

The in-between age of the in-between Gull: Identification of second-winter Thayer's Gull

Chris Gibbins and Martin Garner

Abstract

One of the early detailed articles on the identification of Thayer's Gull was titled 'The in-between Gull' (Garner and Mactavish, 2001). This and subsequent articles, however, dealt only with the identification of first-winter¹ and adult Thayer's; little has been published on the other, in-between, age groups. While photographs and published descriptions allow birders to gain a general sense of what Thayer's Gulls look like in second-winter plumage, to our knowledge no specific criteria that help separate Thayer's from similar taxa at this age have been proposed. This photo-essay focuses on the identification of second-winter birds and sets out a number of specific features that, subject to testing and refinement, may help form criteria for the identification of out-of-range Thayer's Gulls.

The absence of a mirror in the outer primary, the number of primaries with a venetian blind pattern and the balance of dark and pale in the outer primaries help separate second-winter Thayer's from darker Kumlien's Gulls. The exact tone and pattern of fringing on the primaries and the tone of brown in the tertials, tail and secondaries are also important for separating these taxa at this age. Some hybrid gulls (involving various combinations of Herring, American Herring, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged) can resemble Thayer's, but structure, along with these plumage features, should help rule out most hybrids. While typical second-winter Thayer's Gulls are eminently identifiable, the frequency of hybrids and birds with characteristics intermediate between Kumlien's and Thayer's help stress the need for caution.

Introduction

A number of Thayer's Gulls have been reported in Europe over the last 10-15 years, but all accepted records have either been adult or first-winter (1w) birds. Very little is written about the identification of Thayer's Gulls in their second-winter (2w), and this may partly be responsible for the lack of records of this age group. The most comprehensive identification papers cover only adult and 1w Thayer's Gull (Gosselin and David, 1975; Garner and McGeehan, 1998; Howell and Elliott, 2001). In their identification section, Malling Olsen and Larsson (2003) dedicate only one short paragraph to 2w Thayer's and offered no firm or specific guidance for how they can be separated from similar taxa. This and other monographs (Howell and Dunn, 2007) are also constrained by space and so are only able to depict a relatively small number of individuals.

Published information on 2w birds is somewhat descriptive, rather than pinpointing key features that allow separation of Thayer's from confusion species. This photo-essay aims to help remedy this situation. It is intended primarily as a reference collection of photographs (rather than a detailed identification article) but at the same time discusses a number of specific features that observers could usefully focus on. At the moment these features are provisional and we hope that this photo-essay encourages birders to check their local birds in order to test their validity. The key confusion arises

¹. 'First-winter' is used here to refer to birds in their first winter of life, rather than first winter *plumage*. In fact many Thayer's Gulls retain a full set of first generation feathers through their first winter so strictly speaking are birds in juvenile plumage.

with darker Kumlien's Gulls and some small American Herring Gulls or hybrids, so the emphasis is on separating a candidate Thayer's from these. All the Thayer's Gulls were photographed in California in December 2012; locations for the photographs of other taxa are given in the plate captions.

The starting point

The general appearance of 2w Thayer's is not quite like any other gull – if you are lucky enough to encounter one in Europe, you will likely run through Kumlien's, Herring, and American Herring, but not quite be able to fit it into any of these; it will look rather in-between in most ways...then the penny will drop - Thayer's Gull.

In the first instance you should be on the lookout for a bird intermediate in size and jizz between Herring and Kumlien's/Iceland, with a smudgy body, lots of uniform brown in the wings and perhaps a grey saddle. At rest the primaries should look dark brown (not blackish) with a pale fringe around the tip. The key to ID is then to see the bird fly or preen – here the details of its wing and tail patterns can be assessed. Photographs are likely to be key, as it can be tricky to observe the necessary detail directly in the field, especially on a flying bird.

Standing birds



Plate 1. Thayer's Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). Everything about this taxon is intermediate between the larger, Herring type gulls and the smaller Kumlien's/Iceland types. In some ways it is like them all, but also not quite like any of them; herein lies the trick to identifying second-winter Thayer's. The very short and thin legs are apparent in this photograph and are especially obvious in direct comparison with Herring and other large gulls. This bird is at the petite end of the range (presumably a female) but it would be a mistake to think that all are like this; Thayer's can be appreciably larger and more robust looking with a bill and head shape that approaches or overlaps with smaller Herring and American Herring Gulls.

