

Status of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* in India

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The Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* is a monotypic, large, white-headed gull. It breeds from the northern parts of the Black-, Caspian-, and Azov Seas, and Lake Aral, east to Lake Balkash, and Lake Saisan, Kazakhstan; wintering in the southern part of its breeding range—in the Persian Gulf, east to the Indian Subcontinent, and sparsely to the northern Red Sea (Olsen & Larsson 2004). It is similar in appearance to the 'Steppe Gull' *L. fuscus barabensis*, and good views are required to separate the two.

The Caspian Gull is now considered a monotypic species (Collinson *et al.* 2008). Its current status in India is interesting, as Grimmett *et al.* (2011) considered its status as 'uncertain', while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) considered it as 'hypothetical'. It was recently excluded from the India Checklist by Praveen *et al.* (2014), who discounting two individuals seen here as probable *cachinnans* / *barabensis* intergrades, and not pure *cachinnans*, concluded that there were no confirmed records of the species from India. One of the birds that I saw in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat, on 02 March 2014 [140, 141] was considered to be closer to *barabensis*, based on the amount of black on its primaries, though it showed mirrors on 'p10' and 'p9', similar to *cachinnans* (Hans Larsson, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 13 May 2015).

The hybridisation between *cachinnans* and *barabensis* is discussed in detail in Panov & Monzikov (2000), and Collinson *et al.* (2008); the latter stating that, 'there is some evidence of hybridization between the two, but it is very limited and unidirectional: *barabensis* type mtDNA has been found in individuals



Photos: Prasad Ganpule

141

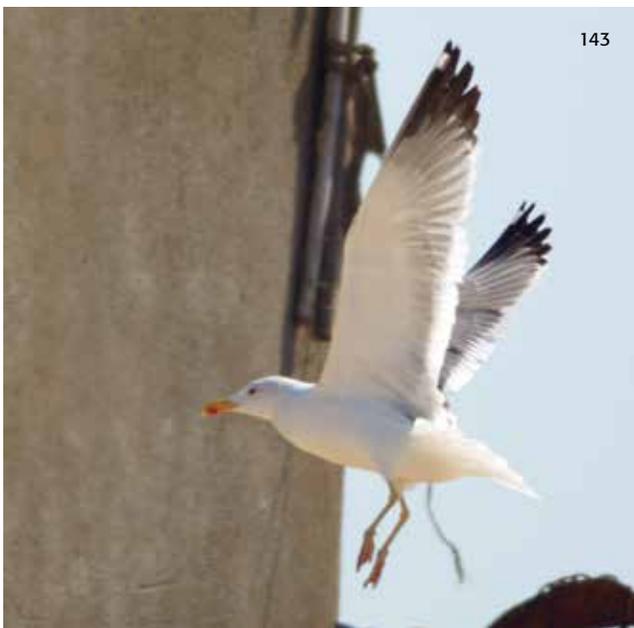
that are phenotypically *cachinnans*, but not vice versa.' However, they add that individual gulls, sometimes, show intermediate characters between *cachinnans* and *barabensis* and it may be impossible to assign them to either form; but the fact that some *barabensis* individuals are phenotypically close to *cachinnans* means that it does not always imply intergradation. We believe that gulls reported here fall in the latter category, though this cannot be ascertained conclusively.

Another individual seen in Okha, Gujarat, on 11 January 2015 [142, 143] could also probably be a *cachinnans*, but showed a different wing pattern from that of a typical Caspian Gull. It had an elongated, 'pear shaped' head with a sloping forehead, straight bill, pale upperparts, and had completed a moult in January, but had a mirror only on 'p10' and not on 'p9', and showed more black in wings with restricted grey 'tongues' on outer primaries, which is unlike *cachinnans*. This individual could not conclusively be identified as a Caspian Gull. It should be noted that Caspian Gulls, in the eastern parts of their breeding range, show more black / less white in the wing, which is similar to *barabensis*, and hence are not easily separable from it (Images 455, 456 in Olsen & Larsson 2004). Olsen & Larsson (2004) discuss this geographical variability in *cachinnans* in detail. Some Caspian Gulls, breeding in northern Kazakhstan, have *cachinnans* type features but a wing-tip pattern approaching that of a 'Steppe Gull', while others have a pattern like *cachinnans*; both being treated as Caspian Gulls currently: please see images at URL: <http://birdsofkazakhstan.com/> (Wassink 2015). Such birds could occur as winter migrants in India, and could be overlooked among the 'Steppe Gulls' here. This individual was very similar to such a type of Caspian Gulls.



140

140-141. This gull from the Little Rann of Kachchh was considered to be closer to *barabensis*, based on the amount of black on its primaries, though it showed mirrors on 'p10' and 'p9', similar to *cachinnans*.



Photos: Prasad Ganpule

142-143. This gull from Okha, could also probably be a *cachinnans*, but showed a different wing pattern from that of a typical Caspian Gull.

