

## The Baltic Gull *Larus fuscus fuscus* in Goa: An addition to the Indian avifauna

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The Herring Gull/Lesser Black-backed Gull complex (*Larus argentatus*/*L. fuscus*), often known as *large white-headed gulls*, is a well-known example of 'taxonomy in flux', and has led to nomenclature confusions, difficulties in field identification, and uncertain range statements/maps (Collinson *et al.* 2008; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The two well-accepted taxa from this complex that winter in southern Asia are Heuglin's Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini* and the Steppe Gull *L. f. barabensis*—both considered subspecies of the Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Apart from these two, there are a few records of the Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* from Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), a handful of records of the Mongolian Gull *L. smithsonianus mongolicus* from Odisha (Dutta 2013), and a few records of the putative Taimyr Gull *L. f. 'taimyrensis'* from Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). All other taxa, including the Baltic Gull *L. f. fuscus*, are treated as hypothetical (Rasmussen & Anderton

2012; Praveen *et al.* 2014). In this note, we detail the first confirmed record of a Baltic Gull for the Indian Subcontinent.

On 13 November 2009, while on a birding trip to Goa, DW photographed a dark-backed gull at Utorda Beach (15.32°N, 73.90°E). At that time it was believed to be a Heuglin's Gull. Recent analysis, in light of further photographs from Goa, has ascertained it to be a Baltic Gull. Though a good series of photographs were obtained during the trip, all of them were lost except for the one available in a blog [11].

On 17 January 2010, MG and T. Bleifuss photographed another dark-backed gull [12] at Morjim Beach (15.62°N, 73.73°E), which was definitely identified as a Baltic Gull. On further enquiries at Backwoods Camp, they learnt that the said bird had been there for some days and a few other groups had also come across the same (Qupeleio De Souza, *verbally*, 17 January 2010). This is evident from a few online trip reports, and



11. Baltic Gull at Utorda Beach.



Pics: Martin Gottschling

12. Baltic Gull at Morjim Beach.

images, from Goa from that period (Dryden 2010a, b; Fell 2010). From the images, it is quite likely that all the sightings were of the same individual that must have traveled c. 50 km along the coast, from Utorda to Morjim.

This was a small and slim gull, and from the photos it can be seen that it is darker than any of the Heuglin's Gulls present there. Its mantle is also nearly black, darker than that of *L. f. graellsii* or *L. f. intermedius*—which breed between the ranges of Heuglin's, and Baltic. There is no contrast between the colour of the primaries and rest of the wing and mantle (contra Heuglin's). As seen in photos [13, 14], the bird is moulting its primaries in January; such late moult is typical of northern breeders, even though it is variable in second and third year birds (Olsen & Larsson 2004). Also, unlike any other races of the Lesser Black-backed, there are very few streaks on the nape, and much less yellow on its greyish feet. Extensive pale-tips to the overall dark bulbous bill are indicative of the age of the bird, and it is probably in its second or third winter plumage. Though second winter birds are normally expected to have an extensively pale bill, this type of dark bill, with pale tip, is also expected at this age (Olsen & Larsson 2004). The images were sent to Hans Larsson who readily agreed they were of a Baltic Gull (Hans Larsson *in litt.*, e-mail dated 04 December 2017).

From the available literature, this seems to be the first report of a confirmed Baltic Gull from the Indian Subcontinent. Goa has been birded heavily since then, but there have not been any suspected reports of Baltic Gull till date. The bird was, in all probability, a vagrant, but it can turn up anywhere on the western coast. Hence, birders should be careful while scanning gull flocks. They breed in Scandinavia and winter mostly in East Africa, and rarely in Israel and the Persian Gulf (Olsen & Larsson 2004); and hence, it was most likely a straggler to India. Olsen & Larsson (2004) state that its status between the Arabian Sea and India is uncertain, but that it is a vagrant to Nepal, and Goa (India). However, no confirmed prior records of the Baltic Gull are known from the Indian Subcontinent and this is an addition to the avifauna of India.



13. Baltic Gull showing moulting primaries in January.



14. Baltic Gull in flight from above: note the lack of contrast between the nearly black mantle and upperwings.

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