The Identification of *Thayer's Gull* in the Field

By Paul Lehman

INTRODUCTION

To many, Thayer's Gull *(Larus thayeri)* represents an identification and taxonomic nightmare. A number of factors contribute to this representation:

1. The bird is a gull.
2. The principal field guides' treatment of Thayer's Gull is either skimpy or totally lacking.
3. Hybridization among different "species" of gulls is relatively common.
4. Individual variation in size, shape, and plumage among gulls is significant. This knowledge is particularly important when one is dealing with Thayer's vs. Kumlien's *(Larus glaucoides kumlieni)*, the North American race of Iceland Gull. Thayer's and darker Kumlien's Gulls are *very* similar, and some individuals may be impossible to differentiate in the field. Thayer's seemingly lies at the dark end of a cline among it (Thayer's), Kumlien's, and the paler, nominate race of Iceland *(L. g. glaucoides)*.
5. The description of first-winter Iceland Gull in *The Gulls of the World* (Dwight 1925) was based partly on a Thayer's Gull specimen.
6. The taxonomic status of Thayer's Gull has long been a subject of much controversy. Thayer's was first described as a new species by Brooks (1915). Later, Dwight lumped the bird with Herring Gull *(Larus argentatus)*. Macpherson (1961) treated Thayer's as distinct from Herring, but not necessarily from Iceland. The 1957 *AOU Checklist* treated it as a subspecies of Herring Gull. Then, Neal Smith's study (1966) presented evidence that led the AOU, in its 32nd supplement (1973), to promote Thayer's to the rank of full species. Presently, however, there exists some feeling that Thayer's Gull should, again, be lumped—this time with Iceland.



First-year Thayer's Gull; February 5, 1977; Ocean City, Maryland. Note the broad, uniform tail-band.—*Photo by Alan Brady*

In the following discussion most of the fieldmarks presented are not foolproof and clear-cut. In many instances I have used such modifiers as "sometimes", "on the average", "often", "usually", and "perhaps". To be true to the study of gulls, the reader should apply these terms to almost every statement in this article. However, most Thayer's Gulls *can* be properly identified by using a *combination* of fieldmarks; *do not* rely on only one or two marks.

