



Photo: Art Martell

IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN COASTAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

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.

Western Gull—This species is not abundant anywhere in BC, but is regularly seen in small numbers in coastal areas where gulls concentrate. Western Gulls are frequently seen in gull flocks all around Vancouver Island, but around Vancouver and the Fraser Delta, pure-looking birds are decidedly uncommon to rare.

Herring Gull—Despite being the common, large gull species of the interior and Atlantic Coast, 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.

Thayer's Gull—In fall, winter, and spring, this arctic-breeder is more numerous than Western and 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, Ring-billed, Mew and Bonaparte's Gulls—These gulls are smaller than the four 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.*

Species	Relative Size	Leg Colour	Eye Colour	Bill	Mantle (back)	Wing-tips
Glaucous-winged	Large, bulky	Pink	Dark	Large yellow with orange spot, like Herring but usually thicker	Light gray	Gray
Western	Large, bulky	Pink	Palish	Large yellow with orange spot, bulbous, often with orange hue	Dark gray/slatey	Black
Herring	Large	Pink	Pale	Long, yellow, with orange spot	Light gray	Black
Thayer's	Medium	Deep pink	Darkish	Like Herring but smaller	Light/medium gray	Black, often pale edging
California	Medium	Yellow	Dark	Yellow with black and red spots near tip	Darkish gray	Black
Ring-billed	Small, but larger than Mew	Yellow	Pale	Yellow with black ring	Light gray	Black
Mew	Small	Yellow-green	Dark	Small/slender, unmarked, yellowish-green	Medium gray	Black
Bonaparte's	Smallest	Orange-red	Dark	Dark and thin	Light gray	Black

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

IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Glaucous-winged Gull (GWGU)

- White or smudged head/neck
- Large yellow bill with orange spot
- Medium-gray wing tips with white ends
- Large head/usually bulky body
- Dark beady eye

Glaucous-winged Gull with dark eyes and medium gray mantle and wing tips (Photo: Russ Cannings) ►



Western Gull (WEGU)

- Head stays clean white all year
- Dark-gray mantle (back)
- Large "school-bus-yellow" bill
- Jet-black wing tips with white spots/ends
- Usually with greenish eye

Western Gull with dark gray mantle and black wing tips (Photo: Dick Cannings) ►



Herring Gull (HEGU)

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

Herring Gull with pale eye and jet black wing tips (Photo: John Cavanagh) ►



Thayer's Gull (THGU)

- Shows similar markings as Herring Gull in winter
- Light/medium-gray 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 gray wing tips with more white than HEGU

Eye-colour and head-shape make Thayer's Gulls look "cuter" than Herring Gull (Photo: Mike Yip) ►



IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

California Gull (CAGU)

- White or smudged head/neck
- Medium-gray mantle (darker than RBGU/HEGU)
- Medium-sized gull with medium sized bill
- Bill with black ring AND red spot
- Dark eye
- Yellow legs

Medium sized California Gull with medium-sized bill with a black ring AND a red spot (Photo: Docent Joyce)



Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)

- Non-breeding birds have some head/neck-streaking
- Light-gray mantle
- Small-medium sized, yellow bill with black ring
- Pale-eye like HEGU
- Yellow legs
- Jet-black wing tips with white ends/spots

Ring-billed Gulls are smaller than other gulls, larger than MEGU and have a ringed bill (Photo: Russ Cannings)



Mew Gull (MEGU)

- Smallest of the “white-headed” gulls
- In winter, head often covered in dark smudging
- Medium-gray mantle; darker than RBGU
- Small/thin greenish-yellow bill; usually unmarked
- Yellowish-green legs
- Jet-black wing tips with white ends/spots
- Relatively long-winged; noticeable while at rest

A dark eye and rounded-head give Mew Gulls a cute (dove-like) look (Photo: Mike Yip)



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

Bonaparte's Gull with black hood, orange legs, and black wing tips (Photo: Mike Yip)

