

# Scottish Birds Records Committee criteria for identification of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

## Chris McInerny, on behalf of the SBRC

Recent taxonomic changes have resulted in the elevation of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* to full specific status (Sangster *et al.* 2007). This has coincided with an increase in observations of this species in southern and eastern England, perhaps reflecting an expansion in the species' population range in eastern Europe, as well as an increased awareness of identification criteria.

Caspian Gull was first observed in Scotland, when a first winter was present at Dunbar and Belhaven Bay, Lothian from late December 2006 to February 2007 (Forrester *et al.* 2007). This was followed by another first winter in Lothian, at Tynninghame, in October 2007. A third, also a first winter, was found in Clyde at Strathclyde Country Park Loch in February 2008.

Because of the recent taxonomic changes, and the fact that Caspian Gull is so rare in Scotland, this is a species which requires a description submitted to and adjudicated by SBRC. In light of the publication on the SOC website of identification criteria used by the SBRC to assess records of the closely related Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis*, it was decided to publish similar details to enable observers in Scotland to be aware of the features required to identify Caspian Gull, and eliminate other related confusion species.

It is important to emphasise that while some Caspian Gulls *can* be surprisingly distinctive, *others* can be difficult to identify, with these latter individuals only showing a range of subtle features in all plumages and ages, that require careful examination by experienced observers (Jonsson 1998, Garner and Quinn 1997, Garner *et al.* 1997, Small 2006). Individuals can also show much variation in certain key identification features (Gibbins 2003). **Thus to safely identify Caspian Gull requires the careful consideration of a number of features.** Furthermore, it is essential that observers are aware of the variation shown by the more common *Larus* species, such as Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. argentatus argenteus/argentatus*, *L. fuscus graellsii* and *L. marinus*), and be particularly mindful of immature Yellow-legged Gulls, which can be a trap for the unwary.

## Identification features

### Structure and behaviour

Unusually for a large white-headed gull, first and second winter birds are easier to identify than adults. This is reflected in the fact that the three Scottish records so far have all been first winters. For this reason, this article will focus on immatures, with briefer notes on adults.

All descriptions should start by describing a *Larus* species in size similar to *argenteus* Herring Gull, though some, probably males, can be bigger. Differently from Herring Gull, however, the structure is more similar to Lesser Black-backed Gull (and Yellow-legged Gulls), having in folded wings a long primary projection (at least 150% that of the bill length) and an almost non-existent tertial step. However, in contrast to Lesser Black-backed Gull, Caspian Gull also has a prominent higher breast, giving a somewhat "front heavy" posture. The most striking feature is the subtly different head shape; with experience it is quite unlike other large gulls species seen in Scotland. Caspian Gull has a relatively small head, with a long sloping forehead. This is emphasised by the bill-shape and structure, which is long, thin and parallel-sided, with a less prominent gonys angle, when compared with Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls. These latter two species usually show much thicker heavier bills, with distinct gonys angles, sometimes creating bulbous tips. Combined, the head and bill of *cachinnans* may give an elongated "pulled-out" silhouette, almost pear-shaped. However, it must be emphasised that not all *cachinnans* show this feature, and that Herring Gulls can occasionally show this head and bill shape. So, by itself, it does not identify Caspian Gull; other features (described later), must also be present for safe identification. Furthermore, female Caspian Gulls are smaller and less distinctive than males, having more

rounded heads, shorter, though still thin bills, and shorter legs, almost looking like “giant” Common Gulls *L. canus*; and interbreeding with other closely related taxa occurs (Jonsson 1998, Gibbins 2003). Thus, some individuals may be extremely subtle and so be, as a vagrant in Scotland, unidentifiable.

Other useful identification features include leg length and shape, which are long and thin with much visible tibia, call and posture. Leg length and thickness can be a good feature for identification of Caspian Gull, but to judge these is subjective and thus requires direct comparison with other nearby large white headed gulls, ideally with photographs taken. As well as being long, the legs are coloured differently, having a chalky, clean flesh tone unlike the bruised, pinker legs of Herring Gull; again direct comparison is required to see this.

