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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by **Cheryl Bastedo**

Glaucous-winged Gulls

Sitting in the sun at Montague Beach recently I was scanning the area with binoculars when I saw a gull. There was something dark hanging down its very white chest. I kept telling it to turn around so I could have a better look. A slight turning and I realized it had two legs of a purple sea star and part of the body in its mouth, it was the other three legs that were hanging out. For the next half hour I stayed fascinated as the gull slowly swallowed the sea star, turning a little more toward me with each gulp until the finale happened right in full frontal view. I asked the gull if it could still fly and it turned its back to me, waddled into the water and swam away. Of course, my curiosity was piqued to know more about these common birds around our shores.

Aside from watching gulls I really do not know much about them except they seem to make themselves very scarce around the local eagles nest from egg laying to fledging, not wanting to be a convenient meal. The first thing I had to do was change the title of this article from "Sea Gulls" because I read in "Birds of Coastal BC", by Nancy Baron & John Acorn, that there is no such species as the 'sea gull'

There are multiple species of gulls that hang out on our shores and identification is surprisingly difficult, with several species being very similar, some interbreeding, and changes of plumage during breeding, maturing, and season. Also, it takes three years for them to achieve full adult plumage.

It is at this point that I had to make a second change to the title because 'The Active Page' couldn't possibly print such a long article as it would be if I tried to include all gulls. Since I am fairly sure the gull I watched so closely was a Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*), I will concentrate on it.

About 26 inches high, big-billed, with gray wing tips, this gull is very common along the BC coast. Like all gulls, they fly gracefully, eat voraciously and make many sounds and use body language when dealing with each other. Identification is complicated by interbreeding with Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*), which produces birds with characteristics of both species; the hybrid can closely resemble Thayer's Gulls (*Larus thayeri*). Adding to the identification challenge are the Glaucous Gulls, which are rare but may show up during winter; they look like Glaucous-winged Gulls but have white wing tips and yellow eyes. In winter, Glaucous-winged Gull adults have much gray-brown mottling on the head, neck, and chest. At the end of the first and second winters, plumage may be very whitish. The gray mantle colour of the adult begins to appear in the second winter, when the parts of the wings, head, breast, and tail are mottled grayish-buff. Third-winter birds resemble adults but retain a gray band on the tail and are more mottled on the head and chest. In adults, the heavy bill is yellow with a red spot on the lower mandible; in first-winter birds, it is entirely black. Older immatures have an irregular dark tip to the bill that is not sharply separated from the pale base. The legs are pink in all plumages, brightest in breeding adults. Eye colour varies from yellow to brown.

Glaucous-winged Gulls will take a variety of food including live animals as well as carrion and garbage. It has been

known to kill and eat rabbits and pigeons and Glaucous-winged Gull chicks.

Glaucous-winged Gulls range from the Aleutian Islands and the western and southern coasts of Alaska south to northwestern Washington, and south along Pacific Coast to Baja California in winter.

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Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: Why doesn't tape stick to an ice cube? Well, let's get to the crux of this question. Why would you *want* to stick tape to an ice cube? We could give you all sorts of scientific reasons involving the biochemistry of 'stickiness' and the physics of ice, but really, what's the point? Listen, as you can tell, we're getting to the bottom of the barrel when it comes to Natural Mysteries. So help us out here. Send us a question. An intriguing question about the world around us on Galiano. And we'll come up with an answer for you. Usually.

This month's Natural Mystery: And this is the last question to do with stickiness. Then, we really must move on. Why don't spiders stick to their own webs?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. How? Just send us an email at galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Visit our website at <http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.