

## A REFERENCE GUIDE TO GULLS OF THE AMERICAS

Howell, S.N.G. & Dunn, J. 2007. Peterson reference guide series. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin. ix + 516 pp. with 4 tables, numerous colour photographs and maps. Hard cover. ISBN-13: 978-0-618-72641-7; ISBN-10: 0-618-72641-1. US\$35.

Like pigeons and starlings, gulls are much maligned by the average member of the public. This stems largely from the abundance of certain species—and the resultant over familiarity with them—and by their “hamburger-joint” scavenging habits. In contrast, birdwatchers and biologists seem endlessly fascinated by gulls, but for different reasons. Gulls are a taxonomically complex group with many similar species and much age-related plumage variability. Thus, they present a real identification challenge for birdwatchers. For biologists, gulls are attractive subjects for such reasons as their relative ease of study, nearly ubiquitous distribution, and relative insensitivity to observer effects. As a result of this interest, gulls are better known than many other families of birds.

*A Reference Guide to Gulls of the Americas* is the first in the new Peterson Reference Guide Series, designed to push the already formidable envelope of the Peterson Field Guide Series by offering “authoritative, comprehensive information, including detailed text, maps, and superior illustrations” (publisher’s promotion). As the title states, this is a reference guide, not a field guide. At 516 pages and 1.6 kg, this is a book to throw on the passenger seat of a car rather than carry in a daypack. The book covers 36 species of gulls living on the continents of North and South America, including Greenland, the Galapagos Islands, the Antarctic Peninsula, the Falkland Islands, the South Orkneys, and South Georgia. The book’s size results from some 260 pages of colour photographs of all species covered, each in various stages of age and plumage moult, and the detailed species accounts with half-page or larger range maps.

A short preface is followed by a generally useful “How to Use this Book” section that indicates the bounds of the book and therefore sets a realistic expectation level for its scope and depth. Curiously, a table of body measurements is given for a selection of “white-headed gull” species, with no obvious purpose in mind. An Introduction to gulls, their taxonomy and identification, moults and other topics, then precedes the two main sections of the book: Plates and Species Accounts. The book also includes a Glossary, a useful gull bibliography, and a species index.

The centrepiece of the book is the photographs. Species are organized, here and in the Species Accounts section, into two main groups: Tern-like gulls—Masked Gulls, Small Gulls, Kittiwakes, Fork-tailed Gulls, Ivory Gull; and Typical Gulls—Hooded Gulls, Primitive White-headed Gulls, Small White-headed Gulls, Large White-headed Gulls. This breakdown of species seems to be reasonable and practical, aiding quick reference to individual species (although I question the utility of the Primitive White-headed Gulls category, which should be subsumed within the other White-headed Gull categories). Species are depicted in plumages from juvenal through definitive (adult). Some plumages are shown more than once if an additional aspect is visible. There seems to be a loose order in which each species’ plumage is presented, but it

is not consistent between them, which makes finding an image of a specific plumage more difficult. It would also help to show the species name in large type at the beginning of a plumage series.

Overall, the quality of the photographs and the colour registration of the halftone reproductions were excellent. Uniquely (I suspect) in a book on gulls, the authors emphasize the importance of lighting on the appearance of gulls in photographs. Depending on factors such as temperature and direction of the light, the same gull’s back and belly can appear in various shades of grey from dark to white. As a standard reference, the authors present a table of Kodak grey-scale values for each species based on museum specimens and (I assume) standard lighting conditions. Photographs are frequently annotated with a comment on lighting, which is very useful.

The species accounts appear to be authoritative and jam-packed with useful information under the headings Identification Summary, Taxonomy, Status and Distribution, and Field Identification including Similar Species, Habitat and Behavior, Description and Molt, and Hybrids, followed by a Notes section, which includes citations referencing the Bibliography. Most species accounts come with a range map; these are large and easy to read. Seasonal ranges are coloured consistently across maps, and arrows mark migration routes. I like the fact that the key is reprinted on each map. However, the maps are not perfect (when are they ever?). For example, Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) are not shown breeding in the mouth of the Bay of Fundy (they do, pers. obs.) and Little Gulls (*Larus minutus*) breed in southern Ontario (Cadman *et al.* 2007). Ivory Gulls (*Pagophila eburnean*) still breed on Seymour Island in the Canadian high Arctic (M. Mallory, pers. comm.) and range in the winter from offshore to the coastline of Labrador and eastern Newfoundland. These are relatively minor errors of omission, but there are likely others.

This book will appeal to birdwatchers and biologists interested in the avifauna of the Americas. For the gull watchers out there, *A Reference Guide to Gulls of the Americas* will be especially attractive, and at US\$35, it is a real bargain considering its quality. While reviewing this work, I grew to like it—particularly once I had learned how to navigate quickly to sections of interest.

### REFERENCE

CADMAN, M.D., SUTHERLAND, D.A., BECK, G.G., LEPAGE, D. & COUTURIER, A.R. (Eds). 2007. Atlas of the breeding birds of Ontario, 2001–2005. Toronto: Bird Studies Canada, Environment Canada, Ontario Field Ornithologists, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and Ontario Nature. 706 pp.

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