

Identification of American Herring Gull in a western European context

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The first American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* (hereafter *smithsonianus*) recorded in Europe dates back to November 1937 when a second-winter bird, ringed as a chick on Kent Island, New Brunswick, Canada, in August of the previous year, was caught on a ship 480 km off the Spanish coast (Gross 1940). Nothing was recorded on the appearance of this bird but it is doubtful that the occurrence would have attracted any attention had it not been for the fact that the bird carried a ring. Almost 50 years passed before the next record, a first-winter at Cobh, Cork, south-western Ireland, in November–December 1986 (O’Sullivan & Smiddy 1990). The finder of this bird, Jim Wilson, was sufficiently struck by its unusual appearance to record detailed field notes. It was not until he subsequently visited North America and encountered *smithsonianus* there that he realized the significance of his observation. There followed a remarkable series of records in Ireland in the late winter and spring of 1990 (involving 10 birds, all first-years), which provided many observers with the first real opportunity to study *smithsonianus* alongside its European counterpart (Mullarney 1990). Since then, *smithsonianus* has been recorded almost annually in Ireland (apart from 1993–95), with a total of 42 records up to the end of 2001 (Milne 2003). Of these, four long-staying first-year birds at Cobh and Ballycotton, Cork, from December 2000 (Diggin 2001) provided the best opportunity yet for extended observations of *smithsonianus* in Europe. At least two of these remained throughout 2001 (and were still present in January 2002), constituting the first records of over-summering birds on the European side of the Atlantic. One of these two was present again in the winter of 2002/03 (cf *Birding World* 16: 119, 2003) the first conclusively identified third-winter bird recorded in Europe.

Outside Ireland, however, there are relatively few records of *smithsonianus*. Surprisingly, there are only 10 records for well-watched Britain where most other North American gull species have been recorded much more frequently than in Ireland. Several reports, however, remain under consideration by the British Birds Rarities

Committee (BBRC) (Rogers & Rarities Committee 2003) and this, coupled with the observation of several contentious individuals in, for instance, Britain (Ahmad & Elliott 2000, Vinicombe 2000) and the Netherlands (van Duivendijk & Kok 1998), Germany and Norway (Martin Gottschling and Håken Heggland pers comm) certainly suggests that *smithsonianus* is being actively looked for in other parts of Europe. The few records outside Britain and Ireland include four for France (Dubois et al 1995ab, Frémont et al 2000), two for Norway (Solbakken et al 2003), four for Portugal (Moore 1994, de Juana & Comité Ibérico de Rarezas de la SEO 1995, Hoogendoorn et al 2003) and one for Spain (de Juana & Comité Ibérico de Rarezas de la SEO 1995, Álvarez-Balbuena García et al 2000). This clearly hints at the likelihood of regular occurrence of *smithsonianus*, at least along the western seaboard of Europe. The finding of three birds in one week-end during the 5th International Gull meeting in Portugal in 2001 (Hoogendoorn et al 2003) and at least four first-winters in Iceland over a few days in March 2003 (pers obs) are probably good indicators that *smithsonianus* is a regular visitor, at least to certain ‘strategic’ locations in Europe where up to now they have been largely overlooked. Given the regular occurrence of other Nearctic gulls in Europe during the past c 35 years (Hoogendoorn & Steinhaus 1990, Mitchell & Young 1997), it is difficult to explain the virtual absence, until recently, of records of *smithsonianus*. The sudden surge of records since 1990 may reflect a genuine increase in their occurrence but it seems more likely that the apparent change in the status is largely the result of the dramatically increased interest in ‘large-gull’ identification in recent years.

Focus

Despite the growing interest in finding *smithsonianus*, comparatively little has been published on its identification in a European context. The aim of this paper is to describe and illustrate what we believe constitute ‘identifiable *smithsonianus*’ on the European side of the Atlantic and discuss a range of likely pitfalls. The research for

this paper involved five winter visits to the East Coast of the USA (Massachusetts and New York, from mid-January to mid-February) as well as two autumn visits (New Jersey, in mid-September). It is important to bear in mind that most of the photographs of *smithsonianus* shown here are from that area, as even a cursory comparison of *smithsonianus* occurring in different regions of North America suggests there is significant variation in features such as timing and extent of post-juvenile moult and, in adults, wing-tip pattern and tone of grey upperparts. In addition to our North American experience, we have observed at least 18 different *smithsonianus* in Ireland, two in Portugal and four in Iceland (still to be submitted to the Icelandic rarities committee), which has helped greatly in assessing the practical value of various identification features in a European context. While most of our experience of European Herring Gull is in Ireland, involving *L. a. argenteus* (see the section on taxonomy below), we do see small numbers of *L. a. argentatus* types in Ireland in the winter months and we both have additional experience of *L. a. argentatus* in Fennoscandia throughout the year. Observations of Herring Gulls in Iceland in March 2003 provided further useful, albeit somewhat disturbing, experience. Herring Gull is a relatively recent addition to the Icelandic avifauna and the original colonisers, which started to breed between 1920 and 1930 (Gudmundsson 1951), are believed to have derived of *argenteus* stock, rather than *argentatus* (although Snell (1991) argued that the colonisers were in fact *argentatus*). In the course of a six-day visit in March 2003, Killian Mullarney found only one possible *argentatus* (an adult) among the numerous *argenteus*-type adult Herring Gulls, but the first- and second-year birds there included a significantly higher proportion of superficially 'smithsonianus-like' birds than we have observed in any other part of Europe. To some extent this might be explained by the much higher proportion of hybrids Glaucous *L. hyperboreus* x European Herring Gull in Iceland but the appearance of certain birds (plate 18-20) suggested the possibility of genuine *smithsonianus* influence. Is it possible that *smithsonianus*, too has entered the 'Icelandic Herring Gull' gene-pool? The answer to this question will require considerably more investigation than could be attempted in a brief visit, and is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be borne in mind that Iceland may be a source of confusing *smithsonianus* look-alikes. In spite of the bewildering variation in the appear-

ance of Herring Gulls and apparent hybrids Glaucous x European Herring Gull in Iceland it was possible to confidently identify at least four first-year *smithsonianus* (cf Birding World 16: 120, plate 17, 2003).

We are conscious of the fact that detecting and identifying *smithsonianus* in Ireland, where *argenteus* is by far the predominant Herring Gull, may be significantly easier than in parts of Europe where *argentatus* is more numerous. In addition, we must not forget that it is not only *argenteus* and *argentatus* that need to be considered when identifying *smithsonianus* on the European side of the Atlantic; Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus graellsii* (hereafter *graellsii*) in some of its first-year guises can present a significant source of confusion.

Our experience of large numbers of birds in the eastern USA in winter has indicated to us that well over 90% of first-winter and c 70% of second-winter *smithsonianus* should be identifiable, with some measure of confidence, if encountered in Europe. Most third-winter and older birds are much more difficult to conclusively identify as evidenced by the virtual lack of accepted records of birds of this age in Ireland or elsewhere in Europe (just one, referred to above). It seems very likely, however, that they do occur here. This paper outlines what we believe are key features to be considered when faced with a potential *smithsonianus* of any age, between September and April. It should be noted, however, that it is based primarily upon our personal experience of *smithsonianus* and we have no doubt that in certain respects, particularly in relation to geographical variation within *smithsonianus*, our experience is incomplete.

Taxonomy

Until recently, most authors had treated *smithsonianus* as a subspecies of Herring Gull (Dwight 1925, Grant 1986). The Dutch committee for avian systematics (CSNA), having adopted the Phylogenetic Species Concept (PSC), were the first to propose that *smithsonianus* be recognized as a distinct species (Sangster et al 1998) although it did not expand on the reasons for this decision, other than stating that *smithsonianus* 'is specifically distinct based on qualitative differences in morphology and vocalizations'. More recently, Crochet et al (2002) presented evidence, based on analysis of mitochondrial DNA control region and cytochrome-*b* gene sequences, that *smithsonianus* is more closely related to the North American-Arctic species California

Gull *L. californicus*, Iceland Gull *L. glaucoides*, Thayer's Gull *L. thayeri* and Glaucous Gull than to *L. argentatus*, their results thus supporting the CSNA hypothesis. Crochet et al (2002) held back from unreservedly recommending that *smithsonianus* be regarded as a full species, preferring to wait until their results were confirmed using larger sample sizes of all North American taxa. Additional unpublished data gathered by several independent research teams (Pierre-André Crochet in litt) confirm the earlier findings and have led to the formal recommendation by the Association of European Rarities Committees Taxonomic Advisory Committee (AERC TAC) that American Herring Gull be treated as a species, *Larus smithsonianus*.