Thayer's is a gull, so don't expect them all to look the same. You have to establish that your bird sits within **acceptable bounds, not match it exactly to a caricatured 'average' or 'typical' Thayer's**. Many look rather like a second-winter American Herring Gulls in general, with a grey saddle, brown wings and smudgy head and body. Others are much browner in the mantle and scapulars, while the pale ones approach the darkest Kumlien's Gulls. On standing birds, the things to concentrate on are structure, tertial pattern and the tone of the primaries; where visible also look at the tail and the underside of primary 10 (P10).



Plate 2. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). This individual is slightly larger than the bird in plate 1 and has rather more of a Herring Gull-like facial expression. As is typical, the closed wing is predominantly brown and the tertials have solidly brown centres; the bill is bicoloured and the legs are a lovely clean, deep pink. The iris usually looks dark on 2w Thayer's; actually it is dark brown and in bright sunlight a contrast between the iris and pupil is evident.



Plate 3. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). This bird is rather more advanced, with 2 grey tertials and some grey greater and median coverts. The bird behind is also a Thayer's. Note the jizz of these birds.



Plate 4. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). This bird has a mixture of grey and beige and cream scapulars. Otherwise notice the similarities with the birds above, in terms of jizz, the rather uniform mid brown greater coverts and tertials and dark brown primaries with a neat fringe confined to the tip of each feather.



Plate 5. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). This bird has limited grey, some barred upper tertials and its median coverts have a matching pattern, so it exemplifies some of the subtle plumage variation than can reasonably be expected. Its eye is at the paler end of the spectrum for 2w Thayer's (dark amber in colour).



Plate 6. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns, Newfoundland (Chris Gibbins). Compared to all the Thayer's above, notice the paler and more stippled tertials, paler greater coverts and primaries, with the latter having very broad pale fringes that extend well along to the primary coverts.



Plate 7. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns, Newfoundland (Chris Gibbins). Again notice the paler and more strongly vermiculated tertials and greater coverts relative to Thayer's. The primaries have very broad and diffuse fringes, and the dark shafts stand out, as does a subtly darker area near the tip of some feathers; these features are not seen in Thayer's.



Plate 8. American Herring Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). Care needs to be taken with American Herring Gull, as some share generally similar plumage to Thayer's. As this and the bird in Plate 9 show, key differences are in the head and bill proportions, and hence the facial expression/character of the bird, and the blacker primaries, with extremely limited pale fringing (just a tiny pale tip visible).



Plate 9. American Herring Gull, California (Chris Gibbins).



Plate 10. Presumed hybrid gull, California (Chris Gibbins). Working out the parentage of birds like this is a mixture of common sense and guesswork, and is not always easy. The parents of this bird may involve American Herring and either Glaucous or Glaucous-winged Gull. The result is a bird whose general appearance matches many Thayer's. Note however the overall larger size, more robust, bulky structure and heavier bill. This is a relatively obvious hybrid; some more tricky birds are shown later.

The bird in this plate is a useful example to help stress a very important point. The frequency of hybrid gulls (notably Glaucous-winged x Western and American Herring x Glaucous-winged) on the West coast of USA has understandably led to birders being cautious when identifying Thayer's Gulls there. To some degree this may have introduced a bias in perceptions of what Thayer's look like, as only the most petite and hence structurally obvious ones would be considered safe. In fact proven Thayer's (captive reared birds collected from the breeding grounds of Thayer's as chicks) can be large birds with angular bills and head profiles like Herring Gulls (see images in Sutton and Parmelee, 1978). Thus, we need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, being careful with Thayer's Gull identification because of the hybrid problem, while on the other hand recognizing that not all Thayer's are small and petite. This is not an easy balance to strike. Because of the limited information from the breeding grounds of Thayer's that might be used objectively to set boundaries, identification of problematic birds involves arbitrary decisions. This inevitably leads to differences of opinion about identification, and hence how the more tricky individuals should be classified.



Plate 11. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Rapid fire mode on modern digital cameras is great for capturing the details of preening birds – keep your finger on the trigger and you will record the key detail. The underside of the longest primary (P10) is visible in this image. No sign of a mirror here. This is typical of Thayer's and unlike Kumlien's.



Plate 12. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Again, note the absence of a mirror on this different individual. The authors have not seen enough 2w Thayer's to produce meaningful statistics, but based on photographs and the birds we have experience of it seems that the clear majority lack any sign of a P10 mirror. This is the opposite of Kumlien's (the vast majority have a mirror).



