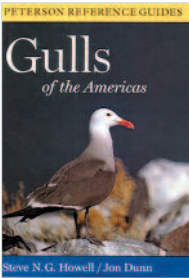


BOOK REVIEWS



Gulls of the Americas. 2007.

Steve N. G. Howell and Jon Dunn. Houghton Mifflin. Boston and New York. Hardcover, 17 x 26 cm, 1,160 colour photographs, 516 pages. \$45.95 CAN. ISBN 13:978-0-618-72641-7.

Gulls of the Americas (hereafter H & D) is the latest in the Houghton Mifflin nature guide series. It is more precisely termed one of the Peterson Reference Guides. Indeed, the book's large size and weight preclude it as a field guide. Steve Howell and Jon Dunn have produced an exhaustive reference work for the 36 species of gulls recorded in the Americas. This includes 22 species that have bred in North America, 10 that breed in South America, and 4 that strayed from Europe and Asia. With a great volume of published identification material, H & D are field identification experts.

The book begins with the chapter How To Use This Book. A lengthy but informative introduction follows, which is essential reading for the gull student. It starts by defining gulls, and continues

with sections on taxonomy, field identification, individual variation, geographical variation, hybridization, topography, molts and plumages, age terminology, molt strategies and behaviour. The final 200 plus pages are Species Accounts in ascending order of body size. There is a section on Hybrid Gulls that discusses regular hybrids occurring on both coasts, almost exclusively involving large gulls. The book concludes with a Glossary, extensive Bibliography and a section on Geographic Terms. Medium-sized photographs begin species account groupings. A range map is found on the first page of each Species Account. Included are an identification summary, discussions on taxonomy, status and distribution, field identification vis-à-vis similar species, detailed descriptions and molt. Hybrids involving other species are listed and references for further information conclude each species account. An astounding 1,160 colour photographs are contained in this book. Most are found in the plate section (pages 47 to 298) sandwiched between the introduction and the species accounts. Most of my comments are directed at the impressive number of photographs.

My review compares this book to its main competitor *Gulls of North America, Europe and Asia* by Olsen and Larsson (2003), hereafter O & L. See the review of O & L by Pittaway (2005) in *Ontario Birds*. Both books were influenced by the seminal work of Jonathan Dwight (1925), and in the past quarter century by two editions of the splendid *Gulls* by the late Peter J. Grant (1982, 1986). H & D's 516 pages and O & L's 608 make both large, weighty tomes. Both are marvelously produced and visually appealing. I have not read all species accounts in either book, but those examined are free of typographical errors. The books differ in price. My copy of O & L was \$80.00 Canadian in 2004. H & D is a relative bargain at \$45.95 in 2007. O & L is currently out of print in North America.

These books diverge in formatting and use of illustrations. O & L treats each species as a separate entity with the text interspersed with illustrations (generally excellent) followed by photographs. H & D place a nearly all-encompassing block of photographs in the first 300 or so pages. Species accounts follow in a separate grouping. H & D is nearly devoid of illustrations save for the paintings of Ross's Gull on pages 71 and 73, Red-legged Kittiwake on pages 79 and 81, and a chart showing varying adult wing tip patterns in Kumlien's Gull on page 252. These were done by Martin T. Elliott. Another difference between the books is taxonomy, centred on two complex taxonomic groups. H & D acknowledge that

the American Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*), European Herring Gull (*L. a. argentatus/argenteus*) and Vega Herring Gull (*L. a. vegae*) are best regarded as separate species, but the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) has not split them. Conveniently, H & D give these three subspecies groups separate accounts. O & L treat all three "Herring Gulls" as distinct species following European taxonomic decisions. The other contentious group is the Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides*) complex. H & D give separate accounts for the North American breeding subspecies (*L. g. kumlieni*) and the Greenland nominate subspecies *L. g. glaucooides*. They treat Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*) as a full species. See the Iceland Gull Complex on page 462 for a discussion of this vexing issue. O & L handle both subspecies of Iceland Gull separately in one section and Thayer's Gull gets full species treatment.

