

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**GLAUCOUS GULL**

FEBRUARY 2026

Arizona has no ocean coasts and is not located near any of the Great Lakes, so it may be surprising to learn that 18 different gull species have been confirmed in the state. The largest, and one of the rarer species, is the Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), which breeds in the world's arctic regions, including the western coast of Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, east to Labrador and northern Greenland. In winter, it is rare or uncommon south of its breeding range, but some do move south as far as temperate maritime regions of the Pacific and Atlantic coasts and the Great Lakes. Only 9 have been recorded in Arizona since 1988; all but 1 were immature birds in the months of November through January. The exception was an adult at San Carlos Lake, 4 to 20 April 2025, which was the first record for the 3 counties bordering that large reservoir—Graham, Pima, and Pinal. The most recent occurrence was at Lake Pleasant in Maricopa and Yavapai counties, 8 December 2025 into January 2026. Other locations include Scottsdale (1988), Yuma (1992), Painted Rock Dam (1993-94), Lake Havasu (2011-12), Lake Mohave (2014), Patagonia Lake (2014), and Willow Lake in Prescott (2023).



Glaucous Gull (immature, first winter), Lake Havasu, Mohave County, 23 December 2011. Photo by Gary Rosenberg

If seen with other gulls in Arizona, the Glaucous Gull is distinguished by its greater size at all ages. Adults in breeding plumage are white with white unmarked wingtips, pink legs, heavy yellow bill, yellow iris, and often an orange gonydeal spot at the tip of the lower mandible. In nonbreeding plumage, they may have some light streaking on the neck. Glaucous Gulls take 4 years to acquire adult plumage, and in Arizona young birds at intermediate stages are most likely to be seen. The mantle changes from flecked brownish to smooth gray before attaining the white adult plumage. The head and underparts become whiter with age. The eye progresses from dark in juveniles to yellow in adults, and through the third winter the bill will be pink with a black tip. In comparison, immature Iceland Gulls (*L. glaucoides thayeri*), the subspecies that occurs in Arizona, are smaller, darker and through the first summer have all-black bills. In all immature plumages it has darker primaries. Closer in size, but rare in Arizona (only 8 confirmed reports) is Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. glaucescens*). However, immature birds of that species are darker at all plumages and through the second winter have all-black bills. The most common gull occurring in Arizona, the Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), is very unlikely to be confused with Glaucous Gull, as it is much smaller, has black primaries in all plumages, and has a shorter bill. As with several other gull species the Glaucous Gull frequently hybridizes with other species, including American Herring Gull (*L. smithsonianus*), European Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*), Great Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*), Slaty-backed Gull (*L. schistisagus*), and Glaucous-winged Gull, which can complicate identification.