

# Observations of probable Taimyr Gulls *Larus fuscus taimyrensis* at Okha, Gujarat, India

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## Introduction

The taxonomy, and identification, of the 'large white-headed gull' group is complex. There are two taxa from this group that commonly winter in India: Heuglin's Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini*, and Steppe Gull *L. f. barabensis* (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). For India, the Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* was considered 'uncertain' by Grimmett *et al.* (2011), and 'hypothetical' by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). It is, however, a rare winter visitor, at least to Gujarat (Ganpule 2015). The status of the Mongolian Gull *L. [smithsonianus/vegae] mongolicus* is uncertain, with a record from Odisha (Dutta 2013); photos of gulls similar to *mongolicus*, from different regions of India, have been recently posted on birding websites, e.g., [www.orientalbirdimages.org](http://www.orientalbirdimages.org).

I report here observations of probable Taimyr Gulls *Larus fuscus taimyrensis* (= *heuglini*) (Dickinson & Remsen 2013) from Okha, Gujarat, made over a period of three years from 2014–2016.

## Taxonomy

The situation regarding *taimyrensis* is complex. Yésou (2002) described, in detail, the taxonomic status of *taimyrensis*, and stated that it is an invalid taxon, and treated it as a hybrid between *heuglini*, and the nominate *vegae*. However, it was treated as a sub-species of *L. heuglini* by Olsen & Larsson (2004). Based on genetic studies, Collinson *et al.* (2008) proposed *taimyrensis* as a subspecies of *L. fuscus*, with the caveat that though included, 'it may be best synonymised with *heuglini* or be regarded as a transient *heuglini* x *vegae* hybrid population.' Citing work done by Yésou (2002), they also stated that birds breeding within the accepted range of *taimyrensis* are, in fact, phenotypically identical to *L. vegae birulai*. Dickinson & Remsen (2013) synonymise it with *heuglini*, which is a subspecies of *L. fuscus*.

A recent paper on Taimyr Gulls (van Dijk *et al.* 2011), based on studies carried out on birds breeding in the Taimyr Peninsula, showed that they have extensive variations in leg colour (most dull yellow, but pink or grayish in some individuals), but assortative mating with respect to leg colour, or any other characteristic, was not observed. Though it was suggested that these gulls represented a distinct population, with a measurable degree of genetic differentiation, no new genetic data was presented to refute the recommendations of Collinson *et al.* (2008).

## Wintering range

The wintering range of the Taimyr Gull is uncertain, and there is confusion regarding this. It was thought that it migrated in a

south-westerly direction to winter in the Caspian Sea, and along the coast of the Arabian Sea (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Recent studies, however, indicated that Taimyr Gulls wintered mainly in Hong Kong (Kennerley *et al.* 1995), and Japan (Ujihara & Ujihara 2008). Its status in South Korea is uncertain as it is believed to be a passage migrant, with birds arriving in September, and seen in large numbers in October. Though a small number of birds remain in winter, most birds are thought to spend winters further south (Moores 2011).

## Observations & identification

On 12 January 2014, I visited Okha, Gujarat (22.46° N, 69.06° E), a small village located on the north-western-most point of Saurashtra, on the coast of the Arabian Sea. It is a fishing village, and since fish is processed here, large white-headed gulls are seen in good numbers. There were around 1500 gulls present there on that day, with adults, first-winter, and immature birds roosting in the area. The majority of the birds were Heuglin's Gulls. Many were Steppe Gulls. Caspian Gulls were not noted on this day.

I found a group of around 20 gulls, which were different from the Heuglin's, and Steppe Gulls, present in the area. The former were very pale-mantled (paler than any Heuglin's, and approaching closer to Steppe), late moulting bulky gulls (with p6 or p7 growing in second week of January in some individuals, unlike any Steppe which has completed the moult), with either yellowish or light-pinkish legs, whitish eyes, and with prominent head streaking in adults. There were a few juveniles also in this group. I took photographs of these birds [1-7].



1. Adult Taimyr Gull. Note heavy head streaking, pale mantle, yellowish legs, and pale eye with reddish eye-ring. This bird is moulting (like others), with p8 being longest, in the second week of January, indicating its northern origin. Although there is heavy streaking in the crown area too, as per van Dijk *et al.* (2011), "There is much variation in the extent of head-streaking shown by adults during the non-breeding season". Okha, Gujarat. 12 January 2014.



2. Adult Taimyr Gull. Note streaking on head, pale mantle, yellowish-pink legs, and pale eye with reddish eye-ring. Note late moult—P8 longest. Okha, Gujarat. 12 January 2014.



3. Adult Taimyr Gull. Late moult, with only p7 longest. Pale mantle, deep yellowish legs, and pale eye with reddish eye-ring. The growing primary makes this gull look different. Okha, Gujarat. 12 January 2014.