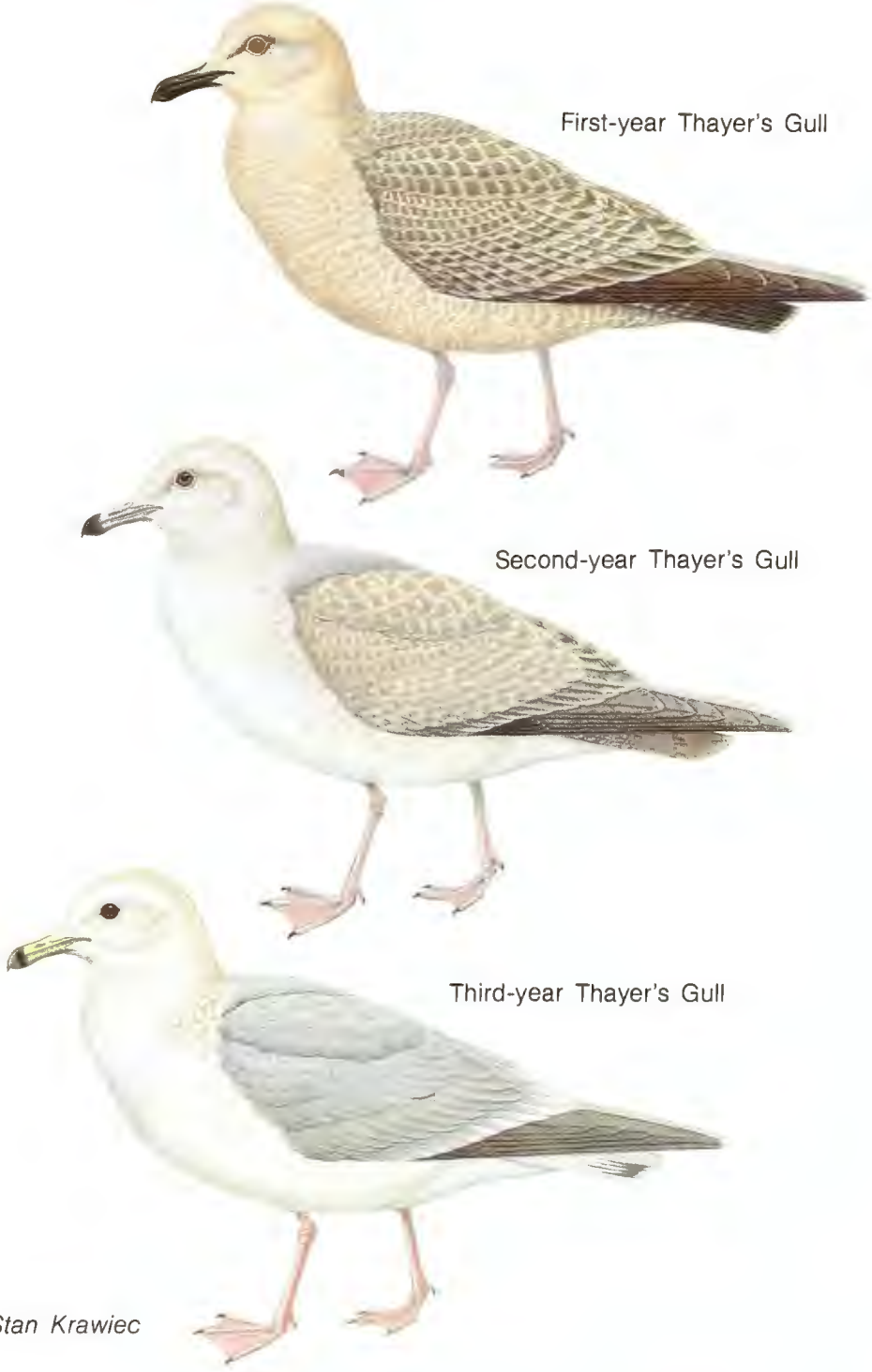
RANGE

Thayer's Gull breeds from the northern Northwest Territories (i.e., Banks and Ellesmere Islands) south and east to central Baffin Island, western Greenland, and the northern Hudson Bay area. There is a small overlap zone in the breeding ranges of Thayer's and Iceland* Gulls on Baffin Island. Along the Pacific Coast, Thayer's Gull winters predominantly from British Columbia south to southern California and northern Baja. The bird is a very rare but regular visitor to the interior West.

Kumlien's Iceland Gull breeds in the Baffin Island area and winters predominantly on the Atlantic Coast. The nominate form of Iceland Gull breeds in Greenland and Iceland; it is likely that it winters predominantly (exclusively?) in Europe.

The status of Thayer's Gull away from its nesting grounds and the far West is not well known. In the interior sections of North America east of the Rockies, Thayer's may well prove to be more likely to occur than Iceland; Thayer's is now significantly outnumbering Iceland in the western Great Lakes region. It is also likely that a small number of Thayer's Gulls is occurring along a large portion of the Atlantic Coast. A number of recent records have come from the mid-Atlantic Coast and Florida, where the

*All references to Iceland Gull in this article apply to Kumlien's subspecies unless otherwise noted.



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species will probably prove to be regular. It is also quite likely that Iceland Gull is occurring as an accidental visitor in the far West. Documenting these occurrences will not be easy, however!

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Ages Encountered

As with other large, four-year-sequence gulls, first-year and adult Thayer's Gulls are the age classes most likely to be encountered. And, as with other arctic species, immature gulls, particularly first-years, tend to move farther south in winter. Therefore, it is likely that at more southerly latitudes, such as California, Texas, and Florida, first-winter birds predominate. In the Pacific Northwest, adult birds are much more common than are second- and third-year birds. In fact, third-years are particularly rare, and almost all observers have seen comparatively few of them.

Molt

In order to properly determine the age of a bird under consideration, it is very important that the observer understand the molt sequence in gulls. Not all recent authors are in total agreement about the exact timing of molt in gulls, however. The following description of the molt sequence of Thayer's Gull was given largely by Guy McCaskie and is modeled after Dwight (1925):

> Thayer's Gull is a large gull which takes a little over three years to reach adult plumage; thus, adult plumage is attained during the bird's fourth year. A bird which hatches in summer retains a somewhat dark, juvenile plumage into late summer/early fall, molting into first-winter plumage by October or, rarely, as late as November. A head-and-body molt during February and March advances the bird into first-summer plumage, and a subsequent complete molt during late summer and early fall places the bird, when it is about 15 or 16 months old, in second-winter plumage. This sequence continues, with the bird advancing through second-summer plumage and into third-winter plumage by the time that it is 27 to 28 months old. Then it progresses into third-summer plumage, finally molting into adult plumage when it is just over three years old. The primaries, secondaries, and rectrices are molted only during late summer, being retained during the head-and-body molt of late winter and throughout summer. (Feather-wear and bleaching leave many individuals whiter than expected, especially in late winter, spring, and summer, a factor which should be taken into account when identifying gulls.)

