

The history of colour-ringing Mediterranean Gulls

Larus melanocephalus

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ABSTRACT

Colour-ringing programmes of Mediterranean Gull were started in the Netherlands (white rings, since 1990), Italy (dark blue, 1990), NW-France (green, 1991), Belgium (joining the Dutch programme, 1992), E-France/Germany (light blue, 1994, to be changed to green in 1999), Hungary (red, 1994), Ukraine (black, 1994), Yugoslavia (joining the Hungarian programme, 1995), England (yellow, 1997), Greece (black, 1997), Turkey (black, 1997) and Czech republic (joining the Hungarian programme, 1998). Some of the ringing teams of the early 1990s have strongly supported the start of other teams. Up to August 1998, over 5,300 birds have been colour-ringed.

RÉSUMÉ

L'historique du marquage coloré de la Mouette mélanocéphale *Larus melanocephalus*. Les programmes de marquage coloré de la Mouette mélanocéphale ont démarré aux Pays-Bas (bagues blanches, depuis 1990), en Italie (bleu foncé, 1990), dans le Nord-Ouest de la France (vert, 1991), en Belgique (se joignant au programme néerlandais, 1992), dans l'Est de la France / en Allemagne (bleu clair, 1994, deviendra vert en 1999), en Hongrie (rouge, 1994), en Ukraine (noir, 1994), en Yougoslavie (se joignant au programme hongrois, 1995), en Angleterre (jaune, 1997), en Grèce (noir, 1997), en Turquie (noir, 1997) et en République tchèque (se joignant au programme hongrois, 1998). Certaines des équipes de baguage du début des années 90 ont considérablement soutenu le démarrage d'autres équipes. Jusqu'en août 1998, plus de 5.300 oiseaux ont été munis d'une bague de couleur.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution to the proceedings of the '1st International Mediterranean Gull Meeting' is a rather personal view on the history of colour-ringing Mediterranean Gulls in Europe. Since the author has been mainly involved in the Dutch/Belgian ringing programme, these countries have perhaps received more attention than the other countries. My apologies in advance!

HOW IT ALL BEGAN IN THE NETHERLANDS

On 30 May 1989, while censusing nests of Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* on the complex of DOW Chemical, an industrial site near Terneuzen, Zeeland, The Netherlands, Peter Meininger (PLM) and Hans Schekkerman located two nests of Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*. The nests were situated on the edge of a small colony of Black-headed Gulls, and - to our surprise - could be easily identified on the basis of egg size and egg coloration and by the structure of the nest. One of the nests contained a chick, which we ringed with a metal ring.

These were the first Mediterranean Gull nests we ever found. Since we now had noticed that the nests and eggs of this species are relatively easy to identify, we decided to check this the next day at a large Black-headed Gull colony at Slikken van de Heen West, Zeeland. In previous years up to six or seven Mediterranean Gulls had been observed here among thousands of Black-headed Gulls, and the number of breeding pairs of Mediterranean Gull was tentatively estimated at 2-3. Although only a few Mediterranean Gulls were observed flying over the colony on 31 May 1989, we found eight nests, this figure increasing to at least 12 during subsequent visits. Stimulated by this unexpected success, during the next days we checked a few other colonies where there had been reports of Mediterranean Gulls. This produced another seven nests at Hellegatsplaten, Zuid-Holland and 14 at Moerdijk, Noord-Brabant. We carefully marked the nests, took notes on contents, took measurements of eggs, ringed the chicks and took measurements and weights of these chicks.

These days we were mainly studying Common Terns, including ringing of adults by catching these on the nest. As an experiment we placed a cage over one of the Mediterranean Gull's nests at Terneuzen, and within minutes captured our first adult! We hardly expected to be successful, but now the bird was in our hands we took measurements and weight, photographed it and released it after ringing.

Our field work in the Delta area of the SW Netherlands during the breeding season in spring 1989 was enlightened by a continuous series of memorable events. Apart from to the many Mediterranean Gulls, there were several breeding Black-winged Stilts (Meininger & Schekkerman 1990), and observations of rarities like Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*, Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*, Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* and Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, the latter even a first for the Netherlands (Schekkerman & Meininger 1990)!

Problems with the ringing centre...

