

PRIMARIES OF A NINE-YEAR-OLD HERRING GULL

BY HUSTACE H. POOR

In the fully adult American Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) it is usual for the primaries to be tipped with white and for each of the outermost two (ninth and tenth) to have a sub-apical white spot, or "mirror," separated from the apical spot by an irregular black bar. There is considerable individual variation in the extent of the mirrors. That on the ninth primary sometimes is lacking, sometimes is confined to the inner web, and sometimes extends over both webs. The mirror of the tenth primary normally covers both webs, and "is usually separated from the apical spot by a black band, but, rarely in *smithsonianus* and *vegae*, and frequently in *thayeri* and *argentatus*, the mirror and the spot join, forming a white tip for fifty or sixty millimeters." (Dwight, 1925.) Numerous authorities have surmised that in *smithsonianus* the latter condition occurs only in old birds. Theories of change in plumage with age after adult plumage has been acquired are currently in disfavor, but since it is not possible to ascertain the age of Herring Gull specimens beyond the fourth year, proof of either contention is lacking. Goethe (1937) found that in the European race *argentatus* this character was associated with females, and that there was some geographical variation in the frequency of occurrence.

At Long Beach, Long Island, New York, the writer found on February 11, 1945, a banded Herring Gull (not sexed) having this primary pattern, as shown in the accompanying photograph. The bird had been banded as a juvenal by Dr. A. O. Gross at Kent Island, New Brunswick, in July, 1935, and was thus in its ninth winter. From the discussion of Herring Gull longevity by Gross (1940) it may be concluded that nine and one-half years is beyond the normal life expectancy of this species, even if we exclude the high-mortality immatures and base life expectancy on only those individuals which safely achieve adulthood.

To the best of the writer's knowledge this is the first evidence on the subject based on a specimen of definitely known age, and it is consistent with the "old-age" theory. A single specimen is obviously inadequate to validate a generalization, but it does emphasize the possibilities, at present so largely ignored, of using series of collected banded birds to supplant conjecture with fact in advancing our knowledge of morphological variations with age.

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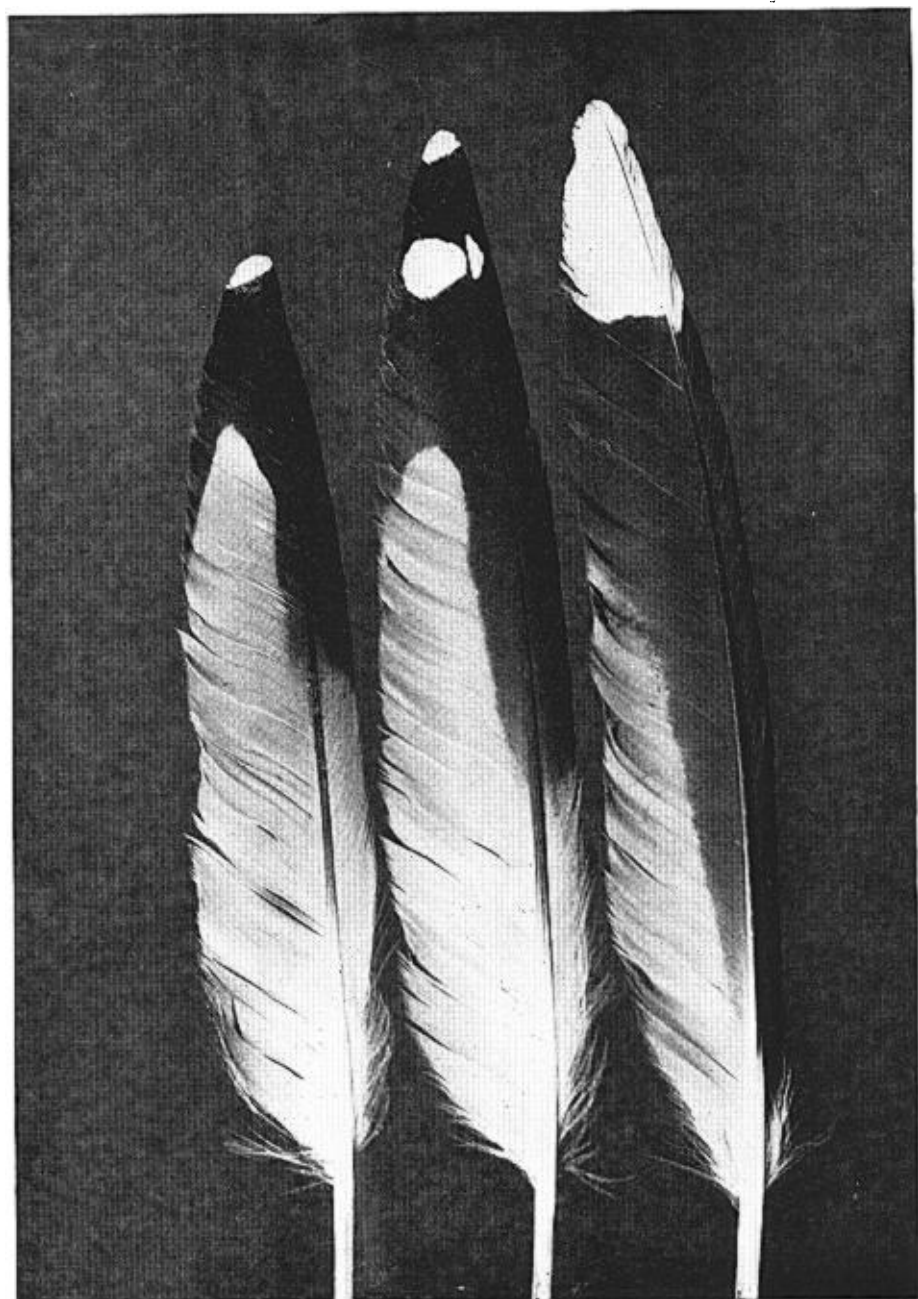
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[This is an excellent example of how bird-banding and taxonomy may supplement each other. Persons finding adult banded Herring Gulls dead are urged to save the primaries from at least one wing and to forward them, together with the band number, to Mr. Hustace H. Poor, c/o Linnaean Society, American Museum of Natural History, New York 24, N. Y. Ed.]



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