

## Bird Beat # 72

### Gulls vs. Terns

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(Photo credits below)

I consider myself gull-challenged. Though I may be slightly better at gull identification than those who consider all gulls to be of the species 'seagull', I admit to a near complete mental block when it comes to identifying sub-adult gulls. I like to think that I am better with tern identification, but it is likely that I am just as bad.

Tern ID is a bit easier than gull ID mainly due to the fact that terns reach adult plumage more rapidly than gulls (by their third year) and look very adult-like by their second year.

Large gulls can take up to 4 years to reach adult plumage with each year having a very particular look. This makes it easier to discern a gull's age for those who possess an encyclopedic understanding of gulls and their plumages, but it can cause a large amount of confusion for basic identification if you aren't as well versed. Not only does each species have 4 years' worth of plumages, but each may also have a different winter and summer plumage leaving you with eight distinct looks to know. No problem, right!?

Before you attempt to dive down the rabbit hole of species-specific identification, start with the basics. What makes a tern a tern and a gull a gull? After all, they do look a lot alike... white fronts with darker backs with a tendency towards the same coastal habitats. To illustrate the differences between the two, I have picked two of our most common species; Forester's tern and ring-billed gull. I picked photos of the birds flying as I believe flight profiles and habits are the easiest way to tell them apart.



*Forester's Tern- Jonathan Irons*



*Ring-billed gull- Jonathan Irons*

Though I know it is difficult, attempt to disregard color and light-and-dark patterns. Both gulls and terns may have black on their heads and wing tips, different colored legs, different colored bills, etc., but there are structural features that will help you separate the two more reliably. When I see a gull-like bird, I look first at the shape of the wings, body, and tail. Gulls are usually much stouter than terns with thick bodies, wings, and blunt or rounded tails. Terns have slenderer pointed-wings, slimmer bodies, and often forked tails. Next, I look at the bill. As you can see from the photos, the tern's bill is slim and pointed and the gull's thick and blunt.

Finally, I look at the bird's legs. Terns tend to have short, thin little legs and gulls long, thick ones. Oh yeah, don't forget about the gull-billed tern, because we weren't already confused enough without something that looks like a cross between both.

If all else fails and you find yourself stumped, be like me... give up and go birding in the woods. 😊