

Birds in Flight

I have taken a different approach to this quiz. In the past, one person has provided the answers to the quiz photos, and that one person *has known beforehand the identities of the birds* in the photo quiz. This time, instead of having one person provide the quiz answers, I sent the quiz to three skilled birders and each has provided his perspective on our quiz birds. *They answered the quiz blind*, with only the information provided in the last issue of *Birding*, namely, the date and location of each photo.

I suppose I could have asked three “establishment” birders to analyze these photos, but instead I asked three talented younger birders in their teens or early twenties. They are **Thomas B. Johnson**, **Luke DeCicco**, and **Neil Gilbert**. For each quiz photo, all three of the guest quizmasters have provided their thoughts. Read through their answers and compare their results—and thought processes—with your own.

Several things stand out as I read through these quiz answers. The most important is how quickly all three use a *combination of relevant clues* to cut down the possibilities. Many birders struggle with

identification not because they are unaware of identification criteria, but rather because they get bogged down with details instead of quickly grasping what is most relevant to a given situation. The ease with which all three pinpoint key facts and eliminate clutter from the equation highlights how important this process is to fast and accurate bird identification.

Also notice how the date, the location, or both play a key role

in the identification process. All birders know when and where they are while birding, and our quiz masters demonstrate how effectively experienced birders use this basic information to their advantage.

Along with date and location, the authors consistently gravitated to overall color as another essential aspect of identification. Why? Because overall impressions of color and areas of contrast between light and dark are visible at much greater distances and more quickly ascertained in the field than specific field marks.

Although there are a number of similarities in how these three authors approached the quiz birds, there are dissimilarities as well. Often they approached the photos in different ways and stressed different characteristics. This tells us that bird identification is personal; it is based on individual experience and perception. There is no one perfect way to approach bird identification.

Speaking of perception, differences in the way some traits were perceived led to one discrepancy in the authors' answers. Even experts can be tricked by their own perceptions—leading to errors. Who is correct in this case? You can decide for yourself. In this exercise, the process is more important than the result.

Quiz Photo A

The generally whitish plumage and long wings suggest a gull. The bird appears to have a black tail band, barred undertail coverts, dark eyes, a pink and black bill, and pinkish legs. Thus, it is an immature gull. These can be difficult to identify, but let's consider the simplest option. An immature gull in fall in Cape May is most likely to be one of four species: Laughing Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, or Ring-billed Gull. Without beginning the process of eliminating species based on field marks, how about asking if we simply recognize this bird? Sure, it looks very typical for a first-cycle **Ring-billed Gull**, a normal sight at this location on this date. A check of the black tail band, bicolored bill, dark eyes, and overall crisp brown markings on a largely pale background are all consistent with this identification. —TBJ

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Quiz Photo A—Cape May, New Jersey; 5 October 2008.

Gulls... Many birders give up at the sight of most gulls, but let's give this one a shot. The overall mottled brown plumage of this individual suggests that it is not an adult. The photo shows very few obvious or conspicuous characteristics of this bird apart from a distinctive terminal dark tail band. Also of note are the clear white upper portions of the tail feathers above the terminal dark tail band, as well as the barred undertail coverts. The consistent width of the terminal tail band, the small head, the black-tipped small bill, and the barred undertail coverts rule out many of the larger *Larus* gulls and suggest that this bird is a first-winter **Ring-billed Gull**. —LD

Most birders would instantly recognize this bird as a gull. Gulls are not difficult to confuse with other groups, but pinning down the exact species generally is trickier, particularly with a young bird such as this one. The fact that the bird is flying directly toward the camera complicates matters. At this point, many birders would throw up their hands in despair and quit. However, if we winnow out the various possibilities, the situation becomes much less intimidating.

My first impression of the bird is of a smallish to medium-sized first-cycle gull. The bill, even when viewed head-on, simply seems too wimpy for one of the big bruisers such as Herring or Western. Additionally, the bill is cleanly bicolored pink and black. Most large white-headed gulls don't develop extensive pink on the bill until their second or third cycle, and even then the border between the pink and the black is often messy. The mostly whitish underparts do not match any first- or second-cycle large white-

headed gulls in fresh plumage. Most species show whiter underparts when bleached, but in early October something like a Herring Gull would have more uniformly sooty brown underparts. Another field mark that immediately jumps out at me is the dark tail band. This is a distinctive characteristic of young Ring-billed Gulls. If this bird had been photographed on the West Coast, Mew and California Gulls would also be possibilities. Happily, these can easily be eliminated by range.

