

Mew Gull *Larus canus* at Harike Lake, Punjab, India

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During a birdwatching trip to Harike Lake, Punjab (India) from 6th to 10th February 2001, I was watching the young pupils at the Sikh temple on the 10th February, throwing chapattis, Frisbee style, to the gulls on the water. One particular gull amongst the Brown-headed Gulls *Larus brunnicephalus* caught my attention. Although it was superficially similar to and about the same size as the Brown-headed Gulls, its wing pattern and bill were totally different. As this bird was much smaller than any of the large gulls, I knew I was looking at something unusual for India but familiar to me. I was pretty sure I was looking at a Mew Gull *L. canus*, which I am very familiar with having been brought up in Britain and having spent many years' birdwatching there and elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless I took detailed notes to make certain I was not looking at a similar species. I then went into my room in the temple where I was staying and checked my field guide to make sure there were no other confusion species and to check for any additional diagnostic features to look out for. With additional observations, along with original notes, I made the following description.

Description

Observations were made at a range of about 10-15m with a Kowa ED TS613 telescope at 30x magnification and at such close range the more suitable Zeiss 10x40 binoculars. The bird was present for at least a half hour.

The bill was noticeably thicker and less dagger-like than that of Brown-headed or Black-headed *L. ridibundus* gulls. It was distinctly yellow with a neat black sub-terminal band. This was not the often two or three coloured band comprising of different coloured spots of the larger gulls Yellow-legged *L. cachinnans* or Heuglin's *L. heuglini* but rather was a simple straight narrow black sub-terminal band running across a dull yellow bill. Neither was the bill as thick or as bulbous as that of the larger gulls.

From observations of the bird on water and in flight, the wings, mantle and back were a uniform medium grey which was slightly but noticeably darker than that of the Brown-headed Gulls close by for comparison. In flight there was a clear white trailing edge to all the grey of the wing. The outer primaries were totally black forming a clear broad black outer primary wedge except for the fairly large clear white sub-terminal spot. The black outer primaries contrasted with the medium-grey of the inner primaries and rest of the wing.

The head was all white except for the crown, which was

slightly speckled. The forehead was steep and the eye was dark, which gave it a more handsome appearance than that of Brown-headed Gull. The legs were yellow. The tail was all white. The white head with only slight speckling and the lack of brown in the plumage point to it being an adult in winter plumage.

Confusion species

The outer primaries were totally black forming a clear broad black outer primary wedge, except for the fairly large clear white sub-terminal spot. Black-headed and Slender-billed *L. genei* gulls are not confusion species as the black in the webs of the primaries is negligible. Adult Black-headed and Slender-billed gulls show a diagnostic upper wing pattern with a clear black trailing edge to the outer primaries contrasting with the white outer primaries.

Compared to the adult Brown-headed Gulls nearby the bird had much more black in the outer primaries. Adult Brown-headed Gulls have a white inner primary panel, which contrasts clearly with the black outer primaries of the upper wing. The bird discussed had none of these features, the black outer primaries contrasted with the medium-grey of the inner primaries and the rest of the wing.

The bird was about the size of a Brown-headed Gull and therefore far too small to allow confusion with the larger gulls, Yellow-legged, Heuglin's, etc. The bill pattern and shape also ruled out those species.

The overall size of the bird, the shape, colour and pattern of the bill, the broad black primary wedge contrasting with the grey rather than white inner primaries of the upper wing identify this bird conclusively as an adult Mew Gull.

I am familiar with Brown-headed, Black-headed, Slender-billed, Yellow-legged and Heuglin's gulls from extensive gull-watching in Goa and also Black-headed Gull and as stated previously Mew Gull from Britain and Denmark.

Confirmatory records

Magnus Ullman, leading a bird group from Sweden, also recorded three Mew Gulls on 5th February 2001. Mark Beaman, from Britain, leading a Birdquest group, recorded one Mew Gull between 13th and 14th February 2001 (Mark Beaman, *in litt.*) and Werner Suter, in a group comprising Susanne Ruppen, Günther Helm, Wolf-Rainer Ilenburg, Werner Müller, Hermann Reinhardt and Chista Glauser, from Switzerland, recorded one Mew Gull on 1st February 2001 (Werner Suter, *in litt.*). Between one to three Mew Gulls

were therefore present at Harike from 1st to 14th February 2001.

Previous records

Mew Gull has been recorded previously at Harike (Kazmierczak & Singh 1998), probably by Per Undeland, who recorded most of the rarities at Harike (Krys Kazmierczak, *in litt.*, 2001) but further details are necessary. Alström (1994) recorded this species near Delhi and Paul Holt *et al.* recorded a first winter bird at Morjim, Goa on 14th December 1996 (Holt 2000). There are also five records from Pakistan, two from Nepal, one more from near Delhi and another from Bhutan (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Inskipp & Inskipp 1991; Inskipp 1988; Kazmierczak 2000; Robson 1993).

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Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus* at Harike Lake, Punjab, India

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During a birdwatching trip to Harike Lake, Punjab (India), from 6th to 10th February 2001, I spent many hours studying the grebes near the Sikh gurdwara (temple) at the west end of the lake. There were several Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* present but some birds were noticeably different from this species and so I took notes of all such birds. It wasn't until later and after comparing notes with Werner Suter and Mark Beaman, who were also visiting at that time that I realised I had seen at least one and probably two Horned Grebes *P. auritus*.

A small grebe was seen on 10th February 2001, south of the gurdwara, at a range of about 20m through a Kowa ED TS613 telescope at 30x magnification. The bird dived after a few minutes and was not relocated immediately until later, when presumably the same bird, was spotted at a distance of c. 400m, to the east of the gurdwara.

Description

The overall impression was of a small, smartly two-toned dark-grey and white grebe, with none of the dusky or buff appearance of Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, it was also longer necked.

The eye was orange-red and this along with small size points to Black-necked or Horned Grebe. This bird had a very clear white spot on the lores. Another feature was the pattern around the eye, the black cap extending only to the middle of the eye and there was a rather straight line running straight back from the eye. The ear coverts were white and

the lores pale. The hood was also well defined and contrasting with the white ear coverts.

The throat, breast and flanks were all white. The cap, nape, scapulars, wings and tail were all a very dark-grey. This contrast created the clear two-tone effect.

The bill was pale with a clear dark upper edge to the upper mandible.

When it dived there was a white zigzag on the wing—too fast to see if this was more than just the secondary panel—but the zigzag suggests a possible white leading edge.

The shape of the head was not clearly the triangular shape, supposedly typical of Horned Grebe but also did not show the high forehead of Black-necked Grebe.

Discussion

This bird had a very clear white spot on the lores, which is diagnostic for Horned Grebe (Jonsson 1993; Beaman & Madge 1998; Mullarney *et al.* 1999). Another diagnostic feature was the pattern around the eye, which exactly fits the illustrations in the three works just cited. The black cap extended only to the middle of the eye and there was a rather straight line running straight back from the eye; the ear coverts were white and the lores were pale. The overall result is that the eye was only surrounded by extensive black above a line extending directly above the eye, with no black below eye level or directly to the front of the eye, where there was the pale loreal spot, i.e. black surrounding about 110 degrees of