Identification of immature Mediterranean Gulls

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Dungeness Bird Observatory

(Plate 48)

INTRODUCTION

Part of the construction of the nuclear power station at Dungeness, Kent, involved the digging of a tunnel beneath the sea-bed for the intake of cooling water. The bulk of this work was carried out in 1963, and a feature during the whole process was the escape of compressed air from the tunnel through the sea-bed to the surface, where a carpet or 'patch' of bubbles was formed. During the course of construction this patch moved steadily away from the shore, eventually ceasing when it had reached some 300 yards out.

With the disturbance of the sea-bed, particles of food were brought to the surface. In addition, fish and other marine life were forced up close to the surface by the stream of rising bubbles and the unique conditions thus created proved to be extremely attractive to feeding gulls and terns (Laridae).

Conditions were not comparable in 1964 or 1965, but in 1966, with the power station in full operation, another area of disturbed water appeared, this time permanently placed 30-40 yards off-shore at low tide. This new patch resulted from the voluminous discharge of cooling water back into the sea, which again brought food to the surface. In addition, the outflow system was used as a convenient way of returning to the sea the fish, weed and other marine life that had been drawn in and filtered off at the intake. Once again this proved attractive to feeding gulls and terns, perhaps to an even greater extent than before.

Species and Numbers Involved

The largest concentrations of birds feeding over the patch, both in 1963 and in 1966, occurred during the summer months when their numbers were greatly swollen by the presence of terns. At some times as many as 2,000 birds or more would be attracted to the area. Apart from Black-headed Gulls Larus ridibundus and Common Terns Sterna hirundo, both of which breed locally, only a very small proportion of the other species was adult. These two local breeders were almost always the most abundant, but at times unexpected numbers of other species were encountered, such as 200 Kittiwakes Rissa tridactyla in the summer of 1966.

With such concentrations of feeding birds close inshore it was possible to reassess our knowledge of the status of several species in the narrows of the English Channel. Three species in particular proved
to be far more numerous than previous records had suggested. These were the Roseate Tern Sterna dougallii, the Little Gull Larus minutus and the Mediterranean Gull L. melanocephalus.

The increase in the number of recorded Mediterranean Gulls in the two years 1963 and 1966 when there was a disturbed patch in operation is clearly shown by the total of individuals seen in each year during 1962-66 (before which period there had been only two records at Dungeness since the bird observatory was established there ten years earlier): 1962, none; 1963, ten; 1964, two; 1965, none; and 1966, nine.

From these records it is suggested that the Mediterranean Gull is, in fact, quite a numerous species in the Channel, particularly in the summer months (the bulk of the Dungeness records being between June and October), but it is only likely to be recorded with any degree of regularity where intensive sea-watching is being carried out or where a special food source is available to attract the birds; in either case, observers need to be familiar with the full plumage range of the species.

Only two of the 21 Mediterranean Gulls seen at Dungeness during 1963-66 were adults, and so we were provided with an excellent opportunity of making a detailed study of the identification features and plumage cycles of the immatures. Table 1 gives the dates and ages of each of the individuals recorded, all but two of which were watched by one or both of us. The age notation follows that in Witherby et al. (1938-41).

### Table 1. Dates and ages of Mediterranean Gulls Larus melanocephalus at Dungeness, Kent, in 1963-66

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27.vii.63</td>
<td>Juvenile/first-winter</td>
<td>12.vii-5.x.64</td>
<td>Second-summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.vii-9.viii.63</td>
<td>First-summer</td>
<td>8.v.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-9.viii.63</td>
<td>First-summer</td>
<td>29-31.v.66</td>
<td>First-summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-11.viii.63</td>
<td>First-summer/second-winter</td>
<td>9.vi.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.viii.63</td>
<td>First-winter</td>
<td>11-13.vii.66</td>
<td>Adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>12-16.viii.63</td>
<td>First-summer/second-winter</td>
<td>16.vii.66</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12.viii.63</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>20-21.vii.66</td>
<td>First-summer</td>
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<td>Second-winter</td>
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<td>Second-winter</td>
<td>23-25.viii.66</td>
<td>First-summer/first-winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-14.xi.63</td>
<td>Second-winter</td>
<td>27.viii.66</td>
<td>Second-winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.iv.64</td>
<td>Second-winter/second-summer</td>
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**Identification of Mediterranean Gulls**

Charlwood and Ferguson-Lees (1964) have already drawn attention to the similarity in the flight patterns of immature Mediterranean and Common Gulls L. canus, and have stressed that comparisons between Mediterranean and Black-headed Gulls in previous literature are misleading. Observations at Dungeness fully support this, but in their note
IMMATURE MEDITERRANEAN GULLS

Charlwood and Ferguson-Lees described only an individual in first-winter plumage, whereas immatures at other ages may be equally unfamiliar, or in the case of first-summer birds, even more similar to Common Gulls of the same age.

