



# IDENTIFICATION GUIDE:

---

## Five Common Gulls of Eastern Canada



Cat. No.: CW66-589/2019E-PDF  
ISBN: 978-0-660-30945-3

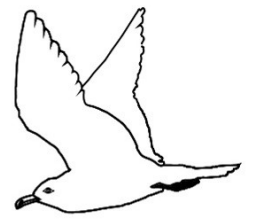
Unless otherwise specified, you may not reproduce materials in this publication, in whole or in part, for the purposes of commercial redistribution without prior written permission from Environment and Climate Change Canada's copyright administrator. To obtain permission to reproduce Government of Canada materials for commercial purposes, apply for Crown Copyright Clearance by contacting:

Environment and Climate Change Canada  
Public Inquiries Centre  
12<sup>th</sup> Floor, Fontaine Building  
200 Sacré-Coeur Boulevard  
Gatineau QC K1A 0H3  
Telephone: 819-938-3860  
Toll Free: 1-800-668-6767 (in Canada only)  
Email: [ec.enviroinfo.ec@canada.ca](mailto:ec.enviroinfo.ec@canada.ca)

Photo: © Garry Donaldson

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, represented by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, 2019

Aussi disponible en français



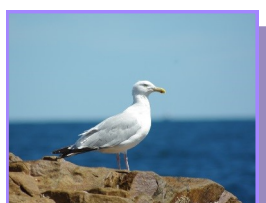
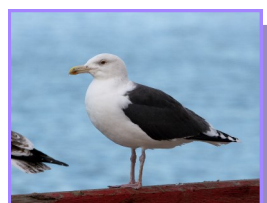
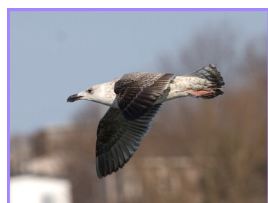
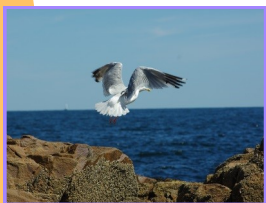
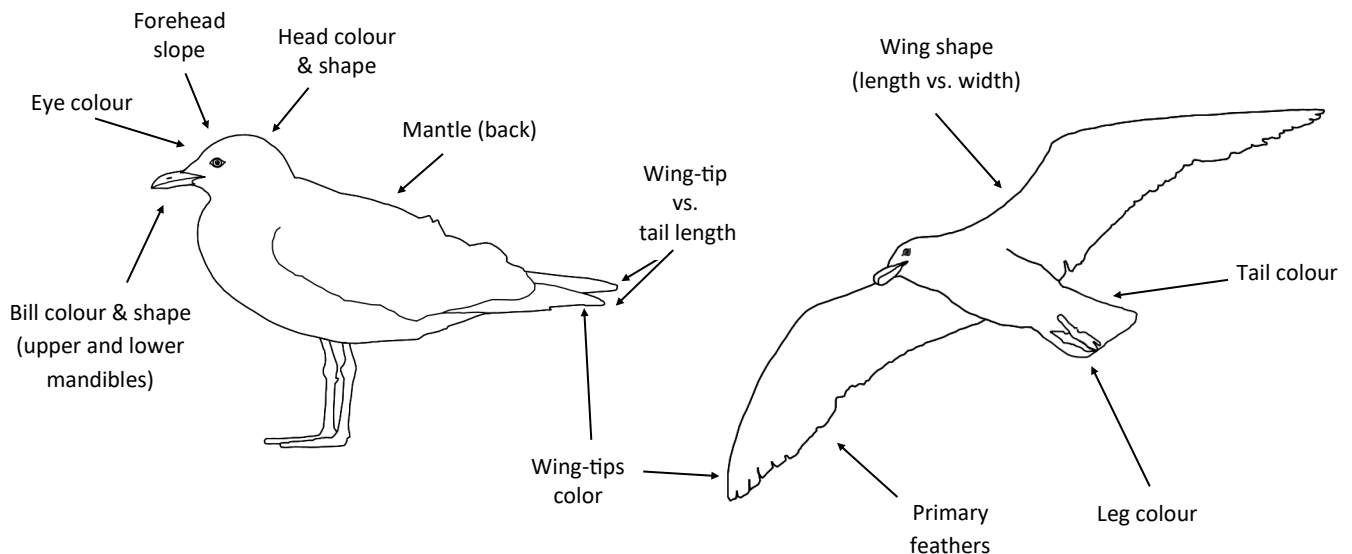
# Identification Guide:

