

birds displaying narrow barring would invariably be Cuckoos. Blom (1989) noted that Oriental Cuckoo has an ochre undertone on the lowerbreast-to-vent area and, of the specimens of Cuckoo examined, only one did not have pure white undertail-coverts (but sample size was not stated). Furthermore, Parkes (1990) noted the width of the ventral barring in Cuckoos of the subspecies *C c telephonus* (which occurs in north-eastern Asia and thus is unlikely to occur in western Europe) to be usually distinctly narrower than in Oriental Cuckoo with only a few specimens being intermediate. Parkes (1990) further qualified this statement by adding that, while these comments regarding the ventral colour and width of barring on the underparts may hold true for *C c telephonus*, they appeared not to do so for the western European subspecies *C c canorus* which generally has heavier ventral barring and looks like the migratory Asian population of Oriental Cuckoo.

We have found this comment to be generally correct and plate 139 shows a female Cuckoo trapped at Rye Meads, Hertfordshire, Britain, in May 1989, with both an ochre tinge to the undertail-coverts and broad barring on the breast and undertail-coverts, features which are frequently associated with Oriental Cuckoo rather than Cuckoo.

A previously undocumented difference between Oriental Cuckoo and Cuckoo is the pattern of the underwing which appears to consistently differ and, given good views, can be used to separate the species in the field. Oriental Cuckoo has a broad

band across the centre of the underwing caused by the off-white bases to the inner primaries, greater underwing-coverts and axillaries. This pale band contrasts sharply with the grey secondaries and lesser and median underwing-coverts as shown in plate 140. While it appears that adults show darker and, therefore, more contrasting underwings, the difference is still obvious in immature birds as plate 141 illustrates. Frank Rozendaal (in litt) has commented that he was unable to detect any subspecific differences in the pattern of the underwing between samples of *C s saturatus* and *C s horsfieldi*. It is therefore considered that the darkness of the underwing is dependent on age rather than the subspecies involved.

By contrast, Cuckoo shows extensive broad white barring across the primaries and bases of the secondaries while the distal part of the secondaries is dark grey and unmarked and the underwing-coverts are finely barred (plate 142). This effect gives Cuckoo a relatively pale and uniform underwing while that of Oriental Cuckoo appears dark with an obvious contrasting pale band across the centre which can be surprisingly easy to see in the field.

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Yellow-legged Gulls in Poland: a comment

In a recent note, Dubois et al (1990) claimed that at least some of the yellow-legged Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* (sensu Cramp & Simmons 1983) occurring on the Polish Baltic coasts are Yellow-legged Gulls *L cachinnans* (sensu Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982), probably belonging to the Black Sea subspecies *L c cachinnans*. They also hypothesized that the small inland population breeding at the Vistula river, Poland, may also be of Black Sea

origin. Far from sharing their point of view, we would like to comment on some controversial points in their note.

Dubois et al (1990) stated that the wing of an adult gull depicted in their plate 9 shows characters of *L c cachinnans*. It is unclear, however, which characters are referred to. A closer look at this wing reveals three important features: a completely white tip to the outermost primary (p10) (type 1 pattern in Goethe 1961 and Barth 1968), black markings on five outer primaries and the so-called 'thayeri pattern' (sensu Barth 1968) on p9. In our opinion, none of

these individual characters (nor their combination) seems to justify the identification as *L c cachinnans* for the following reasons. 1 An extensive white tip of p10 lacking a black subterminal band occurs in adults of almost all European populations of the *L argentatus* complex (sensu Cramp & Simmons 1983) studied so far (Barth 1968, Isenmann 1973, Coulson et al 1982). It seems typical for Black Sea *cachinnans* (all names refer to subspecies throughout this letter unless otherwise stated), in which more than 33% in a sample of 18 individuals had an extensive white tip on p10, while a further 39% had only faint traces of a black subterminal band (cf Kohl 1959). However, the highest frequency of the white tip character (53% of a sample of 197) is known from the Norwegian populations of the *L argentatus* complex (sensu Cramp & Simmons 1983), which represents the north-eastern extreme of a SW-NE cline of increasing frequency of this feature along the north-western and northern coasts of Europe (cf Barth 1968). 2 The black pattern on the primaries of typical *cachinnans* always involves at least six outermost feathers (Kohl 1959, Cramp & Simmons 1983); individuals with black

