

Winter Gull Identification Challenges at Carlyle Lake and Melvin Price Locks and Dam in Illinois

By Dan Kassebaum

Identification of the large white-headed gulls can make for exciting birding in late winter.

Given the complexity of plumages within the American Herring Gull complex (*Larus argentatus*), documenting potential vagrant gulls becomes quite a challenge.

Included here are photos of interesting gulls observed during the 2008-2009 winter season at Carlyle Lake, Clinton County and the Melvin Price Locks and Dam, Madison County. Each of the birds is unique in that the field marks suggest an identification other than American Herring Gull. As of yet, none of the records has been evaluated by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC), and all tentative identifications are still open to further research and debate.

GULL # 1

25 January 2009, Melvin Price Locks and Dam, Madison County: In the field, this was a very clean bird with an unmarked head, which is atypical for American Herring Gull in late January. The iris was dark and the legs were straw yellow. Compared with the nearby American Herring Gulls, the bird was similar in size, but the bill seemed narrow and did not display a strong gonydeal angle. In flight, P9-P10 had large white mirrors, and the tongues extended well into the black of the primaries. These features match best with Caspian Gull (*L. cachinnans*), a species from eastern Europe and Central Asia. This represents an outlandish identification, but I'm at a loss to offer any other suggestion.

Figure 1. *Caspian Gull?* Note the clean white head and underparts. Photo taken 25 January 2009 at the Melvin Price L&D, Madison County by Dan Kassebaum.



Figure 2. *Caspian Gull?* In flight, this bird displayed large white mirrors on P9 and P10 and pale tongues that extended well into the black of the outer primaries. Photo taken 25 January 2009 at the Melvin Price L&D, Madison County by Dan Kassebaum.