

ISLINGTON U3A – BIRD WATCHING GROUP

GULLING ABOUT (or About Gulls)

The third in my series of 'blogs' this time I'm looking at gulls. Triggered by reading a book called Landfill by Tim Dee the book is more than just about gulls but it does show how our landfill refuge sites have had quite an impact on our (Europe's) gulls. We tend to not pay much attention to gulls, expecting them to be all the same and always there. But there is much to learn about gulls. This blog is an aid to the bird watching beginner and hopefully will help you tell the difference between different species of gulls. There are now over 620 species on the British bird list. But only 200 are native or habitual visitors. Out of the full list there are 40 'gulls' (see Appendix 2). Many of these may have been only seen a few times even by the best twitchers. So we can immediately rule out ones that we are unlikely to see – particularly in the south of England. So the common ones that we are most likely to see are:

- Herring gulls
- Black headed gulls
- Lesser black backed gulls
- Common gulls
- Common tern (not strictly a 'gull') so not detailed below

The next ones, ones we might see would include:

- Great black backed gulls
- Yellow legged gull
- Caspian gull
- Artic tern (again, not really a gull)

Before we look at the distinguishing features of each of the four most common gulls in south east England, here are some general facts about gulls. Firstly – these days there are as many land gulls as sea gulls. So you are just as likely to see gulls inland as at the sea side. However all gulls like to sleep on water. They can travel quite a distance from where they are feeding during the day versus where they are sleeping. The quantity of land gulls has been increasing since the second world war until recently. Possibly started by workers after WWII, who frequently shared their lunch box contents with gulls. No one really knows the whole reason for this trend. However with landfill dumping rates slowing, and particularly the food content in landfill declining, then numbers are now falling in some areas. The other trend has been regarding migration. Originally all gulls were migratory, but now many (but not all) land gulls are largely non-migratory – in Britain. Strangely this is only a British phenomena – currently. In France, Holland, Belgium for example they still go south for the winter.

The first thing to identify is: it a gull or a tern. Flight path can help tell the answer here – terns seem to be faster, swooping more. But it's body shape that you'll spot first. Terns are thinner, slender. Gulls are bigger and rounder.



The second thing to consider is regarding juveniles. The plumage of young gulls is generally brown (not black and whites of the adults). This makes it additionally difficult to tell the species apart. Often the best way is not to try to figure out the species of the juvenile but to look at its company, the adults nearby. Figure out what the adults are and that will tell you what the juvenile is. A juvenile will take two to three years before it gets its full adult plumage.



That's enough about the generalities. Here is some information about each to help spot and tell the difference between them.

For gulls the key features to tell each type apart are: overall shape and size, colour of legs, beak, colour (of back or head).

HERRING GULL



Herring gulls are large (the largest of our 4 here), noisy gulls found throughout the year around our coasts and inland around rubbish tips, fields, large reservoirs and lakes, especially during winter. Adults have light grey backs, white under parts, and black wing tips with white 'mirrors'. Their **legs are pink**, with webbed feet and they have heavy, slightly hooked bills marked with a red spot. You might be surprised to learn that this species is on the red list due to ongoing population declines and wintering population declines.

Size: Length: 54-60cm,
Wingspan: 130-150cm,
Weight: 690-440g

Population: UK breeding: 1,400 pairs, UK wintering: 740,000 birds

Audio Link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Larus-argentatus>

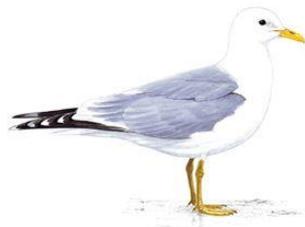
Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/search/?q=herring+gull>



Similar species:



Yellow legged



Common



Lesser Black backed

Note: all have yellow legs, not pink

BLACKED HEADED GULL

Not really a black-headed bird, more chocolate-brown - in fact, for much of the year, it has a white head. It is most definitely not a 'seagull' and is found commonly almost anywhere inland. Black-headed gulls are sociable, quarrelsome, noisy birds, usually seen in small groups or flocks, often gathering into larger parties where there is plenty of food, or when they are roosting. Legs are red (stronger than the pink of a Herring gull).

Black-headed gulls are the commonest inland gull, particularly in N England, Scotland and Wales. Large colonies along the south and east coasts of England.



