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Photo Quiz

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Figure 1



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December 2005 Quiz

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You are walking along a local beach when you notice a bird taking flight directly away from you. Even with the bird flying away from you, with no opportunity to adequately examine its head and breast, a good look at the field characters revealed in this photograph (Figure 1) should permit a correct identification of the bird.

The combination of this bird's long and pointed wings, light silvery-gray mantle, predominantly white tail, and webbed feet, narrows the possibilities down to one of the Laridae (gulls and terns). Even most novice birders would have come to this conclusion instinctively.

One of the most striking features of this bird is the strongly marked dark blackish-brown "M" pattern across its outer primaries and primary coverts, with a wide-banded carpal bar through the lower and outer lesser secondary coverts, most of the median secondary coverts, and innermost greater secondary coverts. This pattern allows us to age this bird as a first basic individual, and effectively eliminates any of the terns from further consideration, as first basic terns do not demonstrate such a strongly marked "M" pattern.

Identification of our quiz bird is therefore limited thus far to a selection of the small and medium-sized

first basic gulls with a distinct dorsal "M" pattern, that includes Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Black-headed Gull, Ross's Gull, Sabine's Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake.

A juvenile or first basic Black-legged Kittiwake is easily ruled out since our quiz bird obviously has decidedly reddish-pink legs and feet, has far too pale a mantle for a Black-legged Kittiwake, and lacks any hint of the black nape marking found on juvenile and most first basic Black-legged Kittiwakes.

Sabine's Gull is a very long distance migrant to the southern hemisphere and consequently the molt from juvenal to first basic plumage is delayed until they reach their winter range, so that most individuals retain juvenal plumage until late December or January, which is well beyond the latest dates of occurrence in Ontario. Since first year birds remain in the southern hemisphere in their first summer, immature Sabine's Gulls that occur in Ontario are exclusively juveniles in fall. Juvenile Sabine's Gull has a much browner and more scalloped mantle and inner wing than our quiz bird, and it completely lacks a contrasting dark carpal bar. It has grayish-flesh legs, nowhere near as vividly reddish-pink as in our quiz bird. Sabine's Gull can thus be confidently ruled out.

Figure 2



Another thing that is striking about our quiz bird is the obvious pink wash to the visible flank. Although this is a typical field mark commonly associated with being nearly the rule in Ross's Gull, individuals of many of the small North American gulls (Little, Black-headed, Bonaparte's, Sabine's, Franklin's, for instance) can show a bright pink wash like this due to feather staining by preen gland oil and/or a crustacean-rich diet, and so it is not a definitive or even particularly useful character in the analysis of our quiz bird.

Another striking feature of our quiz bird is the extensively white trailing edge to the wings, with all-white secondaries and inner primaries in a pattern similar to juvenile Sabine's Gulls and Black-

legged Kittiwakes. First basic Black-headed Gulls show a very well-defined dark secondary bar and all-dark inner primaries. Similarly, first basic Bonaparte's Gulls also show a distinctly dark secondary bar as well as dark-tipped inner primaries. Both of these species also show dark terminal tail bands that involve all the rectrices, unlike our quiz bird which shows dark tips only involving the central rectrices. We can thus confidently eliminate Bonaparte's Gull and Black-headed Gull from further consideration.

First basic Little Gulls routinely show a distinctly dark-capped crown. What little portion of the crown we are able to see here appears completely white. They also show a grayish secondary bar (although this may

Figure 3



be faint in some individuals), and the pale trailing edge of the wing does not extend into the outer primaries, as it does in this quiz bird. They also do not show the “M” pattern of the dorsal wing surface being joined across the lower back as we see on the quiz bird. Structurally, Little Gull has a shorter, more rounded wing, and a shorter, square-cut tail with a dark tail band involving all the rectrices (though beware of summer birds in active tail molt). Conversely, our quiz bird shows a long, wedge-shaped tail with dark tips only on the central rectrices. Thus, our quiz bird is clearly not a Little Gull. All of these field characters are therefore consistent with an identification of this quiz bird as a first basic **Ross’s Gull**.

Fortunately, other photographs of this bird were obtained which

allow us to review other aspects of Ross’s Gull identification. The photograph of the bird in flight (Figure 2) allows us to see the entirely white crown (unlike first basic Little Gull), the uniformly medium gray wing lining (but beware that this may appear closer to black as in Little Gull in both harsh and low lighting conditions), the very wide white trailing edge to the underwing, the longer central tail feathers (which impart a diamond-like shape to the spread tail; see Figure 1), and the exceedingly short bill (the shortest bill of any gull species). The photograph of the standing bird with folded wings (Figure 3) shows us how the combination of the rounded head, large eyes accentuated by a characteristic dark eye patch, short bill, puffy chest and long attenuated rear end give

the Ross's Gull a gentle, Mourning Dove-like appearance. Ross's Gulls appear more "pot-bellied" than the other small gulls. The closed wing shows broad white primary edges (particularly the inner primaries) and usually shows isolated dark primary spots, as this bird does—a pattern not seen on the other small gulls. This contrasts markedly with first basic Little Gull, which shows a completely dark outer edge to the closed wing. Note that the Ross's Gull at rest shows a whitish area on the primaries extending just between the tip of the tertials and the dark wingtip formed by the dark outer primaries. Note also the pale, smudgy gray on the lower nape and breast sides, typical of first basic Ross's Gull.

Keep in mind a few behavioural traits of Ross's Gulls that might make them easier to pick out of a large flock of Bonaparte's Gulls. When walking on the ground, they often show a pronounced pigeon-like, head-bobbing gait. When feeding, they often land in the water and pick prey from the surface while spinning in circles much like a phalarope. An adult Ross's Gull on the Niagara River in 1995 was easy to pick out among hordes of Bonaparte's Gulls in the flypast due to its deeper and faster wingbeat, as well as its all-gray underwing linings.

This Ross's Gull was photographed at Point Pelee National Park on 17 May 1999 by Steve Pike. For additional photographs of this bird, see: <http://www.stevepike.com>

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