tips on five primaries only – as the bird depicted in Dubois et al's plate 9 – seem to be virtually absent among typical *cachinnans*. Again, five (or less) black-marked primaries are common in northern populations (54% of a sample of 200, cf Barth 1968; 65% of a sample of 169, cf Coulson et al 1982) but less frequent further south, eg in Germany (13% of a sample of 160, cf Goethe 1961) and Great Britain (20% of a sample of 1424, cf Coulson et al 1982), where a more extensive black pattern predominates. 3 Within the European range, a *thayeri* pattern on p9 seems to be restricted to Fennoscandia where it forms a SW-NE cline of increasing frequency, reaching 27% (of a sample of 15) in eastern Finnmark (Barth 1968) and again 27% of 95 museum skins from north-western Russia (Coulson et al 1984). It is virtually absent in central and western Europe (0-1% in north-western Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain) (Barth 1968, Coulson et al 1984) and we are not aware of any records of this character from southern populations of the complex. In fact, the *thayeri* pattern has been used as a reliable criterion for the identification of northern Scandinavian birds among

143 Wing of adult Yellow-legged Gull *L c cachinnans* (sensu Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982), breeding colony at Sivash, Azov/Black Sea, Ukraine, USSR, May 1989. Note six black-marked primaries (p5-10) with trace of black on p4, white wedge on inner web of p10 and wide black band on inner web of p8. Compare with wing of claimed *L c cachinnans* from Vistula mouth, Poland (Dutch Birding 12: 16, plate 9, 1990) (Czesław Nitecki)



Herring Gulls wintering in Great Britain (Coulson et al 1984).

Summarizing these points, we find no clear indication for the claimed Black Sea origin of the specimen illustrated in Dubois et al (1990). The only feature fitting descriptions of *cachinnans* (the pattern on p10) is not unique to this subspecies. On the other hand, the combination of characters shown by this individual is typical for populations from the north-eastern part of the European range of the complex. Together with the yellow legs of the bird (M Skakuj and T Stawarczyk pers comm), it suggests a Fennoscandian origin (most probably northern Scandinavia) (cf Eigenhuis 1990).

In spite of these arguments, of which the second and third were already put forward in shortened form by Eigenhuis (1990), Dubois (Dutch Birding 12: 193, 1990) defended his original subspecific identification, suggesting that the wing pattern shown is the result of moult and abrasion, 'reducing the amount of black'. We do not know how serious this statement is since neither moult nor abrasion have anything to do with the number of black-marked primaries and the *thayeri* pattern on p9 (unless we would have to agree that abrasion can, on some primaries, change the colour of some subterminal regions of a feather from black into white or grey – a point of view which is difficult to accept).

Dubois, in his same reply, also argued that it was identified as a 'pure Yellow-legged Gull' on the basis of a rather dark grey mantle and yellow legs. Again, both characters do not allow the separation of *cachinnans* from Fennoscandian *argentatus* (including '*omissus*'). The common belief that gulls of the *cachinnans* group have a darker mantle than northern birds of the *argentatus* group, holds true only as long as western Mediterranean *melanoleuca* is compared with gulls from central and western Europe, ie from Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark (mainly *L a argenteus*). Yet, Herring Gulls from Fennoscandia have a much darker mantle than central and western European birds (Barth 1968: figure 1), being equally dark or even darker than *melanoleuca* and *cachinnans* (Barth 1968: figure 10). Similarly, bright yellow legs, as opposed to straw-yellow ones, are not typical for *cachinnans* which actually has pale straw-yellow legs (C Nitecki pers comm, based on many birds seen and caught in the Black Sea area).

