IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN COASTAL BC IN WINTER

OVERVIEW
Despite being large, relatively bold, and conspicuous, gulls are considered one of the most difficult groups of birds to confidently identify. By familiarizing yourself with the key field marks and habits that separate each gull species from another, you will eventually be able to identify the majority of gulls that you encounter in the field. It’s easiest to start with the adults, so use the photographs and descriptions in this guide to get started!

STATUS & DISTRIBUTION

Glaucous-winged Gull—The most abundant gull on the BC coast - often comprising 75% or more of the gulls in any given group on the coast. It is common in urban areas, fields, garbage dumps, shorelines, and marine environments.

Herring Gull—Herring Gulls are fairly uncommon in the Georgia and Juan de Fuca Straits. However, there are usually a few mixed in with any large concentration of gulls on the islands, Sunshine Coast, and Lower Mainland. They are more numerous along the outer coast and particularly offshore.

Iceland (Thayer’s) Gull—Infall, winter, and spring, this Arctic breeder is more numerous than Herring Gulls but is still often vastly outnumbered by Glaucous-winged Gulls in most situations. Highest numbers of this species can be expected at salmon runs in the fall, and herring spawns in the early spring.

California, Heermann’s, Ring-billed, Mew and Bonaparte’s Gulls—These gulls are smaller than the first three gulls listed above, and somewhat easier to distinguish based on their size and other features.

IDENTIFICATION TABLE
This table outlines the six basic physical characteristics that will help you to identify ADULT gulls in the field.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Relative Size</th>
<th>Leg Colour</th>
<th>Eye Colour</th>
<th>Bill Description</th>
<th>Mantle (back)</th>
<th>Wing-tips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glaucous-winged</td>
<td>Large, bulky</td>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>Large yellow with orange spot, like Herring but usually thicker</td>
<td>Medium grey</td>
<td>Grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herring</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Pale</td>
<td>Long, yellow, with orange spot</td>
<td>Light grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland (Thayer’s)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Deep pink</td>
<td>Darkish</td>
<td>Like Herring but smaller</td>
<td>Light/medium grey</td>
<td>Black, often pale edging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>Yellow with black and red spots near tip</td>
<td>Darkish grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heermann’s</td>
<td>Similar to Ring-billed</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>Red with black tip</td>
<td>Dark grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring-billed</td>
<td>Small, but larger than Mew</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Pale</td>
<td>Yellow with black ring</td>
<td>Light grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mew</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Yellow-green</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>Small/slimmer, unmarked, yellowish-green</td>
<td>Darkish grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonaparte’s</td>
<td>Smallest</td>
<td>Orange-red</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>Dark and thin</td>
<td>Light grey</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In some cases, you will encounter gulls that do not fit comfortably into a single category. These birds may be hybrids.

IDENTIFYING HYBRID GULLS IN COASTAL BC IN WINTER

HYBRID GULLS ON THE BC COAST
Hybridisation between large white-headed gulls in the North Pacific is fairly common and can cause identification challenges. Many hybrids go undetected because they can look nearly identical to one of their parent species. In typical cases, hybrids will show a mixture of traits.

In the Pacific Northwest, hybridism between Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls is so common that birds with intermediate characteristics have almost become the norm and will often outnumber apparently pure Glaucous-winged Gulls.

The other hybrid combination that is frequently encountered along the BC coast is Glaucous-winged X Herring Gull.

It can be impossible to completely determine the parentage of some birds, so don’t worry too much about it.

In general these two hybrid gulls will look similar to a Glaucous-winged Gull but have dark wing tips.
Glaucoous-winged Gull (GWGU)
- White or smudged head/neck
- Large yellow bill with orange spot
- Medium-grey wing tips with white ends
- Large head/usually bulky body
- Dark beady eye

Herring Gull (HERG)
- Usually with vertical streaking on hind-neck (outside of breeding season)
- Light-grey mantle
- Long slender yellow bill
- Pale iris gives it fierce look
- Large gull but more slender appearance than GWGU
- Jet-black wing tips with small white spots/ends

Iceland Gull (Thayer's) (ICGU)
- Shows similar markings to Herring Gull in winter
- Light/medium-grey mantle
- Smaller, daintier bill than Herring Gull
- Head is usually more rounded than Herring Gull
- Usually has darkish iris
- Often has deeper pink legs than Herring Gull
- Black/dark grey wing tips with more white than HERG

Heermann's Gull (HEEG)
- Dark grey mantle, greyish undersides
- Bill red with dark tip; dark eye
- Juveniles dark overall with dark bill
- Breeds in Mexico & moves north in late summer & fall
- Uncommon except on offshore islands

California Gull (CAGU)
- White smudged head, streaked on back of neck
- Medium-grey mantle (darker than RBGU/HERG)
- Medium-sized gull with medium sized bill
- Bill with black ring AND red spot
- Dark eye
- Yellow legs

Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)
- Non-breeding birds have some head/neck-streaking
- Light-grey mantle
- Small-medium sized, yellow bill with black ring
- Pale-eye
- Yellow legs

Mew Gull (MEGU)
- Smallest of the "white-headed" gulls
- In winter, head often covered in dark smudging
- Medium-grey mantle; darker than RBGU
- Small/thin greenish-yellow bill; usually unmarked
- Yellowish-green legs
- Relatively long-winged; noticeable while at rest

Bonaparte's Gull (BOGU)
- Smallest gull in BC
- Breeding adults have black hood
- Wintering adults have white head and black spot behind the eyes
- Bill is dark and thin
- Legs are red-orange and wing tips are black
- In BC, seen mainly during migration in spring & fall

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