

Mediterranean Gulls at Southend Pier

By Steve Arlow

Southend Pier, in Essex, is perhaps the best and most reliable site in the county at which to obtain excellent views of Mediterranean Gulls *Larus melanocephalus*. Although birds are present throughout the year, late August is perhaps one of the best times to visit as such a wide variety of birds in different plumages can be obtained. The birds congregate amongst the Black-headed Gull flock and can be readily seen in the vicinity of the disused lifeboat launch ramp at the end of the pier (best accessed via the half-hourly electric train or alternatively by 25 minute walk). They also get on the neighbouring railway station roof at the end of the pier and in much smaller numbers by the Westcliff-on-Sea leisure centre along the promenade a mile west of the pier.

On 29th August 2002, Mike Bailey and myself notched up a new all-time record for the SOG area – recording a phenomenal 26 Mediterranean Gulls – two advanced juveniles, 9 first-years, 6 2nd-years and 9 adults. At the same time, Paul Griggs recorded a further two adults at Westcliff. One of the adults was a regularly returning bird bearing a green plastic ring inscribed ‘A00’. This individual has returned to the pier for the past three winters and emanates from Northern France.

A large number of Mediterranean Gulls are ringed each year in Europe, with most countries having specific colour combinations. For example, British ringed birds are marked with yellow rings, whilst those in The Netherlands/Belgium generally have white rings. French birds are dark green, Germany pale blue, Italian dark blue, Hungarian red and Greece & the former Yugoslavia black.

To show the variation between individual birds, I obtained the following images. Note the different stages of covert moult on the first year birds.







1st Year Mediterranean Gull Southend Pier Steve Arlow 29/08/02



2nd Year Mediterranean Gull Southend Pier Steve Arlow 29/08/02





Mediterranean Gulls take just three years to attain full adult plumage and can be readily aged in all four stages – juvenile, first-winter/summer, 2nd winter/summer and adult. The best sources of reference are Peter Grant's essential 'Gulls – a guide to identification' (pages 58-62 & photographs 98-119) and Killian Mullarney's superb plate (on page 173) of the Collins Bird Guide.

As a general guide, juvenile Mediterranean Gull is very heavily scalloped on the mantle and upperwings, with blackish eye-crescents and thin white crescents above and below the eye and a broad band of dusky-brown feathering extending from the hindneck to the breast and flanks. The tail has a clear-cut black subterminal band, whilst the iris is dark brown, bill mainly black and legs very dark.

First-winter plumage is generally acquired by late September, giving rise to a prominent black mask behind the eye, wholly white underparts, a pale pearly-grey mantle and back and some paleness to the bill-base. The upperwing pattern remains largely juvenile-like, with a broad black secondary bar, black-centred tertials and largely black outer primaries. By April of the first year, much of the head becomes black, the upperwing pattern becomes more faded and bleached and the bare part coloration progresses to variations of orange and red.

The second winter plumage is acquired between late May and September, and results in an all-white tail and only the outer 3-6 primaries with variable extents of black on them. The bill becomes reddish, with a dark tip or subterminal band. The legs become orange-red. As birds approach the following spring, the hood becomes fully black with obvious white eye-crescents, the white primary tips on the black primaries reduce and gradually disappear and the bare part coloration deepens in tone.

The adult plumage is acquired by a complete moult in late summer. In this, the upperwings are gleaming white, as is the tail, with the brown iris surrounded by a bright red orbital ring. The extreme tip of the rich red bill is often yellowish, whilst the legs are brighter red than before. The hood is completely black, extending farther down the nape than Black-headed Gull.