4. A group of gulls at a small puddle in Okha, Gujarat, 12 January 2014. The individuals standing on the left, and in the center seem like Taimyr Gulls based on the following features: Well-proportioned body appears neat and fairly compact, shortish bills showing a "weak" gonydeal angle, and a rounded head shape. Light yellow bill base, gony spot orangish-red, reaching cutting edge of upper mandible, with a small dark marking near the gony. The presence of a slightly longer primary projection, beyond the tail. Rather flat backed. Dull yellow legs with pinkish tinge (Taimyr's leg colour is frequently yellow in adults, however many show pinkish tones). Pale eyes with red orbital ring. Whitish head with streaking confined to hind parts, and sides of neck. Although not fully visible in the image, the individual on the rear right side (right side second row, with dark eye) shows some *vegae* features too. Can this be a Taimyr sub adult, (or) Taimyr x Vega hybrid, considering its features? Dark eyes with iris spot density (26-50%), longer bill, with a fairly "obvious" gonydeal angle, pale bill base, gony spot dull orange, not reaching cutting edge of upper mandible, which has no dark marking, more flesh / pink coloured legs, and streaking on head, crown and neck.



5. Adult Taimyr Gull. Slightly darker mantle than other birds, but still paler than *heuglini*. Heavy head streaking with blotches on the nape. Pale eye with reddish eye-ring. Streaking similar to *vegae*. A Vega Gull (or) Taimyr x Vega hybrid based on weak rear end with fairly short primary projection beyond tail, somewhat large white mirrors, and heavy streaking on head, neck, and breast. In mid-winter (December-January), most Vega Gulls show extensive grey-brown (tinged warmer) streaking, and smudged "thumbprints" on the hind neck, across the neck sides, and, often, down the breast sides. Okha, Gujarat. 12 January 2014.



6. First-winter. 'possible' Vega Gull (or) Taimyr x Vega hybrid. 12 January 2014. Okha, Gujarat.



7. First-winter. 'Possible' Taimyr Gull based on the pale plumage, long wings with barred greater coverts, and black bill with pale base and weak gonydeal angle. 12 January 2014. Okha, Gujarat.

I visited Okha on 11 January 2015, and 31 January 2016 to specifically search for these late-moulting, pale-backed gulls. I was able to note about 30–40 in 2015, in about 1000–1200 gulls present, and around 20–25 in 2016, amidst 1600–1800 gulls, taking photos on both occasions [8-9]. I focused on adult birds, as these are easier to identify. The visits were consciously made in January, so that moult timings in these birds could be better studied. However, on a visit to Porbandar (21.63°N, 69.60°E), Gujarat, on 07 February 2016, three similar birds were noted [10].

All: Prasad Ganpule



8. Adult. Pale mantle. Note head streaking. This individual looks quite short legged (like Vega Gull), but the rest of its features are good for Taimyr Gull. Okha, Gujarat. 11 January 2015.

All photographs were taken between 1000 hrs and 1100 hrs in harsh sunlight, and I have refrained from post-processing to retain the true mantle colour. Images were taken with Nikon D7100 DSLR Camera with Nikkor 300mm F4 lens + Nikon 1.7 TC.

The adult birds could be differentiated from Heuglin's, and Steppe Gulls as per the characteristics listed in Table 1.

Though comparative features of the Caspian Gull are not given in Table 1 (a group of six to seven adult Caspian Gulls was noted during my visit on 31 January 2016), they can be ruled out based on the fact that it moults very early (completing its primary moult by November), is very pale-backed [Kodak Grey Scale (4)5–6.5], and has a long, straight, and slender bill. Caspian



9. Adult. Pale mantle; yellowish legs. Note the prominent head streaking. Very late moult, with p8 longest. A Vega Gull (or) Taimyr x Vega hybrid based on the weak rear end, and heavy streaking on head, neck, and breast. 31 January 2016. Okha, Gujarat.



10. Adult: Pale mantle, and fine head streaking on head, with bolder streaks on hind neck, and upper breast, and hence a 'possible' Taimyr x Vega hybrid. Pale eyes, with red orbital eye-ring, and flesh-coloured legs. Beak looks smudged. Late moult, with moult not completed in first week of February. Since this image was taken very late in the evening after sunset, the mantle colour may not be represented properly in the image, and the pale mantle may look little darker (minor sharpening is done for this image). Porbandar, Gujarat. 7 February 2016.

shows very little black on the outer primaries, with mirrors on p9 and p10. Further, it is a rare winter migrant to Gujarat, and is usually seen only in very small numbers (Ganpule 2015).

