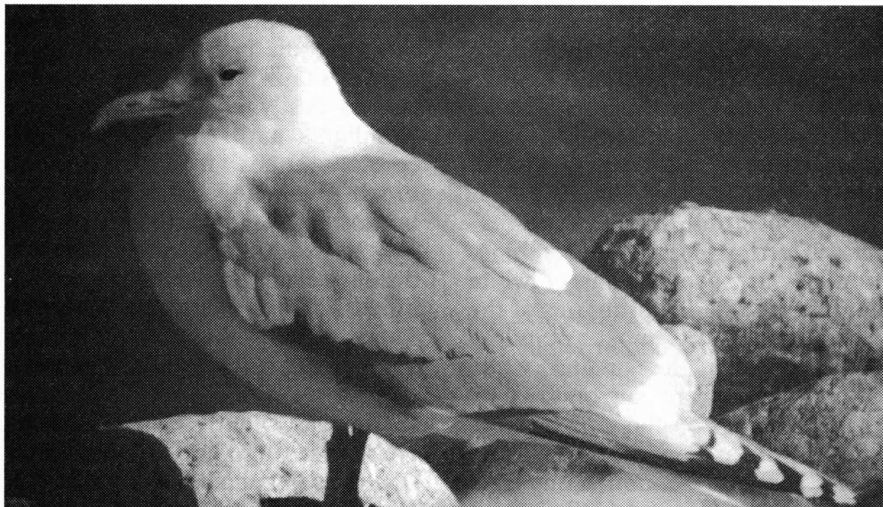


## Photo Quiz

Ron Pittaway



When identifying any large gull, keep in mind that there are few single diagnostic characters separating the species. Large white-headed gulls in the genus *Larus* are very closely related genetically. As well, there is low to high frequency hybridization between many species. Hybrids are fertile and they may backcross with either of the parent species. Large gulls also show much more individual and geographical variation than is generally realized. The identification of a large gull should be based on a combination of consistent field marks.

Glenn Coady photographed the quiz bird on 12 April 1998 at the Leslie Street Spit in Toronto. Glenn reported that it was about the size of a Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*).

We can tell that it is a white-headed gull with a grey mantle. It has black wingtips showing large white primary spots. In life, the legs were pink and the bill was yellow with a red spot on the lower mandible near the tip.

First, let us age the quiz bird. It shows no sign of immature plumage. It also lacks dusky head and neck streaking typical of this type of large gull in definitive basic (adult winter) plumage. Given its appearance and the date, we can assume that the quiz gull is in definitive alternate (adult breeding) plumage.

What species is it? Except for California Gull (*L. californicus*), North American Herring Gull (*L.a. smithsonianus*), Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*) and Kumlien's Iceland Gull

(*L. glaucooides kumlieni*), other large gulls in Ontario can be eliminated by checking a good field guide.

The quiz bird has a dark eye as in a California Gull, but California usually has a black spot (not always present) in front of the red spot on the bill. In addition, the quiz bird shows too much white and not enough black in the folded wingtips to be a California Gull. In life, the California also has greenish yellow legs, whereas the quiz bird has pink legs.

We can rule out a *smithsonianus* Herring Gull by the combination of dark eye and larger white spots on the folded primaries of the quiz bird. On most standing Herring Gulls, the smaller white primary spots are surrounded by black, whereas on the quiz bird the white spots are open on top, as on many Thayer's. *Caution:* a tiny fraction of adult Herring Gulls have a wingtip pattern that is identical to Thayer's Gull, so the primary pattern alone is not diagnostic of Thayer's. Compared to a Herring Gull, other supporting field marks for Thayer's are its usually deeper pink legs, mantle averaging slightly darker, and silvery undersides to the primaries, best seen in flight, but often partly showing on standing birds. Much more difficult to see is the purplish red fleshy orbital ring (eyelid) of Thayer's and Kumlien's, instead of the yellowish orange of Herring, most evident on breeding birds. Finally, adult Thayer's and Kumlien's Gulls often can be picked out among Herrings Gulls in winter until about April by their

pale yellow or greenish bills; Herrings usually have brighter yellow bills, lacking greenish tones. Glenn Coady reported that the quiz bird's legs were pinker and its mantle was perceptibly darker than on nearby Herring Gulls.

The quiz bird appears to be a Thayer's Gull, but Kumlien's Gull is not so easily eliminated. In both Kumlien's and Thayer's, the eye colour ranges from yellow to brown, averaging somewhat darker in most Thayer's. Birds with brown eyes appear to have black eyes at a distance. The very dark eye of the quiz bird favours it being a Thayer's. It also has more extensive black, and blacker, wingtips than almost all Kumlien's. Its mantle shade was slightly darker than a Herring's; Kumlien's usually has a slightly paler mantle than Herring. In addition, many Kumlien's appear smaller and more dove-headed than the quiz bird, because of their rounder heads and shorter, thinner bills, but there is overlap in size and structure. However, the bigger and longer bill on the quiz bird again favours Thayer's. Finally, compare the quiz bird to the illustration of the Thayer's Gull on Plate 36 in the revised edition of *The Birds of Canada* by W. Earl Godfrey (1986). They are a close match. Based solely on its morphological characters, the quiz bird can be identified with a high degree of confidence (99%) as a **Thayer's Gull**.

For an historical perspective on the taxonomy of the Thayer's Gull, see my article in this issue.

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Editors' Note: Bob Curry will be back doing the Photo Quiz in the August issue.