

# Identification of adult gulls in Finnmark



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

*Identification of gulls in the field can be both difficult and challenging. The reason for this is that many of the species resemble each other, and each species occurs in different plumages depending on age and time of year. Many observers are satisfied to differentiate between “small gulls” and “big gulls”. With the aid of this fact sheet you can however learn to identify adult birds of the different gull species.*

A number of different gull species can occur in Finnmark. Some of these are common breeding birds, while others are only rare visitors. A total of about 55 gull species have been described in the world, and of these 21 have been recorded in Norway.

The difficulty of identifying birds in the field is often to know what to look for. Adult gulls are usually relatively easy to identify, as each species has a characteristic combination of size and colour of bill, legs, upper-wing and wing tips. Young birds are more difficult. They have often spotted plumage in grey or brown. They also lack the adult's colour of bill and

legs. The smallest species usually take a little more than a year to gain adult plumage, while the larger species can take up to 3-4 years.

In order to facilitate identification of the gull species that occur in Finnmark, we have divided the gulls into groups based on head colour, colour of the upper-wing, and the wing tip.

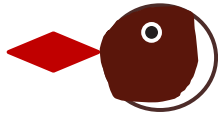
Note that there can be a good deal of individual variation. Not all birds fit into this main pattern; this applies particularly to the colour of bill and feet. Note also that females in general are smaller than males.