This quiz bird is a prime example of how straightforward most gull identification is once you get past the initial panic. In this case, a few overall impressions of jizz and some field marks, along with location, all make a very strong case

for this bird to be a **Ring-billed Gull**. —NG

Quiz Photo B

The setting of this photo suggests it was taken at sea; in addition, the slim-bodied, long-winged structure suggests it is another seabird, probably a gull or tern by the shape and white underparts. The bill shape looks more like a tern than a gull. Considering terns, the most notable features of this bird heading toward the camera in flight seem to be the white face and fore-crown contrasting with dusky "earmuffs." Combined with a pointed black bill and large dark eyes, this doesn't look much like any typical adult tern. However, the head and bill pattern are typical for a first-cycle **Bridled Tern**. Considering the identification in the context of status and distribution, Bridled Terns are frequently seen in the Gulf Stream in summer. —TBJ

It is 24 August off the coast of North Carolina. This bird's structure, long slender wings, and slim light body suggest that it is a species of either tern or gull. The flight style of this bird would likely be light, due to its low wing loading (long wings, plus small slender and light body). Jaegers and skuas would be darker-bodied and much stockier than this slender individual. The long tail, long pointed wings, and straight bill of this bird suggest that it is a species of tern rather than a gull. The entirely dark upperwing and dark trailing edge to the underside of the secondaries of this individual rule out the majority of the terns, leaving only Bridled, Sooty, and Black Terns. The lack of a completely dark underwing rules out Black Tern,



Quiz Photo B—Hatteras, North Carolina; 24 October 2008.

leaving us with Bridled and Sooty Terns. Both of these species are possible off the coast of North Carolina. An important plumage characteristic of this individual is the lack of black lores and the lack of solid black plumage on the nape or the back of head. These two characteristics suggest that the individual pictured here is a **Bridled Tern**, likely in its first year of life. —LD

This bird can also be readily assigned to a broad group. Those long, narrow wings, pointed tail, and slender build identify it as a tern. Terns are only slightly less frustrating than gulls to sort out. Fortunately, this tern is one of the more distinctive species. The most striking aspect of this bird is the very dark upperparts. The majority of terns that occur regularly in the ABA Area have pale gray upperparts. Only a handful of terns make the cut: Sooty, Bridled, and Black. All of these species are possible in late summer in North Carolina, so the range maps don't help us out this time.

Black Tern is easy to eliminate. At first glance, this species fits, since it has dark upperwings, a black bill, and a smudgy dark patch on the back of the head. However, other features simply don't match this species. The dark head-smudge of Black Terns usually has a well-defined dark spur behind the eye, which this bird lacks. The underwings of this bird are mostly pale (don't let the shadows deceive you), while Black Terns have uniformly dark gray underwings. Other strikes against Black Tern include the

heavy-duty bill (Black Terns have more petite bills) and the long tail (Black Terns have very short tails.)

This leaves us with Bridled and Sooty Terns, two similar tropical species that are regularly seen on pelagic trips out of North Carolina. This bird is too pale and washed out for a Sooty Tern. Sooty Terns are crisp studies in black and white, with sharply defined black head patterns. Even though it is difficult to determine given the angle, the bird appears to have a medium-gray back, not a jet-black back (like a Sooty). The only candidate left is **Bridled Tern**, which is a beautiful fit for this quiz bird. Bridled Terns have dark grayish upperparts, a low-contrast dark head smudge, pale underwings, and a long tail. Our bird shows all of these characteristics. —NG

Quiz Photo C

This looks like another gull/tern/jaeger-type seabird with long, pointed wings and a strong chest. The overall dark coloration and staggered tail (different length feathers) make this one of the jaegers. I generally have strong reservations about identifying jaegers from a single photo. These birds are difficult enough to identify in the field, and single photos often don't show enough solid field marks or consistently represent the structural characteristics that experienced birders like to use to identify jaegers. In fact, photos can be downright misleading as to shape. So, with these caveats in mind, this appears to be a mostly dark brown or blackish bird with crisp pale fringing on the upperwing and very little apparent primary "flash" (often noted on jaegers due to pale primary shafts above and whitish feather bases below).

