

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Strathclyde Country Park, February 2008 - the first for Clyde.

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A Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, was discovered at Strathclyde Country Park during February 2008. This individual, a first winter bird, constitutes the first record of this species for the Clyde recording area.

Recent taxonomic changes have resulted in the elevation of Caspian Gull to full specific status (Sangster *et al.* 2007). This has coincided with an increase in observations of this species in southern and eastern England, perhaps reflecting an expansion in the species population range in eastern Europe, as well as an increased awareness of identification criteria by ornithologists. However, it remains extremely rare in Scotland with just two accepted records, both first winter birds in Lothian, the first at Dunbar and Belhaven Bay, from late December 2006 to February 2007, and the second at Tynninghame, in October 2007.

The Clyde bird was seen on the 9th and 14th February 2008 in the Strathclyde Country Park gull roost on the loch from the southwest car-park, north of the water sports centre. It was discovered in the gull roost, sitting on the water amongst Lesser Black-backed (LBBG) and Herring Gulls (HG) (*L. argentatus argentatus/argentatus* and *L. fuscus graellsii*), first noticed because of the bright clean whiteness to its head and breast, with just a tiny grey mask behind the eye. This feature was very striking because the bird had an almost all dark bill indicating that it was aged as first winter; all the other accompanying immature, and particularly first winter, LBBG and HGs were much dirtier and brown looking in the head and breast. On closer examination the bird was clearly something interesting as it was most similar in size and structure to nearby LBBG having a very long primary projection. But in contrast it had a very striking head profile being very attenuated towards the bill, with a long sloping forehead creating an almost "pear-shaped" head. Furthermore, the bill was obviously long and thin compared with surrounding LBBG and HG, with no pronounced gonys angle. Further scrutiny showed that this individual showed the classic "four-toned" pattern of a first winter Caspian Gull, with a white head and breast, grey mantle and scapulars, brown wings, and black bill, primaries and tail band (Olsen & Larsson 2004).

The following description summarizes the identification features noted during observations on both days. Some of these features are apparent in the accompanying photos taken by KH on the 9th February.

Structure and plumage tones

The bird was smaller and more elegantly proportioned than the accompanying HG, with longer wings when folded, and longer neck, more similar in structure to LBBG and Yellow-legged Gull (YLG) *L. michahellis*, the latter which has also been seen by CJM/KH at Strathclyde Country Park this and previous winters (McInerny *et al.* 2002). The head and neck were a clean bright white, with just a tiny grey mask behind the eye. A slight collar of streaking around the neck was present, but this did not extend onto the breast, which was clean and white. Some dusky marking was apparent along the flanks. The leg size and colour were not determined, as they were not seen, with the bird mostly sitting on water, giving only brief flight views.

The mantle and scapular feathers were grey, with pale edges and some containing a dark central shaft. The wing coverts were brown, with darker centres and paler edges. The tertials were very dark brown, forming a crescent, with pale tips. The folded primary feathers were very dark brown/black, as was the tail, although this was restricted to a prominent tail band (seen during brief flight views).

The bill structure and shape is a crucial feature in identifying Caspian Gull, and so the bill was very carefully examined and compared with those of HG and LBBG nearby. The bill was long, thin, parallel sided, with no pronounced gonys angle. It was also almost all dark, with just a hint of paleness around the base. The head shape is also crucial, so was also carefully compared with HG, LBBG (and YLG from memory). It was quite distinct from all these, being neither rounded or square shaped. Instead the head was very different, being small and elongated with a striking flat sloping forehead.

Flight Views

The bird was seen briefly in flight, when it moved in the roost. This revealed a prominent dark tail band and pale rump. The upperwing was brown, with a paler area around the carpal. The primaries were darker brown, with the coverts a warmer brown. The underwings were apparently mostly pale, with few markings.



First winter Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* (red arrow), Strathclyde Country Park, 9 February 2008, roosting amongst Herring, Common and Black-headed Gulls (*L. argentatus*, *L. canus* and *L. ridibundus*). Note the possible adult Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* (black arrow) in the foreground (Keith Hoey).

Bird identified as first winter Caspian Gull because:

- 1) A *Larus* gull in size and shape most similar to LBBG/YLG.
- 2) First winter due to an all dark, bill with very small amount of pale at the base, grey mantle and brown flight feathers.
- 3) Strikingly clean pale head and breast, with just a tiny mask behind eye.
- 4) Bill long, thin, and parallel sided, with no pronounced gonys angle, compared to LBBG/HG/YLG.
- 5) Striking head profile being elongated towards the bill, with a long sloping forehead creating an almost "pear-shaped" head.
- 6) "Four-toned" pattern with a white head and breast, grey mantle, brown wings and black bill, primaries and tail band.

Separated from similar *Larus* gull species:

- 1) First/second winter *michahellis* YLG – flat sloping crown (not square-headed); long thin bill with no gony angle (not heavy with bulbous tip); all pale white head and breast with small grey mask (not dirty with a large Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus* like mask).
- 2) First winter LBBG - not dark brown wash to head and underparts; not rounded head; longer bill.
- 3) First/second winter *argenteus/argentatus* HG - the all dark bill makes it a first winter bird and clean head and breast excludes HG at this age which are much dirtier; smaller size and different structure, with longer wings and neck and smaller head; head shape quite different.

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