GETTING INTO SHAPE
TO TAKE THE STRESS OUT OF GULL ID, LOOK FIRST AT SIZE AND SHAPE
Story and images by John Rakestraw

QUICK, describe a Herring Gull. It’s typically white, with a pale gray mantle, black near the wing tips, and a yellow bill with either red or black marks.

Now describe a Thayer’s Gull. It shares all those field marks.

Now think of a Ring-billed Gull, then a California. They share the same general pattern. You can use many fine points to separate the species, but when the birds are distant or the lighting is bad, you need something broader. You can tell a horse from a zebra by looking at their hooves, but there are easier ways.

When experienced birders identify a bird from a great distance, it’s usually not because they have better eyesight than their buddies. They are relying on a general impression of size and shape, combined with behavior and choice of habitat, all of which can be seen from far away. Once you start doing the same, you will find that identifying species is much easier, even if the birds are in a confusing plumage, or if you can’t see all of the finer details.

The following three characteristics help to create the general shape of a gull. Study and compare them first the next time you look at your local species; you will quickly see differences emerge.

BILL: The size and shape of a gull’s bill is your first clue to the bird’s identity. Is the bill slender or more paddle-shaped? How long is it? If you have trouble even seeing the bill on a distant bird, that is an indication that the bill is small. Male gulls tend to have larger bills than female gulls, but the overall shape should be consistent within a species.

HEAD SHAPE: What is the shape of the gull’s head in profile? Is the head rounded, giving the bird a pigeon-headed look? Or does the forehead slope up toward the crown, giving the impression of a scowling expression? As with bill size, there can be a lot of variation among individuals — birds can vary their shape considerably depending on whether they’re resting or alert, warm or cold — and gulls will raise and lower their head feathers as they shift positions, but the general shape is consistent.

WING EXTENSION: This refers to how far the tips of the wings extend beyond the tail on a resting bird. Some species have wings that protrude only slightly; these birds tend to have a thicker, more robust shape overall. When the wing tips extend well beyond the tail, the bird appears longer and leaner.

In recent years, resources on gull identification have become more and...
SERIES ONE: MEW, RING-BILLED, CALIFORNIA

Mew, Ring-billed, and California Gulls all share similar color patterns. While the size difference between Mew and California is considerable, distinguishing Mew from Ring-billed and Ring-billed from California can be challenging at a distance. All three species are long-winged, giving them a slender appearance. The major differences lie in the shape of their heads and bills.

This silhouette shows a Mew Gull. Starting with the front, we see a fairly short, slender bill. There is no bulge at the gonys, the ridge along the tip of the lower mandible, making the bill resemble that of a tern. The head is small and round. The wings are very long, extending well beyond the tail. Even though this bird is obviously fluffed up, it still has a long, lean, petite structure. Also notice how the bird appears rather short-legged.

MEW GULL

RING-BILLED GULL

This is a Ring-billed Gull. Like the Mew, it has a short, narrow bill. But notice the distinct point on the gonys, well back from the tip. The forehead is long and sloping, and the head is bulkier than the head of Mew Gull. The wings are long, but not quite as long as those of the Mew. The legs appear slightly longer, as well. So this is also a slender gull, but with a more robust overall shape due to a larger, less rounded head, and slightly shorter wings.

CALIFORNIA GULL

California Gull, too, is a long, lean gull. While we can’t see the tail on this individual, we can tell that the wings are quite long. The bill is pencil-like: long and slender, without much of a gonys bulge. Its shape is among the more reliable field marks for the species. The head is neither small and rounded nor excessively sloping but is rather large and squared. Despite long wings, the gull shows a robust outline.

SHAPE AS A CLUE: The rounded head of Thayer’s Gull distinguishes it from Herring Gull, which has a long sloping forehead.