Commenting on the taxonomic position of European Herring Gull populations, the CSNA (Sangster et al 1998) stated that 'there is no evidence that the form '*argenteus*' is diagnosably distinct from *argentatus*' and concluded that *argenteus* was conspecific with *argentatus*. We question the supposed lack of evidence that *argenteus* is not diagnosably distinct from *argentatus*. From our perspective, *argentatus*-types and *argenteus*-types are often readily separable in the field (plate 23 and 35) and appear to fulfil suf-

ficient 'requirements of diagnosability' to merit taxonomic recognition.

We prefer, therefore, to treat *argenteus* as a diagnosable taxon. While we realise that, in reality, the variation in European Herring Gull seems to be much more complex than the simple '*argentatus*' and '*argenteus*' model, we do not know if much of the yet-to-be explained and quantified variation has a particular bearing on the identification of *smithsonianus* in Europe. In this paper, we follow the conventional arrangement, whereby *L. a. argentatus* refers to the Herring Gull which breeds in Fennoscandia, around the Baltic and White Seas and *L. a. argenteus* refers to the on-average slightly smaller and lighter-mantled type which breeds in Iceland, Britain, Ireland and from Brittany, France, to approximately southern Denmark – although it apparently forms a mixed population with *L. a. argentatus* in the area ranging from the north of the Netherlands to southern Denmark (Barth 1975); the term 'European Herring Gull' is used to refer to *L. a. argentatus/argenteus*.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss further possible (sub)specific variation within *smithsonianus*, it seems likely, given the complexity of 'herring gull' taxonomy in an area

1 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1996 (Pat Lonergan). Individuals as dark as this one should not pose any identification problems in Europe.



the size of Europe, that the North American population comprises more than just one 'type'. Indeed, Jonsson & Mactavish (2001) suggested that the populations wintering in Newfoundland and in the Niagara Falls regions, respectively, exhibit sufficiently consistent differences in morphology and wing-tip pattern to indicate that they represent distinct phenotypes. There also appear to be differences between East and West Coast birds (Dwight 1925, Sibley 2000, Klaus Malling Olsen pers comm) but most of the published information on the 'West coast type' is rather vague and anecdotal in nature. No doubt further sampling and analysis of mtDNA material, combined with more systematic field observations will improve our understanding of variation within *smithsonianus*.

Moult

Generally speaking, moult in *smithsonianus* is similar to that of *argentatus* and *argenteus* as outlined by Grant (1986) but with important clarifications described by Howell et al (1999). The tendency for some first-years *smithsonianus*, apparently originating in northern latitudes, to postpone their post-juvenile moult until mid-winter, or even spring of their second calendar-year, mirrors a similar strategy employed by a significant number of *argentatus* (Nikander 1996, Howell 2001, pers obs) but overall, moult is of little or no significance when it comes to identifying individual herring gulls.

Structure and character

Smithsonianus averages a large heavily built bird, appearing similar in size and proportions to *argentatus*, thus larger than an average *argenteus*. Many immatures have a demeanour which recalls first- and second-year Glaucous Gull due, perhaps, to the combination of a rather thick, long, bicoloured bill and a tendency to have rather uniformly coloured underparts.

Bill structure averages slightly different too, since many *smithsonianus* have parallel-sided bills with little gonydeal angle. The bill also averages slightly longer than in European Herring Gulls – but there is overlap.

Descriptions

The following accounts treat each age category, juvenile, first-winter, second-winter and so on up to adult, individually and in that order. Obviously, there is overlap in juvenile and first-winter plumages, and a certain amount of dupli-

cation in their respective accounts is unavoidable. We restrict ourselves to describing the appearance of *smithsonianus* in the winter period since practically all of our first-hand experience, both in North America and in Europe has been between September and April. Due to the effects of fading, wear and active moult, the summer months are considered a much less rewarding time to study gulls and it may be that this is a significant factor in explaining the virtual absence of summer records of *smithsonianus* in Europe. However, observations of at least two birds that over-summered in Cork in 2001 (Birding World 14: 224, 2001) suggest that detection of birds in first-summer plumage may not be as difficult as might have been imagined.

The extent of age-related, seasonal, sexual and individual variation in large gulls is well known and accounts for many of the associated ageing and identification problems. The potential for individual variation that exists in most large-gull taxa and the consequent overlap in the appearance of many characters has an important bearing on the identification of all 'out-of-range' or vagrant large gulls, and this is particularly true when considering claims of *smithsonianus* in Europe. While it would be unreasonable to expect every *smithsonianus* recorded in Europe to correspond exactly with the most 'classic' examples portrayed in this paper the great majority should, we suggest, be of typical appearance. Although every case should of course be considered on its merits, problematic birds (ie, birds with a mix of 'good' and 'bad' characters) are arguably *more likely* to be unusual-looking European Herring Gulls than aberrant or atypical *smithsonianus*. There will always be cases of contentious birds where it is difficult or impossible to prove that they are not *smithsonianus*, even though birds matching their appearance would be considered unusual, or even exceptional, in North America. At the risk of losing a few records of 'good' birds, we are inclined to recommend that, for the time being, only those birds with the strongest credentials be considered 'acceptable' in Europe.

It is impossible in a paper such as this to cover the vast extent of variation in these gulls. All we can do is try to define what we consider the most useful identification characters for each age group and anticipate the most likely sources of confusion. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of acquiring a comprehensive familiarity with the commoner species of large gull and of always keeping in mind the potential for variation in these birds.



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2 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1999 (Sean Farrell). Note pale window on inner primaries, dark base to greater coverts, densely barred rump and undertail and very limited vermiculation along edges of outermost rectrices. 3 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1991 (Pat Lonergan). Note heavily barred rump and uppertail-coverts, barely contrasting with back; also, note almost entirely dark rectrices with contrastingly pale shaft and narrow 'barred' strip along outermost edge. 4 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1991 (Pat Lonergan). Note uniformly dark underparts. 5 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1991 (Pat Lonergan). Shape and structure of this bird and, especially, weak bill recall Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus graellsii*. Note, however, suggestion of densely marked ventral area. 6 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1991 (Pat Lonergan). Note uniformly dark lower hindneck and underparts. 7 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cape May, New Jersey, USA, September 1996 (Pat Lonergan). Wear on scapulars, tertials and wing-coverts has reduced pale edges to these feathers. Note densely patterned vent and undertail-coverts and apparently all-dark tail. Several juvenile scapulars and mantle-feathers have been replaced with first-winter feathers.



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8 Presumed American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cobh, Cork, Ireland, 8 January 2001 (*Killian Mullarney*). Confusingly similar to some juvenile European Herring Gulls *L. argentatus* but upper- and undertail-coverts densely barred dark and tail almost entirely dark.

9 Presumed American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cobh, Cork, Ireland, 8 January 2001 (*Killian Mullarney*). Same bird as in plate 8. Note densely patterned rump and uppertail-coverts and very extensively dark uppertail, with pale 'marbling' restricted to outer web of outermost rectrices.

10 Unidentified gull *Larus*, juvenile, Dublin, Ireland, 30 December 1999 (*Killian Mullarney*). Tentatively identified as European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *L. a. (argentatus?)* but other possibilities cannot be excluded. Resembles 'light' *smithsonianus*, but comparatively weak barring on undertail-coverts indicative of European Herring.

11 Presumed European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus*, juvenile, Lauwersoog, Groningen, Netherlands, 12 October 1997 (*Theo Bakker*). Exceptionally dark bird. Unfortunately, tail pattern, upper- and undertail-coverts were not seen clearly, so identification cannot be regarded as conclusive. While overall darkness is certainly suggestive of *smithsonianus*, pattern of tertials and rather streaked underparts indicate otherwise. Is there anywhere in Europe where birds that look like this are considered 'normal'?

The greatly improved understanding of gull identification over the past 20-30 years has developed hand-in-hand with a wider appreciation of the effects of fading, wear and moult on the appearance of gulls. The systematic and analytical approach to gull identification, pioneered most notably by the late Peter Grant, places great reliance on critical examination of photographic

material in resolving and defining the sort of detail that we now employ routinely in the field when attempting to identify more difficult individuals. At this level, we believe that a combination of photographs with dedicated captions offers the most effective means of conveying the kind of information most relevant to identification, hence the emphasis on photographs in this paper.



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12-15 Presumed American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile, Cobh, Cork, Ireland, 8 January 2001 (*Jim Wilson*). Underparts streaked, not as uniform as underparts of two first-winter *smithsonianus* present at same time. Confusingly similar to some 'dark' juvenile *argentatus*-types, but upper- and undertail-coverts densely barred dark and tail almost entirely dark (see plate 9), strongly indicative of *smithsonianus*.

