

## Short Communication

### A Note on Large White-headed Gulls in Iran

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کاکایی‌های سرسفید بزرگ در ایران شامل کاکایی پشت‌سیاه کوچک *Larus fuscus*، کاکایی ارمنی *L. armenicus*، کاکایی پازرد *L. cachinnans* و کاکایی سیبری *L. heuglini* می‌باشند. کاکایی نقره‌ای *L. argentatus* در دهه‌های گذشته به چند گونه تقسیم شده، اما بسیاری از پرندشناسان هنوز در حال گزارش آن از ایران هستند، در حالی که در این کشور وجود ندارد. در این مقاله به معرفی تاکسونومی این پرندگان و مواردی از مشاهده موثق آن‌ها در ایران در سال‌های اخیر اشاره شده است.

#### Taxonomic treatment

*The Birds of Iran* published in Persian in 1975 (Scott *et al.* 1975) recognised only two common species of large white-headed gull in Iran, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, following Vaurie (1965) and Hüe & Etchécopar (1970), two of the principal reference works in use in the Middle East at that time. These authors restricted Lesser Black-backed Gull to the two very dark mantled forms breeding in Europe, nominate *fuscus* and *graellsii*, and included all the paler mantled west Asian forms, including *armenicus*, *cachinnans*, *heuglini* and *taimyrensis*, in the Herring Gull (*argentatus*) complex. Thus, when the waterbird counts of the Iran Department of the Environment were expanded to include gulls in the early 1970s, all large white-headed gulls were identified as either Herring Gulls or Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Birds with pale mantles (*cachinnans*, *armenicus* and *taimyrensis*) were listed under the name 'Herring Gull', and birds with very dark, almost black mantles (*fuscus*) were confidently assigned to 'Lesser Black-backed Gull', but intermediate birds with dark grey mantles (comparable to the grey of *graellsii*) were problematical. These birds, now assumed to be *heuglini*, were often assigned to 'Lesser Black-backed Gull' and account for the relatively high counts of this species in Iran in the 1970s. It was clear, however, that the nominate form of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, with its almost black mantle, was a very scarce bird in Iran.

In the Persian edition of *A Guide to the Fauna of Iran*, Firouz (2000) followed Porter *et al.* (1996) in recognising Armenian Gull *L. armenicus* and Yellow-egged Gull *L. cachinnans* as separate species and including *heuglini* and the weakly defined *taimyrensis* in Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*. However, in his *Field Guide to the Birds of Iran* published in Persian in 2001, Mansoori (2001) continued to use the name Herring Gull *L. argentatus* for the pale-backed forms *armenicus* and *cachinnans*, although he followed Porter *et al.* (1996) in including *heuglini* and *taimyrensis* within *L. fuscus*. In the revised edition of Firouz's book published in English in 2005 (Firouz 2005), separate treatment was given to the dark-mantled form *heuglini* to give four common species of large white-headed gull in Iran: Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*, Armenian Gull *L. armenicus*, Yellow-legged Gull *L. cachinnans*, and Heuglin's (or Siberian) Gull *L. heuglini*. This was the treatment that was adopted by Scott & Adhami (2006) in their recent checklist of the birds of Iran. In this treatment, Lesser Black-backed Gull is confined to nominate *fuscus* from the Baltic and Scandinavia (often known as Baltic Gull), Yellow-legged Gull (or Caspian Gull) includes nominate *cachinnans* and *barabensis*, and Heuglin's Gull (or Siberian Gull) includes nominate *heuglini* and *taimyrensis*. Given the difficulty in separating *barabensis* from *cachinnans* and *taimyrensis* from *heuglini* in the field, this would seem to be the most useful treatment of the large white-headed gulls in Iran at the present time. However, it would be more

appropriate to use the name Caspian Gull for *L. cachinnans*, as many modern authors use the name Yellow-legged Gull for the *michahellis/atlantia* group (which is very unlikely to occur in Iran).

The name 'Pontic Gull' has recently been used for *L. cachinnans*, but this name is best used for the weakly defined form '*ponticus*', which is confined as a breeding species to the Black Sea. Rudenko (2006) has recently reviewed the ringing recoveries of Pontic Gulls ringed in the Crimea and has shown that the great majority of adults and most juveniles remain in the Black Sea throughout the year. Most of those birds that do migrate move southwest to the eastern Mediterranean or northwest towards the North Sea. There have been only two recoveries of Crimean Pontic Gulls in the Caspian region, and these were in Astrakhan (Rudenko 2006). Thus it seems unlikely that Pontic Gulls occur with any regularity in Iran.