A recent article in *British Birds* on the field identification of west palearctic gulls (Grant 1978) shows body molt in first-winter large gulls beginning in January and lasting longer than indicated by Dwight (1925). In addition, individual variation in the timing of molt may be affected by differences in hatching dates.

Juvenals

Thayer's Gulls in full juvenile plumage are probably encountered only on the breeding grounds. Their general appearance is that of a dark version of a first-winter bird, with an overall sooty-brown coloration to the body and head. For a photo of this plumage, see Gosselin and David (1975, p. 1065). Many of the earlier first-year individuals that appear south of the breeding range during fall retain some of the feathers of juvenile plumage, but these feathers molt by some time in November. In any case, Thayer's Gulls should not appear in the Lower 48 until October, so August and September sightings of juvenals should be questioned; they are probably sightings of

juvenals of other species, such as Herring and California *(Larus californicus)* Gulls.

Size

As in most gull species, size is variable in Thayer's, but the average individual is slightly smaller than Herring Gull and slightly larger than Iceland. Smaller individuals (females?) approach the size of California Gull and may overlap with large Icelands, while larger birds may be the size of Herring Gulls. Some small Glaucous-winged Gulls *(Larus glaucescens)* approach the size of Thayer's.

Bill and Head

Bill-size and -shape are often fairly distinctive: proportionately short (shorter than in Herring Gull), rather slender (almost delicate), with a gently curving culmen and no apparent thickening toward the tip. Several observers in the Pacific Northwest have stated that, along with the bird's size and the shape of its head, they consider the size and shape of its bill to be the most important fieldmark in helping to separate Thayer's from similar West Coast species, such as Glaucous-winged, Western *(Larus occidentalis)*, and Herring, and particularly from the regularly occurring hybrids, such as Glaucous-winged x Western and Glaucous-winged x Herring. Bill-size and -shape is especially important when the bird in question is in confusing plumage, as in the case of many hybrids. Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls have larger, deeper, and thicker bills, often with a more-obvious gonydeal angle. Herring Gull has a longer bill which is fairly thin and which often appears pencil-like. Iceland Gull, however, has a bill shaped very much like Thayer's, with some individuals having a bill that is slighter still.

Head shape in Thayer's Gull is often quite round (although some individuals' heads may appear more pointed or peaked). This, in combination with its more-delicate bill, gives the bird an



First-winter Thayer's Gull; December; California. Note the small, all-black bill and the round head, features which give the species a "pigeon-headed" or "delicate" look.—*Photo by Paul Lehman*

overall "pigeon-headed" look, a trait shared by Iceland and Mew *(Larus canus)* Gulls. Several West Coast observers have commented on this round-headed/smaller-billed appearance as giving the bird a "gentle" look and use this fieldmark when identifying the bird. Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls tend to be "rougher"-looking, typically with larger heads and flatter foreheads. Herring Gull also tends to have a flatter forehead. ***Note:*** Caution should be exercised when head-shape is used as a fieldmark in gulls, for there is significant individual and sexual variation; females of many species exhibit a rounder-headed appearance than do males.

Bill-Color

All first-winter Thayer's Gulls have all-blackish bills. At this age, Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls have largely dark bills which occasionally show pale bases. Iceland Gull also shows a predominantly all-dark bill in it first year, with some individuals showing a paler, often grayish coloration at the base.

An important change in bill-color of Thayer's Gull may occur late in the first winter. Beginning in early February, *some* first-year birds begin to show a small amount of pale coloration at the base of the bill. I have never seen a first-year Thayer's with anything but an all-black bill throughout January, but, during February, I have seen several showing dull, flesh-colored bases.

Second-year Thayer's Gulls have a pink base to the bill, although the extent of this coloration varies among individuals. Second-year Icelands show a variable amount of pale-gray or pinkish at the base. Third-year Thayer's Gulls typically have dirty-yellowish bills with a dark subterminal spot or ring, as in Herring Gull.

Adult birds have yellowish bills with a red spot at the gonydeal angle, similar to that of an adult Herring Gull but often with a more greenish tinge.

