

Photo: Art Martell

Identifying Hybrid & Immature Gulls in Coastal B.C.

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 most usual sign of a Glaucous-winged x Western hybrid is a bird of obvious Glaucous-winged/Western build (i.e. bulky body with large bill), with intermediate plumage—typically with mantle and primaries that are too dark for Glaucous-winged but too light for Western Gull.

The other hybrid combo that is frequently encountered along the BC coast is Glaucous-winged X Herring Gull. These birds usually look like a Herring Gull but with a slightly chunkier head, dusky eye, and ashy-gray wing-tips. It can be impossible to completely ascertain the parentage of some birds, so don't worry too much about it. The more gulls you look at (using the pointers provided in this package in combination with field-guides), the more you will become comfortable distinguishing each species complex.

Bleaching, Leucism and Albinism

In addition to hybridism, there are other factors that can confuse things. As one cycle of feathers gets older, it can get worn and bleached, making it look much paler than when fresh. This is most typical amongst second-winter gulls (see example below). Other issues are leucism and albinism—when pigment issues make a bird all or partially white.



Glaucous-winged x Western Gull - *outer primaries are noticeably darker than mantle but not black as in Western Gull. Body and bill shape is intermediate (Photo: Russ Cannings)*



Glaucous-winged x Herring Gull - *wing-tips black like Herring but eye-colour and chest smudging is more GWGU-like. Structure is intermediate (Photo: Russ Cannings)*



Bleached 2nd-cycle **California Gull** *(Photo: Guy Monty)*

Leucistic adult **Glaucous-winged x Western Gull** *(Photo: Mike Yip)*



Identifying First Year Gulls in British Columbia

First and second year gulls are among the most challenging birds to identify. For the most part they are different shades of brown, and can be quite variable depending on moult sequence, feather-wear, bleaching, and even hybridism. However, there are several fieldmarks that can be used to make sound identifications (or at least a "best guess"): size, structure (body, head, bill), and colour of wing tips (e.g. whitish-brown, light brown, dark brown, or black). Additionally, time of year, habitat, and species abundance should always be taken into account. For example, if you see an unknown juvenile-plumaged gull hanging out in a flock of 50 Glaucous-winged Gulls, chances are it's a young Glaucous-winged.

Glaucous-winged Gull (GWGU)

- Uniform light brown with light speckling
- All-black bill
- Little to no contrast between mantle & wing-tip colour



Glaucous-winged Gull (Photo: Russ Cannings)

Western Gull (WEGU)

- Mottled body plumage, mostly dark-brown with white edgings and markings
- Usually with pale belly/vent
- Heavy black bill (sometimes with pale base to lower mandible)
- Wing tips are jet-black (can be dark brown when worn/sun-bleached)



Western Gull (Photo: Alvaro Jaramillo)

Herring Gull (HEGU)

- Fairly uniform dark-to-light brown overall
- Bill mostly black, often with pale base
- Blackish-brown wing tips
- Separated from CAGU by overall size/shape, and bill colour/shape
- Larger than THGU with darker wing-tips



Herring Gull (Photo: Don Cecile)

Thayer's Gull (THGU)

- Smaller/paler version of HEGU
- Dark-brown wing tips contrast slightly with rest of body
- Wing tips have "frosty" edges
- Neat pale speckling on upper-parts



Darker Thayer's Gull, similar to HEGU - note structure (Photo: Russ Cannings)

California Gull (CAGU)

- Juvenile CAGUs have pink legs
- Plumage is quite variable at this age
- Usually fairly mottled with pale face
- Black wing tips
- By winter, bill is usually pink with black tip

California Gull (Photo: Russ Cannings)



Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)

- By first-fall, shows gray feathers in mantle
- Pale belly
- Pink legs
- Small pink bill with black tip
- Dark bars on sides of chest

Ring-billed Gull (Photo: Russ Cannings)



Mew Gull (MEGU)

- Similar to RBGU at same age but smaller and browner overall
- Usually darker-bellied than RBGU
- Dark-brown wing tips (not black like RBGU)
- Small/dainty bill; often pinkish with dark tip

Mew Gull (Photo: Guy Monty)



Bonaparte's Gull (BOGU)

- By far the smallest gull expected on coastal BC
- Breeding birds have a distinctive black head (hood)
- Winter adults/juveniles have dark ear-spot
- Pale-silvery plumage overall, with thin black trailing edge to outer-wing

Immature Bonaparte's Gull (Photo: Mike Yip)



NOTE: 2nd-year Mew, Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls are not included becasue they look more-or-less the same as adults.

Glaucous-winged Gull (GWGU)

- Less patterning than juveniles
- Often showing gray feathers in the mantle
- Usually fairly pale overall with brown smudging
- Base of bill paler than juveniles

Glaucous-winged Gull (Photo: Russ Cannings)



Western Gull (WEGU)

- Eye-colour starting to lighten-up
- Horn-coloured bill with black tip
- Dark gray mantle feathers starting to show
- Solid blackish outer primaries

Western Gull (Photo: Guy Monty)



Herring Gull (HEGU)

- Eye-colour is usually noticeably yellowish
- Body plumage similar to 1st-year but with less neatly-patterned coverts
- Gray mantle feathers coming through
- Bill is pinkish with dark ring near tip

Herring Gull (Photo: Don Cecile)



Thayer's Gull (THGU)

- Like many young gulls, can be quite variable
- Smaller/paler version of HEGU
- Combination of pale body-plumage and dark-brown wing-tips (not blackish as in HEGU)
- Note smaller bill and smaller, more rounded head

Thayer's Gull (Photo: Mike Yip)



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