A closer look shows that only two of the primary shafts on the upperwing appear to be bright white; although this is a character that is hard to assess in the field, it is strongly suggestive of Long-tailed Jaeger. The crisply contrasting white-and-dark barred uppertail coverts and flanks and overall lack of warm tones suggest that this is a first-cycle Long-tailed Jaeger. The central rectrices appear to be pointed rather than rounded (though, being in profile, this is probably a feature better assessed in the field), good for either Long-tailed or Parasitic Jaeger. Because jaegers can show up anywhere (especially offshore), consideration of



Quiz Photo C—Hatteras, North Carolina; 21 September 2008.

status and distribution is important. In this case, all three jaegers can be seen off Hatteras, North Carolina, in September, and juvenile Long-tailed Jaegers are early- to mid-fall birder favorites both here and on the west coast. Though normally I dislike identifying jaegers from a single photo, the bird in this photo looks like a nice darkish first-cycle **Long-tailed Jaeger**. —*TBJ*

It is 21 September now, but we are still off the coast of North Carolina. Unlike the bird in Quiz Photo B, this individual is much stockier with a shorter, bulkier body and wider wings. This bird would likely show heavy wing-loading compared to the light wing-loading of the bird in Quiz Photo B, resulting in less buoyant flight. The “barrel-chested” look, the very dark coloration, and the elongated central tail feathers rule out all terns and gulls. This leaves us with the skuas and jaegers. Both Great and South Polar Skuas show white windows on the inner edges of the primaries, which the bird depicted in this photo lacks. This leaves us with the three jaeger species. The relatively small bill size, thick-bodied (barrel-chested) appearance, and many light primary shafts suggest that this bird is not a Long-tailed Jaeger. The head of this bird appears quite small compared to the body, and the growing central two rectrices appear to be pointed at the tip. These two characteristics suggest that this individual is a first-year **Parasitic Jaeger**. —*LD*

Our last bird is a large, dark, gull-like bird in flight. It superficially resembles an immature gull, but we can

eliminate all gulls by the projecting central rectrices (tail feathers for those who don't speak birder-jargon), and all but some odd Heermann's Gulls by the white flashes at the bases of the primaries. Flip a few pages back in your field guide from the gulls (or forward, if the field guide is up to date on the latest taxonomy), and you'll land on the jaegers. It is not difficult to identify this bird as a jaeger, but untangling the three possibilities is a challenge. I don't have too much experience identifying jaegers, but I'll give it a shot with the aid of the plethora of books crammed on my shelf.

When attempting to identify a jaeger, aging the bird is a good starting point. All three jaegers—Pomarine, Parasitic, and Long-tailed—have plumages that vary by age. Generally, it is sufficient to classify the jaeger in question as an adult or as an immature. This bird can easily be placed in the immature category by all the barring on the wings, underparts, and uppertail coverts. Dark-morph adult jaegers are much smoother brown overall, with little or no barring.

Jaeger identification involves a lot of structural and behavioral clues, which are very difficult to ascertain from photographs. However, I believe Pomarine—the biggest of the trio—can be omitted by looking at the structure of this bird. Pomarine Jaegers are bulky overall with a barrel-chested appearance, broad wings, and a large head. In contrast, our bird appears slender, with relatively narrow wings. A few other details don't add up to Pomarine, including the length and shape of the central rectrices; if visible, and if they are as long as on the quiz photo, then they are usually distinctively rounded on Pomarine.

Parasitic Jaeger is the next candidate. A few minor clues don't add up for this species, either. The quiz bird is slender and streamlined, yet it has a powerful-looking chest, like a body builder. Parasitic Jaegers don't really give this impression, at least to my inexperienced eye. Many immature Parasitic Jaegers are washed with a warm cinnamon or tawny color, but our bird is an anonymous brownish gray. The white wing flashes are awfully limited for Parasitic, with only a few pale shafts visible on the upperwing. Lastly, the central rectrices appear a tad too long for an immature Parasitic Jaeger.

I am left, then, with **Long-tailed Jaeger** as my best guess for the quiz bird. All the characteristics mentioned above fit Long-tailed—both the structural clues and the field marks. This exercise motivates me to go out and study jaegers more often to hone my jaeger identification skills! —*NG*