

# IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN COASTAL BC IN WINTER

## 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.

**Herring Gull**—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.

**Iceland (Thayer's) Gull**—In fall, winter, and spring, this Arctic breeder is more numerous than 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, Heermann's, Ring-billed, Mew and Bonaparte's Gulls**—These gulls are smaller than the first three 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	Medium grey	Grey
Herring	Large	Pink	Pale	Long, yellow, with orange spot	Light grey	Black
Iceland (Thayer's)	Medium	Deep pink	Darkish	Like Herring but smaller	Light/medium grey	Black, often pale edging
California	Medium	Yellow	Dark	Yellow with black and red spots near tip	Darkish grey	Black
Heermann's	Similar to Ring-billed	Black	Dark	Red with black tip	Dark grey	Black
Ring-billed	Small, but larger than Mew	Yellow	Pale	Yellow with black ring	Light grey	Black
Mew	Small	Yellow-green	Dark	Small/slender, unmarked, yellowish-green	Darkish grey	Black
Bonaparte's	Smallest	Orange-red	Dark	Dark and thin	Light grey	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 IN WINTER

### Glaucous-winged Gull (GWGU)

- White or smudged head/neck
- Large yellow bill with orange spot
- Medium-grey 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)*



### Herring Gull (HERG)

- 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 small white spots/ends

*Herring Gull with pale eye and jet black wing tips (Photo: Terry Thormin)*



### Iceland Gull (Thayer's) (ICGU)

- Shows similar markings to Herring Gull in winter
- Light/medium-grey 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 grey wing tips with more white than HERG

*Eye-colour and head-shape make Iceland Gull (Thayer's) look "cuter" than Herring Gull (Photo: Terry Thormin)*



### Heermann's Gull (HEEG)

- Dark grey mantle, greyish undersides
- Bill red with dark tip; dark eye
- Juveniles dark overall with dark bill
- Breeds in Mexico & moves north in late summer & fall
- Uncommon except on offshore islands

*Heermann's Gull (Photo: Terry Thormin)*





## IDENTIFYING ADULT GULLS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA IN WINTER

### California Gull (CAGU)

- White smudged head, streaked on back of neck
- Medium-grey mantle (darker than RBGU/HERG)
- 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: Terry Thormin)*



### Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)

- Non-breeding birds have some head/neck-streaking
- Light-grey mantle
- Small-medium sized, yellow bill with black ring
- Pale-eye
- Yellow legs

*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-grey mantle; darker than RBGU
- Small/thin greenish-yellow bill; usually unmarked
- Yellowish-green legs
- Relatively long-winged; noticeable while at rest

*A dark eye and rounded head give Mew Gulls a cute (dove-like) look (Photo: Terry Thormin)*



### 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 (Photo: Terry Thormin)*

