

## Not just another gull

By [Stephen Shunk](#) of [Paradise Birding](#)

We hopped out of the van near the southeast shore of the Salton Sea. Despite the early spring date of our visit, we sweltered in the Sonoran Desert sun at nearly 200 feet below "sea level." The briny stench that is often attributed to this super-saline lake blew in our faces with the hot western breeze. As we approached the beach we observed a healthy concentration of gulls loafing not far from the water's edge. We dropped our tripod-mounted spotting scopes from our shoulders and began scanning through the flock. We sought a glimpse at the Yellow-footed Gull, a specialty of the Salton Sea and a species difficult to find anywhere else away from Baja California.

Yellow-footed gull photo links to its source, a site about birds by Eldon Caldwell, who is associated with the Imperial Valley College

Many birders cringe at the prospect of identifying gulls. Non-birders simply lump them all under the moniker "sea gulls."

However, many gulls spend little or none of their lives at sea, and with more than 20 gull species

occurring regularly in North America (at least a dozen in Oregon), any

birder who wishes to maintain a list of the all birds they observe must one day face the gull ID challenge. A late summer visit to the Salton Sea may offer diagnostic looks at an adult, or four-year-old, Yellow-footed Gull, making identification fairly straightforward. Birders visiting California's largest lake any other time of year must accept the fact that they may only find immature "yellow-foots," bringing the fits that accompany the identification of nearly all immature gulls.



Our initial pass through this flock of 30-some birds produced only California, Ring-billed and Herring gulls of varying ages, representing the most expected spring species in the region. Within a couple minutes, however, Ronda drew our attention to a noticeably smaller gull standing among its larger cousins. At first glance, the bird could have been a

Bonaparte's Gull, a fairly common wintering species in the southern United States, but Ronda knew better. She had seen plenty of Bonaparte's and she knew this bird was different.

Ronda is an experienced field birder, with lots of data collection and survey experience under her belt. She knows well how to accurately diagnose a puzzling observation. But even those in our group with less experience knew we faced a challenge. We all saw something different than the other birds in the flock. We saw something different than other gulls we had observed. We saw a bird that did not fit the images stored in our brains. By acknowledging these facts, we all took the first step in identifying this unusual bird. It did not have to be a gull. It could have been a warbler or a sparrow or a raptor. We could have been at the Salton Sea or in our own backyards. The setting and subject did not matter. What did matter was the process we used to identify the bird.

The mystery bird's thin black bill was just too tiny for a typical Bonaparte's. The hot weather caused the bird to pant frequently, giving us clear views of the orangey inner mouth lining, also something we would not expect in a Bonaparte's. The bird appeared squatty, with short legs that seemed much redder than those of a typical spring Bonaparte's Gull. Its short red legs even hinted of a Red-legged Kittiwake, a true "sea" gull that breeds on Alaska's Pribilof Islands; but this species would be extremely rare inland or as far south as the Salton Sea. Before we even considered such an ultra-rarity, we had to confidently eliminate all the more common possibilities, especially the Bonaparte's Gull.

Backyard birders often observe aberrant individuals of common species at their feeders. They flip through their field guides with excitement and occasionally report a rare species before first eliminating the commonly expected birds. Identifying birds can be frustrating, but identifying rare birds brings a rush of excitement to routine observations. For the purpose of documenting bird movements and population changes, accurate reporting cannot hold enough importance. Accurate reporting sometimes requires detailed observations and a stricter than usual analysis of the subject.

Typical winter-plumaged Bonaparte's Gulls display a relatively distinct black spot behind their dark eye, contrasting with the all white head and neck. In late March, one must consider that individual birds may have already started to acquire their breeding plumage. In the case of a Bonaparte's Gull, a nesting bird will exhibit a completely black hood, so a transitioning bird could have any amount of black between the simple spot and the all-dark hood. Our subject bird displayed what could have been such a transitional plumage, but the redder and shorter than usual legs, and the tiny bill with orangey inner mouth lining necessitated additional scrutiny. Another feature of our mystery gull was an unusually chunky, compact body

shape with a short tail. Standing on the beach, its folded wingtips appeared to extend just short of the end of the tail. Bonaparte's Gulls tend to appear more slender with relatively long wings and the wingtips extending well past the end of the tail.

With four spotting scopes on the subject and four observers scrutinizing its features, we realized we might be dealing with a rare bird. A fifth observer grabbed the gull identification manual. Such specialized references can make or break a positive ID. Every birder should own at least one basic birding field guide; two are recommended for many field conditions, as the drawings or photos in different publications may vary. Birders who spend an increasing amount of time in the field need to go beyond the basic field guide. Some groups of birds, such as raptors or gulls, pose special identification challenges that simply cannot be addressed inside the limited pages of a general field guide.

Initial review of the four or five field guides present led us to believe we might have a basic-, or winter-plumaged, Little Gull before us. That's not just a "little" gull, but the species named Little Gull (the oddities of ornithological nomenclature often fetter the layperson's simplest communication about birds).

After reviewing the descriptions and drawings of Bonaparte's Gull in our field guides, we turned to the book titled Gulls, by P.J. Grant. Grant dedicates a number of pages to each North American gull species, allowing for close scrutiny of a bird's subtler features. We reviewed the Bonaparte's section and noted the absence of some important features, opening the door to explore an alternate diagnosis.

While the four observers watched the bird, the fifth read aloud the key identifying features of a basic-plumaged Little Gull. We could not observe flight style or underwing pattern due to the gull's posture standing on the beach, but we verified nearly all of the relevant features of a loafing individual. Our increased confidence shifted us into documentation mode. We knew from experience that a Little Gull would be extremely unusual this far west and south; a small North American population breeds at the Great Lakes and winters on the North Atlantic Coast. We repeated the key features from sight as the reader compared them to the description in Grant. We studied this bird for what seemed like an hour, but it stayed only a few minutes.

Suddenly the gull took wing. Most of the group saw the liftoff and noted more key features that stood out in the brief moment of the flight observation: no black wingtips; short wings; clear white trailing edge to the wings; and little or no black in the tail. The bird disappeared to the north, out of sight. We gathered and discussed the bird and the experience. We reviewed our field guides and compared them to Grant and to our notes on

the bird.

After an unsuccessful attempt to relocate our Little Gull, we found a shaded picnic table and completed rare bird report forms we had stashed for such an occasion. We will submit the forms to the California Rare Bird Records Committee for their review, and we will be prepared for them to either accept or reject the sighting as valid. Regardless of the committee's evaluation, we all grew as birders during that brief encounter. We honed our observation skills and practiced communication and teamwork. We tolerated less than ideal field conditions for as long as it took to finish the job. We practiced interpreting our published references and translating our thoughts into our own published record. And perhaps most importantly, we reinforced our appreciation for gulls. Never again will this birder visit a beach or lakeshore to observe just another gull.

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[Oregon Cascades Birding Trail](#)

Oregon Important Bird Areas [www.audubonportland.org](http://www.audubonportland.org)

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