On 25 January 2015, I saw a *cachinnans* type adult gull on a small river on the western side of the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat (23.13°N, 70.93°E). I was able to observe it for almost ten minutes, and photograph it while it was swimming, and also in flight [144–146]. It was a classic *cachinnans*, showing pale grey upperparts, a sloping forehead with a 'beady' eye, long grey 'tongues' on the outer primaries, mirrors on 'p9' and 'p10', and a long bill. The black on the primaries was restricted till 'p5'. It seemed to be in near breeding plumage, with a bright yellow bill, and yellow legs. It could be identified as a Caspian Gull based on Gibbins *et al.* (2010), who state that the typical primary pattern, if noted, is diagnostic in Caspian Gull, especially with respect to other species occurring here, i.e., 'Heuglin's Gull' *L. f. heuglini*, and 'Steppe Gull'.

Since the occurrence of Caspian Gull in India is uncertain, I sent the images I'd taken to various experts for their opinions; who confirmed that the bird looked like a Caspian Gull, the only proviso being its yellow legs. However, Olsen & Larsson (2004) state that 12% of Caspian Gulls in colonies in Ukraine had deep

144-146. This is a classic Caspian Gull from the Little Rann of Kachchh.

yellow legs. Gibbins *et al.* (2010) also state that some birds show stronger yellow legs, though rarely in winter. Hence 'yellow legs' are not unknown in Caspian Gulls.

Though quite rare, there are *cachinnans* type individuals seen in Gujarat regularly. Two of the probable birds, and one typical bird are described above. In addition to these sightings, I have noted one or two individuals every year in Gujarat, either in the Little Rann of Kachchh, or in Jamnagar / Okha areas. Unfortunately I have not kept detailed records of such birds. Hence *cachinnans* type birds do occur here as regular, but scarce winter migrants. Where these *cachinnans* type gulls come from is not known. It is presumed that they breed in the eastern-most part of their

breeding range (Azov Sea?), and are slightly different from the western *cachinnans* in showing more black in wings.

All these records, especially of the individual from the Little Rann of Kachchh in January 2015 showing typical characters of the eastern population indicate that Caspian Gull is a scarce but regular visitor to the region, probably overlooked amidst flocks of 'Steppe' and 'Heuglin's Gulls'. Though some *barabensis* / *cachinnans* intergrades could occur in India, it is unlikely that all *cachinnans* type birds seen here are intergrades. We, therefore, call for inclusion of Caspian Gull in the India Checklist until any revision, in future, of taxonomic status of eastern population (that is currently treated as *cachinnans* by Dickinson & Remsen 2015).

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Woolly-necked Storks *Ciconia episcopus* nesting on mobile-towers in Pune, Maharashtra

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The Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus* is a large wading bird that is patchily distributed throughout the Indian Subcontinent. It prefers well watered areas including flooded grassland, irrigated ploughed fields, rain-filled puddles, banks of streams and rivers, ponds, lakes, and marshes, including ones deep inside forests (Ali & Ripley 1978). The South Asian population is split from its African counterpart *C. microscelis* and assigned a specific status as Asian Woolly-neck *C. episcopus* by BirdLife International (2014), which listed it as Vulnerable since the population is decreasing due to habitat loss (Wetlands International 2014). Though this species is known to normally nest singly in trees (Ali & Ripley 1978), here we report two instances of it nesting on mobile-towers in Pune, Maharashtra.

Nest 1: On 15 October 2011, at 1310 hrs two of us (UV & DS) noticed a pair of Woolly-necked Storks nesting on top of a mobile-tower (17.50°N, 73.84°E) above a four storey hostel building near Mutha River, in the densely populated area of Dattawadi, Pune [147]. The nest was c. 23 m above the ground. The mobile-tower itself was 11 m tall. The nest comprised a platform of c. 1 m diameter built using sticks and other plant materials [148]. Both birds were seen visiting the nest. The

presence, or absence, of chicks could not be ascertained, as the nest was inaccessible.

Nest 2: On 22 September 2013, 0743 hrs, while watching birds at Pashan Lake, Pune (18.54°N, 73.79°E), a reservoir on Ramnadi River, two of us (UV & VB) noticed a Woolly-necked Stork flying with a leafy forked branch, probably of an eucalyptus tree. It briefly alighted on top of the tallest building in the vicinity, and then flew a short distance to a mobile-tower. The mobile-tower was on top of a multi-storey residential building. Another bird was already present on that nest. The bird placed the twig in nest, and spent a few minutes preening [149]. Then the pair started re-arranging the sticks and twigs in the nest. They ignored the House Crows *Corvus splendens* perched close to nest, and also a Black Kite *Milvus migrans* that was soaring over the nest [150]. The three-storey building was c. 10 m tall, and the mobile-tower, an additional 14 m, i.e., the nest was about 24 m from the ground. The nest was similar to the one observed at Dattawadi. Both the nests were built on top of mobile-towers, in the vicinity of rivers, and / or wetlands.

Unlike other colonial breeding storks in this geographical region, Woolly-necked Stork is known to breed individually (Ali