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IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMS WITH LARGE GULLS

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The identification of large gulls is among the most difficult and contentious issues in North American field ornithology. A significant part of this problem is due to hybridization among various taxa, a phenomenon especially prevalent in western North America. In particular, Western Gulls (*Larus o. occidentalis*) and Glaucous-winged Gulls (*L. glaucescens*) hybridize extensively from Puget Sound south to central Oregon (Scott 1971, Bell 1996), while Glaucous-winged Gulls and Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*) hybridize commonly from southwestern Alaska to British Columbia (Williamson and Peyton 1963, Merilees 1974, Patten 1980). Less well-known is the degree of hybridization between Glaucous Gulls (*L. hyperboreus*) and Herring Gulls (Spear 1987) and between Glaucous Gulls and Glaucous-winged Gulls (Swarth 1934, Strang 1977).

Observations on the breeding grounds are the best way to document hybridization, but often these areas are relatively inaccessible—and it is mostly on the nonbreeding grounds where observers are faced with presumed hybrids of uncertain origin. For example, in Marin and Sonoma counties, California, up to 50% of the wintering Western and Glaucous-winged gulls at a site can show hybrid Western × Glaucous-winged characters, while up to 12% of the migrant Herring and Glaucous-winged gulls can show hybrid Herring × Glaucous-winged characters (pers. obs.).

Many adult hybrids can be identified to (presumed) parentage by careful consideration of structure, bare-part colors (especially orbital ring), gray tone of the upperparts, and wing-tip pattern. Immatures, however, are inherently more variable in plumage and pose greater identification challenges. Until the variation in field characters of hybrids—and, indeed, of parent species—is documented and widely appreciated, many problems of identification and distribution will remain unresolved. For example, the distribution and abundance of wintering Thayer's Gulls (*L. thayeri*) in California is clouded by confusion with Herring Gull × Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids. And the field identification of vagrant immature gulls such as the Kumlien's [Iceland] (*L. [glaucooides] kumlieni*), Vega [Herring] (*L. [argentatus] vegae*), and Slaty-backed (*L. schistisagus*) in western North America is laced with uncertainty.

The featured photo on the back cover shows an immature gull I photographed at Petaluma, Sonoma County, California, on 27 December 2001. In any gull identification one should first establish the bird's age. This bird looks to be almost entirely in its juvenal plumage, which is typical at this time of year for a first-year individual of the northern-breeding gull species (Howell 2001). But what species (or hybrid combination) is it? Without other species for comparison this bird's size is impossible to judge. Seen by itself this bird could be called a Kumlien's Gull—its bill does not look overly long or bulbous tipped, and the bird looks overall quite similar to several first-winter Kumlien's Gulls I saw in Newfoundland in February 2002. It was with numerous other gulls, however, and was clearly a large and bulky gull—distinctly larger than several Thayer's Gulls present, and comparable in size to Glaucous-winged and Western gulls. In flight it showed no contrasting dark secondary bar, and the primaries had a blended appearance rather than any contrasting darker pattern.

The milky-brown ground color suggests a first-year Glaucous-winged Gull, and the wing-tips are clearly too pale for a Herring Gull or Western Gull, too dark for a Glaucous Gull. But the strongly checkered and lacy-patterned upperparts are atypical of Glaucous-winged Gulls, at least those wintering in central California, bringing us to

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the problem of understanding individual variation in a taxon. Could a juvenile pure Glaucous-winged Gull show this patterning? In addition to plumage anomalies, the bill is relatively slender and shows more extensive dull flesh at the base than is typical of first-year Glaucous-winged Gulls at this season. If this is a pure Glaucous-winged Gull it is at the extreme end of the spectrum in several features, and its appearance leads one to consider the possibility of a hybrid.

The relatively small and somewhat parallel-edged bill with fairly extensive dull flesh basally suggests Herring Gull or Glaucous Gull parentage rather than a Glaucous-winged Gull × Western Gull hybrid. A hybrid Herring Gull × Glaucous Gull might be expected to show a more contrasting pinkish bill base and some darker, Herring-like patterning in the primaries—but some known hybrids resemble the bird in the featured photo (e.g., figure 1D of Spear 1987). Many presumed Herring Gull × Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids have darker wings and look like Thayer's Gulls (Howell and Corben 2000), but some, like this bird, more closely resemble Kumlien's Gulls. Its primaries are probably too dark for a hybrid Glaucous Gull × Glaucous-winged Gull, but what solid information do we have to eliminate this option?

Given the present lack of knowledge about individual variation in first-year known Glaucous-winged Gulls and about hybrids, I am unable to identify the bird in the featured photo beyond one of three or four options. This bird exemplifies the problems faced by field observers in western North America and should instill caution in all of us when faced with a problematic gull. I thank Peter Pyle, Martin Reid, and Steve Rottenborn for their review of this note.

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