Apart from the identification of the bird in plate 9, the general problem of the breeding origin of 'Herring Gulls' with yellow legs recorded on the Polish Baltic Sea coast is another story. Dubois et al (1990) suggested that, apart from '*omissus*' birds, *cachinnans* may also regularly occur on the Baltic

coast. Perhaps it is useful to remind that yellow-legged individuals constitute at least a significant proportion of 'Herring Gulls' breeding everywhere around the Baltic basin and in Fennoscandia, especially inland, and not only in Norway, Finland and southern Sweden (Barth 1968: 9) but also in north-eastern Germany (Kuschert 1980, Porner 1984, Nehls 1987). Although the subspecific identity and possible origin of these populations are subject to many speculations (cf Barth 1968: 38, Voipio 1968, Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1982), it is clear that especially these gulls are most likely to occur in Poland. Morphological variation within these southern Baltic populations seems to be extensive and as yet poorly known. Consequently, we argue that it is premature and highly speculative to recognize true *cachinnans* individuals among Baltic 'Herring Gulls'. The morphological variation of all populations involved (Baltic, Black Sea) needs to be described in more precise, biometrical and statistical terms (cf Goethe 1961, Barth 1967, Barth 1968, Isenmann 1973, Coulson et al 1982), rather than in hardly quantitative and subjective impressions and comparisons like 'slightly paler', 'little smaller', 'little more', etc.

Furthermore, ringing results suggest that birds from south-eastern Europe reach the Baltic coast only irregularly as a result of dispersal of immatures. A review of ringing recoveries of 'Herring Gulls' obtained under the Polish ringing scheme reveals that from birds ringed as chicks abroad and recovered in Poland 84 were of Baltic origin (Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Denmark) while only three (*first-year*) individuals originated from the Black Sea (Gdansk Ornithological Station, unpubl data). Similarly, only Fennoscandian and Baltic individuals have been recorded in eastern Germany (Kuschert 1980, Nehls 1987). Although many factors, most importantly differences in ringing effort, may have biased these results, it is clear that *adult* yellow-legged 'Herring Gulls' observed nowadays on the southern Baltic coast originate mostly from the local Baltic-Fennoscandian populations, rather than from south-eastern Europe.

This may also apply to the 'Herring Gull' population breeding at the middle Vistula. Although these birds have yellow legs (Bukacinski et al 1989), a closer look at the wing-tips of a perched bird (Dubois et al 1990: plate 8) raises doubts about the identification as *cachinnans*. In this individual, black marks are visible on only three primaries; even when assuming that p10 has a broken tip and the bird is moulting p6, this bird can only have five black-marked primaries at the most, unlike the *cachinnans* pattern!

In summary, we feel that the opinions put forward in Dubois et al (1990) about the subspecific identity of the yellow-legged 'Herring Gulls' in Poland are premature and unproven. However, it is not impossible that further detailed research, based on birds in the hand, may confirm their ideas.

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A comment by Philippe Dubois and Tadeusz Stawarczyk on the views of Chylarecki & Sikora will be published in the next issue. EDITORS

Mystery photographs

41 The grey geese *Anser* illustrated in mystery photograph 41 show a pale-grey forewing and rump and a white tail with obvious central band not extending onto the outer rectrices. Only Pink-footed *A brachyrhynchus* and Greylag Geese *A anser* show this pattern while Bean *A fabalis*, White-fronted *A albifrons* and Lesser White-fronted *A erythropus* would have shown, among other features, a rather dark forewing and a brown rump. The black colour of the tail-band identifies these birds as Greylag Goose since Pink-footed Goose has a pale-grey tail-band. Furthermore, the mystery birds show contrasting dark brown

scapulars, which are characteristic for Greylag Geese, as well as a contrast between dark and pale coverts on the innerwing. Pink-footed Geese have more uniform upperparts and upperwing.

During the Dutch Birding mystery-bird competition on 19 October 1990 held on Texel, Noordholland, 68% of the 69 contenders misidentified the birds as Pink-footed Geese and 13% as Bean Geese whereas only 11.5% correctly identified the birds as Greylag Geese.

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