Juveniles (plate 1-23)

There is wide variation in the appearance of juvenile *smithsonianus*, from the most distinctive type (c 60%) which is very dark and practically uniformly textured on the underparts (plate 1), to less striking birds which have more mottled, or even pale-streaked, underparts and which could easily escape detection among a flock of large gulls in Europe (plate 5). In addition to this variation which can be seen in Atlantic coast populations at, for instance, Cape May, New Jersey, in September, there appears to be another 'type' of *smithsonianus* which deserves particular attention. Unfortunately, we have virtually no first-hand experience with what Howell et al (1999) referred to as 'Pacific coast [American] Herring

Gulls' which are presumed to originate from high-latitude populations and apparently perform a long-distance migration to winter mostly in California. Judging from a few published photographs (eg figures 1, 6 and 10 in Howell 2001) and some of the American Herring Gull video-clips featured in *The large gulls of North America* (Dunn et al 1997), the birds that winter in west North America include a much higher proportion of what might be described as 'problematic' first-years than we observed on the east coast. Possibly the closest thing to a 'high-latitude'-type *smithsonianus* we have seen on this side of the Atlantic is a bird, still in full juvenile plumage, at Cobh, Cork, Ireland in January 2001 (plate 8, 9 and 12-15, Diggin 2001). It was one of three



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birds identified as *smithsonianus* present at Cobh that winter and caused quite a bit of debate when it was first observed due to its rather streaked underparts and overall similarity to some *argentatus* types. David Sibley examined images of this bird and commented that, when he was based at Cape May, New Jersey, he would see a very small number of similar-looking birds but that they did not appear there before November. The late arrival of these birds and their tendency to retain juvenile plumage well into the winter suggests a northerly origin. Interestingly, we did not find any that were clearly of this type in Massachusetts in January-February; David Sibley (pers comm) considers this type to be much more frequent in California than anywhere in eastern North America. Apart from the Cobh juvenile, and another juvenile in Galway in December 2000, all of the *smithsonianus* we have studied in Ireland have corresponded well with the more distinctive 'Atlantic coast type' we are familiar with through observations in New Jersey and Massachusetts

(plate 27). At the risk of exaggerating a problem which we have not had the opportunity to fully investigate ourselves (due to the absence of so-called 'high-latitude'-type *smithsonianus* in the parts of North America we have visited), we recommend particular caution be exercised when identifying juvenile *smithsonianus* in Europe. We have noticed a disturbing similarity between several putative *smithsonianus* photographed in Europe, including the Cobh juvenile, and some perplexing first-year herring gulls, possibly hybrids, observed in Iceland in March 2003.

Having said that, we suggest that critical assessment of the following characters should help resolve the identification of any suspected juvenile *smithsonianus* in Europe.

Tail pattern An 'all-dark' tail is popularly regarded as the most essential attribute of any candidate first-year *smithsonianus* in Europe and birds possessing one are usually among the most easily identified individuals. Three things must be emphasized here however: **1** only

16 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argentatus*, juvenile moulting to first-winter, Byparken, Bergen, Norway, 20 January 2001 (*Frode Falkenberg*). Another very dark bird, with very limited pale fringes to tertials, similar to some juvenile American Herring Gulls *L. smithsonianus*. This bird was ringed in Bergen, already fully grown. It would be interesting to know if there is a particular geographical source of birds that look like this, and whether they develop into perfectly normal-looking adults?

17 Lesser Black-backed Gull / Kleine Mantelmeeuw *Larus fuscus graellsii*, juvenile moulting to first-winter, Galway, Ireland, 28 December 2003 (*Pat Lonergan*). Overall darkness of body and wings, combined with pale head, create superficial similarity to first-year American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus*, but such an appearance is not unusual in Lesser Black-backed Gull. Although underparts are undoubtedly dark, they are not as uniform as in most first-year *smithsonianus*.

18-19 Unidentified gull / meeuw *Larus*, possibly a hybrid, juvenile/first-winter, Reykjanes peninsula, Iceland, 17 March 2003 (*Killian Mullarney*). One of several odd-looking herring gull-types encountered in Iceland. Not as dark as bird in plate 20, this bird too looked distinctly odd. Large size, extensive retention of juvenile scapulars, rather bold uppertail-covert barring and overall demeanour unlike European Herring Gull *Larus argentatus argenteus*. Possibly hybrid Glaucous *L. hyperboreus* x *argenteus*, maybe even some American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus* influence?

20 Unidentified gull / meeuw *Larus*, possibly a hybrid, juvenile/first-winter, Reykjanes peninsula, Iceland, 17 March 2003 (*Killian Mullarney*). Another odd-looking herring gull-type encountered in Iceland, a darker bird than in plate 18-19. Large size, overall darkness and somewhat Glaucous Gull *L. hyperboreus*-like bill reminiscent of American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus*, but tail pattern and upper- and undertail-coverts pattern unconvincing for *smithsonianus*. Possibly hybrid Glaucous x European Herring Gull *L. argentatus argenteus*, maybe even some *smithsonianus* influence?

21 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argentatus*, first-winter, Turku, Finland, 18 December 2003 (*Harry Lehto*). Unusually dark-bodied bird, which might be mistaken for American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus* at first glance. Rather dark greyish second generation scapulars typical of Finnish Herring Gulls, and invite confusion with Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus graellsii*. Note comparatively narrow dark bars on undertail-coverts.

22 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argentatus*, juvenile, Tampere, Finland, 16 August 2003 (*Visa Rauste*). Observers whose only experience of juvenile Herring Gull is with *argenteus* may have difficulty believing a bird like this could ever be a Herring Gull, and insist that it is a Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*! In fact, it is not at all exceptional for juvenile Finnish *argentatus* to have such restricted pale tertial-fringes and virtually no 'notching' in the feathers of the upperparts; such dark examples as this one (and the bird in plate 16) are, however, unusual.

23 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus (argenteus?)*, juvenile, Wijster, Drenthe, Netherlands, 23 January 2000 (*Rudy Offereins*). Portrait of still juvenile-plumaged European Herring Gull, probably of *argentatus* stock. Compare with plate 11 and 20. It would be interesting to identify the geographical source of birds that look like this.



FIGURE 1 Variation in rump and tail pattern of first-winter American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus* (Pat Lonergan & Killian Mullarney). Note that tail pattern varies from wholly dark at one extreme (1 and 2) to, rarely, well-defined tail-band (8). More often, however, pattern is intermediate, with obvious vermiculation on both webs of outer two or three rectrices.

a minority of first-year *smithsonianus* really do have what might justifiably be described as an 'all-dark' tail; 2 an absolutely all-dark tail (including the outer webs of the outermost rectrices) has been observed in first-year European Herring Gulls; 3 the difficulty in establishing the exact tail pattern in the field, as opposed to from critical examination of good photographs, is often underestimated. Many *smithsonianus* have an extent of dark on the tail that is very rarely matched by European Herring. Those with the most extensively dark tails have a solid-dark upper tail surface, as viewed from above (plate 33, figure 1), the only relief being the pale shaft-bases. Close examination will often reveal a very narrow strip, barred black and white, along the outermost edge to the tail (plate 3, figure 1) and it is not unusual for there to be some limited pale barring or vermiculation on the bases to the outer two or three pairs of rectrices. In addition, the fully spread tail (best looked for as a bird takes off or just before it alights), or a view of the tail from below, will often reveal quite extensive areas of pale barring or vermiculation on the bases to the inner webs of the outer rectrices. The variety of tail patterns featured in figure 1 clearly illustrate the point that an 'all-dark' tail should not necessarily be considered a prerequisite of *smithsonianus*. Some European Herring Gulls can show a tail pattern approaching that of classic *smithsonianus* but only exceptionally are the outer rectrices wholly dark (Peter Adriaens pers comm). Similarly, it is not exceptional for *smithsonianus* to have extensive white (usually barred dark) at the base to the outer rectrices and it may even be that this variation is more frequent in some populations than in others.

Vent and undertail-coverts The ventral area and undertail-coverts of juvenile *smithsonianus* are generally more densely patterned with dark than in European Herring Gull, in which these areas are sparsely marked and usually appear predominantly whitish. 'Classic' *smithsonianus* are so extensively dark on the undertail-coverts that the white 'bars' may be reduced to little more than paired spots, and the longest undertail-coverts may be almost solidly dark-centred; such bold and extensive dark markings are probably never shown by European Herring, although a few are more heavily marked than usual and may resemble *smithsonianus*. Of course, some *smithsonianus* are not so heavily marked on the undertail-coverts but such birds are very much in a minority in North America, at least in Atlantic seaboard populations. Any suspected juvenile *smithsonianus* in Europe which does not exhibit reasonably dense or bold undertail-covert-markings should be considered very critically before being positively identified.

Pattern of rump and uppertail-coverts In *smithsonianus*, the rump and uppertail-coverts are characteristically densely patterned with dark brown bars, chevrons or large spots, the overall tone being close to that of the rest of the upperparts but clearly contrasting with the often 'all-dark' tail (plate 3). The overall look of the tail and rump may prompt comparisons with that of a pale- or intermediate-morph juvenile Pomarine Jaeger *Stercorarius pomarinus*. On well-marked birds, this is a striking difference from any typical European Herring Gull but the degree of variation both ways means there is considerable overlap. The longest uppertail-coverts may have a completely dark centre – a pattern similar

to that of the lower scapulars, and very probably not occurring in first-year European Herring.

