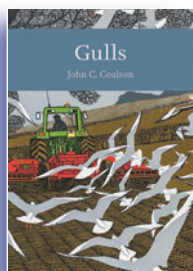


# REVIEWS



**Gulls** By John Coulson. William Collins, London. 2019. ISBN 978-0-008-20143-2 (softback) 978-0-008-20142-5 (hardback). 498 pages, numerous colour photographs and figures. Hardback, £65.00. Softback, £35.00.

*Gulls* is a weighty addition to the New Naturalist series, running to almost 500 densely-worded pages (including appendices and indices). Given the lengthy research career of its author, whose peer-reviewed papers on gulls span seven decades, anything shorter would perhaps have been surprising. But what of the information contained therein?

*Gulls* focuses on species found in Britain and Ireland. There is an overview chapter, setting the scene in 42 pages, which is followed by nine chapters on particular species. These vary a lot in length and depth. The longest chapters are devoted to the Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* and the Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, with 64 and 58 pages respectively. At the other extreme, the Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* has six pages and the Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* has eight. These discrepancies are partly connected to how common, widespread and well-studied each species is in Britain and Ireland, but also appear to be driven by the extent of the author's own research on each. There are extensive descriptions of the work carried out by Coulson and his students, which are very interesting to read from a historical perspective. However, I sometimes felt that the broader context was lost; although I came away feeling far better educated about the status of Herring Gulls on the Isle of May, Scotland, in the 1970s, for example, I would have liked to have seen these detailed accounts discussed in light of more recent findings.

A chapter on rare gulls follows the individual species chapters, which in turn leads on to an account of the methods used to study gulls, the author's take on urban gulls and finally his views on conservation, management and exploitation of gulls. Coulson is highly critical of the scientific basis underpinning the conservation status assigned to gull species in Britain and Ireland. He is also dismissive of various gull control techniques, including those sometimes discussed in the media during the summer months, when urban gulls can make headlines for all the wrong reasons.

At times I had the impression that Coulson did not much like the species he has spent so much of his life working on, and I especially felt this for Herring Gulls. He writes of the species 'invading' towns and cities, and uses pejorative language elsewhere too. Perhaps it does not matter whether a scientist likes their study species, and even if they once did, perhaps it is only natural to fall out of love with them after several decades, but I found it a little unexpected nonetheless.

The book could have done with a closer editorial eye. There are a number of small slips. For example, the JNCC (the UK's statutory advisor to the government on nature conservation) is referred to as the Joint Nature Conservancy Council on more than one occasion (confusing its actual name, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, with that of its predecessor, the Nature Conservancy Council), and the (human) population of Britain and Ireland in 2017 shrinks from 76 million on page 374 to 74 million on page 416. Less forgivable, however, are the mistakes in the science. For instance, Coulson states that a limitation of using GPS tags to track gulls' movements is that birds

need to be recaptured and the tag retrieved to access the data. While this is true for some types of tags, remote-download versions have been available and widely used in gull research (including in studies cited in the book's bibliography) for a number of years.

The quality of the photos is also poor in some places. While certain images are excellent and suitably illustrate the points Coulson makes, in others the birds are hard to see, and in a few instances, the species name or age given in the image caption is incorrect. There are also large numbers of line graphs and bar charts, which in many cases provide detailed results of the author's own studies at particular sites. While interesting, I felt that some of the space taken up by these figures could have been better used for informative figures from more recent research, much of which complements and builds on Coulson's own work.

***Gulls Simplified: A Comparative Approach to Identification*** By Kevin Karlson and Pete Dunne. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 2018. ISBN 978-069-115-694-1. 208 pages and numerous colour photographs. Softback, £20.00.

This book looks at identification of North American gulls by shape and structure, before dwelling on finer plumage characteristics. It starts "Gulls? No waaaayy-eeeeeeeeee!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!", which rather sets the tone for the rest of the book; chatty, laid back and informal, yet educational.

Author Pete Dunne realised he was better able to identify a Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* at 200 yards than at 20 feet, where he was getting bogged down by ageing the bird and looking at every feather in turn. I can relate to this point when thinking about species such as Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* here in the UK, or Lesser Black-backed Gull versus Great Black-backed Gull *L. marinus*: structure, shape, or silhouette is often a good place to start. It is acknowledged early on that you could argue that gulls cannot be simplified, but

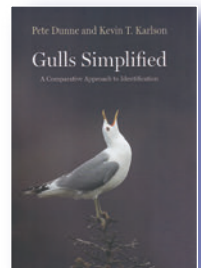
Coulson's long-view is, however, very interesting and instructive. It gives real insight into the difficulties of becoming an ornithologist at all in his youth, when techniques that we can take for granted today, such as ringing, were hard to learn and implement effectively. You are left with a sense of Coulson as a pioneer in his field; his legacy including important innovations such as colour ringing, which revolutionised seabird research. His first-hand accounts of various UK culling programmes are also thought-provoking, especially in light of recent controversial changes to the licensing of lethal control of large gulls in England.

