



## Winter gull watching in the Glasgow area

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**A** wealth of rubbish tips and accessible roost sites make the Glasgow region an excellent area in which to watch gulls during the winter months. In this article we describe a number of sites in the Glasgow area where, in the past few years, we have found Iceland, Kumlien's, Glaucous, Mediterranean, Ring-billed and 'Western' Yellow-legged Gulls (treated here as a separate species from Herring Gull). By providing information on the best sites and what can be found in our area, we hope to inspire readers of *Birding Scotland* to seek out rare gulls for themselves, either at these or their own local tips and reservoirs. We also include an appendix where we provide identification notes for separating the similar Northern Scandinavian Herring Gull *Larus argentatus argentatus* and Yellow legged Gull *Larus cachinnans michahellis*, both of which we have encountered in the Glasgow area.

### Sites

Gull sites around Glasgow fall into two types: rubbish tips and night time roosts on lochs and reservoirs. Generally speaking, the tips are best visited while rubbish is being delivered but there can still be large numbers of gulls on Sundays when the tips are normally closed. Typically, gulls feed on the tips through the morning, till about midday when they loaf nearby, before leaving mid to late afternoon to roost elsewhere; so mornings are the best time to visit tips. In contrast, the loch roosts are only worth watching late in the day with gulls appearing an hour or two before dark, although occasionally birds will come in earlier.

We have tabulated our records for the past three winters (Table 1) in order to give readers some idea of the status of the rarer gulls in the Glasgow area, as well as the best places to look for each species.

### Rubbish tips

Rubbish tips are private land, and access to all is restricted for health and safety reasons. No birder should enter them without permission. We have found that permission to enter tips is hardly ever granted, but that most of them can be viewed quite well and legitimately from the outside. We should remind readers that landfill rubbish tips are temporary in nature. Once full of rubbish a landfill is covered with soil and landscaped and so the tips we describe here may have gone in five or ten year's time. However, new landfills will take their place; some detective work may be needed to discover the whereabouts of these future sites.

#### Dalmacoulter Landfill, Airdrie (NS 770 678)

Leave Airdrie north on the A73. Beyond the A8010/B8058 roundabout take a right-

hand turn into Dykehead Road, half a mile before the tip, go through the small industrial estate and park near Dykehead farm. This spot offers a nice view of the tip to the north.

We have seen small numbers of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls at Dalmacouther, and in December 1999 a presumed adult Glaucous/Herring Gull hybrid. There is much interchange of birds with the nearby Greengairs and Riggend landfills, with the same individual white-winged gulls turning up at these other sites. Unfortunately, this tip appears not to be in operation at the time of writing (winter 2001/2002), and so few gulls are present. Dalmacouther tip may have reached the end of its working life, but we suggest birders check it on their way to Greengairs and Riggend.

### **Greengairs & Riggend Landfill sites, North Lanarkshire (NS 795 697)**

Take the B803 Slamannan Road off the A73 north of Airdrie. Greengairs Landfill is sign posted to the right in the village of Wattston, after about a mile. The tip entrance is about quarter of a mile along this minor road. Follow the road as it bends sharply to the right about 100 yards back from the site entrance, and park by the roadside after a further quarter mile beside a small conifer plantation. From here walk across the moor to your left to view the dump. Wellington boots are essential at this site, as the ground is very wet and muddy.

Greengairs is one of the biggest landfills of its kind in Europe and, not surprisingly, attracts big numbers (between 2,000 and 5,000) of 'large' gulls. Amongst these birds we have found numerous Northern Scandinavian Herring Gull (hereafter referred to as northern *argentatus* - see ID notes in appendix), many Iceland Gulls, a lesser number of Glaucous Gulls, a first-winter presumed Glaucous/Herring Gull hybrid (February 2001), and a pristine adult Kumlien's Gull (January 2001). As already indicated, there is much 'churning' of birds between here and the other tips in the area, particularly Riggend, and as a result we sometimes encounter individual white-winged gulls at more than one site on the same day. We also often only see individual birds once, so clearly there is also a huge turnover.

We believe a proportion of the gulls at Greengairs roost at Hillend Reservoir, which is about four miles to the east of Airdrie adjacent to the A89 (NS 834 675). We have only checked this reservoir a couple of times, but did relocate the same adult Kumlien's Gull that had been at Greengairs earlier the same day, so it may well repay further visits.

It also worth checking Riggend Landfill when visiting Greengairs, as the sites are very close to each other, and it also holds white-winged gulls. Riggend is just east of Wattston, and is best approached by taking the minor road north off the B803, immediately east of the A73 roundabout. Drive 500 yards past the landfill entrance, park next to a metal gate and walk south to the perimeter fence to view the birds.

