



◀ Herring Gulls appear stocky and broad-winged in flight compared to Common Gulls.

## FIELD CRAFT

# A gateway to gulls

**Five gull species occur regularly in many areas of Britain and Ireland, including inland. Your location will determine which of Black-headed, Common, Herring, Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls you see frequently – whatever the answer, building familiarity with those that are regularly found near you is the key to gaining confidence in identification, as Training Manager Nick Moran explains.**

Most of the UK's widespread gulls are highly adaptable generalists, quick to take advantage of feeding opportunities and suitable sites to roost and nest. This can bring them into conflict with

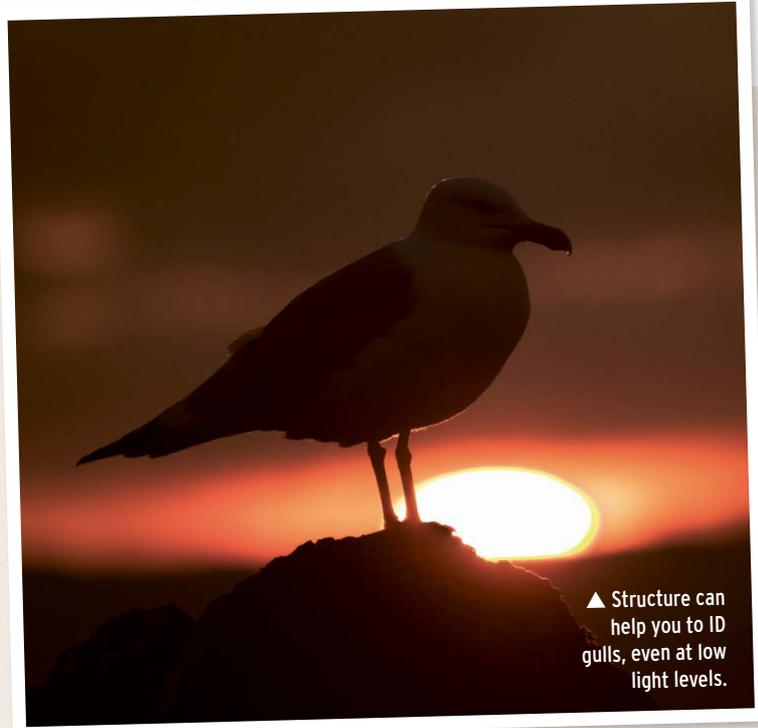
people, and the more sensationalist elements of the media stoke animosity towards these fascinating birds. Even among birdwatchers, gulls are often framed as a 'Marmite' group: love 'em or hate 'em. Any such polarisation is unhelpful (and unjustified) though, whether in relation to their habits or their identification. The objective of this piece is to dispel the notion that you have to be an expert to 'do' gulls!

### STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE!

Gulls, particularly the larger species, can exhibit a bewildering array of plumages, so it pays to put colour and pattern aside to begin with, instead starting with

**Gulls, particularly the larger species, can exhibit a bewildering array of plumages, so it pays to put colour and pattern aside to begin with**

▲ Structure can help you to ID gulls, even at low light levels.



## Size matters

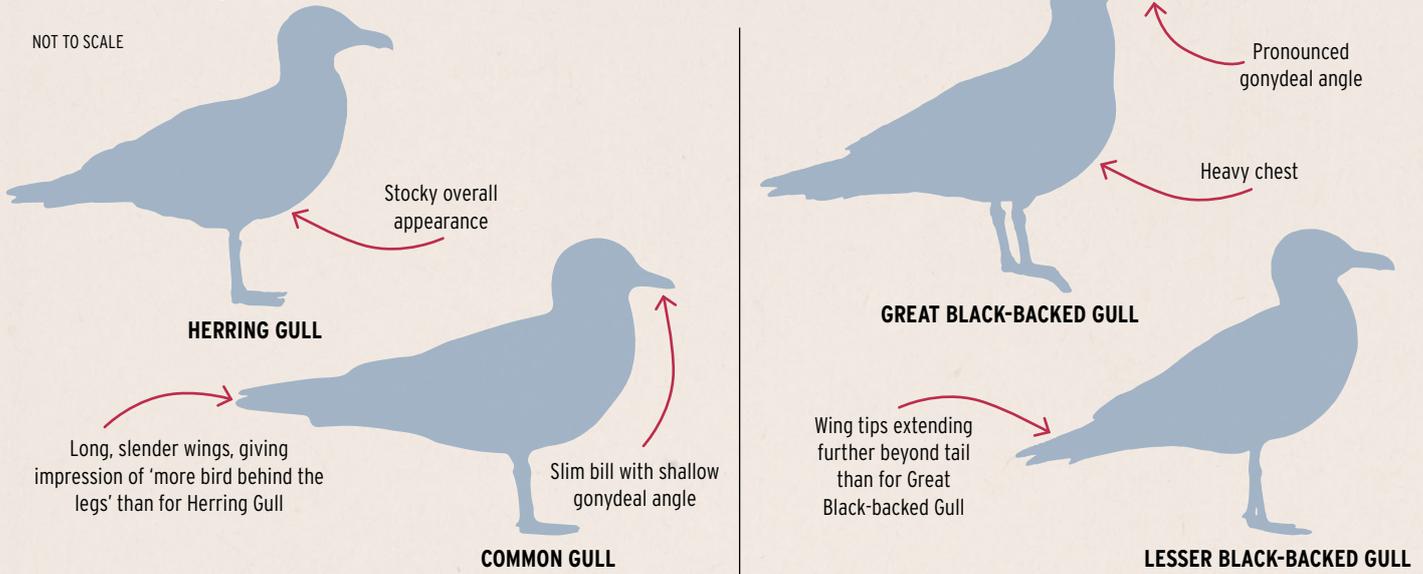
The matter of size can't be ignored, though it should be used with caution, for two reasons. Firstly, size can be hard to judge, particularly on lone birds or against plain backgrounds (such as the sky) with no reference points. Secondly, male gulls are usually larger than females of the same species, and the larger the species, the bigger these differences can be – this leads to an overlap between species. Caveats aside, our five most widespread species line up as follows (largest to smallest): Great Black-backed > Herring > Lesser Black-backed > Common > Black-headed.



