

## Book Review

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**Title:** GULLS OF THE WORLD

A Photographic Guide – 368 pp

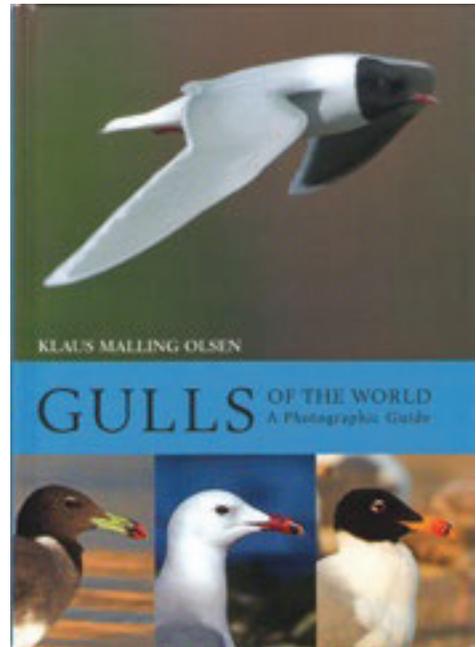
**Author:** Klaus Malling Olsen

**Publisher:** Christopher Helm, London,  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. February 2018.

This book, published by Christopher Helm, is a photographic guide to the gulls of the world. The author, Klaus Malling Olsen, is considered as the foremost expert on gulls. He, along with Hans Larsson, previously authored 'Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America' (Helm Identification Guides, 2004), which is still considered to be the definitive work on gulls. The author explains in the introduction that the aim of this book is to 'present identification in a more concise way' and 'the intention is not to present an authorised taxonomic update or highly detailed descriptions of plumages, moults and measurements'. For this, the earlier work is given as the main reference and this current book is intended as a photographic companion guide to the earlier book.

For any book on gulls, the taxonomic treatment followed for the large white-headed gull complex is always of great interest. Here, the author states in the introduction that all subspecies within a species that are recognisable in the field are described. In certain taxa where taxonomy is unclear or just partly resolved, such taxa are treated in separate accounts. This results in separate accounts for Steppe Gull, Mongolian Gull, Baltic Gull, Kamchatka Gull (previously under Common Gull) etc. to name a few. Of interest for India is the treatment of Heuglin's Gull, which is treated as a distinct taxon, with subspecies *taimyrensis*. The author clarifies that the taxonomic status is unclear but this is treated as a separate species, *Larus heuglini*, with one subspecies, *L. h. taimyrensis*.

The format of the book is an introduction, followed by species accounts and an index at the end. The species accounts covers identification, ageing (description of the plumages from juveniles to full adults), voice, moult notes, geographical variation, hybridisation, status habitat and distribution, similar species, references, distribution map and photographs with detailed captions. A total of 61 accounts are given, which cover all the gulls of the world; about 15 are of interest in the Indian context, with 7-8 covering the common taxa seen here. The photographs are of very high quality, and depict the birds from juveniles to adults, with perched and in-flight images. There are more than 600 photos in the book, helping in identification of each species/subspecies at different ages, which is the reason why this book is so useful. It is a little odd that though references are given for each account, there is no detailed reference list in the book and the author directs readers to consult the earlier work for detailed references.



For gull watchers in India, this book will be an invaluable resource. There is not much interest among birders here in watching gulls. This is mainly due to the constant taxonomic changes and difficulties in identification. With the help of this book, that obstacle can be removed as it will be easier to compare photos and identify not only the large white-headed gulls, but also other gull species occurring here.

Gujarat, with its long coastline, is one of the best states to watch gulls in India. It is now known that in the large white-headed gull complex, the Heuglin's Gull (including *taimyrensis*), Steppe Gull, Caspian Gull and probably Mongolian Gull occur in our state. If intensive gull watching is done here, it is quite probable that Baltic Gull could also be found in Gujarat. The identification of other gulls like Common Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Little Gull etc. will also be easier with the help of superb photos given for these species and will help birders in their search for these vagrants in Gujarat.

This book will certainly inspire bird watchers to look at gulls more closely. It is simple to use, has photos of gulls at all ages, with concise text which is easy to understand, and it is possible to carry it in the field too! All birders, including those who are not keen on gulls, should have this book in their collection as it will help in identification of the common taxa occurring here as well as the rare/vagrant species which one may find. It is available on online book stores at around Rs. 3700 and at this price, is a bargain for its usefulness in the identification of this 'difficult to identify' group of birds. It is hoped that this superb book will aid in gull identification for birders in Gujarat and elsewhere in India, resulting in encouragement for more gull watching in our country.

“ Years ago, as a student peering down a microscope at the intricacies of cells, the chromosomes dyed to make them more visible, I had doubts about linking the inert objects with the dynamism and vitality of living protoplasm. Despite the tremendous advances in cellular research we have not been able to replicate life in scientist’s test tubes. Even if the great breakthrough occurs, the synthetic blob of protoplasmic material would not be the same as substances of which the scientist was made, since it would not have impressed upon it the millennia of interaction with the environment, which generates a complex interplay of elemental forces and organic responses.

We can describe a beautiful sunset, perhaps project a flamboyant reproduction of one, but we cannot recreate its impact on individual gazing at it in isolation across a vista of sea, desert or mountains. Different individuals would experience different responses. Even the finest textbook guided through by the most gifted teachers fall short of experiencing Living nature. How much more inadequate, then, must be the education of our children, given sterile classrooms, drab textbooks and harassed teachers?

Is there any wonder that a land so endowed with the material of intellect, the human brain, has so much mediocrity? We like to believe that we are descended of a civilization which nurtured intellectual giants, but fail to realize that those thinkers were leading unfettered lives in a land which was largely wilderness, and replete with the bounties of Nature. By contrast, today’s child attending the most sophisticated of schools is cramped and provided a constricted vision. The child of yesteryears, while enjoying advantages of limitless horizons, enjoyed the benediction of gurus who encouraged questioning. Today’s child seems sentenced to ten years of a concentration camp governed by a syllabus as tyrannical and circumscribing as any prison code! The system, instead of exciting the wonder of growing minds, suppresses their flight as effectively as any efficient prison warden following the prison code.

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- Lavkumar Khachar

