



Can You Identify These Birds?

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Photo by Stephen R. Mirick

Photo Quiz Answer

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Yes, more gulls! But practice makes perfect and gulls offer great diagnostic challenges, so here are two more. Why are gulls so difficult? First, the plumage and structural differences between species are often subtle. On top of that, there can be quite striking individual differences within species that are related to age, sex, feather wear, color of the non-feathered “soft parts” (bill, legs, eyes, orbital ring), stage of molt, and even light conditions. Because of these difficulties, gull identification requires patience, careful study, and experience.

In general, the gulls in our region fall into two categories: small to medium sized “black-hooded” gulls and medium sized to large “white-headed” gulls. The expected “white-headed” gulls in New Hampshire include Greater and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Glaucous Gull, and Iceland Gull. The “white-headed” gulls have in common pure white heads in adult summer plumage. In the winter their heads remain largely white, but have variable amounts of dark streaking depending on the species.

The “black-hooded” gulls, which include Bonaparte’s Gull, Black-headed Gull, Little Gull, Laughing Gull, Franklin’s Gull and the pelagic Sabine’s Gull, have black, dark gray, or brownish-black heads or hoods in their adult summer breeding plumage. In the winter or non-breeding condition, these species either retain the rear portion of the hood or have a dark “ear-spot” behind the eye. These gulls achieve adult plumage in two years. Their brief juvenile plumage, held for a few months in summer and early fall, is characterized by streaking or scalloping of the feathers on the mantle or upperparts. In their first winter plumages, they are largely separable from adults by black terminal tail bands. Adults, in contrast, have pure white tails. First summer birds usually have incomplete hoods.

Our mystery birds are clearly adult “black-hooded” gulls in non-breeding plumage. Both birds have distinct dark “ear-spots” and in both individuals the top of the head is darkly speckled. Their mantles are uniform pale gray. Their underparts are pure white. Both birds have dark bills and both have dark edging on the folded wing tips. Despite their similarities, the two birds are subtly different. The rear bird is clearly smaller and more delicate in appearance. Its head is rounder. Its bill is smaller and thinner and has a much less prominent angle towards the tip of the lower mandible. If you examine both birds carefully, you can also see that the mantle is slightly darker on the smaller bird.

Three of our “hooded-gulls”—Sabine’s Gull, Laughing Gull and Franklin’s Gull—can be eliminated by the head pattern. These species lack distinct “ear-spots” in winter plumage. Sabine’s and Franklin’s Gulls have partial or half-hoods in winter. Their foreheads turn white, but the rear parts of their heads remain quite dark. In winter, adult Laughing Gulls are less distinctly half-hooded, but the backs of their heads show variable amounts of dark wash. This is sometimes rather restricted in distribution, but never develops into a distinct dark “ear-spot.” Further, Laughing Gull has a long,

heavier, droopy bill, which is quite unlike the more delicate and straighter bills of these two birds. In addition, Sabine's Gull has a bicolor bill that is pale at the tip. All of these species also have much darker mantles than the birds in the photograph.

While not actually a "hooded gull," one species deserves brief consideration. Although it is "white-headed" in summer plumage, adult Black-legged Kittiwake develops a distinct "ear-spot" in winter. But kittiwakes have proportionally short, pale bills that are quite unlike the more slender dark bills of these two birds.

The three "hooded-gulls" that have distinct "ear-spots" in winter plumage are Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, and Black-headed Gull. Of the three, Little Gull is the most distinctive. It differs from the other two species in having a delicate short, straight, black bill. It also has a more extensively dark crown. Finally, adult Little Gulls have short, rather rounded pale wing tips. In flight, the wings of Little Gull show white restricted to the very tips of the wings, while both Bonaparte's and Black-headed Gulls have a prominent white wedge along the leading edge of the upper wing.

Bonaparte's Gull and Black-headed Gull are quite similar in appearance. However, there are subtle differences by which they can be distinguished, if examined carefully. The rarer Black-headed Gull differs from Bonaparte's Gull in being slightly larger and paler mantled with a larger, heavier bill. When seen in the field, the soft parts are also different. The bill and legs of adult Black-headed Gull are deep red. In contrast, adult Bonaparte's Gull has a black bill and its legs are paler orange-red. Other distinguishing differences between these two species cannot be appreciated in resting birds. In flight, the underside of the primary flight feathers are dark in Black-headed Gull, but pure white in Bonaparte's Gull. Further, Black-headed Gull has broader wings and a somewhat slower wing-beat.

If we examine the two gulls in the photograph again we can see that, although superficially similar, they are, in fact, different species. The smaller, more delicate bird in the back is a Bonaparte's Gull. The larger, heavier billed bird in the foreground is a Black-headed Gull.

Bonaparte's and Black-headed Gulls are very closely related species whose breeding ranges, in general, do not overlap geographically. Bonaparte's Gull, *Larus philadelphia*, is strictly a North American breeding bird. It breeds in loose colonies in the boreal forest of Canada and Alaska. Unlike other gull species, it nests in coniferous trees, generally around bogs, ponds, and bays. After a short breeding season, the birds migrate to our coasts where they typically winter in large flocks. In New Hampshire you can expect to find them in bays and coves from Portsmouth to Seabrook. A few non-breeding birds can be found even in the summer months.

Black-headed Gull, *Larus ridibundus*, on the other hand, is primarily an Old World species. It breeds in a variety of habitats from steppe and Mediterranean climates to boreal forest and the fringe of the subarctic from Iceland to eastern Siberia. In the Old World it winters as far south as sub-Saharan Africa, south Asia, and Japan. The species has expanded its range in the 20th century and was first noted to breed in Greenland in 1969 and Newfoundland in 1977. It is now known to be a scarce breeder in Atlantic Canada, in Quebec, and once in Massachusetts. From the latter half of the 20th century it has become an increasingly frequent and now regular visitor to eastern North America, especially in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia and, in lesser numbers, to New

England. Most of these individuals are suspected to be of Icelandic origin and, in fact, one leg-banded individual photographed in New Hampshire in the summer of 2003 was proven to be an Icelandic bird. You can expect to find this species in low numbers in New Hampshire every year, typically in association with flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls. If you want to find this rare species for yourself, just carefully examine those flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls that you encounter along our coast. Eventually, you are likely to be well rewarded.



This excellent photograph, which nicely shows the differences between these two similar species in non-breeding plumage, was taken by Steve Mirick at the south end of Wallis Sands State Beach in July, 2004.

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