▼ Winter gull roosts can present an ID challenge but are a great spectacle.

## Comparing structure

NOT TO SCALE



an assessment of structure (*BTO News* 339). Although this takes practice, it is the best way to avoid classic 'plumage pitfalls' such as a black/brown head or lack thereof, a dark ring round the bill, or the apparent tone of the wings.

Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are a good example. The darker upperwings of Great is often cited as a useful ID feature but this is hard to judge without direct comparison. The tone also varies within each species, particularly Lesser, and there is overlap between the palest Great and darkest Lesser Black-backed Gulls. However, there are clear, consistent structural differences that can even be appreciated on lone birds, by 'comparing

the bird against itself'. For a large gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull is quite slim and elegant. At rest, there is typically more of the bird behind the (rather long) legs than in front, with the wingtips extending well beyond the tail. The longish bill with a fairly weak gonydeal angle – the 'bend' on the underside of the lower mandible – adds to the slim impression. Great Black-backed Gull, on the other hand, is a bruiser of a bird, heavy chested and thick billed, with more bird in front of the legs than behind.

These differences are also apparent in flight: Lesser Black-backed Gulls' wings are long and slim, and their bodies quite streamlined, whereas Greats 'hang' on

their somewhat broad-looking wings, and usually appear heavy keeled, sometimes creating an almost heron-like silhouette.

### AVOIDING COMMON MISTAKES

The marked structural differences between Common and Herring Gull provide the best starting point for distinguishing this pair, too. Common is to Herring what Lesser is to Great Black-backed, but to a greater extreme! The proportionally long, slim wings of Common Gull create a buoyant, sometimes effortless-looking flight action. Herring Gull is a heavy, stocky bird and although they can certainly be fairly agile in flight, the impression is usually one of a thick-set gull. ■

## Examining the plumage

After considering the structure of a gull, the next step is to study its plumage. Try to look at the different elements in this sequence: wings, head, beak then legs, giving highest priority to the clues revealed by the wings, then the head, and so on. This approach not only helps to avoid the trap of basing the ID on one prominent feature but also puts most emphasis on the aspects of plumage that provide the most reliable identification features. For example, a gull with a black head and reddish legs might be assumed to be a Black-headed Gull. However, starting with the wings might allow you to notice that its longest wing feathers (primaries) are all

white, making Mediterranean Gull the more likely candidate. Most of the key wing characteristics are often visible in flight, too. An adult Common Gull has extensive white patches on its longest two primaries, and the black on those feathers extends almost one-third of the distance from the wing tip to the bend (carpal joint). UK-breeding Herring Gulls have relatively small white patches in the same feathers, and the black only extends about a quarter of the distance. Whilst these differences are quite subtle, they give rise to a unique appearance for each species that, with practice, makes the identification of adults in flight a realistic proposition.

### Find out more

BTO's online Gull ID course is a great way to build confidence with gulls. If you already feel comfortable identifying Black-headed, Common, Herring, Lesser and Great Black-backed Gulls in flight, we will greatly appreciate your help with WinGS this winter – for details of this exciting survey opportunity, see pages 26–27.



▲ Common Gulls' long wings help distinguish them from other gulls in flight.

HERRING GULL IN FLIGHT: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO; HERRING GULL SILHOUETTE: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO; WINTER GULL ROOST: IAN SHEPPARD; COMMON GULL IN FLIGHT: ANNE CARRINGTON-COTTON