It is hoped that plate 48, which shows all immature plumages of Mediterranean and Common Gulls side by side, will help to clarify this interesting problem of field identification. The following detailed notes are a summary of the descriptions and field-characters of all the Dungeness birds.

General field-characters
At all ages one of the best field marks of the Mediterranean Gull is its heavy bill with a markedly curved culmen and a distinct gonys which gives an obvious ‘drooping’ effect from most angles. This heaviness is usually further accentuated by a black streak from the bill through the eye. The bill of the immature appears black, but close views usually reveal a trace of dark red at the base of the lower mandible.

The black markings around the eye are generally more extensive than in the Black-headed Gull, although in some second-winter Mediterranean Gulls this area is reduced to a small spot behind the eye. The Common Gull does not normally show any similar mark at all, but it can sometimes be suggested, particularly in first-winter individuals, by an abnormal concentration behind the eye of the usual light brown streaking of the head.

In flight the Mediterranean Gull has a slightly smaller wing-span than the Common Gull, but this is only apparent when the two species are seen side by side. The wing shape is like that of the Common Gull, heavy and rounded, not slender and pointed as in the Black-headed. The wing beat is shallower than in the Common Gull, often giving a more tern-like or buoyant appearance.

In general coloration the Mediterranean Gull is whiter than a Common Gull of the same age, having the whiteness of a Kittiwake, particularly on the head, under-parts and under-wing.

In immatures the dark markings on the wing are black, even in strong sunlight when a Common Gull’s will look mouse-brown. When flying overhead the black line of the secondaries and the black outer primaries show clearly through the wing as clear-cut dark lines, whereas the under-wing of the Common Gull appears virtually uniform.

When standing amongst a flock of gulls, the Mediterranean Gull stands noticeably higher than both Black-headed and Common Gulls, because of its longer legs, and it can often be picked out by this feature.

Juvenile
As first-winter, except for a darker mantle and a rather more strongly
marked diagonal line across the wing-coverts. It is probable, however, that most individuals will be in first-winter plumage by the time they reach Britain.

First-winter
The pale pearly-grey mantle, obviously whiter than in both Common and Black-headed Gulls, is acquired by a body moult, usually before arrival in British waters. The pale area on the wing, caused by the almost white secondary and inner primary coverts and inner primaries, is a good field mark, but some first-winter Common Gulls suggest this, so it is essential that the other general field-characters be noted for conclusive identification. This is the plumage which was fully discussed by Charlwood and Ferguson-Lees.

First-summer
A body and covert moult is completed early in the year (January-May) and it is in the resulting first-summer plumage that the flight pattern is strikingly similar to that of a first-summer Common Gull. The latter, however, always shows a blue-grey 'saddle' contrasting with the whiter wing-coverts. In the Mediterranean Gull the mantle, being pale pearly-grey, does not contrast with the white wing-coverts in the same way and so lacks the saddle effect of the Common Gull.

The wing markings of the Mediterranean Gull are noticeably blacker than those of the Common Gull, this being accentuated by the contrasting paleness of the remainder of the plumage. This blackness can, however, be equalled by some Common Gulls in shaded light, but in these circumstances the blue-grey mantle shows up clearly and accentuates the saddle effect. Conversely, the mantle contrast of the Common Gull is sometimes lost in bright sunlight, but in these conditions the markings of the flight feathers are pale brown, not black.

Second-winter
A complete autumn moult (July-September) produces a near-adult plumage, but a small, varying number of outer primaries retain fine black tippings and the soft parts have yet to attain their full colour.

This plumage is followed by a body moult in the spring when the black head is obtained, but the black wing tippings remain. This, the second-summer plumage, is virtually absent from the Dungeness records (two were seen in 1964) and most of the birds have probably returned to their breeding grounds by the time they reach this age.

REFERENCES


PLATE 48. Plumages of immature Mediterranean Gulls *Larus melanocephalus* (left four) compared with those of Common Gulls *L. camus*. Top two, first winter. Centre two, first-summer. Bottom, second-winter with an additional Mediterranean Gull moulting from first-summer to second-winter (pages 365-368) (sketches: P. J. Grant)