ed., by Paul J. Baicich and Colin J. O. Harrison. 1997. Academic Press, London. 347 pages, 64 color plates, black and white illustrations throughout text. Softback, acid-free paper. \$22.95. ISBN 0-12-072831-1.

This new edition of Colin Harrison's classic work, *Nests, Eggs, and Nestlings of North American Birds* (hereafter *Nests*), published originally in 1978 but out of print for several years, is a window onto the world of the nest. Paul Baicich has helped revise the guide, which covers all birds breeding north of the U.S.-Mexican border. As does the original, the second edition includes an introduction to breeding biology, an egg- and nestling-identification key, brief but detailed species accounts, color plates of nestlings painted by Philip Burton, and egg photos by F. Greenaway and Clark