



Black-headed Gull in first-immature non-breeding plumage, Darwin, N.T., March 1998

Plate 20

Photo: Niven McCrie

Sight Records of a Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* in the Northern Territory

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Summary

This paper reports sight records of a Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* in Darwin, Northern Territory. The record has been accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (Submission 237) and comprises the second record of the species in Australia, and the first from the Northern Territory.

Introduction

The Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* breeds in the Northern Hemisphere, and migrates mostly to parts of the Atlantic Ocean, Africa and southern and eastern Asia during the non-breeding season. The species occurs occasionally in South-East Asia and very occasionally in New Guinea, but has been recorded in northern Australia only once before.

Sightings

At about 0730 h on 1 February 1998, the authors observed an unusual gull roosting with Silver Gulls *L. novaehollandiae*, terns and waders at a high-tide roost

at Buffalo Creek, near Darwin, N.T. The gull was noticeably smaller than the Silver Gulls around it, and was conspicuous in having a bold, dusky ear-spot and a distinctive yellow-orange bill with a black tip. The bird was observed with 7× and 10× binoculars and with a 25× telescope for about 20 minutes, during which detailed notes were taken.

NM returned to the site at about 1815 h on the same day, and relocated the bird at the water's edge, behind the main roost of gulls. Julian Miles, Debbie Colbourne and Brian Baker joined NM, and together they observed the gull for about an hour, gaining views down to about 20–25 m. At one stage, the gull flew in a circle around the observers, at a height of about 5 m. NM took several photographs, and extensive notes were written by all observers.

The site was visited several times during the following week, but the gull was not seen. On the days immediately after the sighting, the tide was not sufficiently high during daylight hours to force the gulls to roost where they could be observed satisfactorily. On 8 February, when the tidal conditions were again suitable, there were up to 150 gulls at the roost, but the unusual gull was not among them.

The authors found the gull again at about 1700 h on 15 February: it was resting with a small group of Silver Gulls on a light-pole at Stokes Hill Wharf in Darwin Harbour. The bird allowed us to approach very closely; it was apparently unperturbed by people around the light-pole. At one stage, the flock of gulls took flight at the approach of a Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*. They flew to the end of the wharf, then returned shortly afterwards, flying low over the water before rising and alighting on a steel structure near the original light-pole. We left the site after about 40 minutes' observation and contacted David Donato, who found the bird still present at about 1800 h but reported that it flew away after about five minutes, in the direction of another wharf (D. Donato pers. comm.).

On 25 March 1998, NM and Mike Houle found the unusual gull again at Buffalo Creek. The bird appeared rather similar to when it was seen previously, but with some small differences. The vertical grey bands on the sides of its head had become duskier, and the crown had extensive grey feathering. There was no sign of brown spots on the scapulars. The bill showed irregular dark areas towards its base, though the overall bicolored appearance was still retained. The bird was still present on 26 March but was not seen again during subsequent visits.

Description

Size

Noticeably smaller (perhaps 10–20%) than a Silver Gull.

Head and neck

The face and forehead were white. There was a distinct dark crescent in front of the eye, extending from slightly above to below the eye; a broad, white orbital-ring was clearly visible above, below and behind the eye. A band of grey extended upwards from the eye, over the peak of the crown, and there was a bold, sooty ear-spot, from which a band of grey extended to the hindcrown. The area between the two bands was whitish at the sides of the head and light grey on the crown. The neck was whitish (Plate 20).



Black-headed Gull in flight, Darwin, March 1998

Plate 21

Photo: Niven McCrie

Upperparts

The mantle was whitish. The wing coverts were grey, similar to those of a Silver Gull. There were a few small, rather diffuse brown spots on the scapulars, and a few small sooty patches near the rear scapulars, possibly on the tertials.

Underparts

White.

Upperwing

The primaries extended well beyond the tail, much more than on Silver Gulls,

and in flight the bird appeared particularly long-winged (Plate 21). The primaries were black, with a long white patch visible on the folded wing; in flight this was seen to be a broad wedge of white on the outer primaries, widening towards the trailing-edge, which was tipped black. A dark line appeared to extend fully along the trailing-edge of the primaries and subterminally along the secondaries, though this was more diffuse on the innerwing. The leading-edge of the innerwing was white. The remainder of the upperwing was grey, similar to the Silver Gull but there were a few brown spots (barely visible) on the scapulars in flight.