#### Status of species in Iran

The only large white-headed gulls that are known to breed in Iran are those breeding on islands in Lake Urumiyeh in Azerbaijan. These are now known to be Armenian Gulls *L. armenicus* – a form that was only recognised as a full species in the 1980s (Grant 1987) and which is confined as a breeding species to a small number of lakes in Armenia, Georgia, eastern Turkey and northwestern Iran. The total breeding population at Lake Urumiyeh was estimated at 4,000–5,000 pairs in the early 1970s (Scott 1995). Most of these birds vacate the breeding grounds in autumn and are thought to winter mainly in the east Mediterranean and perhaps northern Red Sea, with a few birds also reaching the Persian Gulf (Snow & Perrins 1998). A bird ringed as a chick at the Lake Urumiyeh colony was recovered in winter in Mesopotamia, Iraq (Butti 1978).

There can be little doubt that most of the gulls wintering in the south Caspian region are nominate *cachinnans* (Caspian Gull). By the end of 1975 there had been at least 33 recoveries in Iran of 'Herring Gulls' that had been ringed abroad (Argyle 1975, 1976). All had been ringed at breeding colonies of nominate *cachinnans*: 30 at colonies on the Caspian coast in the Republic of Azerbaijan and three at Tengiz Lake in Kazakhstan. Thirty-one

birds were recovered in Mazandaran in the southeast Caspian and the other two in Tehran Province and central Khorasan, respectively. Raffael Aye (pers. comm.) found only nominate *cachinnans* in the southeast Caspian in February/March 2001, and of 1,133 large white-headed gulls recorded in this area during the mid-winter waterbird counts in January 2004, 1,122 were thought to be nominate *cachinnans* and only 11 were *heuglini* (Meininger P.L. & M. Zekhuis unpubl. data).

The first ornithologist to look closely at wintering gulls in southern Iran on the basis of the modern taxonomy was probably C. Richardson who looked at the large gulls on Qeshm Island in December 1999 (C. Richardson pers. comm.). He recorded 50+ Heuglin's Gulls *L. heuglini*, 220+ Caspian Gulls *L. cachinnans*, including many of the form *barabensis*, and a few dark-backed birds believed to be Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus* of the nominate form (Baltic Gull). Keijl *et al.* (2001) identified 168 Caspian Gulls, 51 Heuglin's Gulls and two possible Armenian Gulls on the south coast of Iran in January/February 2000, and thought that these were the only large white-headed gulls present. However, Dubois (2003), who visited the Persian Gulf and Baluchestan in February/March 2001, concluded that most of the Caspian Gulls wintering on the south coast of Iran were of the form *barabensis* rather than nominate *cachinnans*. Of 180 'light grey-backed gulls' checked carefully, 157 were thought to be *barabensis* and only 23 were thought to be nominate *cachinnans*. Two of the latter were considered to be of the western form '*ponticus*'. In addition, Dubois found about 300 Heuglin's Gulls including some relatively light-backed individuals which were close to *taimyrensis*. Over 7,500 large white-headed gulls were identified on the south coast of Iran during the very comprehensive mid-winter waterbird counts in January 2004 (Hornman M. & H. van Diek unpubl. data, van Winden E. & B. Oosterbaan unpubl. data, Willems F. & R. Felix unpubl. data). These included 33 Armenian Gulls (mostly in Khuzestan), 4,957 Caspian Gulls (mostly in the Persian Gulf), 2,538 Heuglin's Gulls (the commonest gull in southern Baluchestan), and only five Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gulls (all in Hormuzgan Province).

This recent work on the south coast of Iran agrees reasonably well with the findings of Yésou & Hirschfeld (1997) in Bahrain in December 1992. These authors were able to identify about 1,300 birds to subspecies, and found about 1,000 nominate *cachinnans*, 166 probable *barabensis*, 35 *heuglini*, 80 'taimyrensis', one possible *armenicus* and seven or eight nominate *fuscus*.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the Armenian Gull *L. armenicus* breeds commonly in the Urumiyeh basin in northwestern Iran and winters largely outside Iran although a few birds have been recorded along the Persian Gulf coast in winter.

The Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* is much the commonest large white-headed gull wintering in the south Caspian region, and also the commonest wintering gull along the south coast of Iran from Khuzestan to Hormuzgan. Ringing recoveries have shown that many of the gulls wintering in the southeast Caspian originate from breeding colonies on the west Caspian coast, while others come from Tengiz Lake in Kazakhstan. A large proportion of the Caspian Gulls wintering in the Persian Gulf apparently belong to the form *barabensis* which breeds in southwestern Siberia.

Heuglin's (or Siberian) Gull *L. heuglini* (including *taimyrensis*) winters commonly along the south coast of Iran from the region of Bushehr eastwards, and is the most numerous large gull in Persian Baluchestan. It occurs commonly on passage in the south Caspian region, but is very scarce in winter.

The nominate race of the Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus fuscus* (Baltic Gull) is a very scarce passage migrant and winter visitor in the Persian Gulf, occurring mainly in the west. It is probably only a vagrant in the south Caspian region.

There is no reason to believe that the Herring Gull as now recognised (*i.e.* *Larus argentatus argentatus* or *L. a. argenteus*) has ever occurred in Iran, or that the forms *michahellis* (Yellow-legged Gull) of the Mediterranean or 'ponticus' (Pontic Gull) of the Black Sea occur with any regularity.



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