

AT A GLANCE

June 2000



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen


Our June photo quiz maintains the recent trend of depicting seemingly headless birds. This month, however, we have added a twist to make the identification problem even more challenging — the mystery bird is depicted upside down! Although there are various species of birds that occasionally initiate full barrel rolls during mid-air flight (e.g., certain waterfowl and raptors, such as Bald Eagles and Bateleur Eagles in Africa), sustained flying in an inverted position is decidedly unusual! Indeed, it is so unusual that in the interests of fairness, it is suggested that the reader turn the magazine upside down before attempting to identify this month's identification challenge. *Bird Observer* apologizes for any inconvenience created by this unusual photo representation.

With this photo orientation disclaimer in mind, let us focus on the image at hand. Several features are at once obvious in the picture: a rounded white tail with a narrow terminal band, a distinct dark band on the trailing edge of the wing that begins at the inner primaries and extends all the way to the point where the wing joins the body, and a head appearing to have a dark hood. These features alone, combined with the fact that the bird is over water, make it pretty obvious that the bird is a gull of some species or another. The fact that the gull appears to have a distinctly black head at

once removes the larger gull species from consideration and leaves only the Little, Black-headed, and Bonaparte's Gull as viable candidates. The larger Laughing Gull and Franklin's Gull, although they have black hoods, can be eliminated by, among other features, the presence of wider, black tail bands and an absence of extensive white in their outer primaries. In like manner the Little Gull can be eliminated because immature Little Gulls exhibit a strong, black, inverted W pattern on the upper wing surface and they do not display a dark trailing edge to the upper wing. This reduces the choice to either Black-headed Gull or Bonaparte's Gull.

Both Black-headed Gull and Bonaparte's Gull require two years to achieve adult plumage. Since the gull in the photo has a complete tail band, it obviously is not an adult, despite the suggestion of a black head. A close look at the bird's back, however, reveals an even light gray color, in marked contrast to the dusky wing coverts and dark trailing band on the wing. The combination of adult-colored back coloration, complete tail band, and the suggestion of a complete or nearly complete dark hood indicate that the pictured gull is either in first-winter or second-summer plumage, rather than juvenal or adult plumage.

With this information in mind, a careful look at the upper wing pattern reveals a fairly indistinct, dusky (rather than blackish) carpal bar, a somewhat reduced amount of white in the outer primaries, an absence of white spots at the tips of the inner primaries, and the suggestion of dusky coloration on the underside of the bird's left wing. If the bird had a more prominent carpal bar, a more pronounced and extensive wedge of white in the outer primaries, white-tips to the inner primaries, an overall paler or "cleaner" look to the upper wing surface, and a translucent quality to the underside of the left wing, then it would be possible to identify the photograph as a Bonaparte's Gull. As it is, however, the mystery gull is a Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) changing from first-winter to first-summer plumage. The suggestion of a dark hood is entirely appropriate for Black-headed Gulls at this age, though very often the hood is less complete than in full-plumaged adults. If the photo were in color, it might be possible to detect the brownish, not blackish, color of the hood — a hallmark of the Black-headed Gull.

Black-headed Gulls are uncommon and local coastal visitors during spring, fall, and winter. In Massachusetts the species is rare in summer and anywhere away from the coast; there is one attempted breeding record for Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. The Black-headed Gull in the picture was photographed in Iceland. 

Wayne R. Petersen



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Can you identify this bird?

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

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