

On records of pink-legged Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* subsp. in Central Europe and the Balkans

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On 9 August 1984, an adult Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* with pink-coloured legs was seen at a fishpond, known as "Academic fishpond", in the puszta Hortobagyi, c. 6 km west of the village of Hortobagyi (47° 32' N, 21° 24' E), Hungary. This bird, resting on one of numerous pieces of fishing-paraphernalia, was observed down to 150 m with a 60 x 60 telescope, though in overcast conditions. Because several Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* and yellow-legged Herring Gulls *L.a. michabellis* (presumably) were also resting in the immediate vicinity of the pink-legged Herring Gull, a fairly accurate comparison between the 2 Herring Gull forms was possible.

In size and general appearance, the pink-legged Herring Gull in comparison with the surrounding yellow-legged Herring Gulls was slightly smaller, with slender body, somewhat shorter legs and a thinner-looking bill shape. The folded wing extended c. 3 cm past the tail, an obviously shorter distance than in the yellow-legged Herring Gulls. In colour, the pale grey mantle and upperwing were lighter, the crown, nape, forehead and hindneck moderately speckled grey, orbital ring yellow brown, legs and feet flesh pink, the bill having the same colour pattern as the yellow-legged Herring Gulls. The latter had a larger amount of black in the primaries. The presence of a yellow orbital ring, shaded brown, probably indicates that the observed bird had not yet developed full adult plumage, which raises some uncertainty about the subspecific identification, though since the other field-characters of this bird were repeatedly recognised in good viewing conditions, a tentative identification was possible.

So far, only yellow-legged specimens of the Herring Gull have been known in Hungary, mainly those of the subspecies *michabellis* and *cachinnans* (= *ponticus*), but also of *omissus* and *beuglini* (Keve & Pátkai 1952-1955, Keve 1960, 1971-1972). Among all these races, *michabellis* is likely to be the most common (Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982). There are already several published records of pink-legged Herring Gulls in Central Europe and the Balkan area. Matvejev & Vasić (1973) recorded them in Yugoslavia, and Raines (1962) observed one in Greece. Although absent from the Rumanian lists (Vasiliu 1968, Cătuneanu *et al.* 1972), one bird was recorded on the Black Sea coast of Rumania in August 1974 (Van Impe 1977).

DISCUSSION

One cannot always make positive subspecific identifications of Herring Gulls in the field, especially in countries where only a few skins are available from collections to permit later comparison. Several subspecies of Herring Gulls with pink legs may be present in Central European countries. Apart from the nominate *argentatus* group, individuals belonging to the *cachinnans* group should be considered, though not mentioned by Cramp & Simmons (1983). According to Dr P. Devillers (see also Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982), individuals of the race *omissus* of Baltic origin with flesh-pink legs also occur.

Kumari (1978) noticed 3 with this leg colour among 28 adult breeding birds collected in the Estonian SSR between 1947 and 1957.

European Herring Gull populations of tidal coasts at low latitudes are very sedentary (Spaans 1971, Parsons & Duncan 1978). The same is true for the Herring Gulls from the southern part of the Baltic (Goethe 1956, Jørgensen 1973). One could conclude from this that the presence of the race *argenteus* or of an intergrading population *argentatus/argenteus* seems rather improbable far inland in Europe. The studies of Kilpi & Saurola (1983a, 1984) on the migration route of Finnish *L.a. argentatus* suggest that their appearance in Central Europe is also unlikely. However, populations breeding at higher latitudes cover larger distances; birds from Arctic Norway and the Murman coast, for instance, visit the North Sea area in Winter (Stanley *et al.* 1981, Kilpi & Saurola 1983b, see also Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982). Nor is it excluded that some of these birds, during their autumn migration, may get caught up with the Lesser Black-headed Gulls *L.f. fuscus* which head Southeast to the Dobrogean coast and the Hungarian plains, where during the first half of August *L.f. fuscus* is a fairly regular visitor, their flocks possibly being accompanied by *L.a. argentatus* in small numbers. It must also be borne in mind that there has been an increase of the breeding population of *L.a. argentatus* along the Baltic coast of the German Democratic Republic and of Poland (Nehls *in* Klafs & Stübs 1977, Bednorz *et al. in* Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982).

However, the description of my Hungarian bird seems hardly applicable to the nominate *argentatus* group, birds of which assume a streaked head usually in September (Cramp & Simmons 1983), a month later than my observation; nor is streaking of the head and the hindneck extensive in the *cachinnans* group. Devillers (*in* Cramp & Simmons 1983), however, mentions that in adult non-breeding plumage, the subspecies *omissus* particularly develops speckles and streaks on the head.

Although it is possible that Herring Gulls of the nominate *argentatus* group visit Central European countries as stated above, the presence of aberrant pink-legged *omissus* must also be considered, and in the case reported here, this identification seems the most likely.

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