### **Auchinlea Landfill, North Lanarkshire (NS 810 592)**

Take the A73 south from the M8 at junction 6. The tip is on your left-hand side, after about 3 miles. Viewing the gulls is difficult from the site entrance car park. A much better area for viewing can be reached by taking the minor road to Hareshaw, which leaves the A73 about half a mile to the north of the tip entrance. After about half a mile, park next to the disused railway cutting, and take the public path to the south which crosses another disused cutting. This path leads around the back of the dump, and affords good views of the gulls. Please keep to the path here, and don't enter the rubbish tip. Gulls also sometimes loaf in the fields around Fernieshaw Farm where they can be seen at close quarters either from this path, or from the minor road running south from Hareshaw.

Auchinlea is another good tip supporting 1,000 to 2,000 'large' gulls and one that offers a reasonable chance of finding Glaucous and Iceland Gull on most visits.

### **Summerston Landfill and Millichen Flood, North Glasgow (NS 570 717)**

Leave Glasgow to the north on the A879 Milngavie Road, go past Lambhill Cemetery and then the main entrance to the tip (both on the left). Then turn left onto Millichen Road a few hundred metres past where the road crosses the River Kelvin, and about half a mile before the B8049 roundabout. The gulls from the tip often loaf in large numbers in the fields on both sides of Summerston Farm, about half a mile down this road, particularly the flooded fields to the south-west of the farm (Millichen Flood). Mornings and around noon are best here as the birds often leave the site by mid to late afternoon. You can also view the flock of gulls on the near side of the tip, up on the hill to the south, although views are quite distant. Gulls also sometimes loaf in the fields on the other side of the dump next to the A879. Check the fields around the tip entrance. We have also had large numbers of gulls (including 2 Iceland) using Possil Loch during the middle of the day, especially when the loch is frozen. Possil Loch is about 1 mile south of Summerston Landfill on the A879, opposite Lambhill Cemetery.

These are good sites where we regularly see one or two Iceland Gulls (Plate 49), as well as the occasional Glaucous Gull, and good numbers of the distinctive northern *argentatus* Herring Gull (Plate 60). The latter peak in January, with up to 40 birds on each visit. The Summerston/Millichen area has been particularly good this winter (2001/2002). In January 2002 we had a cracking adult Kumlien's Gull on Millichen Flood (Plate 50), with 4 other white-winged Gulls also present on the same day. Also in January 2002, a presumed adult Glaucous/Herring hybrid was seen here (Plate 51).

### **Mt Vernon Landfill, South-East Glasgow (NS 665 627)**

Exit M74 at Junction 3, and drive east along the A74 (Hamilton Road), just past Mt. Vernon railway station. Park at the entrance to Kenmuir Road, which is currently blocked by dumped rubbish, walk down this road for about 500 yards, before crossing left into the fields. View the tip from the perimeter fence.

Mt Vernon holds a big flock of 'large' gulls, including a reasonable number of northern *argentatus* Herring Gulls and occasional Iceland Gull.

## Loch Roosts

There are at least a dozen gull roosts on inland waters in the Clyde area. However, the sites described below have been especially productive for the rarer species over the past few years.

### **Strathclyde Country Park, between Hamilton and Motherwell (NS 725 574)**

The main loch here is without doubt the premier gull site in the region. At peak times of the year (December - February) between 10 and 20, 000 birds use the loch as a night roost, a truly impressive site. The park loch is located next to the M74, immediately east of Motherwell, and is accessed from either junction 5 or 6.

The only problem with so many birds present is that it is usually difficult, and often impossible, to comprehensively check all the gulls during the limited time available before the light fails. Strathclyde Country Park (SCP) is certainly more productive and enjoyable with a number of observers.

SCP holds the largest winter concentration of Lesser Black-backed Gulls (LBBG) in Scotland with 500 birds not uncommon up to December, and a mid-winter minimum of around 50 in mid-late January. Possibly because of this, we have also encountered a few 'Western' Yellow-legged Gulls (YLG) at this site, probably of the Mediterranean race *michahellis*, which are known to associate with LBBGs in southern Britain (Plates 53 & 54). We have found at least two adult birds in the winters of 2000/2001 and again in 2001/2002, although several others have been suspected. Some of these dark-mantled birds had prominent head streaking and so may not be *michahellis*, but possibly instead were *atlantis*-type YLGs (see ID notes in appendix).

The most abundant gull species in the roost are Black-headed (5,000 to 10,000) and Herring (2,000 to 10,000) Gulls, but there are also 1,000-3,000 Common and 70-150 Great Black-backed Gulls. This is a good site for getting to grips with northern *argentatus* Herring Gulls, which can be seen between November and late February. We are normally able to pick out between 20 and 30 of these darker-backed Herring Gulls and have estimated, from sampled sections of the flock, that over 100 are normally present in mid winter. SCP is very good for Iceland Gull. Throughout a winter we would expect to see at least one or two Iceland Gulls on each visit (Plate 55), but had no fewer than six first-winter birds on 7th March 2000, a Clyde area record. Over the past ten years Glaucous Gull (Plate 56) has been surprisingly uncommon at this site, but were more regularly seen in the 1980s and early 1990s. While scanning through the smaller species we occasionally find Kittiwakes and Mediterranean Gulls, and in winter 1998/99 an adult and a second-winter Ring-billed Gull took up residence (Plates 57-59). The sheer number of gulls however, always gives us the impression that something good might easily have been overlooked.