In our enthusiasm, and challenged by the unique opportunity, we 'forgot' that PLM's ringing licence had been limited by the Dutch Ringing Centre to *Charadrius* plovers, terns and Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, the latter species having the same ring size as Mediterranean Gull. By the time PLM informed the Dutch Ringing Centre about the 'additional' ringing activities, and officially asking for permission, 42 chicks and one adult Mediterranean Gull had already been ringed. PLM received an 'invitation' for a personal visit to the head of the ringing centre... During the conversation PLM explained what had happened (in the field and in our minds), and suggested a continuation of the study of Mediterranean Gulls. It was clear that this could be a unique opportunity to document the colonisation of the Netherlands by a 'new' gull species, to collect information on the movements of the birds, and to compare these with the migratory behaviour of the Black Sea population, 3000 km to the east. Using colour rings in addition to the metal (aluminium) rings could greatly add to the results. Thus a project proposal was made and permission asked (and obtained!) for the use of colour rings.

The first white rings

In winter 1989/90 colour rings were supplied by the Dane Kjeld Pedersen through Norman van Swelm, and in spring 1990 we could start ringing seriously! In 1990 we colour-ringed 35 chicks and as many as 24 adult breeders with engraved, white darvic rings, starting with 01A! A request to look out for these rings was published in several periodicals, e.g. BTO News, Sula, Birding World and Dutch Birding, and soon the first observations were reported

(Meininger 1991, 1997). The very first sighting outside the Netherlands was reported by Harry Verduyjsse, an extremely keen reader of colour-ringed Herring Gulls *L. argentatus* and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus*. He observed white 31A at Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, France, on 30 May 1990, only a week after this bird had been ringed as an adult breeder at Slikken van de Heen. This was the first in an endless series of records at Le Portel.

THE ANNEXATION OF BELGIUM

In spring 1992, it became clear that at least a part of the 'Dutch' Mediterranean Gull population apparently had moved to adjacent Belgium! Should we start a war? About 45 pairs were present in a large Black-headed Gull colony below the Hoge Maey rubbish tip near Lillo, Antwerpen. Since this was a substantial part of the Dutch/Belgian population, it seemed worthwhile colour-ringing in this colony as well. Through the Institute for Nature Conservation in Brussels we got in contact with Ludo Benoy, who arranged permission to visit the rubbish tip. On 11 and 21 June a highly motivated Belgian/Dutch team visited the Hoge Maey, and colour-ringed 30 chicks. Ringing with metal Brussels rings was done by François Boel, a local ringer who had been ringing gulls for a long time. In 1993-95 only a few Mediterranean Gulls were ringed annually in Belgium, by Filip De Ruwe, Bernard De Langhe and Georges De Putter at Zeebrugge, West-Vlaanderen and by Guido Goris at Berendrecht, Antwerpen.

The Belgian navy strikes back

Even in his very first letter to PLM, dated 8 May 1993, Renaud Flamant did not only report the sightings of several colour-ringed Mediterranean Gulls, but also suggested the possibility of colour-ringing in Belgium. Renaud was at that time actively compiling a valuable overview of all existing colour-marking schemes in Europe (Flamant 1994). After a lot of correspondence, it was agreed that Renaud would become responsible for the co-ordination of colour-ringing in Belgium, starting in 1996. It was clear the Belgians did not need the foreign aid anymore! It was also agreed that the management of the database of all sightings of white rings would remain the responsibility of PLM. As a real navy officer, Renaud mobilised his troops in various parts of Belgium, and not only effectively managed the colour-ringing in his country, but also stimulated ring-reading by his countrymen. He was also instrumental in the compilation of several newsletters sent to all observers.

FROM WORDPERFECT 4.2 TO PARADOX!

Between 1990 and 1994, the reports of white-ringed Mediterranean were stored in a simple WordPerfect 4.2 file. During 1994, Cor Berrevoets designed a database in Paradox, and this has been in use ever since. The use of a relational database had become inevitable, considering the ever increasing stream of reports. By October 1998, 1468 white-ringed Mediterranean Gulls produced over 13 000 reports. It is now possible to generate selections, reports and letters directly from the database.

AN INDEPENDENT SIMULTANEOUS START IN ITALY

In August 1990, a request for observations of Mediterranean Gulls colour-ringed in Italy, sent to the editors of *Ardea*, was passed on to PLM. He contacted Paolo Boldreghini and

Riccardo Santolini to exchange information. It turned out that in Italy a colour-ringing programme, using engraved blue rings, had been started in 1990. Correspondence and a personal meeting between Paolo Boldreghini and PLM in April 1992, at a special Wader Study Group Conference in Odessa, Ukraine, resulted in a joint poster presentation at the 3rd MEDMARAVIS Conference at Chios, Greece, held on 15-20 September 1992, and a short article on the preliminary results of both programmes (Boldreghini *et al.* 1992). The continuation of the Italian programme was not without problems due to a lack of time of one of the organizers. Since 1995, administration and correspondence has been taken over by Nicola Baccetti of the Italian Ringing Centre. This scheme, with a total of c. 1350 colour rings used up to and including 1998, is now running well.

