

August's **At a Glance** bird requires a thorough understanding of larid structure in order to make a correct identification. Fortunately, two different gull species are available for comparison in the picture -- a situation that happily prevails under many field situations as well. Clearly, the bird to the left, slightly farther away, appears larger than the gull on the right, a real size difference despite the distortion of a telephoto lens. Most importantly, the left bird seems to lack the delicacy and slenderness of the head and bill seen in the gull on the right. There is also a thinner-necked appearance to the right-hand gull that fails to show in the gull on the left. Finally, and of great importance, the mystery gull displays an exceptionally long extension of the primaries beyond the tail, giving the bird an attenuated appearance from the legs to the wingtips. Regrettably, we cannot see this profile in the other bird.

Before proceeding further in our analysis, an effort should be made to determine the age of both gulls pictured since plumage features in gulls cannot be fairly compared unless the individuals are in comparable plumages. The left bird appears to be light gray on the mantle, with dusky smudges on the head and chest (and possibly on the wing coverts), and the bill is light with a dark tip. This combination strongly suggests that it is a Herring Gull in either second-summer or early third-winter plumage. Precise determination is difficult without seeing primary and tail pattern. As for the mystery gull, its mainly dark bill with only a little pale at the base, heavily mottled sides, barred flanks, strongly-patterned back, and unspotted primaries all suggest that the bird is in first-summer or early second-winter plumage. The leg color of both birds is obviously pale or neutral in color. However, no accurate color evaluation can be made in this photograph.

To return to the plumage of the mystery gull, notice should be taken of the whiteness of the head and chest, the dusky patch behind the eye, and the dark tone of the back and wings. The bird fails to present a blonde or buffy appearance, even in the black-and-white photograph. When all of these features are considered collectively, especially the structural points set forth initially, the viewer can only deduce that the bird is a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*). Although the bird's white head and dark back may suggest Great Black-backed Gull, the fineness of the bill, the lack of coarse checkering on the back and wing coverts, and the very long wings all argue against that possibility. The direct size comparison with a Herring Gull (the bird on the left) further simplifies identification.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull in the picture is a first-summer individual molting into second-winter plumage (as determined in life), and it was photographed in Scituate, Massachusetts, on August 2, 1982.

Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Bonnie Manning



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.



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