

Clyde white-winged gulls in the winter of 2002

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Summary

During January and February 2002, large numbers of “white-winged” gulls were recorded in the Clyde area, with 42 Iceland Gulls (*Larus glaucoides*) and 15 Glaucous Gulls (*Larus hyperboreus*) being seen. Amongst these birds, one example of the North American race of Iceland Gull, Kumlien's Gull (*Larus glaucoides kumlieni*), was identified. The majority of these birds were seen at Summerston landfill/Millichen Flood, and in the gull roost at Strathclyde Loch, although a few birds were seen at other sites in the area. In this short article, we summarise the incidence of these birds, put this into the context of white-winged gull distribution in the UK in 2002, and explore reasons why the winter of 2002 was good for these species in the Clyde area.

White-winged gulls in Scotland and the UK

In most years small numbers of both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls are seen throughout the UK, the majority of these records occurring in northern England and Scotland. Iceland Gulls breed in Greenland and NE Canada and consequently tend to show a westerly bias to their winter distribution in the UK. Glaucous Gulls have a circumpolar distribution and instead show a greater spread of winter records in the UK (Olsen & Larsson, 2003). Both species tend to occur with large concentrations of other gulls, particularly around sites where anthropogenic waste is abundant e.g. fishing ports and landfill sites (Burton *et al.*, 2003).

In the Clyde area the combination of several large landfill sites for feeding and open water bodies for roosting, provides ideal conditions to support a large community of gulls (McNerny *et al.*, 2002). These include rubbish tips at Greengairs, Summerston, Riggend and Mount Vernon, and roosts at Hogganfield Loch, Balgray Reservoir and Strathclyde Loch, the last of which can hold up to 20,000 birds. These opportunities for observing gulls have produced good numbers of white-winged gulls in recent years. Since the 1980s each winter has revealed 5-10 individuals of the two species in the Clyde area, but occasionally larger numbers have been observed. For example the winters of 1983, 1984, 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1995 produced 10-20 birds. Since 1995, 15-20 birds have been seen in every winter. Exceptionally, the winter of 2000 resulted in 52 Iceland Gulls and 9 Glaucous Gulls in the Clyde area (Gibson, 2003).

Winter 2002 in the Clyde area

In the winter of 2002, two sites produced unusually large numbers of both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls: Summerston landfill and Strathclyde Loch. Included with Summerston landfill is Millichen Flood as this site is immediately adjacent to the tip, and is the place where gulls congregate in large flocks during the day while not feeding, before leaving mid-late afternoon to their night-time roost site(s). Other sites in the Clyde area also recorded birds of both species, with the Greengairs landfill having the next highest count.

Iceland Gulls

In January 2002, from the beginning of the month until about the 20th, up to 3 Iceland Gulls were seen at Summerston/Millichen: a 1st winter, an adult and long staying 2nd winter bird. On 20th these three Iceland Gulls were joined by a beautiful adult Kumlien's Gull, which at times sat next to two Iceland Gulls and an adult Glaucous Gull, allowing direct comparison (see Figure 1A). This rare gull appeared as part of the unusually large numbers of Iceland Gulls present on this site at this time: 6 different birds, of various ages, were seen at Summerston/Millichen on 21st,

and 3-5 birds were seen until 3rd February, with smaller numbers through to 11th April. Some of these birds showed individually identifiable traits, and were seen on several days, while others were seen only once or twice. We estimate that at least 15 different Iceland Gulls were present at Summerston/Millichen during January-March 2002. This is the record winter count for this site, with the previous highest count being 5 different birds during the winter of 2000 (Gibson, 2003).

Strathclyde Loch also had good numbers of roosting Iceland Gulls, with birds present from early January (first seen 18th November in 2001), until 23rd March 2002. Peaks counts were 6 on 17th, and 4 on 9th February, with an estimated total of 11 different birds being seen. Once again, this is the record winter count for this site, with the previous highest count being 9 birds during the winter of 2000 (Gibson, 2003). It is possible that some of these roosting birds were the same as those seen feeding at landfill sites during the day; indeed a distinctive 2nd winter Iceland Gull with a broken right leg was seen at both Riggend tip (19th January) and Strathclyde Loch (24th February). This observation supports our previously held view that the gulls roosting at Strathclyde Loch are attending landfill sites at Greengairs and Riggend (McInerny *et al.*, 2002). It is possible that Strathclyde Loch birds are also feeding at Summerston/Millichen, although this seems unlikely as these birds typically head south and west towards the Clyde estuary at the end of each day, where a very large roost of gulls also occurs.