Overall, *Gulls* is an interesting addition to the bookshelf, especially if you are seeking historical information on these sometimes maligned and misunderstood species.

**Viola Ross-Smith**

at the same time that the pathway to identification can be. Gull nuts subconsciously do it all the time, narrowing down the options on first impressions of size and shape and the likelihood of the species being where you have seen it. It is when we start overthinking it that we tie ourselves in knots! The book's approach also tries to turn every gull you see into something rarer! So, overall it is a good place to start if you want to take the first steps into the wonderful (warning: addictive) world of gull identification.

Bringing the book to life, pages six to nine are full of gull profiles - the first two pages are cut-out photographs, the latter two are those same images in silhouette. This is something I found particularly interesting to study and made me appreciate my own habits when first seeing a gull. These pages are followed by illustrated anatomical terms and helpfully, are repeated throughout, making the book highly accessible. For example, on a given species page, where the text mentions the 'tertials' or 'wing coverts', the accompanying image is annotated to show readers where those parts of the gull are, so you do not have to keep flicking back to the introductory pages.



Why would it need pointers to plumage characteristics if we are only looking at structure? Well, when we delve into the species accounts, this book does not underestimate the need to look at plumage and does go into detail regarding within-species variation of plumages of similarly aged gulls. However, ageing is pared back, and this could be the point where *Gulls Simplified* becomes too simplified. The choices are 1) immature, 2) sub-adult and 3) adult (breeding/non-breeding). When you really get into gulls, the ageing tends to be rather more precise, especially in larger gulls, but then, who is this book for? This approach is accurate enough to understand the plumage development, and the month and year that each photograph was taken is included in the caption, allowing the exact age of the gull in question to be deduced.

In addition to structural and plumage descriptions, the species accounts use distribution maps, some behavioural notes (which bring the species' 'character' to life), and features to look out for when dealing with potential confusion species. The style of writing feels chatting with a friend, rather than being lectured on the finer points of gull identification and the descriptions provided are often quite amusing to read! The layout, with chunks of information, allows you to dip in and out of the text and photographs (with their informative captions) with ease.

Ah the images... The cover sets a high standard and the full-page images within are simply stunning too. OK, if I have to choose - the Ring-billed Gull *L. delawarensis* by John McNamara on page 32 is probably a personal favourite. The majority of photographs are by Kevin T. Karlson and make for a beautifully illustrated publication. If I were being very picky, it would be nice not to have the same images repeated - I would have hoped there would be enough photos out there to show various points without recycling them. But overall, the images really are perfectly chosen to explain a point being made in the text and many are fascinating. Especially those with mixed flocks in the same frame allowing direct comparisons.

These images teamed with the friendly style of writing make you want to read and study every corner of this book, every paragraph, every caption, which is lucky really, because towards the back of the book is a photographic quiz! Oh yes, and not only is it great fun, but the answers reiterate the points made earlier in the book and put all we have learnt into practise.

From a non-North American perspective, you will need to ignore some of the American spelling, for example the colour 'gray' and the term 'molt' - ironically two of the most frequently used words in the world of gull identification! And for sections on hybrid and rarer species to North America, you need to remember the context of location and what might be relevant to where you are. This leads onto species names which may cause some confusion for those who do not know the quirks in common bird names. For example, 'their' Herring Gulls become American Herring Gulls *L. smithsonianus* when they visit the UK and are a distinct species to 'our' European Herring Gull *L. argentatus*. Also, 'Iceland' Gull is our 'Kumlien's' Gull *L. glaucoides kumlieni* and 'our' Common Gulls *L. canus* are their Mew Gulls - the latter two pairs being separate races. Overall though, it is a refreshingly uncomplicated read and I often find myself browsing through the pages again and again.

This is a book aimed to complement other gull books on the bookshelf (even for the American audiences). It is an enjoyable read, easy on the eye and for those of us who are gull mad, it makes us look at gulls from a simplified perspective once more. It is a valuable and enjoyable resource that I would highly recommend to those tentatively approaching gull identification in North America. For those who are already hooked and from further afield, searching for vagrant gulls outside North America, it is also of interest. It really is a lovely book that sits proudly between my other gull books... Well, it is meant to, but it spends most of its time on the floor next to my bed within easy reach for night-time reading!

**Sarah Harris**