

Scottish Birds Records Committee criteria for identification of Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Chris McInerny, on behalf of the SBRC

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* is an extremely rare bird in Scotland with just 34-35 individuals noted to the end of 2007, all of these adults or sub-adults, with no accepted records of either first winter or first summer birds (Forrester *et al.* 2007). Those seen in Scotland are assumed to be of the subspecies *michahellis*, although *atlantis* cannot formally be ruled out. A further large number of records have been rejected by SBRC, usually because the descriptions did not eliminate other closely related *Larus* species, or possible hybrids.

To help introduce transparency and consistency in the assessment of records of Yellow-legged Gull by SBRC, it was decided to draw up a list of characteristics that SBRC uses to judge records of adults and sub-adults of this species. It is hoped that this will prompt observers when finding in Scotland a bird which they believe is a Yellow-legged Gull, to endeavour to see and include all of these features in their description to ensure that other possibilities are eliminated.

Identification features

All descriptions should start by describing a *Larus* species in size between Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*L. argentatus argenteus* and *L. fuscus graellsii*), but with a mantle/upperparts colour in shade intermediate between these two species, most similar in tone to Common Gull *L. canus*, though marginally darker. In Scotland the most widespread subspecies of Herring Gull is the local resident breeding *argenteus*, which has pale grey upperparts, but the darker coloured northern nominate subspecies *argentatus* is also observed through the autumn and winter. Yellow-legged Gull upperpart colour is very similar to *argentatus* in tone, but lacks the bluish tinge.

However, the most critical identification feature is a detailed description of the extent of black in the outer primaries of the upper wing. To see this feature can be very difficult under field conditions and requires careful prolonged views through a telescope, typically of a preening or flying bird, when the primary feathers are revealed. Digital photography can greatly assist this, and photographs should, if obtained, be included with the description. What should be noted involves the extent of black in the primaries with, for Yellow-legged Gull, much black from P10-6 (where P10 is the outer primary feather) and, crucially, a prominent thick sub-terminal black band in P5. The P10-5 primary feathers should show small apical white spots, with P10 having a sub-terminal white mirror, which is sometimes present in P9, although very much smaller. This wing pattern excludes the *argentatus* subspecies of Herring Gull and Herring/Lesser Black-backed hybrids, which show either much reduced black in the outer primaries because of larger white apical spots and mirrors, grey/white tongues, and/or no black or a weak band in P5, mostly restricted to the outer web.

Other supporting features that help identify adult Yellow-legged Gull, and that should if possible be in the description, include:

1. Legs usually bright “custard” yellow, especially in spring/summer, but can be dull/pale yellow. However, rarely, Herring Gull can show yellow legs, so this feature *by itself* does not identify Yellow-legged Gull.
2. In winter, a clean bright white head with little or no streaking, although Yellow-legged Gull can show restricted light streaking around and behind the eye, and on the nape. Herring Gull, and particularly the subspecies *argentatus*, shows heavy, extensive head streaking in winter. Yellow-legged Gull head profile is also more square shaped than in Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

3. In late summer/autumn, moult stage of primary feathers should, if possible, be described, as Yellow-legged Gull moults earlier than Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, so this can be a useful identification feature.

4. Compared with Herring Gull of both subspecies, a longer primary projection, which in flight manifests as longer, narrower, wings. Non-flying birds with folded wings when perched or sitting show a bulky front end and slender back end, with a scarcely noticeable tertial step, more similar in structure to Lesser Black-backed Gull. This is quite different from Herring Gull, particularly of the subspecies *argentatus*, which has a relatively short primary project and a distinct tertial step.

5. In folded wings, extensive black in the primary feathers, with small apical white spots.

6. In spring/summer, a more prominent bill red spot than seen in Herring Gull. The bill often also looks larger and heavier, sometimes bulbous tipped, with a distinct gonys angle.

7. In flight, the underwing shows a dusky trailing bar.

Usually, individuals are seen with other gull species, and direct comparison with these, especially *argenteus/argentatus* Herring and *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls, greatly strengthens the description. Furthermore, as many photos/videograbs should be taken and submitted as possible, 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.



Adult Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* Strathclyde Country Park Loch, Clyde, 17 February 2008 (Keith Hoey). This image shows a number of features used to identify this species described in this article, including the mantle tone in comparison with Lesser Black-backed and Common Gulls (*L. fuscus graellsii* and *L. canus*), which are present alongside, the clean white square shaped head, long primary projection, and small white apical spots on the black primary feathers. Crucially, however, this individual also showed a prominent black sub-terminal black band in P5, observed when the bird was washing and preening.

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 adult/sub-adult Yellow-legged Gull observed in Scotland:

1. Upperwing primary pattern, especially the amount of black/white in P10 and P5.
2. Mantle colour in direct comparison with other species of *Larus* gulls.
3. Bare part colouration.
4. Size/structure (jizz), emphasizing head shape and primary projection.
5. Moulting details where relevant, either wing/primary moult (later summer/autumn) or amount of head streaking (winter).

As many photos/videographs as possible should accompany the submission, along with direct comparisons with other closely related gull species.

These features can be used for birds of age second summer/third winter and older. Those that are second winter and younger have not developed some of these features, especially the wing pattern, and so require a different set of criteria. Such age classes have not yet been recorded in Scotland.

We hope these notes help clarify the situation with regards to the identification of Yellow-legged Gull in Scotland, and the SBRC looks forward to receiving records of this species in the future.

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