Which book should I buy? There are 36 species in H & D and 32 of them are in O & L. I will make some comparisons and let you decide. Field guides and handbooks derive their success or failure from the quality of photographs and illustrations. Gull study is heavily visual and detailed, and both H & D and O & L score highly in this regard.

I heard comments about the small images in H & D. The small photos in O & L are actually smaller than similarly sized photos in H & D. Though smaller, these images in O & L are consistently brighter and sharper than the slightly larger ones in H & D. O & L has many

more bright and larger sized photos than H & D, and mixes large and small throughout the book. This creates a more attractive layout than in H & D, whose photos on most pages are small and similarly sized.

Regarding complaints of dark and fuzzy images in H & D, I found very few that are a real concern. Some examples of too dark photos are: Gray-hooded Gull (p. 56, 3.4), Red-legged Kittiwake (p. 80, 9.9), Lava Gull (p. 99, 15.9), Heermann's Gull (p. 105, 16.15), Gray Gull (p. 108, 17.8) and Glaucous-winged Gull (p. 238, 33.19, 33.20).

In assessing the "too small" complaint, I think that the small size of the photos in H & D exacerbates a problem where the birds in the image are already small, particularly where two or more birds are compared. A pertinent example is on page 69 (6.6), Little Gull with a Bonaparte's Gull. Another case is a photo showing a group of Sabine's Gulls (p. 84, 10.6).

Hans Larsson's fine illustrations in O & L add lustre to that book, both for their aesthetics and accuracy. Should H & D have used artist Martin Elliott more or perhaps the talents of Thomas Schultz? The latter's gull illustrations, virtually unaltered through five editions of the National Geographic Field Guide (2006) are eye pleasing and technically correct. The already large size of H & D likely did not allow for extra pages of illustrations considering the massive number of photos. My preference is having superb illustrations and excellent

photographs. O & L combine these two facets exceptionally well.

There are many pluses among the photographs in H & D such as the instructive use of photos in topographical diagrams on pages 18 to 22; the photos on pages 75 to 78 showing the subtle differences between eastern and western Black-legged Kittiwake subspecies; the eight photos of Ivory Gulls on pages 88 and 89; a seldom seen side by side comparison of adult Franklin's and Laughing Gulls on page 90; page 264 has three photos demonstrating that juvenile Thayer's Gulls can vary in appearance as much as any large gull; and the 101 photos on pages 274 to 298, of presumed hybrid large gulls, are a major resource in the literature. This is the first major publication to have photos of these hybrids in a single group. Most hybrid gull photos are from the West Coast, where hybrids are frequent.

It is heartening to see photos of uncommon species in Ontario so well represented such as 41 images of California Gull (*L. californicus*) and 37 of Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*). For species of regular occurrence in Ontario, I compared captions and photos, checking that they matched in terms of identification and plumage. I found very few points of concern. Some examples are the bill on the Kumlien's Gull in photo 35A.9 on page 253. The bird is in its first calendar year, but the bill is markedly two-toned. Juvenile Kumlien's seen in autumn in southern Ontario are essentially black-billed, with the bill becoming obviously

pale basally only after New Year. Also, I had difficulty determining the feather generation of the scapulars on this bird. The authors term it first cycle indicating that they do not know its exact plumage. Although it is often difficult to separate juvenal from first basic scapulars, my sense is that many Ontario Kumlien's retain full juvenal plumage until New Year or later. Note the second cycle Kumlien's Gull number 35A.39 on page 259. The two outer primaries (P9 and 10) on the right wing seem much too narrow and pointed for a second cycle (second basic primaries) age designation. It looks like a first basic bird to me. See first cycle Thayer's Gulls on page 266 (36.17). Not noted in the caption, the right most bird appears to be a second basic Western or Glaucous-winged x Western hybrid. On page 270, the photo 36.34 of the adult nonbreeding Thayer's Gull has a production error involving the tips of P9 and 10 on the right wing, referred to in the caption, which is cut off at the margin.