The best vantage points for checking the gull roost are the two waterside car parks on the east side, and the northernmost car park on the west side.

We typically start off by checking gulls from the northernmost car park on the east side about a quarter mile south of the funfair/theme park (NS 723 578). From the shelter of the convenient gazebo, we can expect to see a small but varied gathering of gulls (including several YLGs this winter) which loaf on the water and in quiet parts of the car park or, on certain wet days, feeding on the roadside verge. This site is best between early and mid afternoon, but as dusk approaches these birds move to the middle of the loch and action then switches to the main roost.

The second car park on the east side is about half a mile further south, and is well known as the stakeout for two Ring-billed Gulls present during the winter of 1998/99 (Plates 57–59). We have seen little else of note here but the views of gulls attracted to the loaves of Mother's Pride being thrown to the Mute Swans here are often excellent.

The best viewpoint for checking the main roost is the car park on the south-west side, at the end of the road, beyond the water sports centre (NS 729 568). This spot has several advantages: the gulls are nicely backlit by the setting sun thus maximising the available light, and you can shelter from the wind behind your car while listening to the football on the radio (gulls and football – what better way to spend a Saturday afternoon?). If one is brave or foolish enough to stand still for long periods in the face of winter temperatures, it can pay to walk to the bench about a quarter mile north of here. Here you are closer to the main mass of roosting Herring Gulls, where most of the white-winged gulls tend to settle.

### **Hogganfield Loch, North-East Glasgow (NS 642 672)**

Leave the M8 at junction 12 and head north up the A80. Hogganfield Loch is on your right hand side after about half a mile. This roost is very variable with 1,000 to 2,000 gulls on an average winters night, but occasionally no birds will roost and for no apparent reason. Small gulls predominate, with 1,000–2,000 Black-headed and 200–500 Common Gulls. However, there is a highly variable number of Herring Gulls (100–1,000) plus 10–20 Lesser Black-backed Gulls in midwinter. The Hogganfield roost is quite small but is conveniently close to the centre of Glasgow, and allows very close views of the birds. This site repays regular watching as over the past six winters we have had a Glaucous Gull, about 10 Iceland Gulls, several Kittiwakes, a Little Gull and a Belgian-ringed Mediterranean Gull here. The best viewpoint is from the blue brick shelter about halfway along the A80 side of the loch. This can be accessed from the car park at the west end of the loch, or from the Esso garage at the east end, both next to the A80.

### **Balgray Reservoir, Barrhead (NS 513 573)**

To reach Balgray, head south from Glasgow on the M77. Exit the motorway at junction four, signposted for Newton Mearns, and continue southwards parallel to the motorway

on the B769. Follow all signs to Barrhead, crossing the M77, and the reservoir is beside the unclassified road to Barrhead less than a mile after leaving the B769.

The roost here numbers 1,000 to 3,000 birds between November and March and can be viewed adequately from the main waterside lay-by, but better views can be obtained by walking for 20 to 30 minutes along the southern edge of the reservoir to the obvious headland.

Balgray roost used to be the biggest midwinter gathering of LBBG in Scotland (50-100 birds), although Strathclyde Park has held even more in recent years. Although quite small, the Balgray roost has repaid regular watching over the past twenty years. The highlights over this period have been about 40 Iceland Gulls and half a dozen each of Glaucous Gull, Little Gull and Kittiwake, along with single Mediterranean and Ring-billed Gulls. Up to 30 northern *argentatus* Herring Gulls have been recorded and a few are present on most winter evenings. The same adult Iceland Gull has roosted regularly here over the past 6 or 7 winters and has been seen on over 50% of visits this winter (2001/2002).

#### **Craigmaddie Reservoir, Milngavie (NS 561 752)**

Leave Milngavie going north on the A81. Immediately after leaving the town, you will see the steep reservoir embankment on your left-hand side. Drive to the far end of the embankment and park on the main road next to a lodge building by the waterside. Public access is through the entrance gate here. A small number of mainly Black-headed and Common Gulls use this reservoir as a roost. Of note however, we have had a single first-winter Glaucous Gull here (January 2001).

**Table 1.** Bird-day counts for rarer gulls at sites within the Glasgow area during the period 1998-2002. Highest day count for each site in brackets.