**Best of luck!**

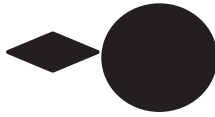


*Adult Common Gulls in summer plumage*

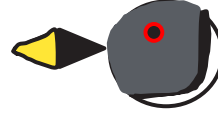
## GULLS WITH DARK HEAD



Black-headed Gull

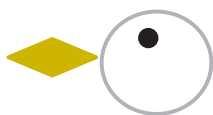


Little Gull

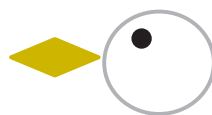


Sabine's Gull

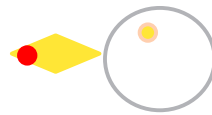
## GULLS WITH PALE HEAD AND PALE GREY UPPER-WING



Common Gull

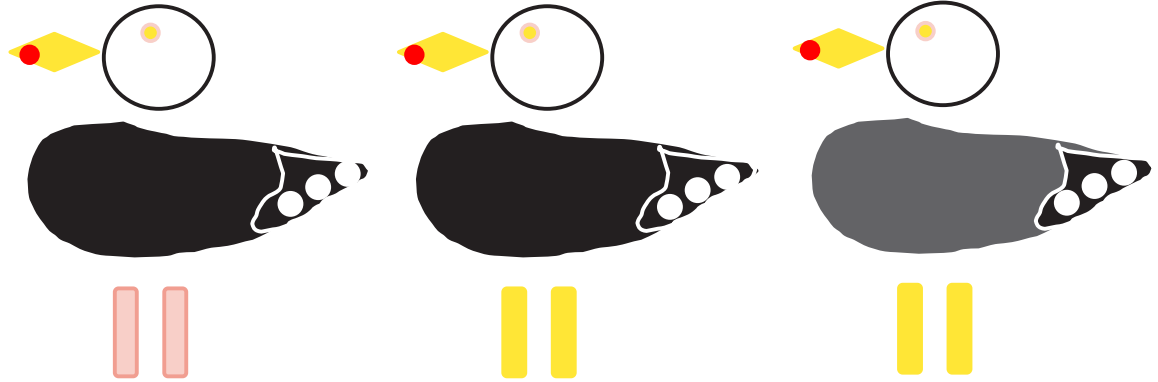


Black-legged Kittiwake



Herring Gull

## GULLS WITH PALE HEAD AND DARK GREY UPPER-SIDE

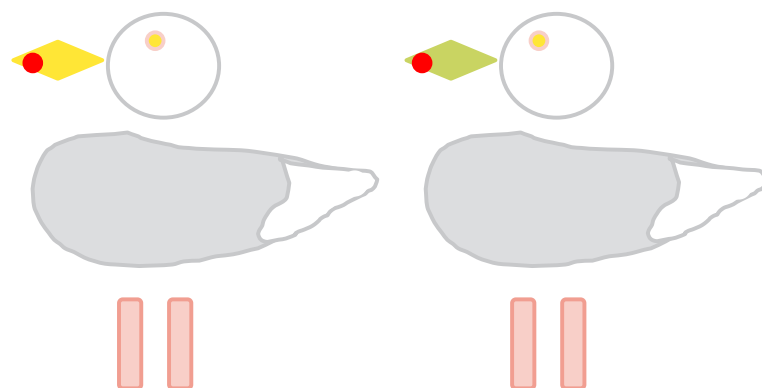


Great Black-backed  
Gull

Lesser Black-backed  
Gull (*fuscus*)

Lesser Black-backed Gull  
(*intermedius*)

## GULLS WITH PALE HEAD AND WHITE WING TIPS



Glaucous Gull

Iceland Gull

## Black-headed Gull

- Relatively small
- Dark red legs and bill
- White underside and grey upper-wing
- Chocolate-brown hood not extending down to the back of the neck
- Scarce and sparse breeding bird in Finnmark. First found breeding in the 1960s.
- Nests rather inaccessibly on islets or tussocks in fresh water, or on islets along the coast.
- Often nests in small colonies that loudly defend themselves against nest predators. Other species can gain advantage of nesting in colonies of Black-headed Gulls (e.g. ducks and Little Gulls).
- Migrates south to Denmark, Great Britain and Continental Europe in winter.



## Little Gull

- A small gull
- Slender, dark red bill
- Small, round head
- Black hood that stretches well down to the back of the neck
- Short, red legs
- Grey-black underside of the wings. Lacks black on the wing tips.
- Buoyant, tern-like flight. Rounded wing tips.
- An eastern species. Common breeding bird from Finland eastwards.
- Scarce visitor to Finnmark since the 1970s
- First found nesting in Pasvikdalen in 1999. Flocks of up to 100 birds recorded.
- Nests in damp sites by fresh water. Often builds the nest on islets or floating tussocks in vegetation-rich peat bogs. Often in Black-headed Gull colonies.
- A migrant that arrives in mid-May and leaves us during the summer. Winters off western Europe and in the Mediterranean.
- Feeds almost entirely on insects during the breeding season.

## Sabine's Gull

- A small gull with black bill and yellow bill tip
- Slate grey hood that stretches some way down to the back of the neck
- Dark legs
- Slightly forked, white tail.
- An arctic breeding bird. Only a few pairs nest in Svalbard.
- Remains mainly on the open sea outside the breeding season
- Winters in the South Atlantic
- A very scarce visitor along the coast of Finnmark in summer (adult birds) and autumn (young birds)
- Seen then often with Kittiwakes
- Feeds mainly on small fish and various small organisms including insects. Can also take offal and birds' eggs.



## Common Gull

- A medium-sized gull. White underside and pale grey upper-wing.
- Slender, greenish-yellow bill and legs
- Resembles a small and slim Herring Gull
- Evenly distributed over the whole of Finnmark. A characteristic bird along the coast.
- The commonest gull inland and in the mountains
- Breeds as single pairs or in small colonies on skerries and islands along the coast or on dry peat bogs, exceptionally in trees or on roofs etc.
- Eats many small rodents, and breeding success inland improves in years with large numbers of small rodents.
- Migrant that arrives in mid-April and leaves Finnmark in August-September. Winters along the North Sea coast south to Portugal.
- Some Common Gulls remain in winter, for example in the Kirkenes area.
- Often forages near habitation. Feeds mainly on fish, fish offal, household refuse, mussels, insects, birds' eggs and young, worms and berries.
- Often seen on newly ploughed fields, often together with Black-headed Gulls.

