



Gulls are the vultures of the sea, scavenging fish and marine invertebrates with a strong & slightly hooked beak. Herring Gulls are the common, widespread species of the North American Continent, breeding to the Far North & wintering commonly on the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida. Like many large, white-headed adult gulls, they get brown specks on their head and necks. It is crucial to make sure your bird has those black primaries, as some rare gulls don't.



Herring Gulls are pretty aggressive and play rough. These all-brown immatures are about the same size as adults, with males of larger gulls visibly larger than females (same as the blackbirds and ducks). Several rare species of gulls have brown immatures; you can read about them in your neighborhood field guide. Notice the flatness of this species' head.



Herring Gulls are significantly larger than Ring-billed (right) and Laughing. They are not as large as Glaucous and Greater Black-backed Gulls. So with gulls, size matters. Young Herring Gulls have dark bills, as the adult's yellow beak with a gonygal spot serves as a pecking target for baby birds who want their parent to regurgitate food. Note the rounded head on the ring-billed, a useful field mark when working with difficult gulls.



Here you can see the Ring-billed Gull's speckling, and the yellow legs which also may be useful in identification. [Immatures have pink legs like herrings.] That's a pretty big trout that was cleaned by a fisherman & tossed. Our white-headed gulls are all winter residents and appear in early fall. By March they lose the dark speckling.



Lesser Black-backed Gulls have only been recorded in this Continent since around 1970, although a few were probably passed up before that. The back is no more than slate gray, not the black of the Greater Black-backed Gull. Their legs turn from pink to yellow, and this one is doing just that. [Mine turned yellow surf fishing in October, when a sand shark swam right past me.] Adult males often have very colorful bills, and some are extremely large. This species is much more common in Brazoria County coz GCBO stole ours. :0



Many of the LBBGs I see are this plumage, & you can't help but be struck by the lighter head than the mantle (seldom that way in young herring). You can also see that they are much smaller than Herring, as an adult is nearby. Also note the rounded vs. flat shape of the heads. Remember that the best identifications are those using several field marks.



Here are three Lesser Black-backed Gulls with a Laughing Gull behind. Two are in that typical plumage, with a sharp adult on the left. Her head shape is close to flat, oddly, and I've noticed that sometimes wind (or whatever) will temporarily alter the crown's shape. A Herring Gull with that light a rump patch would probably be a Vega Gull from Asia. [You might be a little vega bout it, tho.]



There are five species of more/less white gulls in America, the only ones in the World (I think). This Glaucous, visiting recently, is the largest (note flat head), followed closely by the Glaucous-winged, which is West Coast north, and does not visit the Lone Star. Then the Thayer's, which historically has visited Texas the most (kinda up and down), those Iceland's (below) which have a smaller, more rounded head than GLGU, and Ivory Gull. [I will marry your dog if you find me one.] {Ross's Gull means children, too.}





I thought this Laughing Gull might be a nice reflection on me. They have the fairly dark back, some pigment on the head in winter, black bill in winter but always the obnoxious yelling. Dolph Tillotson's Galveston's official Island bird. This species moves around the Gulf more than most people think, but we always have some here. By April, they'll be on the Bay Side breeding, like Little Pelican Island's west side salt marsh.



This bird is not a happy camper. It is not well, sitting on its knees (actually, ankles) and is also missing a tail. It was too healthy to take to a rehabber, but if any bird can survive not well, it's a "seagull." I have the greatest respect for our own Charli Rohan & all the years Truly Belz up in Texas City cared for injured, sick and orphaned birds.



This winter Laughing Gull is a bit of a mutation; she's missing all the melanin in her legs. I have seen this before, both in their legs as well as their (normally) black bills. Some will be missing all their black (some reptiles do) and they're called amelanistic. Btw, the dark ones are first year birds, while our example is an adult.



Looking a lot like a winter-plumaged Laughing Gull is this winter Franklin's Gull. It has larger white spots in the primaries, a thinner bill and more dark pigment on the hind part of the head. Go ahead; compare them! These are fall migrants that peak around the end of October, but a few winter here. This species migrates to the Chilean (!) Coast and breeds from about the Great Salt Lake to the Upper Great Plains.



