



Plate 147. Ivory Gull at Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Centre, Beith, Ayrshire, 2019. © *Bernie Zonfrillo*

Ivory Gull in the Firth of Clyde

H. DOUGLAS, G. CHRISTIE, B. ZONFRILLO & A. RUSSELL

Records of Ivory Gull in Scotland go back many years, to the early 1800s, but with fewer than 100 accepted records and with a world population of perhaps under 15,000 breeding pairs, it is undoubtedly a rare species. The breeding range is within the high Arctic with Spitzbergen (Svalbard) being the closest to Scotland.

On 23 January 2019, in the town of Stranraer at the base of Loch Ryan, in Dumfries & Galloway, a ghostly gull, an Ivory Gull to be precise, was found in a garden, and was clearly not very well, lying still for several hours. That evening it was taken to Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Centre in Beith, Ayrshire, where its weight was noted at 380 g.

Since a previous example of Ivory Gull in 2007 had died from a gapeworm infestation, Gay and Andy Christie quickly treated the bird with worming medicine and suitable antibiotics. This had an immediate effect and the bird was soon eating the whitebait provided. It is a species that perhaps eats at infrequent intervals in the high

Arctic, and with a correspondingly fluctuating weight. In captivity, it started to gain weight rapidly, and by the time of its release weighed in at a very healthy 590 g.

After a few days spent in a spacious aviary, where the gull could fly around, it spent much time bathing and preening and had clearly made a full recovery. On 10 February, the Ivory Gull was ringed by Hayley Douglas, of the Clyde Ringing Group and a lettered Darvic ring fitted in order that any possible future sightings could be reported. On holding the bird for ringing operations, it was noted that the bird had a strong bite for its size and that the one call that it made was a “keerweeh”, much more like a Sandwich Tern than any other species of gull. A short video clip of the ringing operations was made by Tommy Daniels, and the bird was then returned to its aviary. Measurements of head and bill suggested it was a male. Since strong westerly winds had been blowing, the release, at Stevenston Point in Ayrshire, was delayed

until the following day, 11 February 2019: the welfare of the bird taking priority. Fortunately, winds had turned southerly and were much lighter on 11th.

The following eye-witness description is by young enthusiast, Andrew Russell:

About 130 birders had gathered by 13:00 in the bright sunshine awaiting the arrival of the Hessilhead Rescue Centre van. It was a strange 'twitch' atmosphere, with no nervous energy around the site and everyone pretty relaxed, having travelled from far and wide to see the Arctic wanderer, but knowing they would definitely see their target bird. Once the rescue centre van arrived, you could feel the excitement around the crowd assembled at the Point. Everyone was about to see one of the most stunning visitors to Scotland in its less regularly observed adult plumage.

Eventually the long-anticipated box was brought out and two short speeches were made as everyone gathered round. Andy Christie then opened the box and there was a real buzz from the assembled crowd as the bird flew out and landed just 5 m away. It looked to be in great condition with pristine plumage, other than slightly worn wing tips. It spent around 30 seconds looking at the admiring

crowd before flying strongly north and doing a few loops around Saltcoats' east shore before attempting to land on the beach where many gulls were already gathered. The crowd watched as it was relentlessly chased by Herring, Lesser Black-backed, Common and Black-headed Gulls. Eventually, the Ivory Gull had enough and headed north, last seen flying away over Saltcoats.

This Ivory Gull was only the second ever ringed in the UK. The first had been caught, coincidentally also in the garden - the garden of Robert and Stuart Rae's parents in Westhill, Aberdeen. The brothers had been ringing Common Gulls and, amazingly, they attracted a juvenile Ivory Gull to the bait. It was caught on the morning of 29 December 1976, its arrival following an overnight northerly blizzard and 150 mm of snow. It weighed 460 g. After release, this young bird hung around the general area for another week before vanishing with the thawing conditions.

Thanks to all at Hessilhead for a superb job well done, and to Rab Rae for his notes on the Aberdeen encounter.

Hayley Douglas, Gay Christie, Bernie Zonfrillo & Andrew Russell



Plate 148. Gathering crowd at Stevenston Point, February 2019. © Andrew Russell



Ivory Gull status in Scotland

This rare high Arctic species has an almost circumpolar breeding range from the Parry Islands of Canada eastwards through northern Greenland, Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya, and Severnaya Zemlya to the New Siberian Islands. Birds disperse after breeding, with the winter range mainly along the edges of the pack ice and drift ice zones of the Arctic including Iceland, and the Barents Sea coasts of Norway, Finland and Russia.

There have been 141 accepted individuals in Britain to the end of 2017, with 99 (70%) of these in Scotland. As expected, the distribution of Scottish records is strongly biased to the north and west: 21 in Shetland, two on Fair Isle, 14 on Orkney, 11 in the Outer Hebrides, five in Caithness (six birds), 13 in Highland, one in Moray & Nairn, 11 in North-east Scotland (15 birds), two in Angus & Dundee, one in Fife, one in Perth & Kinross, one in Lothian, one in Borders, seven in Argyll, one in Clyde, one in Ayrshire and one in Dumfries & Galloway.

Virtually all records have been in winter, often after northerly gales, with 89% found between the end of October and mid-March, plus one in late March, four in April, two in May, singles in June and July, and two in September. The birds seen outside the 'winter' period are thought to be wandering non-breeders.

Plate 149. The release, Stevenston Point, Ayrshire, February 2019. © Andrew Russell



Plate 150. Ivory Gull, Stevenston Point, Ayrshire, February 2019. © Andrew Russell



Plate 151. Ivory Gull flying free Stevenston Point, Ayrshire, February 2019. © Michael Sinclair