

ORNITHOLOGY

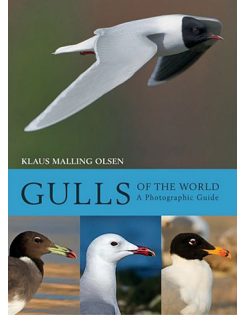
Gulls of the World: A Photographic Guide

By Klaus Malling Olsen. 2018. Princeton University Press. 368 pages, 65 maps, and 600+ colour pictures, 45.00 USD, Cloth.

As has been frequently noted, gulls can be a real pain to identify because, not only are many of the species very similar, but they exhibit changes of plumage with age to a greater degree than any comparable group of birds. Consequently, they deserve, and have received, much attention in the form of identification guides specific to the group, starting with Peter Grant's (1982) classic, *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. They continue to attract enormous attention from birders, especially now that hybridization among species is known to be extensive. Facebook groups and 'twitterati' agonise over the identity of individual birds (... probably a Western × Glaucous-winged ... almost certainly a second winter Thayer's Gull ...), sometimes long after the bird has flown off into the sunset.

Fifteen years ago, Klaus Malling Olsen, along with the artist Hans Larsson, produced a monumental, 608-page guide to the gulls of the northern hemisphere (Olsen and Larsson 2003) which dealt with their identification, voice, moult, plumage, and distribution, including detailed range maps. The current book is a revision and expansion of the earlier book, although with much less detail on topics other than identification. In place of Larsson's plates, the book is illustrated entirely with photographs, which, as pointed out by another reviewer, are an improvement on those in the first book. In fact, the book comprises an unmatched collection of gull portraits and, as such, is an unmatched resource for identifying gulls in the field.

Given the global spread of e-Bird since the earlier book, you might have expected an improvement in range maps as well, but I did not find that to be the case. The colour code in the current volume consists of yellow for breeding range, blue for wintering range, and green for "if no wintering area shown, occurrence all year" (p. 29). In fact, I found no green areas on any maps. Consequently, where breeding and wintering areas overlap, as for American Herring Gull (*Larus smithsonianus*) on the Great Lakes, the



reader cannot tell where the northern limit of the wintering area is. Some rather strange errors in the maps have been perpetuated from the earlier book, including the breeding colony of Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) at Cape Cod (unnoticed so far by North American ornithologists) and the swath of Ivory Gulls (*Pagophila eburnea*) supposedly breeding across the western Queen Elizabeth Islands.

Because of extensive hybridization among gull species, their taxonomy is contentious. For example, Olsen treats Thayer's and Iceland Gulls (*Larus thayeri*, *Larus glaucoideus*) and American and European Herring gulls (*Larus smithsonianus*, *Larus argentatus*) as different species, whereas the American Ornithological Society now regards Thayer's as a subspecies of Iceland (*L. g. thayeri*) and continues to treat North American Herring Gulls as conspecific with their European counterparts. Since Grant's book in 1982, four species dealt with here have been carved out of his "Herring Gull".

One small reservation I have about treating this book as the last word on gull identification (a reservation I also hold about the opinions of many experts that I read on the web) is that few of the contentious identifications are backed up by genetic material. Consequently, I cannot see how many of the identifications can be treated as better than 'best guesses'. One of the problems of a book like this is that someone might find a gull in the field identical to one of Olsen's pictures and consequently feel confident in the identification. But what if Olsen was wrong? Peter Adriaens and Amar Ayyash, on the American Birding Association website, give a list of errors that they found, including several identifications that they consider erroneous (<http://blog.aba.org/errata-gulls-of-the-world>). Nothing is perfect and we need to keep that in mind. In science, all is provisional.

Literature Cited

- Grant, P.J. 1982. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. T. & A.D. Poyser, Calton, England.
 Olsen, K.M., and H. Larsson. 2003. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. A&C Black, London, United Kingdom.

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