

Puzzling out the identification of the Common/Mew Gull complex

Chris Gibbins (University of Aberdeen) and Peter Adriaens (ornithological consultant)

The **Common Gull** *Larus canus* (or Mew Gull as it is called in North America) has a circumpolar distribution and consists of four taxa: nominate *L. c. canus* (**Common Gull**) in Europe (including parts of European Russia), *L. c. heinei* (**Russian Common Gull**) throughout Russia and Siberia, *L. c. kamtschatschensis* (**Kamchatka Gull**) in eastern Siberia, and *L. c. brachyrhynchus* (**Short-billed Gull**) in western North America. Although there has been a wealth of new published information in the last decade on the identification of larger gulls, knowledge of how to separate the Common Gull taxa has stood still. In the two most recent gull monographs, *heinei* is pictured as a bird that is more or less inseparable from *canus* (Olsen & Larsson 2003, Howell & Dunn 2007). This lack of knowledge of their field characters, especially in immature plumage, hinders assessment of the geographic ranges and status of all four taxa, and especially the occurrence of vagrants.



Kamchatka Gull at Gangneung, South Korea (Chris Gibbins).

Over the last two years we have been trying to clarify the identification of the Common Gull taxa. As part of this project, we have travelled to many parts of the world, to study them within their accepted ranges. Key to putting together the jigsaw was being able to study birds from overlap zones, e.g. between *canus* and *heinei* in the west, and *heinei* and *kamtschatschensis* in the east. We were fortunate in securing funding through The Seabird Group for a visit to the Zoological Museum in Moscow, to study such birds.

Thanks to this funding, we spent five days in Moscow in November 2014, examining birds (skins) collected on breeding grounds extending from around Moscow westwards to the Kamchatka Peninsula. The collection in the museum included many birds from core areas, but also others from areas of potential intergradation.

Based on our field studies and examination of

specimens, we have now written a number of papers on the identification of the Common Gulls (look out for papers in Dutch Birding and Scottish Birds in early 2016). Our work shows that, in fact, many individuals of all age classes can be identified in the field with confidence. Adults can be separated most easily, using a combination of their wing-tip patterns and bare-part colours. A paper on this topic is currently in preparation. We hope the paper will allow birders and ornithologists to approach the identification of Common Gull taxa with more confidence than hitherto possible.

Reproduced from The Seabird Group Newsletter No. 131.