<b>LOCH ROOSTS</b>	<b>Strathclyde CP</b>	<b>Balgray</b>	<b>Hogganfield</b>	<b>Craigmaddie</b>	
<b>Mediterranean</b>	1 (1)		1 (1)		
<b>Ring-billed</b>	10 (2)	1 (1)			
<b><i>argentatus</i> Herring</b>	237 (25)	15 (5)	22 (6)		
<b><i>michahellis</i> Yellow-legged</b>	36 (2)				
<b>Glaucous</b>	4 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)		4 (1)
<b>Iceland</b>	126 (6)	23 (2)	6 (2)		
<b>Glaucous/Herring</b>	2 (1)				
<b>RUBBISH TIPS</b>	<b>Summerston/Millichen</b>	<b>Dalmacouther</b>	<b>Greengairs/Riggend</b>	<b>Auchinlea</b>	<b>Mt Vernon</b>
<b><i>argentatus</i> Herring</b>	290 (40)	22 (10)	370 (40)	26 (7)	52 (6)
<b>Glaucous</b>	10 (1)	4 (1)	26 (3)	6 (2)	5 (2)
<b>Iceland</b>	57 (6)	10 (2)	56 (5)	2 (1)	
<b>Kumlien's</b>	1 (1)		2 (1)		
<b>Glaucous/Herring</b>	1 (1)	1 (1)			

## General hints

As with all birding, effort and a degree of luck play important parts in finding unusual gulls at the sites we have described. To be successful we recommend repeated visits, and that birders don't become discouraged if they haven't seen an interesting bird after an hour or so at a dump or roost. Many times we have been convinced that we'd checked all of the gulls in front of us, when, as if by magic, a cracking 'white-winger' has appeared out of nowhere. Try to check the flocks as carefully and systematically as possible - not always easy when dealing with strong wind and rain, 10,000 gulls and the failing light (!), but perseverance definitely does pay off.

We are constantly surprised at the turnover of birds at the sites we visit. We do see some recognisable individuals again and again throughout the winter (and in a few cases over several winters), but nevertheless, we see most of the birds only once or twice. With this large-scale 'churning' of birds, it is always worth doing the best sites regularly.

The ideal conditions for identifying gulls are overcast with no strong light. This may sound strange but strong, direct sunlight hampers the accurate comparison of mantle tones between adult gulls, as colours are bleached out. The correct assessment of mantle grey is especially important when trying to pick out western YLG and northern *argentatus* among flocks of native *argenteus* Herring Gulls.

It is also important to remind observers that the apparent upperpart colour of gulls is influenced by the posture of the bird relative to the observer. Mantle tone becomes darker when the bird faces either directly away or towards the viewer, and is paler when side on. So it is important when comparing tones between birds that they are facing the same direction.

A very practical point to remember is that standing still for an hour or more at a dump or roost in the middle of winter demands that you keep warm. The patience and concentration needed by the avid gull-watcher is impossible in conditions that would send a brass monkey scuttling back to the car heater! Our advice is to think about what you would normally wear for a day's birding in winter - and then double it. Extra layers, long-johns, woolly hats and thick gloves will make all the difference - take it from us!

## The future

Winter gull watching at inland sites in Scotland is still in its infancy. The example set during the last ten to twenty years of gull watching in England has shown how much can be found and learned at inland sites like the ones we have described. Caspian Gulls (*L. c. cachinnans*) are now found regularly at certain places, while other races of Herring Gull, YLG and even LBBG are being claimed with increasing confidence. We hope that our perseverance at the dumps and roosts in the Glasgow area will, over time, reveal as many interesting birds. A gull showing characteristics of an *atlantis*-type YLG

has already been seen at a park pool in Glasgow (Sweeney, 2000), while the streaky-headed, dark-mantled birds we are seeing at SCP might also be of this form. We are still eagerly waiting, however, for central Scotland's first Caspian Gull!

August and September are good months for *michahellis* in England, as there is a significant passage of LBBG at inland sites during this period. We have largely neglected our Glasgow sites at this time of the year (distracted by east coast/northern isles migrants!) and suggest that looking through LBBGs at dumps and at SCP in early autumn may prove fruitful.

The large winter congregations of gulls around Glasgow should allow the finding of other rare gulls. Our area has already had four Ring-billed Gulls and there is real potential for other vagrant gulls like Bonaparte's, Franklin's and Laughing Gulls, or even the American race of Herring Gull (*L. a. smithsonianus*).

We hope this article may inspire some *Birding Scotland* readers to get out looking at gulls either around Glasgow or elsewhere in the country: dumps, inland waters and coastal sites everywhere attract large numbers of this 'sexy' group of birds. With a big slice of luck, and even more observer effort, we hope a real 'biggy' (Thayer's, Yellow-footed, Glaucous-winged or Slaty-backed Gulls) might one day be found - by ourselves of course!

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