This young Franklin's Gull is showing off its white eyelids, generally more conspicuous than those of Laughing Gulls. They are also shorter than Laughing, with shorter wings & tail. When this species returns in April, their bill & legs are just as red as Laughing Gulls, but their huge, white spots in the primaries easily identify them.



A 3rd gull that gets dark hoods in spring is the Bonaparte's Gull, but our winter ones have a dark smudge like so many small gulls in basic plumage. Curious, these winter residents don't arrive until after New Year's, when they did so in late October many years ago. I'd guess maybe with climate change, their food source "up North" is available longer than a late fall phenomenon. These aren't facts, but never underestimate the value of reasonable hypotheses in science.



Bonies flit over the water's surface a lot, picking up bits of food on the fly. The orange legs are vivid and the butterfly flight style is unmistakable. Also, adults have the white stripe on the front of the wings, plus an all-white tail. With all that, they still manage to have a black tip on all primaries, to keep the feathers whole, from all the hovering.



Immature bonies may be as beautiful as the adults! Don't you wanna paint that, Rose?



Caspian Terns are our largest tern; heavy-bodied with a red bill. They feed in inshore and even fresh water, in shallows and large lakes. They also have a very loud, grating call and may be fairly tame. Below, the flock contains several Royal Terns. They are more slender than the mighty Caspians, with a thinner, more orange beak. Two left; two right of center.





These Royal Terns are pretty social birds, and three are protesting the fourth having one heck of a good-sized fish dinner. Several terns will drop their wings when behaving in a social way, though it's hard to always know what they are communicating. Sandwich and Royal Terns feed out deep, so the Gulf Beach is often the best place to find them.



Some seabirds lose most of the black off their head in winter, as this Royal Tern shows. The reason is that it takes melanin to make black, and that's needless energy expended as the sun is not strong enough in winter to warrant this pigment production. Royals & a few winter Sandwich Terns fly out deep for fish like this Cutlass Fish, *Trichurus lepturus*.



It's interesting to me that the occasional Royal Tern will prance around w/ wings lowered in fall & winter when there is nothing going on reproductively. This is not uncommon w/ their species. It's interesting to compare this "look" with some of the flying dinosaurs of the late Mesozoic, perhaps a good example of convergence???



Royal Terns spend all year flying back and forth between the Gulf shore and deep Gulf * water for their food of choice. Like the summering Sandwich Terns, they are built slender and elongate, definitely created for long, efficient flight. Other terns around the World, like the Lesser Crested Terns of Australia, do the same, and have this build.

*A small portion of ours forage closer, feeding in the deeper portions of Galveston Bay.



Our most common species in this family, accounting for the entire year, is the Forster's Tern, one of the smaller species. They feed right along the shoreline, often vocalizing w/ their rough, higher-pitched notes. By late March their bill will gain an orange base, while the similar returning Common Terns will be red there. Many people struggle with those!



The best place to look for the Sandwich Tern in winter is the Texas City Dike, probably resting from their feeding ventures into the Ship Channel in Galveston Bay. Still having that curious yellow bill tip, they are easy to pick out of tern flocks. These are about the same size as Gull-billed Terns, also a scarce winter species on the UTC.



In fact, here is the Gull-billed Tern, which I get in winter most often at Brazoria NWR. A salt marsh nester, the vast majority goes south in winter. I believe this is a first-year bird, owing to the dark pigment in the secondaries. Notice the short, thick, black bill, more for grabbing arthropods like grasshoppers and dragonflies than fish.



A relative of terns, skimmers are found around the World in the warmer regions, with our Black Skimmer ranging from the US south into Amazonas. Breeders on our sandy beach habitat – sadly being run over by four-wheelers – many now nest on the parking lots at Dow Chemical in summer.

It's really neat watching their flocks rise and fall out over the Bay, sometimes with their buddies the terns mixed in. This is one of the many shorebirds whose population is in trouble, along with even more of our songbirds. Part of the problem is that there are 5-6 major issues birds are facing & we seem to lack either the will or knowhow to fix them.

