

AT A GLANCE

December 1999



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen

The final At A Glance photo of the twentieth century depicts three of everybody's favorites — large gulls. Despite the chilling effect that some birders seem to feel when faced with identifying large larids, try taking a crack at sorting out the images in this month's photo quiz.

First, based on the hefty overall structure, as well as the light leg and bill pattern of the three birds in the picture, it is reasonable to assume that they are all big gulls, as opposed to small, hooded gulls (e.g., Laughing, Little, Black-headed, Bonaparte's) or Black-legged Kittiwakes. It is also important to also note that two of the gulls in the picture have white wing tips and one has black wing tips.

Most Massachusetts birders are probably aware that the majority of large gull species have black wing tips. Indeed, only the Iceland and Glaucous Gull have white wing tips along with light-colored bills and legs (the smaller Ivory Gull has black legs and a dark bill with a light tip). Given these realities, it is obvious that at least two species of gulls are represented in the photograph.

The gull in the photograph with black wing tips, a medium-toned gray (?) mantle, what appears to be a pale eye, and a size at least comparable to the bird behind it in the picture collectively suggest that the bird is a Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*). In addition, there is no black on the bill, a feature which helps to eliminate California Gull, and which is obvious on the other two birds in the picture. Although difficult to see, the

dark-mantled individual also has white apical spots on the ends of its folded primaries. These prominent spots and the total absence of dusky markings on the wing coverts, head, and underparts all suggest that the bird is an adult.

Looking at the other two gulls in the photograph, it is interesting to note that 1) they have white wing tips, 2) they have distinct dark rings near the distal end of their bills, 3) the mantle coloration of the bird in the foreground appears to be slightly darker than that of the bird in the background, and 4) the bird in the foreground appears to be noticeably smaller than either of the other two birds in the photograph. From what has already been stated, the most likely candidate for the identification of these birds is either Glaucous Gull or Iceland gull.

From the information visible in the picture, it is fair to assume that both of the "white-winged" gulls are in immature plumage. The fact that there is a marked contrast between the light gray mantle color and the white primary and secondary coverts, as well as a dark band near the tip of the bill, indicates that the birds are probably in either first-summer or second-winter plumage. At this point it is necessary to specifically distinguish between Glaucous and Iceland gull.

Although many Massachusetts birders are undoubtedly familiar with these two species, a brief review of the key distinctions may nonetheless be helpful. Glaucous Gulls are typically large, heavy-chested gulls which, in immature plumage, usually have either a black tip or a dark subterminal ring near the end of the bill. Male Glaucous Gulls are as large, or larger than Herring Gulls (females are slightly smaller), and their head shape tends to exhibit a somewhat flat-headed, sloping forehead profile. Because they also have a shorter wing-to-tail ratio than Iceland Gulls, they present a more compact, less attenuated wing profile than Iceland Gulls. Iceland Gulls typically exhibit a decidedly rounder-headed, gentler profile than do Glaucous Gulls. Additionally, Iceland Gulls often exhibit more extensively dusky bills than Glaucous Gulls in corresponding plumage; however, this last difference is somewhat variable depending upon the precise age of the individual gull in question.

With these facts in mind, it would appear that the large gull in the picture behind the Herring Gull is a typical Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) in second-year plumage. A close comparison between the smaller individual in the foreground and the Glaucous Gull suggests that the bill pattern and overall shape of the two birds is nearly identical, the most noticeable difference being a slightly darker mantle coloration in the smaller bird. Indeed, this gull is also a Glaucous Gull, except that it represents a different subspecies (*L. h. barrovianus*). The race *barrovianus* — a smaller, shorter-billed, and slightly darker-mantled race than *hyperboreus* — breeds in the northern Yukon and western Mackenzie areas of northern Canada.

In summary, the photograph depicts two Glaucous Gulls of two distinct subspecies, as well as one Herring Gull. The picture was taken in early summer in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. Present at the same dump were a number of "Nelson's" Gulls - Glaucous X Iceland hybrids - but that's another story! Herring Gulls are abundant year-round residents in Massachusetts, while Glaucous Gulls of the race *hyperboreus* are uncommon winter visitors in the Bay State. ↗

Wayne R. Petersen

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Digital image by David M. Larson



Can you identify this bird?

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

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