

FEATURED PHOTO

IDENTIFICATION AND MOLT OF HYBRID GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULLS

JON R. KING and STEVE N. G. HOWELL, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, California 94970

Large white-headed gulls of the genus *Larus* hybridize frequently (Pierotti 1987). In particular, the Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. glaucescens*) hybridizes readily with other large gulls wherever they breed sympatrically: with the Western (*L. occidentalis*) along the Washington and northern Oregon coasts (Bell 1996 and references therein), with the Slaty-backed (*L. schistisagus*) on the east coast of Kamchatka (Firsova and Levada 1982) and on the Commander Islands (V. I. Grabovsky et al. unpublished data), with the Herring (*L. argentatus smithsonianus*) in southern Alaska (Williamson and Peyton 1963, Patten and Weisbrod 1974), and with the Glaucous (*L. hyperboreus*) in western Alaska (Strang 1977).

Probably nowhere else in the world do hybrids constitute such a large proportion of the total gull population as along the west coast of North America. Consequently, birders in this area have little choice but to familiarize themselves with the appearance and variability of hybrid gulls if the identification of scarce and vagrant gulls is to be attempted seriously. Unfortunately, current literature oversimplifies (or avoids) the relevant issues. For example, it is generally believed that Glaucous-winged × Western hybrids are much more abundant than Glaucous-winged × Herring hybrids in California (Grant 1986); while this may be true, we have found these hybrid combinations to be equally abundant at some northern California sites in winter. Our research suggests that Glaucous-winged × Herring hybrids have generally been overlooked, presumably identified either as Glaucous-winged × Western hybrids or as Thayer's Gulls (*Larus [glaucoides?] thayeri*).

The featured photo on the back cover of this issue shows a hybrid first-year Glaucous-winged × Western Gull, photographed by King at Laguna Point, Mendocino County, California, on 27 November 1997. This bird arguably resembles a Glaucous-winged more than a Western Gull so may not be a first-generation hybrid. The following characters suggest this hybrid combination: The outer webs and tips of the primaries and the upper tail, so far as visible, are rather dark in comparison to the tertials and wing coverts; the dark grayish brown body plumage is more typical of a juvenile Western Gull; the freshly molted scapulars of the first basic plumage show prominent dark basal and subterminal bars, a pattern more typical of a Western (the Glaucous-winged in first basic plumage normally shows pale plain or finely marked scapulars); the bases of the outer greater coverts are plain brown (the Glaucous-winged often shows white spotting and wavy patterning across the bases of all the greater coverts); and the bill appears to be deep, possibly more similar in shape to the Western's than to the Glaucous-winged's.

One further characteristic warranting attention is the timing of the first prebasic molt. Western Gulls undergo this molt from October through December, while in the Glaucous-winged Gull this molt may be initiated at any time from late October to March (pers. obs.). Hybrids vary widely between the extremes of the two parent species in the schedule of their first prebasic molt; in general, however, even hybrids that most closely resemble the Western Gull apparently delay the molt, more closely resembling the Glaucous-winged Gull in this respect. The featured gull shows more first basic scapulars than are expected in November for a pure Glaucous-winged Gull but certainly many fewer than are typical for a first-winter Western Gull by that time of year (pers. obs.).

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With the primaries (and other parts of in the plumage) so dark, and a wholly blackish short bulbous-tipped bill, the possibility of the featured bird's being a Glaucous-winged \times Glaucous hybrid is readily eliminated. Elimination of a hybrid with the Herring Gull is more problematic, as these can resemble Western Gull hybrids closely. Bill and head shape and bill coloration, however, are usually distinct, being more Herring-like than in the bird featured here. Hence the bill would be expected to show moderately extensive pink basally and to appear slimmer, with more parallel sides and a less bulbous tip, which combine to heighten the effect of a sloping forehead and more angular head shape. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the plumage of a Glaucous-winged \times Herring hybrid would be so dark, and the bars on the first basic scapulars are perhaps darker and grayer than expected on a typical Glaucous-winged \times Herring gull.

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