

During BSBO's Lake Erie Pelagics, many rare/target winter birds are easy for guides to point out to participants (e.g. Purple Sandpiper, Snowy Owl, Long-tailed Duck). But with their constant circling and sheer numbers, gulls can be a bit tricky to lock on to and track, especially if you already feel overwhelmed with their identification!

Here are some introductory gull identification tips to better prepare you for the typical gulls encountered during BSBO's pelagics. Knowing what to look for and familiarizing yourself with the abundant Ring-billed Gull, American Herring Gull, and Bonaparte's Gull will greatly improve your ability to spot a rarer gull — either on your own or when one is pointed out by guides.

This handout is just an introduction and mainly features adult birds. For a detailed guide to gulls, we recommend *The Gull Guide: North America* by Amar Ayyash.

Alpha codes used:

American Herring Gull - AHGU
Bonaparte's Gull - BOGU
Glaucous Gull - GLGU
Great Black-backed Gull - GBBG
Iceland Gull - ICGU
Lesser Black-backed Gull - LBBG
Ring-billed Gull - RBGU



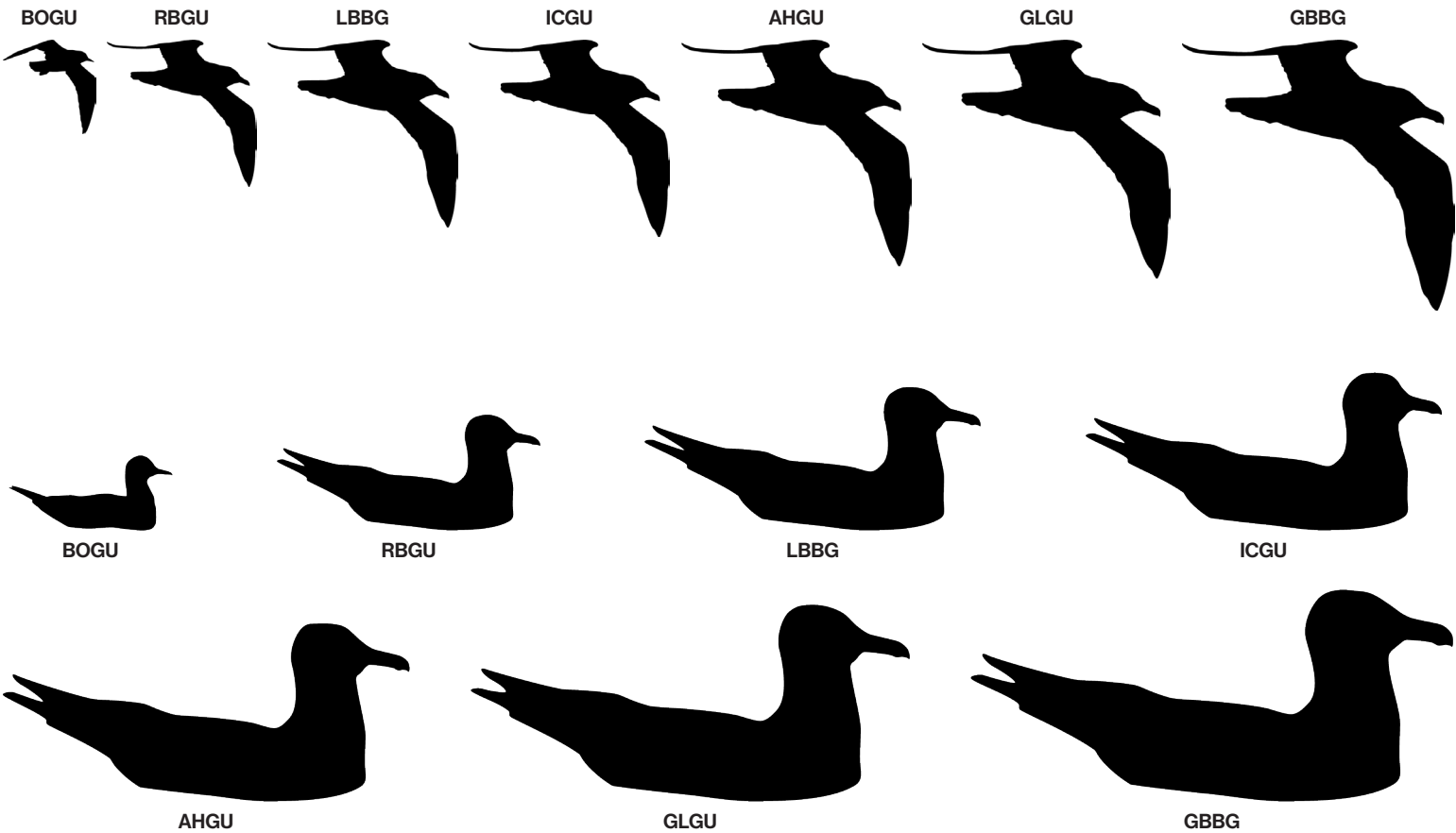
Tips for Easier Gull Spotting

- Be familiar with the three common species (with gray backs and dark wing tips) and their sizes: Bonaparte's Gull, Ring-billed Gull, American Herring Gull.
- Size varies within species (especially larger gulls), but it helps to know who's generally bigger/smaller than the common three.
- Once you know the common three, scan for "something different."
- With thousands of Ring-billed Gulls around, focus in on larger birds.
- In a sea of gray and white, darker-backed birds stand out.
- Scan the tips. On resting birds, scan the primaries (outer wing feathers) folded over the tail. In flight, scan the outstretched wing tips. Look past the flurry of dark tips and hone in on white/gray.

Common Species - Bonaparte's Gull, Ring-billed Gull, American Herring Gull



Size Comparison (in flight and profile)



Wing/Color Comparison (above)

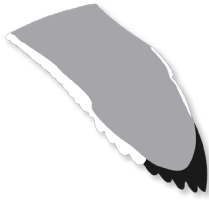
BOGU



RBGU



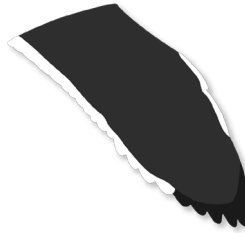
AHGU



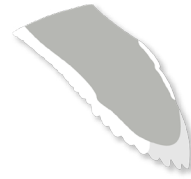
LBBG



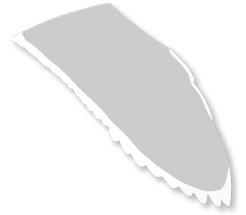
GBBG



ICGU



GLGU



Bonaparte's Gull

- Gray above
- Dark wing tip/trailing edge
- White leading edge on wing

Ring-billed Gull, American Herring Gull

- Gray above
- Dark wing tip with white spotting (not shown)

Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull

- Dark/black above
- Dark wing tip with white spotting (not shown)

Iceland Gull, Glaucous Gull

- Gray/light gray above
- White/light wing tip
- ICGU with varying dark gray wing tips

ICGU

medium size,
gray above,
light wing tips

RBGU

small size,
gray above,
dark wing tips

GLGU (young)

medium/large size,
all white/light above,
white wing tips

All RBGU

uniform size,
gray above,
dark wing tips

GBBG

large size,