If heard, the call is a quite un-gull-like hoarse laughter, sometimes described as sounding like a Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*. Individuals can also be very aggressive to other gulls, defending with an Albatross-like posture, with the neck arched, head forward and wings outstretched. This aggressive behaviour of Caspian Gulls is often shown, and is a good feature for noticing and identifying this species.

### Plumage characters

#### **First winter**

Perhaps the first striking feature an observer might notice when finding first or second winter Caspian Gull is their very clean head and underparts. These are usually pearly white, with no streaking apart from some around the hind collar, although a few birds may also show just a small grey mask around the eye and smudgy flank streaking. This is unlike other similar gull species which, at this age, usually show much streaking around the head and breast, with a darker and dirtier ground colour. Observers should be aware that first and second winter Yellow-legged Gulls can have a similarly pale head and underparts, though it is very unusual for this species to be quite so pale, and usually it shows a much more pronounced mask behind the eye made up of narrow streaking (reminiscent of Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus*). Rarely, other large gulls, such as Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls can have clean white heads and breasts in first and second winter plumage, so these must also be carefully eliminated.

Along with the white head and breast, first winter Caspian Gulls often have plainer greyer mantle and scapular feathers, which are less prominently marked than other large white-headed gulls in showing just dark shaft streaks (becoming exaggerated by wear) and softer subterminal “anchor” marks. The mantle becomes paler with wear and contrasts markedly with the brown wing-coverts (that also have a different and plainer pattern) and large and notably plain dark brown tertials, the latter with neat pale fringes and tips. The bill is blackish, but like *michahellis* often develops a paler base more quickly than other taxa and can also develop a pale tip. The primary feathers look long and black, with pointed tips.

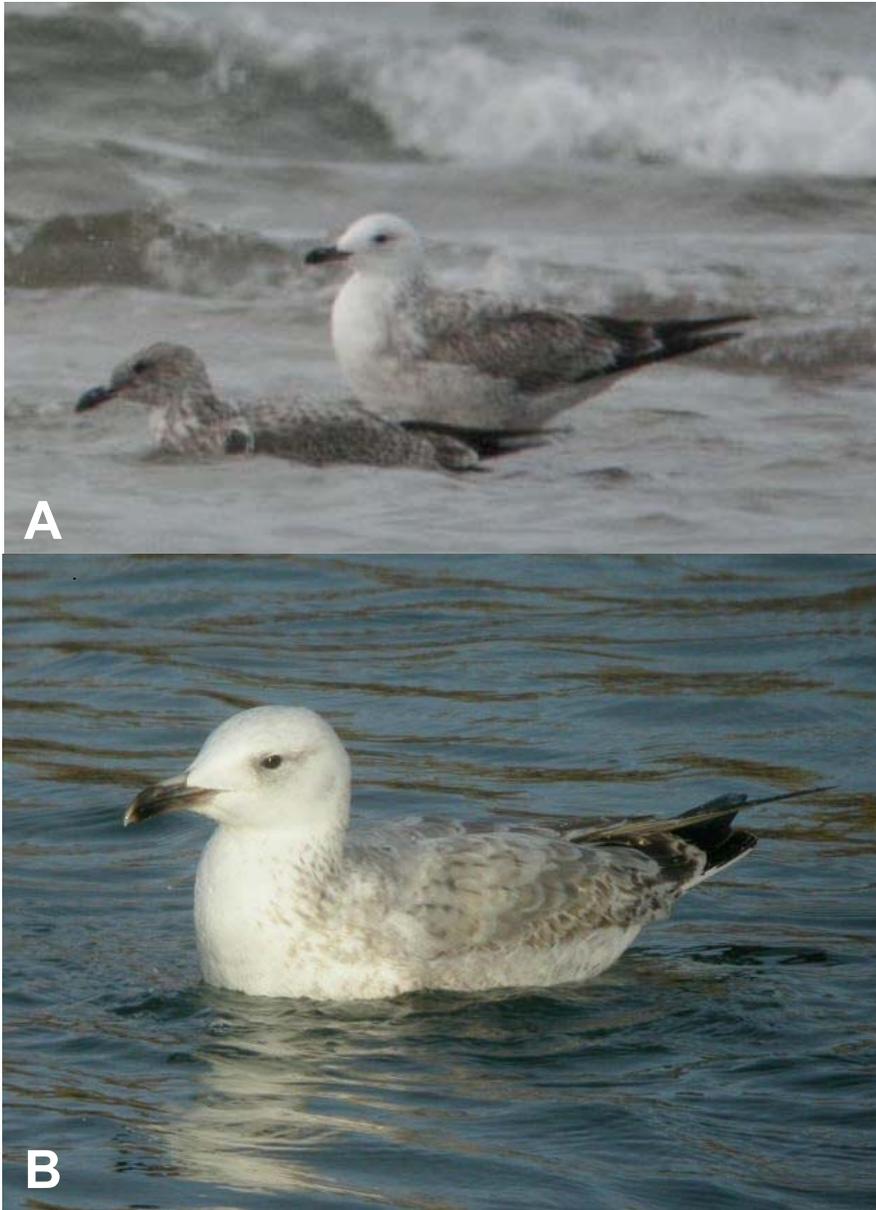
All these features combine to create a distinctive “four-toned” appearance, not seen in other first winter gull species: a pale white head and breast, grey mantle and scapulars, black bill and tail band, and brown wings. First winter *michahellis* can rarely have this appearance, though can be eliminated by a more square shaped head and a heavier, thicker bill.