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**SHAPE CHARACTERISTICS OF 13 GULLS**

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<th>Wing Extension Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MEW GULL</td>
<td>Short and narrow</td>
<td>Small and round (pigeon-headed)</td>
<td>Very long</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>RING-BILLED GULL</td>
<td>Medium short and narrow, with a slight gonyleal bulge</td>
<td>Sloping forehead</td>
<td>Long</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>CALIFORNIA GULL</td>
<td>Long and narrow, pencil-like</td>
<td>Blocky</td>
<td>Long</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>HERRING GULL</td>
<td>Substantial but not overly thick</td>
<td>Sloping forehead</td>
<td>Medium short</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>THAYER’S/ICELAND GULL</td>
<td>Fairly small and slender, shorter than Herring Gull</td>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Medium long</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>GLAUCOUS GULL</td>
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<td>Short</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>WESTERN GULL</td>
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<td>Sloping forehead, flat-headed</td>
<td>Medium short</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Substantial but not bulging</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL</td>
<td>Substantial but not bulging</td>
<td>Sloping forehead</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL</td>
<td>Massive</td>
<td>Sloping forehead, flat-headed</td>
<td>Medium short</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL</td>
<td>Fairly long and slender</td>
<td>Slightly rounded</td>
<td>Long</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>LAUGHING GULL</td>
<td>Long and drooping</td>
<td>Sloping forehead</td>
<td>Long</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>FRANKLIN’S GULL</td>
<td>Fairly short, narrow, and straight</td>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Medium long</td>
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**SERIES TWO: HERRING AND THAYER’S**

Herring and Thayer’s Gulls were once considered to be one species. Now Thayer’s Gull is considered to be either a separate species or a subspecies of Iceland Gull. Whatever their taxonomic status, Thayer’s and Herring Gulls can appear similar in all plumages. Both are fairly robust but not as bulky as Western, Great Black-backed, Glaucous-winged, and Glaucous Gulls.

**HERRING GULL**

Wings

Tail

Compare these gulls. Herring shows a long sloping forehead and a fairly substantial bill. Thayer’s Gulls typically have more rounded heads with shorter bills. Many birders describe Herring Gulls as having an aggressive expression, while Thayer’s Gull appears more demure. The impressions are subjective, based solely on the shape of the head and size of the bill. Females of both species may appear more round-headed than males, so the differences in shape between a female Herring and a male Thayer’s can be subtle. The wing extension on Thayer’s Gulls is slightly longer than on Herring Gulls, adding to Thayer’s more delicate impression.

**THAYER’S GULL**

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Tail

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SERIES THREE: SLATY-BACKED AND WESTERN

Along the coast of California, Oregon, and southern Washington, Western Gull is usually the most common gull species. The bird's dark mantle makes it one of the more easily identified species as well. But small numbers of Slaty-backed Gulls visit the West Coast annually. If you look at plumages only, Western Gulls, Western X Glaucous-winged Gulls, and Slaty-backed Gulls can look similar to each other. Birders eager to find a rare Slaty-backed are sometimes confused by an odd pale-eyed Western.

SLATY-BACKED GULL

Wings

On occasion, looking at shape saves the day. Both Slaty-backed Gull and Western Gull have a stocky build and similar head shapes, but study the bills: Slaty-backed has a substantial but slender bill. The bill on a Western Gull shows a rounded tip and a large gonydeal bulge — you could paddle a canoe with this bird! One look at the bill is usually all you need to differentiate the species. Also, note that Slaty-backed Gull has slightly longer wings than Western, which you should expect on a long-distance migrant.

Many gulls molt almost continuously during the first two or three years of life, and some do not attain their adult, or definitive, plumage until they have undergone three or four molt cycles. The photos above show two gulls in their third plumage cycle: a Slaty-backed Gull and either a Western Gull or a Western X Glaucous-winged hybrid. (The extensive mottling over the entire head, neck, and upper breast suggests Glaucous-winged Gull somewhere in this bird's ancestry.) Both birds are fairly dark. The Slaty-backed Gull is noticeably darker, but shades of gray can be hard to judge on individual birds, and lighting conditions affect our perceptions. Both birds have pale eyes, pink legs, and streaking on the head and neck. The main difference is the shape of the bill.

WESTERN GULL

Wings

Gonys

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