black above,
dark wing tips

RBGU

small size,
gray above,
dark wing tips

AHGU

medium/large size,
gray above,
dark wing tips

A Note on Young Gulls

Although this handout is focused on adult gulls (given their higher abundance during BSBO's pelagics and their general uniform appearance/patterns), it's worth noting that younger gulls look different than adults, often with darker markings and/or browner plumage. Gulls take multiple years to attain adult plumage and our common three species are no exception. For BOGU, it takes two years to reach adult plumage; RBGU, three years; and AHGU, four years. In the gull world, we call these years to adult plumage "cycles" (or noted in some field guides as first winter, second winter, etc.).

While patterns and coloration may differ between ages, overall size and shape remain similar. Especially for larger gulls that show much variation among younger cycles, additional studying of leg color, bill patterning, and eye color will be useful for discerning age and species.

BOGU 1st Cycle



BOGU Adult



BOGU - two years

Differences compared to adult:

1st Cycle - More black in leading and trailing edge of wing. Blackish bar in the middle half of the wing. Dark bar at tail tip.

RBGU 1st Cycle



RBGU Adult



RBGU - three years

Differences compared to adult:

1st Cycle - Brownish wings with gray mottled back. Brownish mottling throughout head and breast. Dark bar at tail tip. Pinkish bill with black tip.

2nd Cycle - Mostly similar to adult but with some browns in back/wings and dark spotting in tail tip.

AHGU 1st Cycle



AHGU 2nd Cycle



AHGU - four years

Differences compared to adult:

1st Cycle - Mostly brown overall (variably light brown/dark brown). Mostly black bill with pinkish base. Dark tail.

2nd Cycle - Brownish-gray mottling throughout with some gray in back. Pale bill with black tip. Dark tail. Much variation occurs (shown twice to illustrate this).

3rd Cycle - Mostly similar to adult but with some browns in back/wings/body. Bill mostly pale yellow with dark ring near tip. Tail with varying black near tip.

AHGU 2nd Cycle



AHGU Adult





Find the 13 Lesser Black-backed Gulls among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.



Find the Bonaparte's Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls.



Find the Iceland Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.



Find the Glaucous Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.



Find the Lesser Black-backed Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.

Try for Yourself! (answers)



Find the 13 Lesser Black-backed Gulls among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.



Find the Bonaparte's Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls.



Find the Iceland Gull among the Ring-billed Gulls and American Herring Gulls.



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