

VIDEO REVIEW: The Large Gulls of North America

By Mark Lynch

The Large Gulls of North America, with Jon L. Dunn. The Advanced Birding Video Series. 1997.

There are groups of birds that make you feel that complete knowledge of their field identification will always be beyond your grasp. When I'm teaching a birding class and mention that we will be covering gulls that semester, there is inevitably a collective groan from the students. The reasons for this reaction are known to every birder who has ever searched through hundreds of Ring-bills for that one Mew: there are numerous gull species, many similarly-plumaged, and they go through a succession of plumage changes as they mature. If this weren't enough, the taxonomy of the gulls is in flux, and increasing attention is now being paid to subspecies whose separation in the field may depend on very subtle characteristics. Like with some Zen conundrum, we can never master gull identification, only hope to get better at it.

Field guides are woefully inadequate for the task of sorting through those thousands of gulls in their devilish variety of plumages that we see along our coast. More helpful are books like Peter Harrison's *Seabirds: An Identification Guide* and especially P.J. Grant's *Gulls: A Guide To Identification*. The only shortcoming of Grant's excellent volume is its way of presenting the material. Complete plumage descriptions for each species appear in a separate section from the black-and-white photographs. This requires a lot of flipping back and forth to see what is being described. Though Grant certainly describes most of the subspecies of *Larus argentatus*, one has always longed for good color comparison photos that would show all the essential characteristics that can distinguish the members of the Herring Gull complex in the field. This was actually accomplished last year in a series of articles in *British Birds* (see bibliography), which dealt with the separation of North American Herring Gulls (*L. a. smithsonianus*) from European Herring Gulls (*L. a. argentatus* and *L. a. argenteus*) and the recently split Yellow-Legged Gull (*L. cachinnans*). These articles included good black-and-white and numerous color photographs as well as very good color paintings. Reading these articles is a humbling experience because the authors' knowledge of very subtle field characteristics is nothing short of mind-boggling. Unfortunately, these articles are not widely available to the North American birder.

Which brings us to the video: *The Large Gulls of North America*, the first title in the proposed "Advanced Birding Video Series." According to John W. Vanderpoel, the series producer, "The *Large Gulls of North America* is the first in a series of videos planned [for] the next ten years, built around a conviction that video can provide a serious identification tool in an attractive format."

Thirteen species of the large gulls that have been sighted in North America are covered. This includes species with very restricted ranges in our area, such as Kelp, Slaty-Backed, Yellow-legged, and Yellow-footed, as well as the more expected species. Surprisingly, not included on this tape are Ring-Billed and Mew and Common Gulls. One concludes that those species will be included in subsequent video on the "smaller gulls" of North America. The *Large Gulls of North America* comes with a location card that indicates the running times of each segment. The flip side of this card is an illustration of gull topography.

The video is narrated by Jon L. Dunn. In the introduction segment, Mr. Dunn is seen checking out the gulls at some harbor and even suggests that if you need a closer look, just throw some old bread out to them and "just become their friends." This is followed by a nice overview of gull topography and plumage sequences, using the Herring Gull as the example. The species accounts are very well done. The camera work is good, and often the motion will freeze for a moment to let you see some plumage detail under discussion. Common hybrids are shown and discussed, as well as subspecies of the Herring Gull — *argenteus*, *argentatus* and *smithsonianus*, as well as the Yellow-legged Gull. All the critical field marks are discussed and shown for all species. Often a comparison shot of a "look-alike" species is shown in the same frame as the species being discussed (though sometimes these still shots are shown all too briefly and need to be freeze-framed on your VCR in order to be really studied). A minor quibble is that range maps are shown only when speaking of subspecies, and otherwise the ranges of most of these species are simply verbally described.

Be forewarned that this is a long videotape, clocking in at just under two hours. That amount of time dedicated to only descriptions of plumages is enough to cause the even most ardent lariphile's eyes to glaze over. Students have complained to me that Jon Dunn's narration is too monotone and not exciting enough. In all fairness to Mr. Dunn, it is hard to say how speaking about primary windows and leg color for two hours can be made attention-grabbing. Just as you wouldn't read Grant's gull identification guide from cover to cover at one sitting, do not slip this tape into the VCR and watch it from beginning to end. There is just too much detailed information. By the time the tape gets to the separation of the Yellow-legged Gull from races of the Herring and Lesser Black-Backed Gulls, many viewers are going to feel as if they are listening to a lecture on quantum mechanics. If you are a beginning-to-intermediate birder, my recommendation is to watch the introduction and then fast forward to the three common species of our area. Watch these with a field guide and a notebook and pen handy. Perhaps pick out a few of the less common field marks of these species — say, the white tertial crescent of a resting Great Black-backed Gull — and then as soon as possible go out and look for that field mark. Every serious birder should know the plumage terminology and sequences

of these common species first before moving on to less common species like Lesser Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls. Save the sections of the tape devoted to species that have never occurred in our area, like Yellow-footed or Western, for another time. Birders who are more at home with our local larids will find tuning to the sequences on rarely-occurring species, like Thayer's or California gulls, helpful and enlightening. Fanatic gull-gazers will ardently study the sections of the tape concerning the Yellow-legged Gull and other "mega-field-problem" species. If you go searching for these species, which have indeed occurred in North America, do us all a favor and make sure you get good photographs!

The Large Gulls of North America, an auspicious start to the proposed "Advanced Birding Video Series," is an important learning tool for birders of all levels of experience.

References

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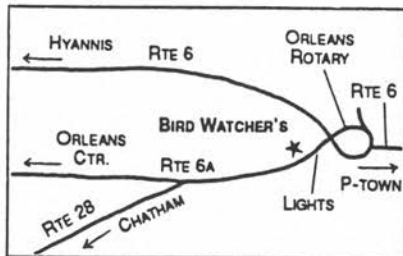
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