Plate 13. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). The key thing to look out for is a marked contrast between the outer and inner webs on the outer 5 or 6 primaries (the so-called 'venetian blind' pattern). On Thayer's the distinctly darker tone of the outer web reaches the primary coverts on at least 5 feathers. Also note that the dark of the outer web extends across the shaft and invades part of the inner web on these outer primaries. This, and the fact that the dark hooks extensively around the tip, means that dark covers a greater part of each feather than pale. These details are all rather different to Kumlien's Gull (for which see plates 25-30).



Plate 14. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Notice the dark secondaries of this Thayer's, matching the primaries and tail in tone. In Kumlien's all three of these feather groups are normally significantly paler brown than in Thayer's.



Plate 15. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Generally similar to the example in plate 14.



Plate 16. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Again, note the contrast between the outer and inner webs and the dark reaching the primary coverts on the outer 6 (perhaps even 7) primaries, the lack of any mirrors and the dark secondaries. In large gulls the outer web of primary 10 is always narrower than it is on the other feathers. Because of this, on taxa such as Thayer's and Kumlien's which have a contrast between the outer and inner webs, the dark on primary 10 appears more restricted than on the other feathers. Bear this in mind when assessing dark *versus* pale areas.



Plate 17. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). The same general set of features are evident in this bird.



Plate 18. Presumed Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). Some presumed Thayer's have a mirror in primary 10 and so in this regard are more like Kumlien's. Note however that the mirror on this bird is rather small and sits as an isolated circle within the otherwise dark inner web. Also, as typical for Thayer's, the venetian blind pattern is strong on 5 primaries while on several of these feathers the dark of the outer web invades the inner web so that the dominant tone of each feather is dark (the best feathers to look for this feature are primaries 7, 8 and 9 since, for the reason discussed in the caption to plate 16, P10 looks rather different).



Plate 19. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). The tail of most Thayer's is extensively mid to dark brown. Paler vermiculation is present but so restricted that from a distance the general impression is of a uniformly dark tail. The upper tail coverts are also rather dark; on many (as in this individual) the paler bars are narrower than the dark areas, but others have even dark and pale bands.



Plate 20. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). The same individual as above, showing how the tail looks when folded.



Plate 21. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). This angle shows off the tail, rump and secondary patterns. Note also the strongly barred undertail coverts – the overall impression from this angle is very like American Herring Gull



Plate 22. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). An example with a typically dark tail but notice that the upper tail coverts are more pale than dark; Thayer's varies so there are no absolute rules.



Plate 23. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). In terms of its tail, this bird is at the pale end of the range –it has rather extensive pale areas creating more of a tail band than is typical. However, the tone of the tail is typical of Thayer's – dark brown.



Plate 24. Thayer's Gull (Chris Gibbins). The pattern of the undertail coverts mirrors that on the upperside – typically Thayer's are more extensively dark than Kumlien's and, as on this bird, the darker areas dominate over the paler ground tone.



Plate 25. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns, Newfoundland (Chris Gibbins). Notice that the darkest areas in the primaries, tail and secondaries are much paler than Thayer's, and that the outer primaries have much more extensive pale areas. Particularly, there is a very large and diffuse mirror on P10 that covers both webs and extends to the inner edge of the inner web; also (on many) there is the hint of a mirror on P9 caused by the curvature of the darker area. In addition, the dark on the outer primaries is by-and-large-confined to the outer webs, so that overall the pale component dominates over the dark.



Plate 26. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns (Chris Gibbins).



Plate 27. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns (Chris Gibbins). A darker bird, but notice the large diffuse P10 mirror, and pale/mid brown tone of the outer primaries and tail.



Plate 28. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns (Chris Gibbins). Another darker bird. The tail and upper tail covert patterns overlap with Thayer's (e.g. pale in the tail is very limited, and represented as subtle stippling), but the tone of the darker areas here and in the primaries is distinctly paler than on Thayer's. Also, the strong venetian blind is restricted to the outer 3 feathers and faded on the next inwards (P7). The dark outer webs, even on this dark Kumlien's, only reach the primary coverts on the outer 3 feathers. Other clear Kumlien's features are the pale secondaries, the very large and diffuse P10 mirror and another one on the inner web of P9.



Plate 29. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns (Chris Gibbins). Another mid to darker end Kumlien's, but again note the tone of the brown in wings and tail and ghostly mirror on both P9 and 10. The strong venetian blind pattern is confined to the outer 4 primaries (typically 5 or 6 and sometimes 7 in Thayer's).



