

Ring-billed Gull: The distinctive bill tells the story

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

Let's get the trivial, nit-picky item out of the way.

There are 20 species of gulls in the Northwest. None of them are seagulls.

The term "seagull" is a logical association for gulls since we see them most commonly on the coast, by the sea, but you can safely (and appropriately) drop the "sea" part of the name and just call the birds "gulls."

I know, picky.

There are five gull species that are rare or uncommon visitors to areas east of the Cascades: Thayer's, Bonaparte's, Lesser Black-backed, Glaucous-winged and Herring.

While these five species do visit the east side, you'll be lucky to see them.

The two gull species we are most likely to see in eastern Washington are the California Gull and the Ring-billed Gull. Both are medium-sized gulls (17-21 inches) with white heads.

How to tell them apart?

Two field marks are most helpful to separate the species. An adult Ring-billed Gull has yellow eyes and the California Gull's eyes are dark.

The most distinctive difference between the species is the bill. A California Gull (adult) has a yellow bill with red and black marks.

The Ring-billed Gull has ... wait for it... a dark band or ring



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



Whether in flight or at rest, the distinctive ring around the bill identifies the Ringed-bill Gull.

around the bill. The pictures in this article clearly show the ringed bill.

Most people are satisfied to see these gray and white birds with black wing tips and quickly settle on "seagull" as a way to describe it.

Since gulls are common across large areas, the term paints a

pretty clear picture for others.

If you are inclined, you can visit almost any park in our area during the fall and winter to see gulls.

Find a comfortable spot and sit with your binoculars or camera to take a close look at the birds to properly identify them. Help others see the differences if you

have an opportunity.

Early in my bird photography hobby, I was encouraged to go to a park and practice bird-in-flight photography using the numerous gulls that are likely to be present. That's good advice for anyone who wants to get better photos of any bird in flight.

Gulls fly fairly slowly and tend to fly in one direction. They are large enough to quickly find in the viewfinder and your camera has a good chance of catching focus. I'm not saying it is easy, just that gulls are easier than most other species.

If you go to your park to watch or photograph gulls, take some chopped lettuce, peas, grapes or corn to feed the birds.

Please avoid feeding bread to any of our wild birds. Bread is nutrition-poor and causes water quality problems.

Maybe others will see you feeding food that is actually good for the birds and follow your example. We can hope.

Good luck!