A key component of the photo captions is the terminology for age and plumage designations. Rather than attempt to provide any clarification myself, I refer readers to the following: the Species Accounts themselves; "Description and Molt" on page 6; pages 30 to 44, beginning with "Molts and Plumages", and concluding with "Molt Strategies of American Gulls". Central to this section is "Molt and Changing Appearance" starting on page 33. The maturation stages in a Western Gull are

shown using 34 photos of birds in all plumages from juvenile to adult.

I caution readers the plumage and molt terminology is heavy going and should be read several times to fully understand it. Its basis is the Humphrey and Parkes (1959) system of molts and plumages. This under rated and under utilized method is actually simple and easy to use once learned. Ron Pittaway introduced me to Humphrey and Parkes (H & P) about 15 years ago and I now employ it religiously. The authors have determined that both the H & P and the British system, favoured by Peter Grant, do not adequately address the many anomalies to understanding molts and plumages in gulls. They employ a customized H & P system. An example is found in Ivory Gull, which goes from juvenal plumage to definitive basic in its second calendar year. This species, according to the book, has no definitive prealternate molt, and does not change its appearance seasonally. Contrast this to the treatment in Grant's (1986) guide. I still struggle with the concept that very few large white-headed gulls have a first prealternate molt in the spring of their second calendar year. H & D contend that most transition from first basic to second basic plumage is by a protracted complete molt from spring to fall.

Howell and Corben (2000) started the confusion and controversy by deviating from the terminologies used by Grant and H & P. Grant taught us that first basic (first winter) large gulls have a



Figure 1. Definitive basic Iceland Gull,
Markham, Ontario, 6 January 2006.
Photo: Brandon Holden.

head-body molt beginning in late January and lasting until late April, resulting in first alternate (first summer) plumage. The complete second prebasic molt then commences in June and lasts until November on average, according to Grant. However, we can clearly see that the second prebasic molt starts in late April and early May, when the innermost primaries are shed, well shown in second calendar year Herring Gulls in Ontario. So where does a first alternate plumage fit in? Compounding this is the difficulty in determining how much of the extremely variable appearance of large second year gulls is due to the effects of wear and fading, as well as molt. Adding to this conundrum are gulls returning north from southern coastal areas with extreme bleaching effects of sun and sand abrasion. Perhaps through all of this confusion, it is best to keep in mind that a

great deal of work has been undertaken over the past 25 years, furthering our understanding of the complex issue of molt in gulls. I think an open mind is the best tool to employ here.

The majority of the 1,160 photographs in the book are from California, with a heavy reliance on photos taken in that state by the first author. The remainder are from other American states, foreign countries on six continents and Canada. Most Canadian photos are from Newfoundland by Bruce Mactavish. Not one photo is from Ontario. The closest is a photo taken by Willie D'Anna of a presumed hybrid Glaucous x American Herring on page 285 (H3.1). This photograph is one of only two in the book taken in the Great Lakes region. Ontario is one of the largest jurisdictions in North America. Gulls abound here as breeders, migrants, and in winter.

Ontario has one of the largest gull lists of any state or province and has many talented photographers such as 20-year-old Brandon Holden who specializes in gull photography (see Fig. 1). Many of Brandon's images of gulls in flight are unrivalled. The Niagara River, with most of the best vantage points on the Ontario side is one of the prime gull watching areas in the world. The Point Pelee area has a high number of gull species in all four seasons. Were the authors handicapped by a lack of familiarity with Ontario's gulls and birders? How many gull experts west of Canada's youngest province were consulted about identification matters, variation in Herring Gulls, and the status and distribution of gulls across the country? Past issues of Ontario Birds should have been more thoroughly examined for relevant articles. I found only four listed in the lengthy Bibliography. The considerable specimen resources of the Canadian Museum of Nature and Royal Ontario Museum were not used. The above illustrate the strong "American West Coast bias" that pervades the birding literature over the past few decades.

For the birder with only a general interest in gull identification, I recommend the National Geographic Guide (2006) or Sibley (2000) to identify most gulls. However, serious gull students should acquire Howell and Dunn's book and give it a place on the bookshelf next to Olsen and Larsson's guide. Having both books will serve you well as key references for years to come.

Acknowledgements

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Kevin McLaughlin, 30 Bingham Road,
Hamilton, Ontario L8H 1N4