

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Gulls 101 - Plumage

[This is an excerpt from Jack Connor's *The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding*. He goes into detail on how to distinguish between the individual species.]

The routine abundance of gulls makes a convenient excuse for ignoring them. No other group of birds presents so many subtle identification problems or such an array of overlapping plumages. There are more plumage variations within most gull species than there are between species.

The first-winter herring, for instance, looks more like the first-winter versions of western, lesser blacked-backed, California, Thayer's and several others than it does an adult herring.

Gull sizes and silhouettes, are only moderately useful as guides to identification. Sorting out the plumages is essential, and this is one part of birding that seems to get harder with experience.

The first thing to realize about gull plumages is that no general field guide illustrates them all. All gulls have five to nine distinct plumages, not counting periods of transition or racial or individual variations.

The second thing to realize about gull plumages is that there's no avoiding the lingo. Anyone interested in mastering the gulls must adjust to the gull specialists' categories: 'two-year gulls,' 'three-year gulls,' 'first-winter plumage,' 'second-summer plumage,' and so on.



Sorting gull plumages begins with a straightforward principle: the number of plumages increases with the size of the bird. Small gulls, for example Bonaparte's, are two-year gulls and have five plumages. Midsized gull, for example laughing and ring-billed, are three-year gulls and have seven plumages. Large gulls, for example herring and greater black-backed, are four-year gulls and have nine plumages. There are no 'one-year' gulls or 'five-year' gulls.

The general progression is from a muted (often brown) juvenal plumage through a series of increasingly less motley intermediate plumages to the cleaner, crisper colors of the adult plumages.

Juvenal:

The juvenal plumage is worn by all gulls from the time they leave their nest until late summer or early fall. Generally, it is the least important plumage to study, since most gulls molt their juvenal plumage before migrating. You will see juvenal-plumaged gulls regularly only if the species nests in your area. [Such as the laughing gull along the Carolina coast.]

First Winter:

The first-winter plumage is very important to learn and is the subadult plumage most often illustrated in the field guides. It is acquired in late summer or early fall of the gull's year of birth, and worn until the following spring. First-winter gulls are almost always more numerous than gulls in other non-adult plumages and frequently outnumber adults. In fact, if a gull occurs only as an autumn or winter stray in your area, knowing the first-winter plumage is more important than knowing the adult's. Va-



grant gulls are most likely to be 'lost' first-winter wanderers.

First Summer:

The term 'first summer' may seem confusing, since the plumage of a gull's initial summer of life is its juvenal plumage. A gull in first-summer plumage is in its second year of life. In most three-year and four-year gulls, first-summer plumage is hard to distinguish from first-winter plumage.

2nd Winter/2nd Summer:

Since two-year gulls achieve their adult-winter plumage in their second winter and breeding plumage in their second summer the terms 'second winter,' 'second summer,' are used only with reference to three- and four-year gulls. As three-year gulls move into their second-winter plumages, they gain more adultlike wings. Four-year gulls in second-summer plumages often show a telltale mark. Most of the bird is obviously subadult: the wings are smudgy or spotted; the tail is banded; the bill lacks the adult's red spot. But the back (or 'saddle') is the color of the adult's back.

3rd Winter/3rd Summer

These terms are used with reference only to four-year gulls. All smaller gulls have reached adult plumage by their third year. Four-year gulls in their third-year plumages resemble adults except at each end – the tail and the tip of the bill. The tails generally still show bands or smudges of darkness, and the bills often retain some dark color and lack the adult's red spot. The wings also tend to be less cleanly marked than the wings of full adults

Adult Winter:

To separate adult-winter plumage from breeding plumage, study the heads. The hooded gulls [Bonaparte's and laughing] and the kittiwakes have ear patches or partial hoods in adult winter plumage. Most other gulls in adult-winter plumage have streaky or spotted heads.

**Adult Breeding:**

This plumage is achieved by two-year gulls in their fifth plumage, as they are nearing two years of age; by three-year gulls in their seventh plumage, as they are nearing three years of age; and by four-year gulls in their ninth plumage, as they near four years of age. All gulls have easily recognized breeding plumages. One simple and excellent double-check for adult gulls at all seasons is the tail. Except for the Heermann's gull, all North American gulls have bright white tails in both adult plumages.

Once a gull has reached full adulthood, its plumage alternates between adult winter and breeding adult for



the rest of its life. All feathers are renewed at least once annually, and plumage cannot be used to estimate age. Twenty-year-old gulls are indistinguishable from five-year-olds.