Uniformity of underparts The strikingly smooth-textured, evenly dark underparts of many juvenile *smithsonianus* (plate 1 and 4) are probably never truly matched by European Herring Gulls. Sometimes, however, European birds are more evenly saturated and darker-looking below than usual (plate 16), so care should be taken not to place too much importance on this feature alone.

Upperparts The pale fringes and notches to the upper-part-feathers average slightly less extensive than in European Herring Gull, contributing to an overall darker appearance. At the darker end of the range (plate 1), the patterns are probably never matched by juvenile European Herring but lighter *smithsonianus* could easily escape detection, at least on the basis of upperparts pattern, among their European counterparts.

Tertial pattern In juvenile plumage, the tertial pattern is rather similar to some *graellsii* (and therefore unlike most *argenteus*) with little notching which is generally 'finer' and is usually confined to the tips of the feathers. Juvenile *argenteus* tertials are often even more extensively pale-notched than in *argenteus* but, significantly, a high proportion of Finnish *argenteus*, which might be described as 'dark type', have much reduced pale fringe-markings, their tertials being similarly patterned to *graellsii* (plate 18).

Greater-covert bar Most *smithsonianus* show a variable amount of solid dark-brown at the base of the greater coverts which is clearly visible on the resting bird (plate 28, 36 and 37), forming an additional 'bar' in flight (plate 33), similar to that shown by most first-year *graellsii*. The significance of this feature has, perhaps, been over-emphasized since it is by no means exclusive to *smithsonianus* and is often shown by *argenteus* and sometimes by *argenteus*.

Inner primaries On average, the inner-primary window of first- and second-year *smithsonianus* is slightly duller than in European Herring Gulls of the same age, adding to the uniformity of the upperwing. While there is usually no strong contrast between inner and outer webs on these feathers in either *smithsonianus* or European Herring (thus differing from *graellsii*), the ground colour of the inner primaries is rather dull brownish grey in *smithsonianus*, while more pale greyish (with less of a muddy brown tinge) in European Herring Gull. This is not a terribly useful character, of course, but it may be of some significance in evaluating contentious birds.

Confusion with *graellsii*

There are many similarities between juvenile *smithsonianus* and dark first-year *graellsii*, some of which can show a confusing combination of rather dark underparts, heavily patterned rump and uppertail-coverts and sometimes an apparently 'all-dark' tail. Most *graellsii* can, however, be quickly recognized by their more lightweight build, narrower, more pointed wings and

slimmer bill than *smithsonianus* but, since not all *smithsonianus* are 'heavyweights' (plate 5) and size is not always easily determined, the following characters should be checked:

Lack of pale window on inner primaries Much as in European Herring Gull, *smithsonianus* show a prominent pale window on the inner primaries (plate 2 and 3). In *graellsii*, the inner primaries are almost as dark as the outer.

Uniformity of underparts Generally, never matched by *graellsii* but some of the latter are potentially confusing (plate 17).

Vent and undertail-coverts The ventral area and undertail-coverts of juvenile *smithsonianus* are generally much more densely patterned than in *graellsii* (plate 7).

Pattern of rump and uppertail-coverts Most *graellsii* show an obviously whitish rump contrasting with a black tail-band but a few show a pattern and density of markings that is undeniably close to that of less heavily marked *smithsonianus*. It is all-too-easy, when concentrating too much on this one feature, to overlook the other identification clues and mistake such dark *graellsii* for *smithsonianus*.

First-winter (plate 24-58, figure 1)

With more than 90% of the records of *smithsonianus* in Europe being made up of birds in first-winter plumage, this is certainly the best-represented plumage type on the European side of the Atlantic. At least in Ireland, where the vast majority of European Herring Gulls are of the paler *argenteus* type, first-winter *smithsonianus* can be rather conspicuous amongst a mid-winter gull flock. *Smithsonianus* appears to exhibit even more individual variation than *argenteus* of the same age but even so, we had difficulty finding birds in the eastern USA that would not attract some attention in a routine search of a gull flock on the European side of the Atlantic.

Many of the characters which help differentiate juvenile *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gulls, most notably those relating to the upper- and undertail-coverts, wings and tail, remain essentially unchanged in first-winters and therefore do not need to be repeated here. Additional characters on which to concentrate when confronted with a possible first-winter *smithsonianus* include:

Uniformity of underparts By mid-winter, many first-year *smithsonianus* are a little faded and less evenly dark than they would have been as juveniles but are still more uniform below than the great majority of European Herring Gulls. The latter generally have paler, more mottled or streaked underparts but can occasion-



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24 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1999 (Pat Lonergan). Rather similar to bird in plate 36 but with predominantly first-winter scapulars. Note pale head, contrasting with uniformly dark colouration on lower hindneck, mantle and underparts.

25 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1999 (Pat Lonergan). Rather grey individual. Note absence of dark base to greater coverts and overall discontinuous pattern of scapulars.

26 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note uniform, dark underparts and typically densely patterned vent and undertail-coverts.

27 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Cobh, Cork, Ireland, 8 January 2001 (Killian Mullarney). Note new, more slate-grey coloured feathers on flanks, contrasting with older, faded, brownish juvenile feathers on belly.

28 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note uniformly dark colouration on lower hindneck continuing onto underparts and contrasting with paler head; also, note strongly bicoloured bill.

29 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note uniformly dark upper mantle and base to hindneck, contributing to pale-headed appearance.

30 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Very grey and plain individual.

31 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1998 (Pat Lonergan). On some first-winters, pale-blotched scapulars contrast strongly with rest of plumage; note also very worn tertials and inner greater coverts, almost entirely lacking pale fringes.

32 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1998 (Pat Lonergan). On this individual, first-winter scapular pattern is very regular, reminiscent of typical European Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, but note uniformly dark hindneck, mantle and underparts, densely patterned vent and undertail-coverts.

33 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Pat Lonergan). Note distinctive rump and uppertail pattern, dark greater-covert bar and pale inner primary window.

34 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argenteus*, first-winter, Cobh, Cork, Ireland, 3 January 2002 (Killian Mullarney). Occasionally, European Herring Gulls can have more saturated and consequently darker-looking brownish-grey underparts than usual. Note comparatively weak undertail-covert barring and hint of white in tail.

35 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argenteus*, first-winter, Dublin, Ireland, 14 October 1998 (Killian Mullarney). Typical bird, exhibiting evenly barred pattern of fully-moulted first-winter scapulars. Note narrow dark bars on undertail-coverts.



36 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Pat Loneragan*). Very distinctive individual with bicoloured bill, contrastingly pale head, dark lower hindneck continuous with uniformly dark underparts and many retained juvenile scapulars. Note dark base to greater coverts and dense patterning on vent and undertail-coverts. **37** American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Loneragan*). Note pronounced greater-covert bar, and that, unusually for second calendar-year *smithsonianus*, bill has acquired very little pale at base.





38 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Killian Mullarney*). Very dark-headed bird. Note rather 'plain' rear-most (second generation) scapulars; also that one inner median covert has been moulted. **39** American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Not particularly pale-headed individual but note very solid-dark colouration on lower hindneck, mantle and underparts.





40 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, first-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Very worn individual, with second-generation scapulars having pattern unlike that normally exhibited by European Herring Gulls *L. argentatus*.

ally be more uniform (and consequently darker looking), thus resembling *smithsonianus* (plate 21 and 34).

Solid darkness on lower hindneck and upper mantle Typically, *smithsonianus* exhibits a more uniformly brownish lower hindneck and upper mantle that merges with the uniform brownish underparts (plate 28 and 36).

Greyiness of breast-sides and flanks As part of the post-juvenile moult of body-feathers, many first-winter *smithsonianus* acquire plain, contrastingly slate-grey coloured feathers on the breast-sides and flanks, gradually extending to the rest of the underparts (plate 27). Possibly because of their usually more mottled underparts, European Herring Gulls undergoing the same moult show much more subtle contrast between the old (brownish) and new (more greyish) feathers.

Pale-headed appearance Many *smithsonianus* acquire a pale head in late winter as a result of wear (Howell 2001) and due to their dark body this feature may draw attention to a *smithsonianus* among a flock of European Herring Gulls. The importance of this feature has been overstated a little as only a small proportion really is pale-headed (plate 24, 29 and 36) and darker-bodied European birds are likely to also occasionally look pale-headed for precisely the same reasons (plate 16 and 21). European Herring Gulls from the eastern Baltic area are often strikingly pale-headed in winter (Klaus Malling Olsen pers comm).

