

IDENTIFICATION AID
THAYER'S GULL
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Since the publication of the 32nd Supplement to the A.O.U. Checklist in April, 1973, when Thayer's Gull "officially" attained species rank (the gulls, themselves, actually knew it all along), much interest has been generated in how to identify this species in the field. In the following paragraphs, I shall delineate what I look for when I am searching for Thayer's Gull and it is hoped that an interest in gull identification and its complexities will be engendered by this article.

First Step. Go out and see what a Thayer's Gull looks like. I was fortunate to have been shown Thayer's Gulls at Churchill, Manitoba and at Niagara Falls before I attempted to find my own. I found that other birders' tips on identifying this species helped me greatly as I prepared to search out this species in the Cleveland area.

First-Year Immature. In attempting to describe field characteristics of Thayer's Gull, its two most closely allied species (at least here in Ohio), the Herring Gull and the Iceland Gull, must be an integral part of the discussion. When I scrutinize a flock of gulls for first-year Thayer's, I look for the following first: a gull with silvery flight feathers on the underwing surface and a gull with a light brown tail band. With these characteristics first-year Herring Gull is eliminated by the silvery under-wing color and by the "brown sugar" brown of the tail band color (first-year Herring Gulls have a dark brown tail band color). Iceland Gull is eliminated by the presence of any sort of tail band as this species lacks this field mark. The upper surface primaries of Thayer's Gull are buff brown with the feathers of the darkest brown being the first and second primary feathers themselves. These buffy brown primary feathers are slightly darker than the brown feathers of the back of the bird. Another thing I have noticed is a kind of "spotted" look that is created by the silvery color of the under-wing surface and the slightly darker brown of the tips of the primaries. Other points to look for in first-year Thayer's Gulls are what appears to me a slightly smaller and less bulky bill and a flatheadedness. After I point out first-year Thayer's Gulls to people I tell them to look at the photo of a first-year Thayer's on page 318 of American Birds, Volume 31, Number 3. I memorized this photo, convinced myself I could never find a gull that looks like that, and then I found one.

Second and Third-Year Birds. Very little has been written about the plumage characteristics of second and third-year Thayer's Gulls. I saw at Lorain Harbor on January 17, 1981 one bird I believe to be a second-year bird and another bird which might have been a second-year bird in a more advanced stage of molt or it might have been a third-year bird. Assuming that Thayer's Gulls mature like Herring Gull in four years, the sequence of plumage for second and third-year Thayer's Gulls should be similar to Herring Gulls' plumages of corresponding age, but they should be lighter. What I saw on the first Lorain bird was a gull with a light brown tail, light brown primaries and secondaries, a whitish rump with gray mottling, and an all black bill. This bird was easy to study because the all black bill distinguished it from second-year Herring Gulls with their two-colored bills. The bird I shall designate as a second/third-year individual (I do not know) had a two-colored bill, similar light brown upperwing surface, a light brown tail, and a completely white rump. This bird may have been a third-year bird or a second-year bird with different feather wear. Needless to say, I was most excited by these two birds.

Adult Birds. The most obvious field characteristic of adult Thayer's Gulls is the brown color of the eye. In flying birds the best field mark to search for is the wing tip pattern. I look for much less black in the wing and, correspondingly, much more extensive white spots in the wing tip areas. The black color of the wing tips in Thayer's Gull may tend toward a gray color instead of a true black. It must be pointed out that some female Ring-billed Gulls also show this pattern so caution is advised in identifying adult Thayer's Gull on wing tip pattern alone. Adult Thayer's Gulls show white on the under-surface of the wing and this characteristic along with the above ones are the foundation to build your case for an adult Thayer's Gull. The mantle color in adult Thayer's Gulls that I have seen flying around Niagara Falls has seemed to me slightly lighter than the mantle color of Herring Gull. So my impression of adult Thayer's Gull is that it is a darker white-winged gull rather than a lighter-mantled Herring Gull type gull.

Final Comments. One field characteristic alone cannot be used to identify a Thayer's Gull in the field. You must build your case for proper identification, and, hopefully, previous field experience will help you identify the bird. If you are interested in finding Thayer's Gull in Ohio, the places where the species has been properly identified are Lorain Harbor and East 72nd Street in Cleveland. Other likely spots for this species to occur would be the Eastlake CEI plant and Huron Harbor for these are known gull concentration points. The season to look for this species would be from about November 1st to about the end of March. The majority of Great Lakes records of these birds have come from these months.

Literature Cited

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Ed. Note: Since Ray Hannikman wrote this fine article another article on the identification of this species was published: The Identification of Thayer's Gull in the Field, Lehman, Birding Vol. 12, No. 6 (1981). This article has photos which illustrate Ray's points and a drawing of each yearly stage of the three year immature period.

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