Wing-Pattern

The pattern of the flight-feathers is one of the principal fieldmarks used to identify Thayer's Gull. In a first-year bird at rest, the upper surfaces of the primaries are light- to medium-brown, appearing slightly *darker*—never lighter—than the remainder of the mantle. The primaries of an immature Glaucous-winged Gull are whitish or grayish-white, concolor with or very slightly *lighter* than the remainder of the wing. The primaries of a same-age Iceland Gull are *lighter still,* whitish or tannish, and they are almost always paler than the wing coverts and the remainder of the wing. Darker Kumlien's Gulls have primaries which may be concolor with the wing coverts. Gosselin and David (1975) point out that first-winter Kumlien's Gulls also usually show dark (dusky) subapical spots on the primaries, a trait which is not present in Thayer's gull. These spots are not very conspicuous in the field. however. In Western, Herring, and California Gulls, flight-feathers are blackish or blackish-brown, noticeably darker than in Thayer's, and contrasting more with the remainder of the wing. When the bird is at rest, the tips of the three or four outer primaries



First-winter Thayer's Gull; November; California. The "marbled" back-and-wing pattern of this plumage is apparent, as are the dark-brown primaries with pale edges to the tips and the all-black bill.—*Photo by Paul Lehman*



Adult Thayer's Gull; June; Churchill. In flight, from below, the adult's flight-feathers typically show only a thin, black line along the trailing edges of the outer primaries.—*Photo by Paul Benham*



First-winter Thayer's Gull; February; California. In flight, from above, the primaries are just slightly darker than the remainder of the wing, which is light brown.—*Photo by Paul Lehman*



Adult Thayer's Gull. The upper surface of the wing, which is spread, shows the blackish color in the primaries of the adult.—*Phto by Harry Nehls*

of Thayer's Gull show conspicuous pale, crescent-shaped edges (including the inner web). These edges are usually not so obvious in the other gulls.

When seen from below, the flight feathers of Thayer's Gull are silvery-white throughout, including the wing-tips; this color pattern is also shown by Kumlien's. These light wing-tips can sometimes be seen when the bird is at rest (if the observer can see under the "opposite" wing-tip), but it is most obvious when the bird is in flight. In contrast, Western, Herring, and California Gulls show a great deal of dark coloring on the under-surfaces of the flight feathers. In some light conditions, however, first-year nominate Western Gulls may also show this silvery flash to the under-wing when the bird is in flight.

When in flight, Thayer's Gull's wings appear to be uniformly light or very light-brown from above. The primaries may appear to be only slightly darker than the remainder of the wing. From below, however, the flight-feathers look very light because the inner webs of the primaries are pale, giving the bird the look of a "white-winged" gull. When seen from above in flight, Glaucous-winged and Iceland Gulls show flight-feathers which are generally paler than Thayer's; however, when seen from below, they are similar to those of Thayer's. Western, Herring, and California Gulls have flight-feathers which appear darker than those of Thayer's when seen from above and which appear much darker when seen from below, especially the outer primaries.

In the second year, the brownish flight-feathers with pale edges to the primary tips are retained, as is the silvery-white under-surface. Third-year birds are not well known, and flight-feather patterns are variable in individuals of this age; some birds have a pattern similar to that of a second-winter bird, while others show black on the upper-surface. The primaries may also have a gray tone to them. Most



First-winter Thayer's Gull; February; California. In flight, from below, the flight-feathers appear very light-colored, giving the bird the look of a "white-winged" gull.—*Photo by Paul Lehman*



Adult Thayer's Gulls; December; Washington. Note the birds' bill- and head-size/shape, deep-pink legs, mantle color, and variable amount of head-and-neck mottling; the latter is typical in many winter adult gulls.—*Photo by Terence R. Wahl*



Adult "Kumlien's" Gull; February; New York. This dark Kumlien's Gull shows a dark eye at a distance, as well as dark, charcoal-gray primaries, which may appear blackish when the bird is at rest. Note the pale mantle, which is paler than that of Thayer's Gull.— *Photo by Thomas H. Davis*



Adult Thayer's Gull; June; Churchill, Manitoba. This adult, in breeding condition, has a rather small bill, round head, dark eye, purplish eye-ring, deep-pink legs, and medium-gray mantle. (The mantle is typically darker than that of an adult Iceland Gull.)— *Photo by Paul Benham*

third-year birds still largely lack the white windows of the adult (see below).