Scapular pattern The range of individual variation in first-winter scapular-markings exhibited by both *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gulls, and the degree of overlap, make it very difficult to identify any particular patterns that might be considered 'exclusive'. There are, however, certain characteristic patterns in *smithsonianus* that are not so usual in their European counterparts. It is important, here, to distinguish between often-retained juvenile scapulars (usually, the rearmost larger feathers), which are plain, brownish, somewhat worn and with pointed tips, and (freshly) moulted first-winter feathers, which have broader, more rounded tips. The most distinctive of these (again, usually seen among the larger rearmost and lower row(s) of feathers) are rather dark and plain, with or without a diffuse darker centre (plate 38). Due, perhaps, to a tendency in many *smithsonianus* for the post-juvenile moult of the scapulars (in which the juvenile scapulars are replaced with first-winter feathers) to be a rather protracted process, there is often more of a variety of scapular patterns in the one bird than is generally the case in European birds (plate 25 and 31); the explanation for this is that the appearance of feathers in the same generation can change depending on the time of year they are moulted (Howell 2001). In most European Herring Gulls, the pattern of the first-winter scapulars tends to be rather consistent, each individual feather exhibiting much the same markings as the next, the overall effect

being of a series of regular transverse pale and dark bars (plate 35). However, there are many exceptions to these general tendencies and, at best, certain scapular patterns should be regarded as offering little more than marginal supporting evidence in the identification of vagrant first-year *smithsonianus* in Europe.

Underwing-coverts The uniformity of the axillaries (especially) and underwing-coverts, and the general 'smokiness' with a lack of obvious patterning, can be striking in *smithsonianus*. In *argentatus* and *argenteus*, these areas tend to be paler in tone and more mottled in texture. The underwing-coverts of *graellsii*, however, can be very like *smithsonianus* but several other differences from *smithsonianus* (see above) usually preclude serious confusion.

Bill-colour There is a tendency for both *smithsonianus* and *argentatus* to develop a pale base to the bill quite early in their first winter, with the most extreme birds approaching first-year Glaucous Gull in this respect (plate 24 and 36). In *argenteus*, the contrast in the bill pattern tends to be more subdued until later in the winter.

Second-winter (plate 41-58, figure 2)

If it often seems as if no two first-winter *smithsonianus* are quite alike, second-winter birds are even more variable. Some second-winter individuals are, at first glance, extremely first-winter-like, due to a complete lack of clear grey in the scapulars and extensively brownish underparts (plates 41, 48 and 54). Obviously pale-eyed individuals can be more easily aged but some birds do not develop a pale iris until late winter, and even then it may be difficult to discern in poor light or at moderate range (plate 43). In addition, most show more intricately and irregularly patterned greater coverts and tertial-fringes (much as second-winter European Herring Gulls), a clearly pale basal two-thirds to the bill and, at close range, the primary-tips are slightly more rounded than in first-years. Second-winters that differ more obviously from first-winters have at least some clear grey scapulars (plate 51, 53 and 55) and, much as in European Herring Gull, there is considerable individual variation between these two types.

The following characters should help resolve the identity of second-winter type *smithsonianus* in Europe:

Solid darkness on lower hindneck and upper mantle, and underbody As in first-years, there is a much greater tendency for second-year *smithsonianus* to have dense brownish colouration on the lower hindneck and upper mantle, extending onto the underparts, than there is in European Herring Gulls of the same age (plate 45, 51 and 53). This brownish 'wash' is usually less intense, more mottled than in first-years but is

often still strong enough to attract attention. Second-winter European Herring Gulls are generally much more sparsely spotted or blotched with grey-brown in these areas (plate 57).

Tertial pattern There is a tendency in second-winter *smithsonianus* for the tertials, especially the outer tertials, to average more extensively and solidly dark-centred than in European Herring Gulls of the same age, with a corresponding reduction in the extent of pale at the tips. In European Herring Gulls, the tertials are often either wholly 'barred' or have a small dark centre and broad pale tip. However, there is variation in both, and considerable overlap, so the tertial pattern should only be used in conjunction with other supporting characters. We are not able to explain why, but our observations of second-year European Herring Gulls in late summer and early autumn (plate 58) suggest that many at this time of year show darker and more *smithsonianus*-like tertials than at other times of the year.

Undertail-coverts As with younger birds, the pattern of the undertail-coverts can be very useful as an aid to identification. Many second-winter *smithsonianus* have an almost unchanged (from that of first-years) pattern of intricate or closely spaced bars, in contrast with the widely spaced bars and spots or almost unpatterned undertail-coverts of most *argentatus/argenteus*. Others have solidly dark-centred feathers (plate 42, 47 and 49), a pattern, so far we know, never found in European Herring Gulls.

Pattern of rump and uppertail Often more obvious than the undertail-coverts (described above), many second-winter *smithsonianus* mirror first-winters in showing a more heavily patterned rump and uppertail-coverts and a practically all-dark uppertail (figure 2). As the season progresses, the rump becomes paler/whiter, the white rump being acquired through moult rather than wear; moulting birds may have a patchy mixture of (new) pure-white and patterned brown feathers. Second-winter European Herring Gulls tend to have less heavily patterned rump and uppertail-coverts and many are predominantly or wholly 'white-rumped'. Paradoxically, they often have a much *more* extensively dark tail than first-winters and this alone may prompt thoughts of *smithsonianus*. While there is extensive overlap in the tail patterns of second-winter *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gulls, it seems that even the most extreme examples of the latter usually show a narrow wedge (widest at the base) or 'sliver' of white along the outer edge to the tail (shown by some *smithsonianus* too but a definite *lack* of white edges may be significant).

Bill pattern and colour The great majority of second-winters show an extensively pale-based bill, the pattern typically resembling that of immature Glaucous Gull (plate 41, 42 and 45). The colour of the bill-base is variable, sometimes flesh-pink (like most European birds) but often a more neutral greyish or horn colour, with or without a faintly greenish tinge (plate 47). The latter would be unusual in *argenteus* but is not uncommon in *argentatus*. Bill colour remains decidedly 'immature-like' throughout winter and even early spring, being brownish, pinkish or pinkish-white basally.



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41 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Very distinctive individual. Note rather Glaucous Gull *L. hyperboreus*-like demeanour and lack of any clear grey feathers in upperparts.

42 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note rather simple pattern on scapulars and tertials and lack of any barring in plumage apart from vermiculation on greater coverts; also, note diagnostic, practically solid-brown longest undertail-coverts.

43 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). As in plate 42, note simple pattern to scapulars with practically no barring. Unusually for second-winter, note dark bill.

44 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1998 (Pat Lonergan). Note extensive brown wash to underparts and dark tertials.

45 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Note dark lower hindneck extending onto underparts and rather uniform tertials.

46 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Pat Lonergan).

47 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Long Island, New York, USA, January 1992 (Pat Lonergan). Note rather greenish-toned bill, extensively dark tail and solid-brown undertail-coverts.

48 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Note rather uniformly coloured tertials.

49 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1999 (Pat Lonergan). Very dark individual. Note very uniformly patterned undertail-coverts.

50 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Pat Lonergan). Conclusive identification of individuals looking like this bird, and perhaps the bird in plate 52, would pose a challenge in Europe.

51 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Killian Mullarney). Note uniformly dark brown lower hindneck and upper mantle extending onto underparts, and tertials with limited pale markings.

52 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1998 (Pat Lonergan). Lightly marked individual, not so different from some European Herring Gulls *L. argentatus*.



53 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note rather solidly dark hindneck, extensively brown underparts and reduced pale markings on tertial-tips. Dark greater-covert panel is not exclusive to *smithsonianus*. **54** American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note rather uniform mantle and underparts and lack of barring in upperparts, a pattern seldom if ever seen in second-winter European Herring Gull *L. argentatus*.





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55 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Another difficult individual but note dark lower hindneck and tertials.

56 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, second-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1998 (Pat Lonergan)

57 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus argenteus*, second-winter, Dublin, Ireland, 30 December 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Most second-winter European Herring Gulls are rather sparsely marked on underparts, especially undertail-coverts, compared with most American Herring Gulls *L. smithsonianus* of same age.

58 European Herring Gull / Zilvermeeuw *Larus argentatus*, first-summer/second-winter, Wexford, Ireland, 27 August 1997 (Killian Mullarney). Note dark, *smithsonianus*-like tertials.

Primary pattern Like *argenteus*, but in contrast to a minority of *argenteus*, most second-winter *smithsonianus* lack a mirror on p10.

Underwing-coverts On average, more solidly dark than in European Herring Gulls.

Greater coverts Slightly darker and more uniform (less barred) than in European Herring Gulls, although there is considerable overlap.