## Black-legged Kittiwake

- Size about that of Common Gull
- Grey upper-side, white underside and entirely black wing tips.
- Yellow bill and black legs
- The most numerous species in our bird cliffs. Large colonies on, for example, Hjelmsøy, Sværholt, Omgangstauran, Syltefjord and Store Ekkerøy.
- In some places the Kittiwake nests on buildings, but never far from the sea.
- 65% of the Norwegian Kittiwake population breeds in Finnmark
- Winters on the open sea in the North Atlantic
- Return to the colony where they were born when they are 2-3 years old. Begin breeding when they are 4-5 years
- Feed almost entirely on plankton in winter
- In the breeding season catch small fish and various small organisms in the sea. Follow fishing boats to try to get fish offal.



## Herring Gull

- A large gull. Resembles a large and powerful Common Gull.
- Grey upper-side and white underside
- Powerful yellow bill and pink legs (exceptionally yellow legs)
- A common breeding bird along the coast, sometimes in large colonies of up to 5000 pairs.
- Less common inland, but seen regularly e.g. in Pasvik
- Most Herring Gulls migrate south along the coast. Those that stay the winter in Finnmark mainly come from further east, e.g. the Murman coast.
- Can make long foraging flights to find food. Seen then in the morning flying in V-formations that can remind one of goose migration
- Almost omnivorous. Takes fish offal, fish, birds' eggs and young, carrion, mussels etc. Often visit rubbish heaps.



## Great Black-backed Gull

- Our largest gull
- Breeds commonly along the coast; usually single pairs, but also in large colonies.
- Scarce inland, but breeds, for example, in Øvre Pasvik.
- Prefers to have a view, and usually nests on higher ground than the Herring Gull.
- Most of our Great Black-backed Gulls are migrants that arrive in March-April and move south from September
- Winters largely in England and France
- Omnivorous. Can eat, for example, flatfish, young birds and fully grown ducks.



## Lesser Black-backed Gull

- A rather large gull
- Grey-black upper-side and white underside
- Yellow bill and yellow legs
- The two commonest subspecies are *intermedius*: black wing-tips and slate grey upper-wing; *fuscus*: black wing-tips and black upper-wing.
- Breeds sparsely in small colonies in western Finnmark and Porsanger (*fuscus*).
- The population in Finnmark has decreased greatly in recent years
- Typical migrant that migrates south-eastwards and winters by the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, also off East Africa.
- *Intermedius* winters off the coast of western Europe
- Arrives at Finnmark in medio May, and migrates southwards from July to October.
- The Lesser Black-backed Gull is the most marine of our gull species. Often follows boats to feed on fish offal.
- Often seen on newly ploughed fields in coastal areas in spring
- Feeds mainly on fish and fish offal. Often seen in large flocks when foraging.

## Glaucous Gull

- Large, powerful gull, the size of a Great Black-backed Gull.
- White underside, grey upper-side and entirely white wing tips
- Angular head shape, powerful yellow bill and long pink legs.
- The wings usually extend a little beyond the tail
- Nests on Svalbard, Greenland and Iceland. Often on bird cliffs and on islands with many seabirds.
- A rather common visitor along the coast of northern Norway in winter. Scarcer in summer.
- Largest numbers are seen in Kiberg and Vadsø
- Resembles Great Black-backed Gull in habits. Steals eggs and young from other seabirds. Can also steal food from eiders.
- Also takes carrion, fish and fish offal



## Iceland Gull

- Slightly smaller than Herring Gull with long, slender wings.
- White underside, grey upper-side and entirely white wing tips.
- The wing tips extend far beyond the tail
- Rounded head shape (as Common Gull). Comparatively small, yellow bill.
- Nests on Greenland
- Seen annually along the Norwegian coast, especially in Troms and Finnmark.
- Most Iceland Gulls seen in Norway are juveniles
- Most observations are made in autumn and winter
- Often seen singly, together with Glaucous and other gulls.
- Feeds mainly on fish and fish offal



*This fact sheet is prepared by Morten Günther*