At rest, adult birds generally show clean, black wing-tips when seen from above. The wing-tip pattern is similar to that seen in Herring Gull, but the dark areas are less extensive in Thayer's. The wing-tips are almost always darker than Kumlien's. The wing-tips of Thayer's gull show large, white windows, which are larger than in Herring Gull. At rest, Glaucous-winged Gull shows primaries that range from medium-gray to blackish-gray on the upper-surface. A small number (less than ten percent) of Thayer's Gulls, however, have dark-gray primaries which are only slightly darker than those of most adult Glaucous-winged Gulls and which are quite similar to those of dark Kumlien's Gulls. The darkest Kumlien's may have dark blotches in the wing-tips, or they may have wing-tips that are dark charcoal-gray overall, appearing to be virtually black when the wing is folded at rest. This black coloration largely vanishes when the bird's wing is spread in flight.

In flying Thayer's Gulls, the dark of the upper-surface of the primaries appears to cover a smaller area than when the bird is at rest; this dark area appears to be a band near the tip. The under-surfaces of the primaries are distinctly pale-gray or whitish, with only a thin, black line along the trailing edges. In adult Western, Herring, and California Gulls, the black wing-tip shows through the underside of the wing; in Western Gull the inner primaries are also dark. For a photograph of the upper-surface/under-surface differences in adult Thayer's Gull primaries, see Gosselin and David (1975, p. 1065).

Tail-Pattern

As in first-winter Mew Gull, the tail of first- and second-year Thayer's Gulls is brownish or brownish-gray throughout, with light mottling in only the outer two or three rectrices; this mottling is largely restricted to the bases of the rectrices. In flight, the uniform tail-color contrasted with the mottled tail-coverts gives the bird the appearance of having a broad, uniform tail-band. In Iceland Gull, the tail is largely *mottled* with white, so it appears paler than it does in Thayer's. The tails of some darker Kumlien's may approach the pattern of Thayer's, but a close look should reveal that Kumlien's apparent tail-band is not so uniformly colored as is Thayer's. This tail-pattern is an important field-mark in distinguishing first-year Thayer's and Kumlien's Gulls.

In third-year Thayer's Gull, the tail is normally white with a dark, fairly broad subterminal band that may be broken by white. In Glaucous-winged Gull, the tail-pattern is typically uniformly gray at this age. Sutton and Parmelee (1978) point out that there can be great individual variation in the rate at which rectrices are replaced in maturing Thayer's, resulting in variable tail-patterns among birds of similar age.

Overall Plumage Pattern

Overall color in immature Thayer's Gulls, particularly in first-year birds, can vary from individual to individual. Fairly dark first-year birds, usually seen in late fall, are a very "dirty" color, almost dark-brown or chocolate-brown; more typical individuals are tan or buffy-white. The feathers of the back and upper-wing coverts of first-year birds are tan, brownish, or brownish-gray and are edged with white or buffy-white. This coloration results in a checkered pattern, which is often quite distinctive. This pattern differs from the mantle pattern of Glaucous-winged Gulls, which is more uniform and smudgey-looking. Immature Thayer's Gulls also show good contrast between the brown barring and pale ground-color of the under-tail coverts. In immature Kumlien's Gulls, the back-feathers are whitish, with smaller,



First-winter Thayer's Gull; November; California. Note the distinctive tail-pattern: an overall brownish-gray color with a very small amount of light mottling restricted to the base of the outer rectrices. Also note the pale coloration (visible on one of the wings) to the underside of the primaries.—*Photo by Paul Lehman*

dusky-brown bars, giving these birds, too, a checkered look. Thayer's back-feathers have broader brown bars (only the feather-edges are pale), so its mantle looks darker than Kumlien's.

Several observers have pointed out that while first-winter Herring Gulls can often show a white-headed appearance in contrast to the remainder of the plumage, Thayer's does not typically show this feature. First-year Thayer's may have a dark smudge through the eye, a characteristic which is also seen in some Herring Gulls but which is more typical of Thayer's; therefore, this smudge might be used in the field as an indicator of a possible Thayer's Gull.

Second-year individuals have pearly-gray backs and are lighter underneath than are first-winter birds. At this age their overall plumage is reminiscent of first-winter Mew Gulls. Some second-year Thayer's may appear quite pale overall.