## *Five Common Gulls of Eastern Canada*

### Introduction

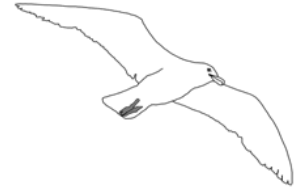
This guide is intended to help users differentiate between five species of gulls common to Canada's eastern provinces, specifically those with habitats located near human activity. Gulls can be difficult to identify, as the characteristics used to distinguish between species are often not noticeable, and can vary within a given species from season to season and by age. This guide contains brief descriptions of the following five species: Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*), Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), Glaucous Gull (*L. hyperboreus*), and Iceland Gull (*L. glaucoides*). It is important to note that other gull species may be observed in Eastern Canada, but not as frequently as these five.

### Terms and Features used for Gull Identification



(Photo credit from left to right: David Fishman, Dave Fifield, Dave Fifield, Dave Fifield, David Fishman)

# Common Gulls Breeding in Eastern Canada



(Photo credit: David Fishman)



(Photo credit: David Fishman)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)

## Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) / HERG

- Medium-sized gull.
- Breeding adults can be easily identified using combination of gray mantle, pink legs, yellow bill with red spot on lower portion and black wing-tips.
- Breeds across North America and often (but not always) in colonial settings; found near large bodies of both fresh and salt water and often in proximity to human activity.
- Population status as of 2010 considered 'secure' with current estimates between 200,000-300,000 individuals in Canada.

## Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) / GBBG

- Eastern Canada's largest gull; breeding adults are distinctive due to large size of body and bill and dark slate-coloured mantle.
- Breeds along coastlines and on islands; commonly observed in coastal areas in Eastern Canada; less common inland.
- Population status as of 2010 considered 'secure' with current estimates between 50,000-100,000 individuals in Canada.

## Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) / RBGU

- Medium-sized gull, but smallest among those discussed here.
- Distinctive features include a slender, yellow bill with a black ring, yellowish green legs and a small, round head.
- Confirmed breeding populations in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, but none in Nova Scotia.
- Population status as of 2015 considered 'secure' with current estimates exceeding one million breeding birds in Canada. Currently there are approximately 21,000 breeding individuals in Atlantic Canada, 160,000 breeding individuals in Quebec and 573,000 breeding individuals in Ontario.

## Table 1—Breeding Adult Quick Comparison Chart

Species	Relative size	Leg colour	Bill size and colour	Back (mantle)	Forehead slope
Herring Gull (HERG)	Medium (56-66 cm)	Dull, fleshy pink	Large; yellow with red and black spot on tip of mandible	Grey	Long and gradual
Great Black-backed Gull (GBBG)	Largest (71-79 cm)	Dull, fleshy pink	Stout and very large; yellow with red (and sometimes black) spot on tip of mandible	Slaty black	Long and gradual
Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)	Smallest (43-54 cm)	Yellowish green	Slender; yellow with encircling black ring	Grey	Short and steep

# Overwintering Gulls in Eastern Canada

Unlike the species above which breed in eastern Canadian provinces, other gulls are only observed here during the winter months after the breeding season is complete. Wintering gulls have different plumages than breeding birds; adults can be found in their non-breeding, or basic plumage, whereas the plumage of immature birds varies with age.

(Photo credit: Mark Mallory)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



## Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) / GLGU

These birds breed in the high and low Arctic as well as off the northern coast of Labrador. They are winter-time visitors to the rest of Eastern Canada. Their population status as of 2010 is considered 'secure' with estimates ranging from 25,000-50,000 individuals in Canada. However, preliminary evidence suggests populations have been in a moderate decline since 1970.

**ADULT:** Large with an overall whitish appearance; similar in size to Great Black-backed Gull. However, unlike Great Black-backed Gulls, its mantle is pale grey and wing tips are white and unmarked. It is best differentiated from the Iceland Gull by its larger body size, broader and shorter wings and the longer, more gradual slope of its forehead. **SUB-ADULT:** Similar in size to adults, with whitish, unmarked wing tips. Plumage is variable between stages but is more-or-less uniform across the body and may range from mottled tan to buff. Young birds have pink bills with black tips. For all life stages, when in resting position wing-tips extend only slightly beyond tail feathers.