Underwing

The inner part of the underwing was white, becoming more grey on the secondaries. The primaries were dusky, with a white wedge visible on the outer primaries (Plate 21).

Tail

The tail was white with a distinct black subterminal band, apparently across all tail-feathers.

Bare parts

The bill was yellow-orange with the tip (about one third) blackish, and was long and slender in comparison with that of a Silver Gull, and showed almost no angle at the gonys; the tip was rather pointed, and dipped slightly. The gape-line was more prominent than on a Silver Gull. The eyes were dark brown. The legs were pale orange-red, but appeared redder in dull light.

Identification

The bird's small size (compared with a Silver Gull), the distinctive wing pattern, the presence of a dusky ear-spot, and the slender yellow-orange bill with a black tip made identification as Black-headed Gull straightforward.

The rather similar Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnecephalus* is a potential visitor to Australia. It breeds in central Asia, and winters regularly in small numbers as far south as Malaysia (Strange & Jeyarajasingam 1993), with irregular records from Singapore (Seng & Gardner 1997) and parts of Indonesia (Andrew 1992). This gull is larger than the Black-headed Gull, and has more extensive black on the outstretched primaries, with a much broader black trailing-edge on the primaries and secondaries on birds in first non-breeding plumage, and a distinct white spot on the outer primaries of adults. It also has a heavier bill and a pale iris.

Age

Fledging and dispersal from breeding grounds by Black-headed Gulls begins in July (Harrison 1983). Juvenile birds undergo a head and body moult at this time, with most birds having completed the moult into first-immature non-breeding plumage by September (Grant 1982). First-immature breeding plumage is achieved by another head and body moult between February and April (Grant 1982). Second-immature non-breeding plumage is attained by a complete moult, usually finished by October in the second year (Grant 1982). During the second year, the colours of the bare parts also change: the bill becomes redder, and the legs more orange



Black-headed Gull in adult non-breeding plumage, Italy, January 1995. The bird in the background, in first-immature non-breeding plumage, still shows extensive areas of brown on the wings

Plate 22

Photo: Niven McCrie

(Cramp & Simmons 1983; see Plate 22). Birds of this age are generally indistinguishable from birds in adult non-breeding plumage; however, some individuals may retain bill and leg coloration similar to that of first-year birds (Higgins & Davies 1996).

The bird in Darwin was clearly in its first year. It had a sooty trailing-edge to the primaries, continuing to form a subterminal line along the secondaries (Plate 21) and a black tail-band as well as the typical yellow-orange bill with a blackish tip.

Discussion

The Black-headed Gull breeds mostly in northern Eurasia, and also in Greenland and north-eastern North America in small numbers (Higgins & Davies 1996). The breeding range is expanding both northwards and westwards (Grant 1982, Harrison 1983).

During the non-breeding season, birds are widespread in north-eastern parts of the Atlantic Ocean, extending southwards to western and eastern Africa, India, Malaysia and the Philippines (del Hoyo et al. 1996). The species is uncommonly recorded in Singapore (Strange & Jeyarajasingam 1993, Seng & Gardner 1997), and regularly visits the coasts of northern parts of Borneo and Wallacea in small numbers (Smythies 1981, MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993, Coates & Bishop 1997); it has been recorded in New Guinea (Beehler et al. 1986, Andrew 1992). Given this distribution, and a sighting of a bird in Broome, W.A., in October 1991 (O'Connor 1991), its presence around Darwin is not surprising.

The long intervals between the sightings around Darwin are of interest because the whereabouts of the bird during those times remain unknown. The sites at which the Black-headed Gull was seen were visited on many occasions, and other areas known to be frequented by gulls were also searched regularly and extensively without success. In the Greater Sundas the species is said to remain mostly at sea (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993); perhaps this was also the case for the bird at Darwin.

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