Upperparts **a** Those birds with entirely or mostly patterned upperparts, often show less regular barring here than European Herring Gulls. The pattern of the second-winter scapulars in *smithsonianus* is highly variable and European Herring Gulls can match most patterns, so these are of little help in identification. However, a few birds have scapulars that are rather plain with a more or less broad dark shaft-streak (plate 42, 43 and 54), creating an overall pattern that we do not recognize as being within the normal range of variation exhibited by European Herring Gull; **b** those with entirely or mostly

grey (adult-like) upperparts may often show a strong contrast between the pale 'saddle' and surrounding dark hindneck, underparts and wing-coverts.

Third-winter (plate 59-72)

As indicated earlier, the proportion of identifiable birds decreases sharply with increasing age. However, there are characters shown by some (perhaps 40-50%) third-winter *smithsonianus* that appear to be diagnostic. In practice, telling second-winter from third-winter 'herring gulls' is not always easy; different parts of the bird, for instance, the tail, body, wing-coverts and bill do not necessarily develop at the same rate, so a bird with an 'advanced' tail pattern, for its age, might have a 'retarded' bill pattern. Most third-winters will have a more advanced wing pattern

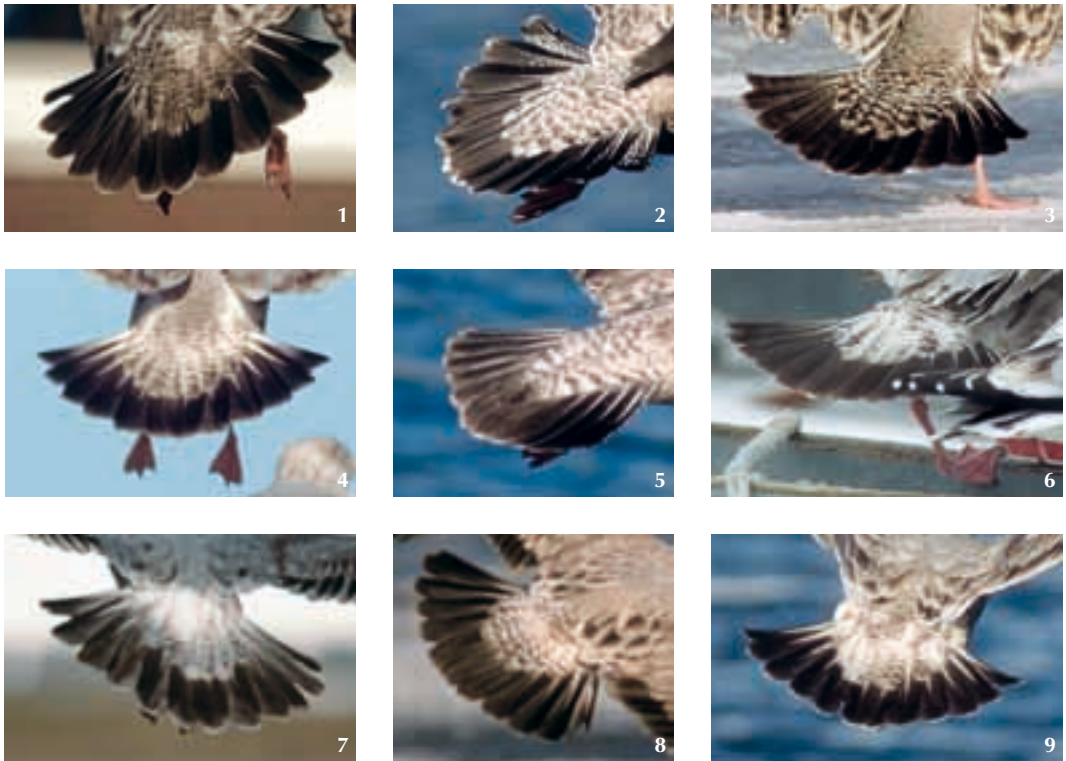


FIGURE 2 Variation in rump and tail pattern of second-winter American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus* (Pat Lonergan & Killian Mullarney). Note that tail can be as extensively dark as in many first-winters.

59 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note solid markings on tertials and extensive black in tail.

60 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Similar to bird in plate 59. Note solid markings on tertials, extensive black in tail and partially concealed discrete black spot on secondaries.

61 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note dark patch on one tertial and extensive dark in tail.

62 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Note very extensive and distinct blackish tertial-markings.

63 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan)

64 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Long Island, New York, USA, January 1992 (Pat Lonergan). Note rather dull greenish-coloured bill-base and discrete black spots on secondaries.

65 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Note extensive, solid blackish-brown in tertials, with no vermiculation.

66 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney)



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67 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Killian Mullarney)

68 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan)





69 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1999 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note dark marks on secondaries and extensive dark in tail.

70 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Rather advanced individual in some respects with unmarked adult-like secondaries. Note that tail is still rather heavily marked.





71 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Killian Mullarney). Note discrete black marks on secondaries and extensive black tail pattern.



72 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, third-winter, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (Killian Mullarney). Note extensive black markings on secondaries.

than second-winter birds, and virtually all will have adult-like grey (rather than pale brownish) inner primaries (Martin Elliott pers comm).

Tertial pattern Many show extensive, sharply defined, solid-black/blackish-brown markings towards the bases of some tertials, usually, the middle and/or outer feathers (plate 59, 62 and 65). Such definite, blackish markings as in the best-marked *smithsonianus* are seldom, if ever matched by European Herring Gulls; however, many *smithsonianus* do not have such distinctive markings and those with less well-defined, browner, more vermiculated markings (plate 63) overlap with what is commonly seen in European Herring Gulls.

Secondary pattern Unlike European Herring Gulls, many *smithsonianus* of this age and older have well-defined black markings on the secondaries. The extent of this feature varies individually; on some birds, virtually every feather is marked with black (plate 72) while, at the other extreme, the secondaries are entirely adult-like (plate 70). Many, however, are in-between and show a limited extent of clean black on just a few secondary-feathers (plate 60 and 71) but are nevertheless distinctive. In European Herring Gulls of the same age, the secondaries are often irregularly vermiculated brownish; they only rarely show such discrete black markings.

Tail pattern The tail pattern varies from being very extensively black, like many second-winter birds, to being practically all white with just one or two dark smudges or spots. On many, an irregular pattern of rather distinct solid-black spots (plate 71) is somehow eye-catchingly different from patterns usually seen in European birds, and can recall the 'piano-key'-type tail pattern of a well-marked second-winter Ring-billed Gull *L. delawarensis*. While a few third-winter-type European Herring Gulls may show similar markings,

most have less clear-cut, and more diffuse or vermiculated rectrix-markings.

Bill colour Similar to European Herring Gulls of the same age (pinkish/pale straw with a broad dark gonydeal band) but quite a few have a pale greenish-tinged bill (plate 64), a colour not usually seen in *argenteus*, but which is not unusual in *argenteus*-types.

Head- and breast-markings The dark head, neck and breast-markings of third-winter types average heavier and more blotchy than in European Herring Gulls, especially *argenteus*, on which these markings tend to be paler and less extensive. On the most heavily marked birds, the density of dark spotting, especially on the hindneck and breast, is strikingly different from anything usually seen in Europe but a few 'dark' sub-adult *argenteus* can be similar.

Primary pattern a At rest: In line with their 'retarded' or 'immature' look, many third-winter *smithsonianus* do not show any obvious white primary tips, while these are usually distinct in third-winter *argenteus* (at least on p6) and especially *argenteus*; **b** In flight: There is much overlap in the primary pattern, but a few third-winter *smithsonianus*, at least in Newfoundland, already show long grey tongues up to and including p10 (on which the tongue may reach down for half the feather length or even more along the inner web), while also showing a complete black band on p5, and sometimes even dark markings on p4 (Peter Adriaens in litt). If a third-winter bird with this type of primary pattern (best seen from below) also retains a lot of brown markings on the wing-coverts/tertials, the combination of all of these characters may be helpful. For instance, third-winter *argenteus* do not have such long grey tongues on p9-10 (p10 normally does not have much of a grey tongue at all at this age), nor predominantly brown wing-coverts. Third-winter *argenteus* may show the long tongues and brown wing-coverts but will, in

that case, be less inclined to show a complete black band on p5, and may have darker grey upperparts. While the primary pattern in third-winter birds is a complex character (eg, also because intergrades *argenteus* x *argentatus* have to be taken into account), it may be worth looking at and documenting when faced with a suspected third-winter *smithsonianus* in Europe.

We would like to emphasize that some third-winter *smithsonianus* can appear very similar to second-winter European Herring Gull. The problem/pitfall may be as follows: an observer may encounter a Herring Gull that attracts his attention because of its dark underparts and hindneck, dark greater coverts and tertials, a lot of dark in the tail, contrastingly pale grey saddle, etc. He may be tempted to believe that he is looking at a second-winter *smithsonianus*, but when he looks more closely, the tail is certainly not all-dark, and the upper- and undertail-coverts are hardly marked at all. Therefore, he dismisses the bird as an odd (dark) second-winter European Herring Gull – while in fact, it was a perfectly typical third-winter *smithsonianus*... Correct ageing is a critical first step in the identification process, but in third-winter birds, it may at times only be possible when the bird is seen in flight (when the inner primaries can be seen).