(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



## Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides ssp. kumlieni*) / ICGU

These gulls breed in the eastern Canadian Arctic. The patterns of movement and migration of this species are not well-studied. During the winter months, many individuals remain in the Arctic while others migrate south and are occasionally observed in Eastern Canada. Their population status as of 2010 is considered 'secure' with estimates ranging from 10,000-25,000 individuals in Canada.

**ADULT:** Similar-in-size or slightly smaller than a Herring Gull; otherwise very similar to Glaucous Gull but with a more 'gentle' appearance. Key differences include smaller size, more slender bill and rounder head. Wings are relatively long and narrow compared to those of Glaucous Gulls with distinctive dark grey markings on the edges of the outer most primaries. For all life stages, when in resting position wing-tips are much greater in length than tail feathers. **SUB-ADULT:** Very similar plumage patterns to immature Glaucous Gull. Differentiate two species on the basis of head shape (i.e., rounder with a more steeply sloped forehead).

(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)

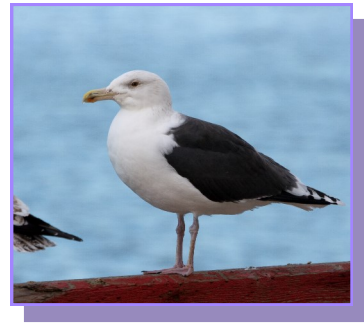


## Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) / HERG

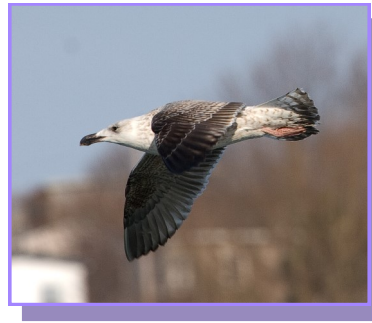
ADULT: Similar to breeding adult (see description above) except for dark mottling on head and neck.

SUB-ADULT: Plumage highly variable but showing tendency for uniformity. Will always have dark wing-tips and in younger stages entire wing may be darkened. Compared to Ring-billed Gulls, sub-adults are larger with thicker bills and have flatter, more gradually sloped foreheads. Compared to Great Black-backed Gull, sub-adults are smaller in size, have smaller bills and a lesser contrast between dark-colored mantle and light-coloured head.

(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



## Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) / GBBG

ADULT: Similar to breeding adult (see description above) except for very slight mottling on head.

SUB-ADULT: Compared to Herring Gulls, body and bill are greater in size. Sub-adults tend to show greater contrast between lighter head and darker mantle and mantle of first year birds can have a sharper brown-and-white checkered appearance than that of Herring Gull.

(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)



(Photo credit: Dave Fifield)

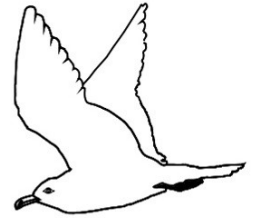


## Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) / RBGU

ADULT: Similar to breeding adult (see description above) except for mottling on head and back of neck.

SUB-ADULT: By the first winter, Ring-billed Gulls will start acquiring some pale grey plumage on mantle. Young birds can be confused with Herring Gull sub-adults due to their dull pink leg colour and bill pigmentation. Compared to Herring Gulls, sub-adults have smaller bodies, smaller and more slender bills and smaller heads. When in flight, one can usually see a well-defined black band (approx. 3cm) across tip of the tail. While young Herring Gulls can also exhibit this type of plumage, bands on immature Ring-billed Gulls are often narrower and more clearly defined.