Other important plumage features should ideally also be observed, including the underwing and tail pattern. The underwing is a good feature for Caspian Gull, often significantly paler than other large white headed gulls, sometimes almost unmarked or with fine brown barring across the axillaries and underwing coverts. The tail is quite distinctive, being largely white, but marked by a black band at the tip (reminiscent of a Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*), differing from the brown and streaked tail pattern of most Herring Gulls.

#### **Second winter**

Second-winter birds appear more advanced than other large white-headed gulls but show a similar colouration to first winters. They have moulted to a plainer grey mantle and the upperwing coverts are a mixture of newer grey feathers and older, worn and faded feathers – *michahellis* can be very similar though they frequently have more prominently barred coverts. The bill colour develops rapidly and can be rather variable, often looking pale with a dark cutting edge

expanding towards a dark subterminal band, or more adult-like in being more or less yellow with a narrow black band and small red spot on lower mandible. In flight they show pale inner primaries and differ importantly in having a thin white mirror on P10 (the outer primary feather). Second winter *micahellis* and *argentatus* rarely show this feature, so as long as the bird is carefully aged, this feature if present strongly suggests Caspian Gull. Finally, the black tail band remains prominent, although it is broader than in first winter birds.



First winter Caspian Gulls *Larus cachinnans* **A** Tynninghame, Lothian, October 2007 (*Keith Gillon*); **B** Dunbar Harbour, Lothian, December 2006 (*Mark Wilkinson*). These images show a number of features used to identify immatures of this species described in this article, including the long, thin, parallel sided bill, with a less obvious gonys angle, flat forehead, prominent white head and breast, and “four-toned” appearance, of black bill and wing tips, white head and breast, grey mantle and scapulars, and brown wings. It is important to note that the individual in image B does not show a strikingly thin bill. Though this is partly due to the angle of the bird when it was photographed, resulting in foreshortening, this image is used to emphasise the fact that not all birds are “classic”, and that as stated in the text, *a number of features* (including the bill), must be used to identify this species with confidence.

### **Third winter and adult**

As *cachinnans* acquire third winter and adult plumage, they become increasingly difficult to identify, sharing more characteristics of both Yellow-legged and Herring Gulls. Even so, birds still possess the long thin bill and elongated body shape, and the eye is small and usually dark, placed well forward in the head. The mantle tone is darker than *argenteus* Herring Gull, but slightly paler than Yellow-legged and *argentatus* Herring Gulls, most similar to Common Gull. However, apparent mantle tone is influenced by light conditions and angle of the bird to the observer, so this feature should be very carefully scrutinised against other gull species.