Plate 30. Kumlien's Gull, St Johns (Chris Gibbins). The conveniently spread wing shows how the dark in the outer primaries is much more restricted than in Thayer's. The shape of the dark on the inner webs of P10, 9 and 8 create large pale lobes on the distal portion of the feathers; the result is that the predominant tone on each feather is pale, whereas in Thayer's it is dark. Also, the venetian blind pattern itself is confined to the outer 4 primaries and, in this individual, the darkest part of each feather is pale and greyish brown rather than the dark chocolate of Thayer's.

Some difficult birds

In keeping with ongoing debates about the taxonomic relationships between Iceland, Kumlien's and Thayer's Gulls, certain birds are perplexing. The problem is an extremely complicated one, for a number of reasons. The first issue is that there may actually be two types of 'Kumlien's Gull' (Howell and Elliott (2001): (i) There are the conventional Kumlien's Gulls breeding mainly on Baffin Island and wintering in Newfoundland, while (ii) there may be birds resembling these conventional Kumlien's Gulls but which result from interbreeding between Iceland Gulls and Thayer's Gulls to the north of the range of Kumlien's. The latter birds could explain pale-winged 'Thayer's Gulls' on Ellesmere Island, some 1400 km north of the known breeding range of Kumlien's. Theoretically such birds could share their wintering grounds with true Thayer's Gulls and so help explain intermediate birds seen in California. The second issue is that hybrids between other taxa may resemble Thayer's to varying degrees. Detailed analysis of these problems is beyond the scope of this photo-gallery, but this brief synopsis should help emphasize that birds showing anomalous features need to be treated with caution. The following plates show a selection of such birds; we avoid too much speculation about their parentage, and instead try to emphasize why their identification should be approached with care.



Plate 31. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). Primaries are very pale and have very broad and diffuse fringing. The greater coverts and tertials are also very pale.



Plate 32. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins) (same as Plate 31). In combination with the features mentioned above, it has a large mirror on P10 and pale secondaries, hence matching Kumlien's, while the extent of the venetian blind (5 feathers) is more Thayer's like. It is an example of a more Kumlien's-like bird on the main wintering grounds of Thayer's; in Newfoundland or perhaps even the UK this bird would most likely be considered a Kumlien's.



Plate 33. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). This bird is very pallid overall – notably the coverts, tertials and body - and its eye is unusually pale. The primaries are within the range of Thayer’s (it lacks a mirror on P10 and the primaries are dark brown). Most likely it is just a pale end Thayer’s, but in the UK this bird may be considered by some to be unidentifiable.



Plate 34. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). General plumage and size match Thayer’s. However, its bill is very deep at the gonys, giving it a bulbous look. Various hybrid combinations could theoretically lead to birds like this, but we also have to recognize that not all Thayer’s have small bills. Caution suggests that it may be best left unidentified, but by doing so we may actually be perpetuating an incorrect notion that all Thayer’s are small-billed. As discussed earlier, without evidence on proven Thayer’s, this is a difficult issue to resolve.



Plate 35. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). This bird may be just an odd Thayer's, but its primaries are a fraction paler than most. A particular concern is that in flight its outer wing looked very uniform, as there was little contrast between the outer and inner webs (i.e. little or no venetian blind pattern). Its head and bill proportions fit Thayer's, but its primary projection is uncomfortably short. One might speculate that it could have some Glaucous-winged Gull genes, but we have to be careful with such speculation; studies are needed to help understand the appearance of **proven** hybrids.



Plate 36. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). This is a rather odd looking creature. The head and body, and especially the nape, are very dark for Thayer's, but it is very small and delicate and the grey tones are too dark for American Herring. The coverts and tertials are also very uniformly brown, more so than typical for Thayer's. The yellow of the bill gives it a peculiar look for this age group, but this applies to any taxon so in itself this is not relevant to identification.



Plate 37. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). Some birds generally resemble Thayer's but have something unfathomably odd about them. This is one such bird. It seems to have all the right features, but its character is odd (e.g. the bill seems too shallow and angular) and in some ways hints at California Gull. In the field the grey tone was judged as being a fraction darker than Thayer's. A real tricky bird that may divide opinion.



Plate 38. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). The jizz and elements of the plumage pattern fit Thayer's, but the primaries are a little too pale (more or less the same tone as the tertials) and the pale fringes around the primaries are not confined to the tip. These features appear to make it unusual for Thayer's.



Plate 39. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). This bird is strangely uniform, and like the bird in plate 38 has primaries that may be considered too pale for Thayer's.