Fourth-winter and older (plate 73-85, figure 3)

A surprisingly high proportion of the essentially adult-like *smithsonianus* we observed in Massachusetts in January-February exhibited features indicative of immaturity such as dark markings on the bill, dark-centred primary coverts or dark spots on the secondaries, tertials and rectrices. One explanation for the comparative abundance of 'near-adult' types amongst the birds we studied in Massachusetts might be that, for some reason, this is a preferred wintering area for four- to five-year-old birds. The high proportion of 'near-adult' types might also indicate that *smithsonianus*, on average, takes significantly longer to acquire a fully adult appearance (without vestiges of immaturity) than does European Herring Gull. Whatever the reason, we have no way of knowing the precise age of these birds but, in view of their overall similarity to adults, we assume that most are at least in their fourth winter and we prefer, therefore, to include them in an 'adult-type' category. At present, these individuals exhibiting certain characteristic vestiges of immaturity in combination with an otherwise essentially adult-like appearance may be the only adult-type *smithsonianus* that can be conclusively identified in Europe.

There has been some suggestion that adult *smithsonianus* have paler upperparts than *argenteus*. Never having had a chance to compare adult *smithsonianus* directly with European Herring Gulls, it is difficult to evaluate the practical usefulness of this feature in the field. In general, the upperparts of *smithsonianus* are pale grey (Kodak grey scale 4.0-4.5), similar in tone to *argenteus* and Ring-billed Gull and clearly paler than mean *argentatus* (Howell & Elliott 2001). However, we did note some variation in upperpart colouration, even in small groups of birds, with a few individuals slightly darker than the majority. The paleness of the upperparts in many *smithsonianus* may, however, be of greater significance when compared with *argentatus*.

The following features may be of more practical use in identification of near-adult and adult *smithsonianus*.

Tertial-spots One feature that was a surprise to us was the presence in a small percentage (5-10%) of near-adults (and possibly a few adults?) of discrete black 'ink-spots' on one or more of the tertials (plate 75, 76 and 79, figure 3). These spots appear to be linked to the extensive dark markings shown by many third-winters, and are similar in extent to the dark spots exhibited by some second-winter Common *L. canus canus* and Ring-billed Gulls. They can, at times, be hidden by the overlying tertial(s) and may only become visible if the feathers are displaced by wind or while preening. In other individuals, they are extensive and can form a regular 'stepping stone-like' pattern across the tertials. While this pattern is usually associated with other traces of immaturity, such as a band on the bill or dark-centred primary coverts, a few apparently 'perfect' adults may show one or two small black tertial-spots (plate 75). We have never observed equivalent markings in adult or near-adult European Herring Gulls although it appears that similar markings may occur in some forms of Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* (plate 22 in Dubois 2001, pers obs). We recommend that any 'light-mantled' herring gull in Europe exhibiting this character should certainly receive detailed scrutiny.

Secondary-spots Occasional individuals in this age category show small, well-defined black spots on otherwise adult-like secondaries (plate 80 and 82). This feature is much more likely to be detected in photographs than in the field but, when present, may be a diagnostic indicator of *smithsonianus*.

Wing-tip pattern Attention has been drawn to a potential difference in wing-tip pattern between *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gulls (Millington & Garner 1998), with at least some birds, apparently originating in north-eastern Canada, having paler and longer grey tongues along the inner web of the outer primaries than in typical *argenteus* (but not unlike some *argentatus*). Wing-tip pattern of *smithsonianus* is known to be variable: Jonsson & Mactavish (2001) described significant



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73 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note solid-black 'patch' on middle tertial and extensive solid-black on primary coverts.

74 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 1999 (*Pat Lonergan*). Similar to bird in plate 77 and 83.

75 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Killian Mullarney*). Note small tertial-spot on this otherwise apparently 'full' adult.

76 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult or near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note tertial-spot and black on primary coverts.

77 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult or near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Killian Mullarney*). Note rather blotchy head pattern and fine shaft-streaks on primary coverts.

78 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note dark in primary coverts.

differences in wing-tip pattern between Newfoundland and Niagara *smithsonianus* and proposed that these populations represent two distinct types. In the original draft of this paper submitted to the editors of Dutch Birding we made an attempt to identify potentially useful differences in wing-tip pattern between *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gulls. However, aware of the fact that long-term studies of known-age *argenteus* and *graellsii* in Britain (Martin Elliott pers comm) indicate that wing-tip pattern can continue to change well beyond the point at which they acquire 'adult' plumage, we doubted that any of our conclusions on this particular aspect of *smithsonianus* identification would prove to be of much practical value. More recently, we became aware that a detailed paper on wing-tip pattern differences between adult *smithsonianus* and European Herring Gull was being prepared by Peter Adriaens and Bruce Mactavish. We are confident that these authors will demonstrate the potential usefulness of wing-tip pattern differences far more successfully than we managed to do and we eagerly await publication of their findings in a forthcoming issue of Dutch Birding.

Primary coverts A rather high proportion (10-15%) of 'adult' and near-adult birds exhibit dark markings on the primary coverts. These vary from extremely fine black shaft-streaks (plate 74, 77 and 83) to broader, more obvious, black lozenge-shaped marks (plate 76, 78 and 84). Dark primary-covert-markings are sometimes shown by a few adult and often by near-adult *argenteus* (Grant 1986) but they tend not to be as well defined and neat, or as black, as in many *smithsonianus*.

Winter head-markings The pattern of winter head-streaking in adults and near-adults often appears different in *smithsonianus* – being blotchier with less well-defined streaks than in *argentatus/argenteus* (plate 74, 77 and 83). However, as with many of the other features, this is variable and should be used with caution.

Bill pattern A high proportion of the near-adult *smithsonianus* we studied in Massachusetts in January-February had more extensive blackish markings around the gonydeal area of one or both mandibles than we are used to seeing in European Herring Gulls at the same time of year. Dark markings on the bill in all of these large gulls are linked with both immaturity and with season (with adults developing a dark spot in winter), so their significance in the context of identifying a vagrant in Europe is doubtful.

Voice

While at this stage we do not anticipate voice characteristics having a major bearing on the identification of vagrants, we have registered a distinctly deeper tone, and possibly a subtly different repertoire compared with *argenteus* with which we are most familiar. Whether this is primarily a function of body size and whether the differences are as pronounced in comparison with *argentatus* is unclear and requires further research.

Hybrids

While 'larophiles' on the West Coast of North America have had to make sense of an extraordinary variety of hybrid gulls for many years, and have now gained sufficient confidence to be able to guess the parentage of many of them, their equivalent in Europe is lagging behind in this particular field. With presumed hybrids apparently being of much more exceptional occurrence in Europe than on the West coast of North America it is difficult for any individual to gain a broad enough perspective on the problem to begin to make sense of it. The extent to which hybrid gulls in Europe may be complicating our attempts to identify *smithsonianus* on this side of the Atlantic can only be guessed at, and until we have a clearer understanding of the limits of variation within 'pure' *smithsonianus* it is likely to remain so.

Some first-winter and second-winter presumed hybrids Glaucous x European Herring Gull bear a strong superficial resemblance to *smithsonianus*, especially when their mix of characters combines the size, rather uniform plumage, bill colouration and general demeanour of Glaucous with the dark wing-tip and tail pattern of European Herring. Most, however, possess obvious clues in their appearance to their hybrid origin, such as a much reduced or washed-out tail-band and secondary-bar, obvious pale fringes to the primary-tips or, at rest, a lighter overall tone to the tertials than a typical European Herring; others, however are not so obvious and correct identification may require very critical consideration indeed. In North America, hybrids Glaucous x *smithsonianus* (so-called 'Nelson's Gull') occur; these are usually more similar to Glaucous than to *smithsonianus* (Bruce Mactavish in litt) but there is evidence that different populations of *smithsonianus* and Glaucous produce different looking hybrids, some of which look more like pale *smithsonianus* but with low contrast between tertials and folded primaries and rest of upperparts (Bruce Mactavish in litt). At least two birds believed to be second-winter *smithsonianus* recorded in Ireland were initially thought to be hybrids Glaucous x European Herring until more detailed examination indicated that their Glaucous-like character was quite compatible with typical second-winter *smithsonianus*.

Conclusion

With a total of around 70 accepted or likely to be accepted records of *smithsonianus* in Europe



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79 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Killian Mullarney*). Note diagnostic small but well-defined black ‘ink-spots’ on two tertials.

80 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, fourth-winter-type, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note solid-black markings on primary coverts and well-defined black spots on secondaries and central rectrices.

81 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note black shaft-streak on outer primary coverts and blackish spot on central rectrices.