## Table 2—Quick Field Identification Key



Step No.	Description of Characteristics	Go to Step OR Species ID
1.	a. Bird is in-flight	#7
	b. Bird is grounded	#2
2.	a. Forehead is large, long and gradually sloped giving the bird a “mean” appearance; medium to large sized gull (56-80 cm); proportionately large bill	#4
	b. Forehead is relatively small and steeply sloped giving the bird a more “gentle” appearance; medium sized gull (43-60 cm); proportionately small bill	#3
3.	a. Wing-tips are black to dark brown	<b>RBGU</b> (ba, nba, sa)
	b. Wing-tips are either white with grey spots, buff, or whitish brown	<b>ICGU</b> (nba, sa)
4.	a. Mantle colour is a dark slatey black; head and nape may have some grey mottling	<b>GBBG</b> (ba, nba)
	b. Mantle colour is either grey, white, whitish or mottled brown	#5
5.	a. Wing-tips are white to whitish buff	<b>GLGU</b> (nba, sa)
	b. Wing tips are black to dark brown	#6
6.	a. Large body size (71-79 cm); prominent, stout bill; and strong contrast in colour between light head and dark mantle; plumage has at least some mottling	<b>GBBG</b> (sa)
	b. Medium body size (56-66 cm); mantle either grey or mottled brown	<b>HERG</b> (ba, nba, sa)
7.	a. Wing-tips are black, dark brown or dark grey	#10
	b. Wing-tips are either white, buff or white with grey spots	#8
8.	a. Wing-tips white with pale grey markings; medium sized adult bird with grey mantle	<b>ICGU</b> (nba)
	b. Wing-tips from white to buff; plumage variable	#9
9.	a. Wings proportionately long and slender; medium bird (52-60 cm) with a narrow bill	<b>ICGU</b> (sa)
	b. Wings proportionately short and broad; large bird (65-80 cm) with a large, thick bill	<b>GLGU</b> (nba, sa)
10.	a. Mantle colour is a dark slatey black	<b>GBBG</b> (ba, nba)
	b. Mantle colour is either grey or mottled brown	#11
11.	a. Large (71-79 cm) with prominent, stout bill; strong contrast between light head and dark mantle; has at least some mottling on mantle	<b>GBBG</b> (sa)
	b. Medium body size (43-66 cm); bill and plumage variable	#12
12.	a. Sub-adult bird with presence of brown mottling on mantle	#14
	b. Adult bird with uniform grey mantle	#13
13.	a. Bill slender with black encircling ring; yellowish green legs	<b>RBGU</b> (ba, nba)
	b. Bill large with red and black spot on tip of mandible; dull pink legs	<b>HERG</b> (ba, nba)
14.	a. Smaller body size (43-54 cm); slender bill; and <b>EITHER</b> a narrow, well-defined black band at the tip of tail; <b>OR</b> predominantly white tail with speckled band and predominantly grey mantle	<b>RBGU</b> (sa)
	b. Larger body size (56-66 cm); large bill; broad, black band at tip of tail but not very well defined.	<b>HERG</b> (sa)

(ba = breeding adult; nba = non-breeding adult; sa = sub adult)

## Table 3—Overwintering Adult Quick Comparison Chart

Species	Relative size	Leg colour	Forehead slope	Bill size and colour	Back (mantle)	Wing-tip
Glaucous Gull (GLGU)	Large (65-80 cm)	Pink	Long and gradual	Stout; yellow with red spot on lower mandible	Pale grey	White
Iceland Gull ssp. <i>Kumlieni</i> (ICGU)	Medium (52-60 cm)	Pink	Short and steep	Relatively slender; yellow with red spot on lower mandible	Pale grey	White with grey markings
Herring Gull (HERG)	Medium (56-66 cm)	Pink	Long and gradual	Large; yellow with red and black spot on tip of mandible	Grey	Black with white spots
Great Black-backed Gull (GBBG)	Large (71-79 cm)	Pink	Long and gradual	Stout and very large; yellow with red (and sometimes black) spot on tip of mandible	Slatey black	Black with white tip
Ring-billed Gull (RBGU)	Smallest (43-54 cm)	Yellowish green	Short and steep	Slender; yellow with encircling black ring	Grey	Black with white spots

## References

- Bird Studies Canada. 2014. Maritime Breeding Bird Atlas. <http://www.mba-aom.ca/english/atlascontact.html>
- Crossley, R. 2011. The Crossley ID Guide: Eastern Birds. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA.
- Environment Canada. 2011. Status of Birds in Canada. <http://ec.gc.ca/soc-sbc/splash.aspx>
- Good, T. P. 1998. Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/330>
- Grant, P. J. 1986. Gulls: A Guide to Identification. Buteo Books, Vermillion, SD, USA.
- Peterson, R. T. 2002. A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America 5th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, USA.
- Pierotti, R. J. and T. P. Good. 1994. Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/124>
- Pollet, I. L., D. Shutler, J. Chardine and J. P. Ryder. 2012. Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/033>
- Pyle, P. 2008. Identification Guide to North American Birds: Part II. Sheridan Books, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI, USA
- Snell, R. R. 2002. Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/699a>
- Weiser, E. and H. G. Gilchrist. 2012. Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/573>