Plate 40. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). On first glance this bird is in the Thayer's ball park, but the pale bar across the median coverts resembles that frequently seen in American Herring Gull at this age. The head streaking also seems to have a netted, cross-ways pattern that is frequently seen on West coast hybrid gulls. An important point to bear in mind with the birds in plates 34-40 is that they all have traits that are suggestive of Pacific taxa. Thus, if you encounter such a bird in Europe, even if it is not identifiable as a Thayer's you still have a very interesting bird on your hands – a bird of Pacific origin.



Plate 41. Unidentified Gull, California (Chris Gibbins). This bird is too dark for Thayer's (especially the primaries) but at the same time it seems rather small and delicate for an American Herring Gull (its size and bulk matched adjacent Thayer's). Presumably it is a hybrid of some sort, but we have to accept that discussions of the parentage of unringed birds like this amount to little more than educated guesswork; fun, but guesswork.



Plate 42. Presumed Kumlien's Gull, St John's, Newfoundland (Chris Gibbins). The dark brown primaries with limited fringing are immediately suggestive of Thayer's Gull. However, the greater coverts are rather pale and the tertials, especially the upper ones, are not the solid brown typically seen on Thayer's. Also, in flight the outer primaries clearly had large mirrors and the structure matches Kumlien's. It is difficult to know for certain what this individual is (maybe a dark Kumlien's, maybe a Thayer's x Kumlien's), but several features indicate that it should not be identified as Thayer's Gull.



Plate 43. Unidentified Gull, Njardvik, Iceland (Peter Adriaens). Just to finish with, here is an example of a problematic bird from this side of the Atlantic. It has tertials and primaries that are a good match for Thayer's, while flight views revealed a strong Thayer's-like venetian blind pattern on 5 primaries. However, one or two features are enough to raise concern: it had rather pale secondaries (no darker than the greater coverts), a large diffuse mirror on primary 10 and its eyes were paler than typical for Thayer's of this age. This combination of features places it in the intermediate territory occupied by paler Thayer's, the darkest of Kumlien's and intergrade Thayer's-Kumlien's. Given this and the out-of-range location, it would seem unwise to identify this bird as a Thayer's.

Summary

1 First impressions of 2w Thayer's are very much of a bird that sits in-between American Herring and Kumlien's Gulls of this age. However, if you are looking at a Thayer's in Britain or Europe, you should become aware that it cannot be shoehorned comfortably into either of these taxa; this should lead you to think about Thayer's. The trick is then to be sure your bird is not a hybrid.

2 Due to individual variability, hybridization and introgression, it would be a mistake to think that there are clinching, presence/absence features that can be used with absolute confidence to identify all 2w Thayer's. While the features we suggest appear to hold some promise, it not hard to find birds that do not quite show the full set. Thus, individual birds have to be treated on a case-by-case basis, and identified using features in a cumulative way; i.e. a balance of probability type approach. Birds with one or more clearly anomalous features should be treated with caution.

3 Most Thayer's can be separated from most Kumlien's by a combination of:

- Dark brown primaries with sharp, narrow and restricted fringing (paler brown and more broadly fringed in Kumlien's)
- Typically no (or only a small) mirror on P10 (large and diffuse in Kumlien's, which often also has a hint of a mirror on P9)
- A venetian blind pattern that extends further inwards on the primaries (typically 5 or 6 (sometimes 7) feathers in Thayer's, 3 or 4 in Kumlien's). Specifically, in Thayer's the dark outer webs that help create this pattern reach the primary coverts on a greater number of feathers than in Kumlien's

- Dark in the outer primaries extending noticeably across both the outer and inner webs, such that the dark covers a greater part of each feather than pale (pale dominates in Kumlien's)
- Solidly dark brown tertials and tail (distinctly paler in tone in Kumlien's)
- A contrasting dark secondary bar (typically no darker than the greater coverts in Kumlien's)

4 Most American Herring Gulls and hybrids are rather different to Thayer's, but some are alarmingly similar. Structure often offers the best clues with such birds – hybrid American Herring x Glaucous or Glaucous-winged are typically more bulky with larger bills. Birds with primaries paler than typical Thayer's should be checked for other odd traits. The primaries of American Herring are darker than Thayer's, appearing blackish brown with little or no pale fringing; also, the venetian blind effect is less apparent, due to relatively darker inner webs.

5 Some paler birds seen in California overlap with Kumlien's Gulls and may be unidentifiable out of range.

Much more work remains to be done, and so what is presented here is merely a skeleton outline of potentially useful identification criteria. That said, hopefully it gives birders a clearer search image for 2w Thayer's and the features to concentrate on when confronted with a candidate bird in Europe.

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Chris Gibbins, Drums, Aberdeenshire
Martin Garner, Sheffield