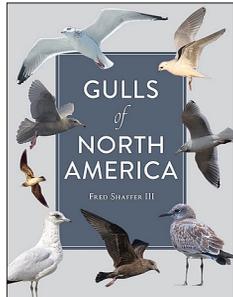


ORNITHOLOGY

Gulls of North America

By Fred Shaffer III. 2022. Schiffer Publishing. 288 pages and 540 colour images, 28.99 CAD, Paper.

This quiet little gem of a book can be added to the plethora of gull-devoted websites and gull identification texts. *Gulls of North America* offers a different enough slant on the topic that will make it a good addition to the libraries of inexperienced gull-watchers and larophiles alike.



At a glance, the format is typical for these kinds of guides. It includes sections on Gull Terms and Topography (with good photos that have arrows pointing out various features), a glossary, and species treatments organized into the usual sections: Hooded Gulls; Large White-Headed Gulls; Medium-Sized White-Headed Gulls; White-Hooded Gull; and Arctic Species, Pelagic Species, and Vagrants. Twenty-seven species are covered.

An example of Shaffer's different approach is the manner in which he treats gull ages. While generously acknowledging the terminology and precise utility of the main gull identification books, Shaffer uses older terms such as breeding, non-breeding, juvenile, first-winter, second-winter, and adult. For the purposes of his intended readership, he says these terms should suffice. He strays from his terminology at times, as even a supposed simple system does not cover all the variations in gull moults.

The biggest difference in his approach—and what to me is attractive about this book—is that it is, in large part, a personal account of his observations and experiences with his beloved gulls. Shaffer worked in an office building across the street from School House Pond, a small conservation area in Maryland, where he studied gulls before work, at lunchtime, and after work for more than 20 years. In an appendix he includes number counts of all the gulls he tallied there, but he also conveys his excitement at the rare and unusual gulls that appeared.

Two other appendices are accounts of a major East Coast fallout of Franklin's Gulls in 1998 and an Ivory Gull invasion of the Northeast in 2009. Again, in these he captures the excitement of those observers.

The best part of the species accounts are not the descriptions of plumages but the Background sections that begin each account. There he liberally quotes passages from Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Life Histories of North American Gulls and Terns: Order Longipennes* (Government Printing Office, 1921). Shaffer clearly loves the lyrical style of those old naturalists who captured the living essence of their subjects. In fact, he does a fair job with his own impressionistic writing:

Kittiwakes spend the majority of their lives in a vast watery world far removed from land, and they are well adapted to thriving in the harsh pelagic environment. It is a thrill to see one of these birds on a winter boat trip, as they navigate strong winds and ocean swells with

the utmost of skill and grace. (p. 224)

In addition to such writing, this book is a photo guide. The Herring Gull account contains 27 photographs, and on pages comparing gull species are more Herring Gull images. The smaller gulls with fewer plumages have, appropriately, fewer photos in their accounts. For example, Black-headed Gull has 19 photos (plus two more photos of a hybrid Ring-billed Gull and Black-headed Gull). Two fold-out pages offer a very nice, quick guide to identifying those pesky gulls.

The 16-page Bibliography is much more than a list of references. Almost all entries are annotated with Shaffer's comments. They make the reader keen to look up the references and read them for her/himself. Two examples:

1) Of J. Dewey Soper in *The Auk* (Volume 63, 1946):

This is a delightful and detailed account of the explorations and ornithological findings of Baffin Island. It provides a detailed inventory of the birdlife of the island and incorporates both Soper's personal observations and observations from the local Inuit population. It provides insights into the birds and natural history of a region seldom visited by birders or researchers. (p. 282)

2) Of Niko Tinbergen's *The Herring Gull's World* (Basic Books, 1960):

This delightfully written book covers the social behavior of Herring Gulls. Tinbergen in-

cludes many firsthand diary accounts of gull interactions and social behaviors, many rendered in black-and-white drawings. This book is not written with a detached scientific viewpoint; Tinbergen's enthusiasm for gulls comes through in the text and the animated descriptions of their behavior. (p. 283)

There are a few shortcomings. Scientific names are not used, except for Short-billed Gull (*Larus brachyrhynchus*). These names are helpful in understanding the taxonomic affinities of gull species. However, the most glaring omission is the lack of a species account for Common Gull (*Larus canus*). *Gulls of North America* was published in 2022, and although Shaffer describes and depicts Short-billed Gull—noting that it was formerly considered a subspecies of Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)—he does not include a separate species account of Common Gull (formerly the Old World subspecies of Mew Gull). Written descriptions and photographs in eBird enable the occurrence of Common Gull to be traced back at least 30 years. Surely Shaffer was aware of this, so why he did not include it as a separate species (with occurrences quite close to his Maryland home) is a mystery.

This omission notwithstanding, *Gulls of North America* is a book for gull-watchers to stuff in winter jacket pockets and use as a quick photo reference guide in the field. It will make a nice addition to their larid bookshelves.

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