Other sites in the Clyde area had a further 16 Iceland Gulls, with the highest number being 6 at Greengairs landfill. In total, therefore, the Clyde area had a minimum of 42 Iceland Gulls during the winter of 2002.

Glaucous Gulls

Smaller numbers of Glaucous Gulls were also seen at both sites. Up to 4 different birds were seen at Summerston/Millichen (see Figure 1), and a 1st winter was seen at Strathclyde Loch during January to March. In a number of cases the same birds were seen on multiple days. In total 7 different birds were present at the two sites. A further 8 Glaucous Gulls were observed elsewhere in the Clyde area, including 3 at Greengairs landfill, making an estimated total of 15 birds during the winter of 2002.

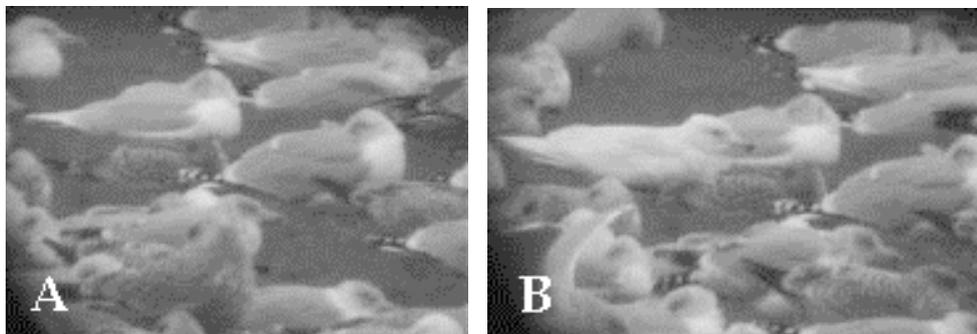


Figure 1. White-winged gulls at Millichen Flood, Glasgow, 20 January 2002 (Keith Hoey). **A.** Adult Kumlien's Gull (left side) and adult Glaucous Gull (top right). The grey primary tip pattern of the Kumlien's Gull is not as obvious in the photo as it was in the field, due to camera over-exposure in the poor light. **B.** 2nd winter Iceland Gull (left side), obscured Kumlien's Gull (centre) and partial view of adult Glaucous Gull (top right).

Incidence of white-winged gulls in the UK in 2002

Reports from elsewhere in the UK showed that many white-winged gulls were seen during the winter of 2002 on the west coasts of Scotland, England and Ireland (Murray, 2002). Consistent with observations in the Clyde area, larger numbers of Iceland than Glaucous Gulls were observed. During this period many westerly and north-westerly gales occurred, which it is suspected drove many Iceland Gulls from their normal wintering grounds in the north-west Atlantic further south to the eastern Atlantic (Olsen & Larsson, 2003). Glaucous Gulls largely winter in the north-eastern Atlantic, which may account for fewer observations of this species during these particular weather conditions.

Others factors that are likely to have contributed to the increase in sightings of these rarer gull species in the Clyde area are observer awareness of identification criteria, combined with extensive coverage of the sites. It is self evident that success in finding rarer birds is directly related to time spent in the field. In 2002 both Summerston/Millichen and Strathclyde Loch were checked very regularly, revealing many interesting birds. It is fascinating how many of the white-winged gulls were seen only once or twice, and without daily scrutiny of the gull flocks these birds would never have been recorded.

We hope that this interesting passage of white-winged gulls during the winter of 2002 will encourage other Clyde birders to check these and other sites to find birds for themselves. We should finish by stating that the Summerston site has now finished as a landfill with the area being grassed over, which has resulted in gulls no longer congregating there or on Millichen Flood in large numbers. We suggest that observers should try instead some of the other rubbish tips in the Clyde area mentioned in this article.

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