

Photo Quiz

by
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Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds* 11 (1): **Little Gull**.

When I wrote the first quiz in this series I promised to identify the bird right away, rather than have you wade through an explanation. Well this time I break with tradition so that first-off, I can tell you that I didn't write "avoid gullibility"! No, that honour belongs to none other than the witty co-editor of *Ontario Birds* — Ron Tozer. Nice one Ron!

Now that I have dispensed with credit where credit is due, the quiz bird is a one year old **Little Gull**. Gulls have traditionally been the bane of many birders, mostly because guides didn't treat them accurately. With better books, particularly Peter Grant's *Gulls: a Guide to Identification*, the task has become much easier. Also, the small gulls such as Little are really not too tricky at all, whereas large gulls can truly be difficult to identify in some cases as they show greater variability in plumage and tend to hybridize with other species on occasion - something that is almost unheard of in the small gulls.

Several features are visible on this bird that really help to identify it. Little Gulls are the smallest gull — in fact they are really not bigger than Black Terns, they are just more robust. Adults in flight are easy to pick out with their blackish underwings, but immatures are less obvious to the untrained eye. Following are features visible on this

photo that identify this bird as a Little. The bill is very fine and spike-like — much finer than a Bonaparte's. While most immature dark-headed gulls have eye smudges and ear spots, only the Little consistently shows a fairly solid dark cap as this bird displays. While some Bonaparte's may display a dusky area on the crown, rarely does it look as neat and uniform as on Little Gulls. You can also see that there is a strong, solid black "bar" running from the shoulder to the end of the secondary coverts (partially obscured by the grey mantle feathers). When in flight this appears as a black "W", much like on a Black-legged Kittiwake. This dark "W" would never appear black or solid on an immature Bonaparte's or Black-headed Gull. The primaries appear mainly black but have a crisp white "zig-zag" pattern on the top edge — something that is particularly obvious on Little Gulls. The last feature to point out is the leg length. Little's have decidedly shorter legs than a Bonaparte's, and this is clear in this photo. This can be a very useful feature for finding Little Gulls of any age, when mixed in a roosting flock of Bonies. Instead of scanning heads, scan the flock's legs. If you can see a gull's belly in the middle of all the Bonie legs, you have likely found a Little Gull! Also, overall the Little Gull appears more foreshortened and "pot-bellied" than a Bonaparte's.

While most Little Gull sightings in Ontario refer to adults, first-summer birds (i.e., one year old birds) are fairly frequently located in flocks of similarly-aged Bonaparte's Gulls during the summer months along the shores of Lake Erie and

Lake Ontario. This bird was photographed at Turkey Point, Lake Erie in mid-June 1992.

Our next bird will test that old adage about a bird in the hand. It was taken in southern Ontario in fall.



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