82 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note black shaft-streak on outer primary coverts, very well-defined black spot on four secondaries and blackish markings on central rectrices.

since 1986 (most of which have been found in under-watched Ireland), it is clear that *smithsonianus* is occurring regularly on the European side of the Atlantic Ocean. We hope this paper will form a baseline for further study on both sides of the Atlantic. The sporadic nature of our contact with large numbers of *smithsonianus* undoubtedly limits our work but we trust that readers of this paper who have more experience

with this taxon will not be reticent about clarifying any aspects we may have unintentionally misrepresented. There is, in particular, a need to develop further and refine the criteria for identifying sub-adult and adult *smithsonianus*, age categories still hardly recorded in Europe but which, surely, must occur more frequently? The other major challenge, we feel, is to gain a clearer picture of variation in juvenile *smithso-*

nianus, particularly the birds at the lighter end of the range. This would help us determine the identity of a number birds already observed in Europe which have closely resembled what might be described as 'light *smithsonianus*', but which have exhibited an ambiguous, or more *argentatus*-like tail pattern and/or upper- and undertail-covert markings. Some, it appears, may be hybrids but if so, what is the parentage? Is it possible that *smithsonianus* has already entered the European Herring Gull gene pool, and could this be the explanation for the appearance of some of the more perplexing birds? We suggest that a thorough investigation of morphological variation in the Icelandic Herring Gull population, combined with judicious sampling and analysis of genetic material could help answer some of these questions.

It is good to hear that *smithsonianus* is, at last, the subject of some new taxonomic studies being carried out by North American research teams (Pierre-André Crochet in litt). Of course, we do not know what this work will entail, but we can speculate as to the advances that might be made if it attempted to evaluate whether morphologi-

cally distinct 'types' (Jonsson & Mactavish 2001) warranted taxonomic distinction. We can also imagine how a large-scale colour-ringing project might stimulate great interest in observing what these (and other, yet-to-be-identified?) types look like as immatures, and where they go outside the breeding season, just as it has in Europe.

Finally, we are very interested in receiving feedback, both positive and negative, from observers whose experience of any of the taxa discussed here is complementary to our own. Increasingly, in recent years, it has been the pooling of information and exchanging of ideas that has been responsible for advancing our understanding of this most challenging group.

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83 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (Pat Lonergan). Note rather blotchy head pattern and very fine blackish shaft-streaks on primary coverts.





84 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2001 (*Pat Lonergan*). Note very well-defined, solid-black centre to primary coverts.

85 American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, adult or near-adult, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, February 1999 (*Killian Mullarney*)





FIGURE 3 Variation in black spots on tertials of adult or near-adult American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus* (Pat Lonergan & Killian Mullarney)

Millington, Paul Moore, John Murphy, Rudy Offereins, Jari Peltomäki, Peter Pyle, Martin Reid, David Sibley, Roy Smith, Norman van Swelm, Alyn Walsh and Jim Wilson. We are especially grateful to Bruce Mactavish, who has been a constant and enthusiastic source of information related to the identification of *smithsonianus*. We also want to thank Peter Adriaens, André van Loon, DK and Magnus Robb who, in performing their duties as members of the Dutch Birding editorial board, suggested many improvements to this paper. Visa Rauste was most helpful in providing an excellent range of photographs of juvenile Finnish *argentatus*, for reference. Pierre-André Crochet kindly advised us on the latest results in the field of mtDNA research on *smithsonianus* and related taxa.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Peter J Grant, whose life-long dedication to clarifying the problems associated with gull identification was such a powerful inspiration, and 'opened the door' for the rest of us.

Samenvatting

HERKENNING VAN AMERIKAANSE ZILVERMEEUW VANUIT WEST-EUROPEES PERSPECTIEF Met tot nu toe c 70 gevallen in Europa is Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus* hier een vrij regelmatige dwaalgast, vooral in Ierland. Een uitgebreid artikel over de herkenning van deze soort was tot op heden echter nog nooit verschenen. Dit artikel wil deze leegte opvullen en bovendien met een groot aantal foto's een idee geven van de gebruikelijke variatie bij de soort. Er wordt voornamelijk aandacht besteed aan de onvolwassen kleden. Het is belangrijk te onthouden dat de hier beschreven en geïllustreerde variatie uitsluitend betrekking heeft op vogels van de oostkust van Noord-Amerika.

Er wordt ingegaan op de verschillen met Zilvermeeuw *L. argentatus*, van zowel de ondersoort *L. a. argentatus* als *L. a. argentatus*, en Kleine Mantelmeeuw *L. fuscus*. De auteurs schatten dat c 90% van de eerstejaars vogels aan de oostkust van Amerika voldoende verschilt van Europese Zilvermeeuw om herkenbaar te zijn in Europa. Dit is ook zo voor c 70% van de tweede-winter- en c 40-50% van de derde-wintervogels. Om de determinatie hard te maken in Europa, zullen foto's meestal onontbeerlijk zijn.

Juveniel

Naast grootte en bouw (in alle kleden), zijn de volgende kleeckenmerken de belangrijkste:

- een grotendeels donkere staart
- (zeer) dichte bandering op de anaalstreek én onderstaartdekveren
- (zeer) dicht gebandeerde stuit en bovenstaartdekveren, die in grondkleur niet veel bleker zijn dan de rest van de bovendelen
- effen donkere onderdelen
- dunnere lichte randen aan de schouderveren
- donkerdere, meer effen tertials
- een donkere band over de (bases van de) grote dekveren
- uniform donkere ondervleugeldekenveren
- iets donker gekleurde binnenste handpennen

Kleine Mantelmeeuw verschilt door de donkerdere binnenste handpennen, de wittere stuit en bovenstaartdekveren en de meer gestreepte onderdelen.

Eerste-winter

De meeste kenmerken zijn dezelfde als bij juveniel, behalve:

- effen donkere achterhals en bovenmantel
- een variabel aantal vuil-grijze veren op zijborst en flanken (een gevolg van lichaamsrui)
- bleke kop
- meestal geen regelmatig gebandeerd patroon op schouderveren
- soms een opvallend roze snavelbasis

Tweede-winter

Bij nogal veel Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuwen van deze leeftijd lijkt het verenkleed nog sterk op dat van eerste-winter. De iris is vaak echter al bleek, de handpentoppen zijn meer afgerond en de tekening op de tertials en grote dekveren is fijner en 'ingewikkelder'. De belangrijkste verschillen met Zilvermeeuw zijn:

- effen donkere achterhals, bovenmantel en onderdelen
- effen donkere tertials, met slechts smalle lichte toppen
- (zeer) dichte bandering op onderstaartdekveren (zoals bij eerstejaars)
- (zeer) dichte bandering op stuit en bovenstaartdekveren
- een vrijwel volledig donkere staart
- snavel met uitgebreid roze, vuilbruine of vuilgrijze basis, soms met iets groene tint
- meestal geen witte spiegel op p10
- meer uniform donkere ondervleugeldekenveren
- donkerdere en meer effen grote dekveren
- ofwel rommelige, 'onvolwassen' bovendelen, ofwel bleekgrijs zadel dat afsteekt tegen de donkere onderdelen en dekveren.

Derde-winter

Opnieuw zien nogal wat Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuwen van deze leeftijd er schijnbaar jonger uit, als tweede-winter. Sommige zijn in zit echter op leeftijd te brengen aan de hand van de (kleine) witte handpentoppen. In vlucht is de kleur van de binnenste handpennen een diagnostisch leeftijdskenmerk: bruin of vuilgrijs bij tweede-winter, blauwgrijs met brede witte toppen bij derde-winter. De belangrijkste kenmerken:

- diep-zwarte of zeer zwart-bruine vlekken op tertials

- scherp afgescheiden, zwarte centra op armpennen
- scherp afgescheiden, zwarte vlekken op staart; soms is de staart nog grotendeels zwart
- zeer donkere kop, hals en borst
- bij sommige vogels is het handpenpatroon mogelijk ook van belang.

Vierde-winter

Sommige vogels van deze leeftijd zijn nog herkenbaar aan:

- zwarte 'inktvlekken' op tertials
- scherp afgescheiden, zwarte vlekken op armpennen
- scherp afgescheiden, zwarte tekening op handpendekveren
- donkerdere, meer effen tekening op kop en borst
- mogelijk ook handpenpatroon.

Verder wordt ook nog ingegaan op mogelijke verwarring met hybriden Grote Burgemeester x Zilvermeeuw *L. hyperboreus* x *argentatus*.

Een uitgebreid artikel over de herkenning van adulte vogels zal later dit jaar in Dutch Birding verschijnen.

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86 STOP PRESS! American Herring Gull / Amerikaanse Zilvermeeuw *Larus smithsonianus*, juvenile moulting to first-winter, Nimmo's Pier, Galway, Ireland, 24 January 2004 (*Pat Lonergan*). They don't come much more distinctive than this!

