

Winter Birding Dull? Take Gull Challenge

By LANNY McDOWELL

The middle of winter can be birding doldrums. Nothing coming, nothing going. Dull, in other words. Or potentially a good time to opt for a bird-learning challenge. When the birds at the feeders offer no surprises and the sea ducks have become easy to identify, the gull family, or the larids, as some refer to them, is a good place to look for identification challenges. Like telling apart flycatchers in the fall or sparrows just about any time, learning to identify all the gulls takes diligence and persistence.

North American gulls are sometimes subdivided into two major groups: white-headed gulls and black-headed gulls. The white-headed gulls are the largest, and two of them, the great black-backed and herring gulls, are on the Vineyard year-round. They are the only gulls with an ongoing history of nesting on the Vineyard and Noman's. The ring-billed gull is another common wintering species, but it does not nest here. The lesser black-backed gull is increasingly seen around the shores of the Island, showing up at all stages of maturity and plumage. In winter, Iceland and glaucous gulls are seen nearly every year, usually as single transients. From time to time, one will call the Vineyard home for the entire winter. Black-legged kittiwakes also can often be seen in this season, nearly always out on the open sea.

Most of the adult white-headed gulls look the same in wintertime as they do as breeding adults. They have white bodies and tails, essentially white heads, yellow bills, and for the most part their backs and wings are some shade of gray. This makes telling them apart a challenge.

Then there the black-headed gulls, although none of them actually has a black head in the middle of winter. The one seen commonly in the shoulder seasons and summer is the laughing gull. They are seen here sometimes in spring, but mostly in the summer after the young are fledged elsewhere, in the fall before their migration south, and occasionally during colder weather. One black-headed gull seen commonly in winter is the Bonaparte's gull, small and energetic. Another one, actually named black-headed gull, is similar to the Bonaparte's and shows up only once in awhile, although it is the common small gull for much of Europe.

The little gull is very small (not surprisingly) and is not annual here. Of all the so-called black-headed gulls, only the laughing gull is likely to be seen during its breeding season plumage, when it sports an all-black hood on its head. Sometimes in mid-spring, usually some time in April, northbound Bonaparte's have partially black or fully black heads.

If you decide to embark on this great gull identification adventure, it is extremely useful to consult one of the popular reference books for Eastern North American birds. These books are indispensable for dealing with the more difficult bird groups. Gulls take up to four years to reach breeding plumage and there are myriad plumage variations along the way.

As birders become more skillful at their hobby, they know there will always be another challenge, hopefully an inexhaustible supply of them. The weather, the season, geography, personal circumstance, ambition and random opportunity are all factors in determining how much birding we do, what we see and how much we are inspired to expand our abilities. Sometimes we look for them tentatively; sometimes we demur; sometimes we leap for opportunities. It's all good, as they say.

A condensed guide to winter gulls

on the Vineyard follows. The descriptions are of adult gulls in nonbreeding plumage. Species are listed primarily in order of size, with the largest first.



Pictures by Lanny McDowell

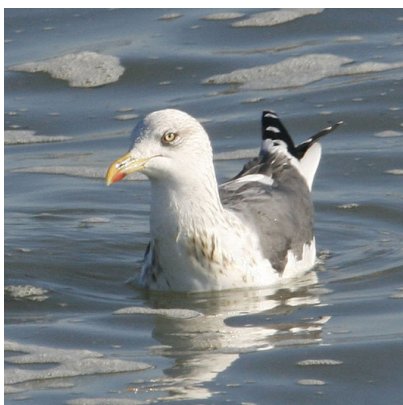
Great black-backed gull: black back and wings, large white spots at wingtips, unstreaked white head, large yellow bill with reddish spot, pink legs, huge. Common.



Glaucous gull: very light gray back and wings, all-white primary tips, limited brownish streaking on head, yellow bill with red spot, heavy and steady flight. Uncommon.



Herring gull: pale gray back and wings, black wingtips with white spots, yellow bill with reddish spot, pink legs, brownish streaking on head and neck. Most common.



Lesser black-backed gull: back and wings slate gray to almost black, black wingtips with limited white spots, yellow bill with reddish spot, yellow legs, extensive brownish streaking on head and neck, slender overall. Occasional.



Iceland/Kumlien's gull: very light gray back and wings, some brownish streaking on head, no black on wingtips, wingtip markings variable from gray to white, round head, relatively dainty yellowish bill with red spot, pink legs. Uncommon.



Ring-billed gull: pale gray back and wings and black wingtips with white spots (like a small herring gull), black band on yellow bill, yellowish legs, brownish streaking on head and neck. Common.



Black-legged kittiwake: medium gray back and wings, small all-black wingtips, smallish all-yellow bill with no markings, smudgy gray collar at nape, dark eye, black legs. Nearly always at sea.



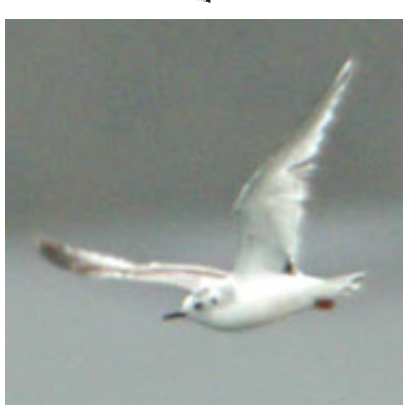
Laughing gull: dark gray back and wings, black wingtips with minimal white markings, smudgy wash at nape, relatively long, narrow wings, dark bill, dark legs, agile. Uncommon in winter.



Black-headed gull: pale gray back and wings, white outer primaries with black tips, dark primaries from below, dark spot behind eye, red bill, red legs, a bit larger than Bonaparte's. Uncommon.



Bonaparte's gull: pale gray back and wings, white outer primaries with black tips, wingtips mostly white from below, dark spot behind eye, small black bill, pinkish legs, active flight. Common.



Little gull: pale gray back and wings, rounded white wingtips, extensive dark under wing, dark spot behind eye and dark smudge at crown, very small black bill, red legs, quite small overall. Uncommon.