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GULLS SIMPLIFIED: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO IDENTIFICATION.

Pete Dunne and Kevin T. Karlson. 2018. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 208 pages. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-691-15694-1.

The title of Pete Dunne and Kevin Karlson's new book, *Gulls Simplified*, may seem like an oxymoron to many birders. Gulls are, after all, one of the most vexing groups of North American birds due to their myriad identification challenges, and many seasoned birders simply "don't do gulls." Indeed, Dunne, in the first line of the Introduction (page 13), writes, "Ask any bird-watcher to name the bird group that is most intimidating, and to a man, woman, and tour leader they often shout: GULLS!" The genesis of the book, and the authors' approach to identification within, arises from the notion that gull identification has long been treated like most of the other difficult bird groups—focusing mostly on (sometimes subtle) details of plumage, a revolutionary method pioneered in 1934 by Roger Tory Peterson in his *Field Guide to the Birds*. For many groups of birds, this method has worked well. However, most gulls take years to mature, and the different plumages a bird wears from hatching to maturity lend enormous complexity to the identification of individual gulls if identifications are based primarily on plumage. In lieu of the Peterson method, the authors of *Gulls Simplified* propose a holistic approach to gull identification—focusing on characteristics of size, body shape, and structure, and supplementing that with plumage details. They also encourage the use of species distributions as a means of simplifying the identification process, for knowing which species should occur in an area tends to drastically reduce the number of possible species to choose from.

The book begins with several pages of sized-to-scale photographs and silhouettes of the 25 species of North American gulls treated within, followed by a helpful section covering basic gull anatomy, a meaty introduction describing the philosophy for the book, traditional gull identification challenges, a discussion of gull natural history and ecology, and a description of how to distinguish gulls from other similar birds. The remainder of the book is largely devoted to species accounts for each of the gull species. The species accounts are in-depth (some more than 10 pages in length), with photographs of individuals exhibiting different postures, in flight and on the ground, and in flocks and solo. The various plumages of each species are adequately shown, and the accompanying text discusses details of size, shape, bare parts (bill and legs), and various plumage details. Each account has information on the species' size, profile, status and distribution, as well as adult breeding, adult nonbreeding, immature, and subadult plumages. Finally, and one of the highlights of the book, is the concluding quiz and review section—35 photos that will challenge the reader—with a section of answers and substantive paragraphs about how each identification was reached.

What makes *Gulls Simplified* shine is that the considerable individual talents of the two authors—Dunne's witty, approachable writing style, and Karlson's considerable skill with a camera—have been married in a manner that really works for an identification book such as this. I found that the ability to look at a photo and read the text describing what should be noted about the individual birds is a surefire way to reinforce learning. The authors have chosen to group gulls in a slightly different way, one that is intuitive to how birders naturally categorize birds for identification. Some examples of groupings include "Small to medium-sized gulls and hooded gulls" (species like Laughing Gull [*Leucophaeus atricilla*], Franklin's Gull [*Leucophaeus pipixcan*], and the kittiwakes [*Rissa* spp.]) and "Large dark-backed gulls" (Western Gull [*Larus occidentalis*], Great Black-backed Gull [*Larus marinus*], etc.). Rarity-seeking bird-watchers will appreciate the coverage of five rare gulls under "Dark horse gulls," a group that includes species like Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) and Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*). The authors also cover several of the most common hybrid combinations. The quality of the photographs throughout is quite good, and readers will be pleased. Additionally, several times I found myself chuckling at Dunne's humor, present throughout the book, but especially notable in the brief description of each species, often witty or ironic. For example, in the Laughing Gull account (page 35), Dunne writes "It's the medium-sized, charcoal gray-backed, black-head gull with the last of your boardwalk hot dog in its mouth and three noisy accomplices standing nearby."

One other topic worth mentioning is the species range maps, used with permission from *Gulls of the Americas*, by Steve N. G. Howell and Jon Dunn (2007). The maps are adequate, but in several instances, I noticed slight inaccuracies, which to be frank, occur in most if not all field guides as distribution is difficult to represent visually. One apparent oversight was the breeding and nonbreeding season occurrence of the "Thayer's" Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides thayeri*), a subspecies that winters along the Pacific Coast, which was omitted from the map because *Gulls of the Americas* was published when the Thayer's Gull (formerly *Larus thayeri*) was still considered a separate species (and presumably treated separately from Iceland Gull [*Larus glaucooides*], with its own map). While the range maps might have benefitted from an update, the maps are visually appealing and generally accurate.

Overall, *Gulls Simplified* accomplishes its principal goal of making gull identification more approachable by simplifying the identification process in a way that focuses on the gull as a whole—the size, shape and structure, augmented by details of plumage. This should be a useful book for both novices and experts and should aid in reducing the frustration of identifying this complex group of birds.—Garrett J. MacDonald, Biologist (contractor), 8711 37th Street SE, U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Jamestown, North Dakota 58401, USA.

LITERATURE CITED

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