Third-year birds have the following characteristics: a gray mantle, white underparts, a white tail with a dark subterminal band, and a dark tip to the yellowish bill. They also largely lack the white windows which often show in the primaries of adult birds, and they may show some brownish in the wing-coverts. Many birds of this age are very well marked (with streaks) around the head and neck.

The mantle of adult Thayer's Gulls is the same color or slightly darker than that of Herring Gulls, and it is darker still than the mantle of all Icelands. (The cover photo of *American Birds,* Vol. 29, No. 6, was printed much too dark, exaggerating the color of the Thayer's mantle.) As in Herring Gull, the head and neck of a winter Thayer's Gull is mottled/streaked with brownish or brownish-gray markings that vary in their intensity; some birds are lightly marked, while others have extensive

streaking which extends down onto the breast and gives them a bibbed appearance.

Eye-Color

All first-winter gulls which we have been discussing have dark eyes. Thayer's retains its dark eye into adulthood, but most second-winter Herring Gulls acquire their pale irides in the second winter. (Some sub-adult Herrings may show a dark eye while simultaneously showing other adult characteristics. Also, winter Herring Gulls often have very dark feathering around the eye, making the eye itself appear dark.)

Adult Kumlien's Gulls have variable eye-color; some individuals have clear-yellow eyes, and others have dark irides (Smith 1966). There may be some correlation between the amount of melanin present in the eyes and in the wing-tips; that is, the darker-eyed Kumlien's may have darker wing-tips. Caution should be used when using eye-color as a fieldmark, since some variation also occurs in Thayer's Gull, and a small proportion of them can appear pale-eyed.

In all cases, lighting is a very important factor in determining eye-color. It is usually much easier to determine with certainty that an individual is light-eyed than that it is dark-eyed.

The eye-ring in breeding adult Thayer's Gulls is purplish, while it is yellow or orange in Herring and reddish-purple in Iceland. This orbital ring thickens as the breeding season approaches, intensifying the color, but it is difficult to see in winter. However, Thayer's can retain its purple eye-ring into December, making the eye-ring visible at close range.

Leg-Color

Leg-color is always pink, although some observers believe that Thayer's legs are often a deeper pink than are those of Herring and Glaucous-wingeds.

A Final Word

Due to feather-wear, gulls become increasingly worn, and individuals appear to be quite pale by February or March and, especially, from April on. Thus, a worn nominate race Western Gull might be called a Glaucous-winged, a worn Glaucous-winged a Glaucous *(Larus hyperboreus),* a worn Herring a Thayer's, and so on. A late-winter Thayer's may also show this effect, resulting in its being misidentified as an Iceland. Therefore, observers are urged to take extreme care when identifying gulls as "white-winged" species in late winter, spring, or summer, especially if the bird in question appears particularly worn.

The identification of many gulls is not easy. The observer must use a *combination* of fieldmarks, especially when dealing with the identification of Thayer's Gulls. Remember, not all gulls are identifiable in the field, and birders must be willing to let some birds go unidentified.

A great deal still needs to be learned about gull identification and taxonomy, especially about Thayer's Gull. I make no claims that all of the information in this article is correct or that it holds for all individuals. Hopefully, the article will serve to encourage present and future gull-fanciers to work on the fieldmarks presented herein, as well as on other field characteristics, and to comment on them. The ABA Field Identification Editors and I would appreciate receiving any thoughts which our readers may have on the subject. Only by exchanging ideas in this way can we improve our knowledge.

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And Then There Was One

The last summer of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow in the wild. The efforts of an extraordinarily intensive survey by foot and helicopter of all possible Dusky Seaside Sparrow habitat in the St. Johns River marshes between Cocoa and Titusville (and as far north as S.R. 46) revealed only four surviving males: one in the St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge tract north of S.R. 50, one in the refuge's Beeline tract, and two on private ranchlands midway between the preceding two locations. The survey was conducted by a team of biologists from the Florida Game & Fresh-Water Fish Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Florida Audubon Society between mid-April and mid-June. No females were found.

In June the Dusky Seaside Sparrow Recovery Team met at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge with endangered-species personnel from Tallahassee, Atlanta, and Washington. They recommended capturing the remaining birds for safekeeping in the aviaries of the Wildlife Research Laboratory in Gainesville, where two Dusky males have been housed since fall 1979. (One of these males bred successfully with a Seaside Sparrow from Cedar Key, Florida [Gulf Coast], and produced three young.)

Three of the four wild males have now been captured. The lone male, a color-banded bird last seen on July 23, 1980, remains at large as of August 5, 1980.