The pattern of the outer primaries in adults is different to Yellow-legged Gull. Though the black extends from P10 to P5 with, similar to that species, a complete broad black band in P5, the primaries have much more white at their base, with long pale "tongues" extending down the inner webs of the outer four primaries. Also, P10 shows a characteristically long white tip, and a large white mirror is present in P9. So, a bird showing a long white tip to P10, white tongues and a complete black band on P5 is a good candidate for Caspian Gull. Furthermore, if the underside of P10 can be seen (often possible in the far wing of a settled bird, especially when preening), the combination of a long white tip separated from the pale tongue on the inner web by a black band is strongly indicative of *cachinnans*.

Usually, individuals are seen with other gull species, and direct comparison with these, especially Herring and *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls, would greatly strengthen the description. Indeed for the safe identification of Caspian Gull it is essential that observers directly compare any putative bird with other *Larus* gulls. Furthermore, as many photos/videograbs should be taken and submitted, as these often show features that are missed, allow jizz to be considered, and permit direct comparisons with other gull species under the same conditions, if these are present.

### **Summary**

In summary, and in order of importance, the following features should be described in as much detail as possible to be included in any submitted record of first and second winter Caspian Gulls observed in Scotland:

1. Head/bill shape, colour and structure.
2. The extent of markings on the head and underparts.
3. Size/structure (jizz), emphasizing length of primary projection and breast size.
4. Description of feather pattern on mantle, scapulars, greater coverts and tertials.
5. Colour, thickness and shape of tail band.
6. Presence of a white mirror in P10.
7. Colour and pattern of underwing.
8. Call and behaviour.
9. Leg length and thickness.

It is crucial that any bird is correctly aged, which should be determined by the shape of the primary tips, bill coloration, pattern of tertials and greater coverts, and the presence/absence of a mirror in P10. Furthermore, as many photos/videograbs as possible should accompany any submission, along with direct comparisons with other nearby and closely related gull species.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Chris Gibbins, Brian Small and John Sweeney for very constructive and helpful comments on an earlier draft of these notes.

### **Bibliography**

Forrester, R.W., Andrews, I.J., McInerney, C.J., Murray, R.D., McGowan, R.Y., Zonfrillo, B., Betts, M.W., Jardine, D.C. and Grundy, D.S. (eds) 2007. *The Birds of Scotland*. The Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Aberlady.

- Garner, M. and Quinn, D. 1997. Identification of Yellow-legged Gulls in Britain. *British Birds* 90: 25-63.
- Garner, M., Quinn, D. and Glover, B. 1997. Identification of Yellow-legged Gulls in Britain. Part 2. *British Birds* 90: 369-383.
- Gibbins, C.N. 2003. Phenotypic variability of Caspian Gull. *Birding Scotland* 6: 59-74.
- Harris, A., Shirihi, H., and Christie, D. 1996. *The Macmillan Birder's Guide to European and Middle Eastern Birds*. Macmillan, London.
- Jonsson, L. 1998. Yellow-legged Gulls and yellow-legged Herring Gulls in the Baltic. *Alula* 3: 74-100.
- McInerny, C. 2008. Scottish Birds Records Committee criteria for identification of Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*. [www.the-soc.org.uk](http://www.the-soc.org.uk).
- McInerny, C., Sweeney, J. and Votier, S. 2002. Winter gull watching in the Glasgow area. *Birding Scotland* 5: 71-87.
- Olsen, K.M. and Larsson, H. 2003. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm, London.
- Sangster G, Collinson, J.M., Knox, A.G, Parkin, D.T. and Svensson, L. 2007. Taxonomic recommendations for British birds: Fourth report. *Ibis* 149: 853-857.
- Small, B. 2006. Guidelines for the identification of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*. Unpublished Report for the BBRC.

**Dr Christopher J McInerny**  
**C.McInerny@bio.gla.ac.uk**

**1 June 2009**