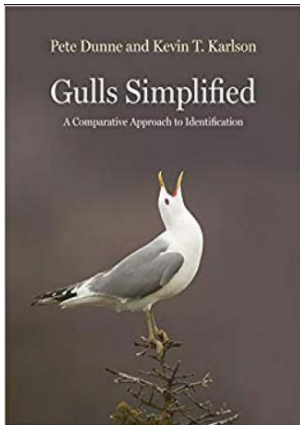


Birders' Book Review

Gulls Simplified:

A Comparative Approach to Identification

Steve Shultz



Two words not often placed in conjunction with one another. “Gulls”, perhaps one of the most confounding groups of birds from an identification perspective, and “simplified”, a term not usually associated with the former.

Merriam-Webster defines gulls as “*any of numerous long-winged web-footed aquatic birds (subfamily Larinae of the family Laridae)... usually gray and white bird (especially of the genus Larus) differing from a tern in usually larger size, stouter build, thicker somewhat hooked bill, less pointed wings, and short unforked tail.*” An alternative definition is “*to take advantage of (one who is foolish or unwary) : Deceive*”. And deceive they often do. With hybrids, close relationships between species, and broad clinal variation across individual species, gull

identification can be anything but easy. Note various synonyms of the second definition (bamboozle, beguile, bluff, buffalo, burn, catch, con, cozen, deceive, delude, dupe, fake out, fool, gaff, gammon), and one can more or less tell that birders find gulls to be one of the harder aspects of identification.

So can gulls be simplified, as Dunne and Karlson suggest? They make a valiant attempt. Breaking down our “seagulls” (you knew I could not resist) into four groups of small, medium (gray-backed), large (dark-backed) and “dark horse”, the authors approach gull identification from the perspective of comparison, versus absolute or diagnostic field marks, which, while commonly used in other families of birds, are less common in gulls. And since a picture is reputed to have the value of many words, most species accounts provide copious numbers of photographs to illustrate key points. For example, the Laughing Gull chapter includes no less than 31 photos of a species that is not, for the most part, as great a challenge as some others.

I especially like the use of photographs with multiple species shown together, as this helps drive the point of comparison home, and very much enjoyed testing my skills via the 35 quiz photos comprising the book's last chapter.

The authors introduce gull identification and challenges by discussing several factors including: a human desire to specifically catalog or identify each individual, which may not always be possible with gulls, at least visually; the complex molt strategy of gulls, which produces many expressions of a single species; the propensity of gulls to interbreed within the macro groups noted above; and the human (birder) behavior of finding additional “value” in rare or out of range birds, thus creating situations where

birders are sorting through more common species with the specific intent of finding a rarity.

The authors suggest simplifying our *approach* to gulls, using geography and probability as a useful tool, not something to fight against, and focusing on learning (and learning well) the common, local species and variation within, so that when a genuine rarity appears, it will stand out all the more due to the observers deeper knowledge and understanding of size, structure and general impression, versus “that mirror on P8”.

And this, I feel, is the key takeaway from the work. Will it provide “six new surefire markings to note when differentiating Ring-billed and California Gulls”? No. But will the reader be encouraged to better understand what makes a California Gull a California Gull by deepening the understanding of structure and appearance? If the answer is “yes”, then the book has done its job. And the way that the job is done is to try and de-mystify the dark voodoo that often comes into discussion about gull identification. By increasing the observers confidence that they can have a reasonable expectation of correctly identifying the vast majority of the gulls encountered, the authors bestow upon the reader the ability to not be intimidated, and thus, in this roundabout way, succeed at making gulls (somewhat more) simplified.

When I started this review, the intent was to define how another entry into an already crowded field of book promising easier identification was not especially required by the target audience, but after more careful attention and time with the book, I find it my first choice when trying to age a particular bird, or brush up on what to look for when I’m hoping to find a Franklin’s among the Laughing.

Returning to our friends at Merriam-Webster, the word simplify is defined as: “*a: to reduce to basic essentials; b: to diminish in scope or complexity; c: to make more intelligible.*” While basic essentials may be met by the traditional Peterson’s or Sibley guide, and where it might not be possible to diminish the complexity of something as diverse as gull plumage and variation, I feel the authors very much succeed at the attempt to make gull identification more intelligible.

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