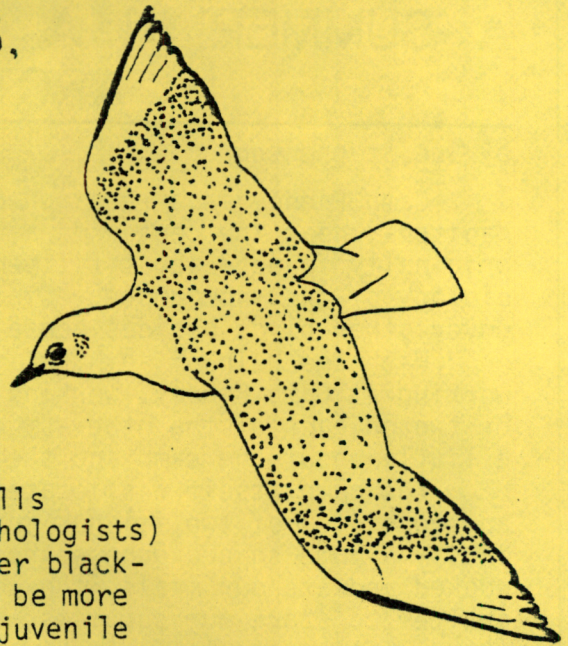


RECOGNIZING BONAPARTE'S, LITTLE, AND BLACK- HEADED GULLS - THREE SIMILAR SPECIES

by Geoff Hogan

Identifying gulls to species and age class is not difficult when using the usual field marks, and is something that more people are finding enjoyment in. No longer are all gulls simply "seagulls" (a term frowned upon by ornithologists) but instead we have Herring, Ring-billed, Greater black-backed, Iceland, Glaucous gulls and others. To be more precise, we may observe two-year old Iceland, juvenile Greater black-backs, or subadult Herring gulls. P.E.I., because of its maritime location, has an abundance of gull species patrolling our coastline or following ploughs turning the soil, not to mention scrounging the K-Mart parking lot or city dump!



One small species of gull that is abundant on P.E.I. during migration in summer and fall, and often seen in spring as well, is the Bonaparte's Gull. Because of its small size and un-gull-like behaviour it is often mistaken for a tern. The Bonaparte's Gull belongs to the group often referred to as the "small hooded gulls". During the breeding season the adults in this group all attain completely dark heads, usually black, but some species may be grey or dark brown, which gives the impression that they are wearing a hood. After the breeding season the 'hood' moults and the head becomes largely white. One of the best field marks to recognize an adult Bonaparte's Gull in any plumage however, is the long wedge of white, with narrow black borders, on the upper fore-edge of the wing, formed by the white primary feathers. This "window effect" is evident as the bird flies and distinguishes it from all other terns and gulls... except one. The Black-headed Gull is a European species that has been seen frequently in eastern North America in the past few years and is known to have bred in Newfoundland. They resemble Bonaparte's Gulls in all plumages and frequently associate with them and hence, present a challenge to 'gull-watchers'. There are differences however. The Black-headed Gull is larger, less tern-like, has a longer, dark red bill (black on Bonaparte's) and perhaps most important, shows much blackish on underside of primaries (the underwing of Bonaparte's is pale grey and white). In immature birds, the darker underwing of the Black-headed Gull is also present but less obvious than on the adults.

The Little Gull, another European visitor, and rare North American breeder, that occurs in our area may also be confused with Bonaparte's Gulls, which it resembles and with which it often associates. The Little Gull, however, is smaller and lacks the distinctive white wedge on the end of the wing. In addition, the wings have a rather round appearance and, most important, the underside of the entire wing is decidedly blackish. Little Gulls also have the tern-like flight characteristic of Bonaparte's Gulls. Juvenile Little Gulls have a blacker "M" pattern across the back of the wings than Bonaparte's Gulls, although juvenile Bonaparte's also exhibit distinct wing markings. Both juvenile and adult Little

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