Summer plumage



Winter plumage

(no black head, just a black spot on its head)

Size: Length: 34-37cm, Wingspan: 100-110cm, Weight: 200-400g

Population: UK breeding: 140,000 pairs, UK wintering: 2.2 million birds, Europe: 130,000 pairs

Audio Link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Chroicocephalus-ridibundus>

Read more at

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/black-headed-gull/>

LESSER BLACK BACKED

Slightly smaller than a herring gull, the lesser black-backed gull has a **dark grey to black back** and wings, yellow bill and **yellow legs**. Their world population is found entirely in Europe. After declines in the 19th century due to persecution they increased their range and numbers. This expansion has now halted and there is serious concern about declines in many parts of its range. The species is on the Amber List because the UK is home to 40 per cent of the European population and more than half of these are found at fewer than ten sites.

Lesser black backed gulls have a red bill spot (as do herring gulls). The young hit this spot to make the adults regurgitate food.

Size: Length: 52-64cm, Wingspan: 135-150cm, Weight: 620-1,000g

Population: UK breeding: 110,000 pairs, UK wintering: 130,000 birds

Audio Link: not available. Read more at

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/lesser-black-backed-gull/>

Lesser are 'lesser' due to them being less aggressive, fly at a lesser height, etc compared to the Greater black backed gulls. See photo.



COMMON GULL

The common gull looks like a **smaller**, gentler version of the herring gull, with greenish legs and a yellow bill. Despite its name, it is not at all common in most inland areas, though it can be abundant on the coast and in some eastern counties. They are now seen more often in towns and on housing estates in winter.



Size: Length: 40-42cm, Wingspan: 110-130cm, Weight: 300-480g

Population: UK breeding: 49,000 pairs, UK wintering: 710,000 birds

Audio Link: not available. Read more at:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/common-gull/>

ORDER OF IDENTIFICATION

The process of identification follows is:

Is it a Tern or a Gull? Use shape and flight pattern to choose. All gulls are bigger than terns.

Has it pink legs (but not a black head, or black spot on its head)? Then it's a Herring gull

Does it have a black head (or a black spot on its head) & red legs? Then it's a black-headed gull

So Common and lesser black backed are left (both with yellow legs). Black backed will have a blacker back, common will be greyer. Common is also smaller and rounder.

APPENDIX 1 – Extracts from: Landfill by Tim Dee

Gulls first start to split off from terns, auks, etc about 60 million years ago and the first true gulls appear between 23 to 16 million years ago. Most gulls formed in the northern hemisphere. Herring gulls are a fairly recent addition and only appeared after the last ice age in Europe. Most species originated either from the North Atlantic region or from the Caspian and Aral seas area.

The first *urban* gulls seen in the 1920s were black headed gulls. Gulls now live on urban rooftops on Europe's western seaboard from Norway to Portugal. But the greatest number is in Britain & Ireland. The number of roof top gulls has doubled since 2000. Most urban UK gulls now don't migrate. Rural birds still do.

Gulls do hybridise making identification harder. Young gulls have a mixture of white and brown plumage for the first few years making identification also difficult. Urban birds may move out at night to rural water sites.

Gulls generally pair for life and life can be 20 years (up to 30 for herring gulls). The herring gull population peaked in the 70s - it had doubled since the end of WW2. But has since dropped by about 80%. So is now back to the level seen in the early 1900s. The reasons for this big swing is not known. The biggest falls have been in sea gulls but the same trend applies for land gulls also. Recent declines in land gulls is seen partially due to the decline of food waste at landfill sites. Most food waste is now composted or incinerated. However gulls from Scandinavia, Holland, France all come to feed on our Essex landfills.

See Appendix 2 for rare gull visitors to Britain.

APPENDIX 2 – List of all Gulls spotted in Britain (in no particular order):

1. Ivory Gull
2. Sabine's Gull
3. Kittiwake
4. Slender-billed Gull (only 8 ever seen so far in UK)
5. Bonaparte's Gull
6. Black-headed Gull
7. Little Gull
8. Ross's Gull
9. Laughing Gull
10. Franklin's Gull
11. Mediterranean Gull (now over a 1000 native breeding pairs)
12. Audouin's Gull
13. Great Black-headed Gull
14. Common Gull
15. Ring-billed Gull
16. Lesser Black-backed Gull
17. Herring Gull
18. Yellow-legged Gull
19. Caspian Gull (similar to a yellow-legged but white headed and longer legs and wings)
20. American Herring Gull
21. Iceland Gull
22. Glaucous Gull
23. Great Black-backed Gull (only 1 ever seen, in 1869!)
24. Aleutian Tern
25. Sooty Tern
26. Bridled Tern
27. Little Tern
28. Gull-billed Tern
29. Caspian Tern
30. Whiskered Tern
31. Black Tern
32. White-winged Black Tern
33. Sandwich Tern
34. Royal Tern
35. Elegant Tern
36. Lesser Crested Tern
37. Forster's Tern
38. Common Tern
39. Roseate Tern
40. Arctic Tern