Similarly, Mongolian Gull could also be excluded, based on the following characteristics: It is mostly white-headed in winter, with faint, narrow dark streaks around its eyes, with a large

**Table 1.** Comparison of adult *Larus heuglini*, and *L. barabensis* with the gulls seen in Okha, Gujarat

Parameters	* <i>L. heuglini</i>	* <i>L. barabensis</i>	Okha gulls
Mantle colour	Dark slaty, almost blackish	Pale to darkish grey	Pale grey in most individuals, a few darkish grey
Kodak Grey Scale	8–11	7–8.5	6–8
Head marking in winter (January)	Usually brown spots/streaks on hind neck, normally finely streaked	Usually white-headed, but may sometimes show faint streaks around eyes	Most birds heavily streaked, with heavy blotches on nape in few individuals
Moult timings of primaries	Generally late moulting, with moult completed by January to mid-March	Earlier than heuglini, with moult completed by December in most individuals	Late moulting, with moult completed by end of February
Winter eye colour	Pale yellow, rarely dark	Pale to dark	Pale yellow
Head shape	Flatter crowned	Rather rounded	Flatter forehead than heuglini
Leg colour	Yellow or flesh-tinged	Bright yellow	Yellow to fleshy or pink
Bill in winter	Dull yellow, usually with dark markings on upper mandible	Pale and often four coloured, shorter and narrower	Dull yellow, often lacking dark marking on upper mandible

\*Details taken from Olsen & Larsson (2004).

bill, and very pale upper parts. It is also an early moulting bird, completing its moult by December, but more information is required regarding this (Olsen & Larsson 2004). There are no definite records of Mongolian Gull from Gujarat, though there are a few uncertain records (*pers. obsv.*).

## Discussion

The majority of these gulls observed in Okha were in active moult in the second week of January. Hence these must be Arctic breeders. These are not Heuglin's (the regular wintering Arctic breeder), since their structure, and mantle colour do not match. Buchheim (2006) also noted three similar individuals at Okha, and speculated that these might be *taimyrensis*, *birulai* or *vegae*.

Based on studies carried out in Japan, adult Vega Gulls *L. smithsonianus vegae* are said to be fairly distinct from the *argentatus-cachinnans-fuscus* group, but birds with yellowish legs, seen in Japan, and somewhat similar to the birds seen here, did not fall within the known criteria of identification of Vega Gulls, and were thought to be either *taimyrensis* or *birulai* (Gibbins 2003). However, all long distance ring recoveries from wintering Taimyr Gulls were from the Pacific coast of Asia, mainly the Sea of Okhotsk (van Dijk *et al.* 2011), with the authors stating that birds resembling Taimyr Gulls winter in low numbers in Iran and Bahrain, noting that the unidentified birds seen by Buchheim (2006), in Okha, might belong to this taxon. Olsen & Larsson (2004) also speculate that birds matching *taimyrensis* could frequent western India. Thus the possibility that a small number of Taimyr Gulls could winter in India is not ruled out.

The observations made over a period of three years show that these Taimyr Gulls are rare, but regular, winter visitors to Okha. Since these were baffling, I sent the images to various experts for their opinions [Klaus Malling Olsen, email dated 9 February 2014, Andreas Buchheim, emails dated 23 January 2014 and 18 January 2015, Nial Moores, email dated 27 February 2014, Norman Deans van Swelm, email dated 2 March 2014, Arend Wassink, email dated 29 January 2014]; they confirmed that these are similar to the birds seen in the Taimyr Peninsula, and could be *taimyrensis* based on the structure, pale mantle, late moult, heavier head streaking (more than seen in *heuglini*), and the yellow or fleshy-tinged/pinkish legs. However, Klaus Malling Olsen (email dated 28 January 2015) also opined that birds with pale mantles, and very heavy head streaking with blotches on the nape (similar to *vegae*) are very unusual, and show *vegae* influences, but *vegae* has not been observed outside South-east Asia (Olsen & Larsson 2004), and these are best retained as 'unidentified' until further research determines their origins.

It is possible that these gulls winter in other areas of Gujarat too, as three similar individuals were noted at Porbandar. Further, a sighting was reported from Kerala in January 2015 (George 2015), which was also identified as a probable *taimyrensis*. Hence birdwatchers are advised to be on the lookout for such pale-mantled, late moulting, and heavily streaked (on the head) gulls along the entire western coast of India. More sightings will help in understanding its status here. However, it should be noted that without genetic studies and knowledge of the breeding areas of these birds wintering in Okha, it is not possible to be sure of their origins and taxa. Large scale ringing, or satellite tagging, of an adequate number of gulls on the Taimyr Peninsula, and in other nearby areas, would lead to a better understanding of whether these are Taimyr Gulls or something else. The gulls wintering in

Okha should also be tagged, and suitable blood samples taken for genetic studies. These 'mystery' gulls in Okha are a challenge for gull researchers, and through this paper, attention is drawn to their presence in India.

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