A SIDE-STEP TO NORTH-WESTERN FRANCE

Already in the 1970s, it was known that Boulogne-sur-Mer and Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, France, held relatively large concentrations of Mediterranean Gull (e.g. Milbled & Apchain 1978, Cramp & Simmons 1983). It came as no surprise that the first sightings of birds colour-ringed in The Netherlands came from Le Portel. Pascal Raevel had been collecting observations from Le Portel since the late 1980s, with a special interest in Mediterranean Gulls. In winter 1990/91 regular counts were made at Le Portel by several teams of French (Pascal Raevel, Serge Deroo, Georges Beal, Denis Tirmarche) and Dutch observers (Ted Hoogendoorn and friends, Peter Meininger and friends). The first letter (in Dutch!) of Pascal Raevel to PLM, in which - among other matters - he reported a sighting of white 51A is dated 1 October 1990. In a letter to Pascal Raevel, dated 1 February 1991, PLM mentioned the absence of white colour-ringed Mediterranean Gulls at Le Portel in winter, while numbers up to 335 had been counted. Also, he suggested the possibility of catching and ringing at Le Portel, preferably in collaboration with local ringers. This was taken seriously by PR, and an application was sent to the French Ringing Centre. After a meeting between PR and the French Ringing Centre, PLM drafted a proposal for colour-ringing in NW-France. This was translated, augmented and submitted by PR in early July 1991. Norman van Swelm made available the necessary colour rings: green with white engravings. The first (and the last!) joint Dutch-French ringing session at Le Portel was held on 8 and 9 December 1991. This was also the first personal meeting of the two teams! Norman van Swelm, Pim Wolf and PLM arrived at Le Portel at 11:00, meeting the eager French team: Georges Béal, Pierre Camberlain, Georges Debever, Sylvie Deloffre, Serge Deroo, Camille Duponcheel, and PR. A video tape was made of the catching efforts by Serge Deroo, who also documented various Mediterranean Gull related activities in later years, including the ringing of chicks in the Netherlands and the 1st International Mediterranean Gull Meeting at Le Portel. Hopefully we will soon see the results! With various simple methods (snares, a clap-net) we managed to catch some Mediterranean Gulls, and after two days the first green-ringed Mediterranean Gulls were flying around! It also soon became clear that Dutch involvement in the catching at Le Portel was unnecessary, and that the French team was perfectly capable of running their own programme (Raevel & Duponcheel 1993). Up to and including July 1998, 333 Mediterranean Gulls have been ringed at Le Portel!

Resulting from the first written contacts between PR and PLM, plans emerged to publish joint papers on the status of the species in NW France (in French in *Alauda*) and at Le Portel (in English). Only the latter paper has been actually written (Meininger *et al.* 1993).

One other person deserves to be mentioned under the heading 'France': Ted Hoogendoorn. In the Dutch bird-watching community he is widely known by his nick-name Ted 'gull' Hoogendoorn, which is easily explained by the fact that he is mainly interested in gulls. He

also fanatically maintains a 'life list' of all species observed in the Netherlands, but it seems doubtful if he is actually able to identify any other species than gulls. It was the tremendous number and variety of gulls attracting Ted to Le Portel, and he inevitably became involved in various Mediterranean Gull projects. This resulted in a paper on spring head moult (Hoogendoorn *et al.* 1992), a frequent series of visits to almost the entire French coast, visits to Italy and Hungary, and an enormous flow of sightings of colour-ringed birds. Ted is also painstakingly accurate, and quite a few (probably...) erroneous readings were eliminated from various databases.

UKRAINIAN BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL!

In April 1992, at the Wader Study Group Conference in Odessa, Ukraine, the 'mother of Mediterranean Gulls' was also present: Tatiana Ardamatskaya. This remarkable lady had been studying and ringing Mediterranean Gulls, among many other coastal birds, at the Black Sea Reserve, for decades. The meeting between Tatiana and PLM at Odessa resulted in the use of the first 300 black colour rings in spring 1994. This ringing effort, carried out by Antonina Rudenko and K.I. Ribachuk, resulted in sightings of Ukrainian black rings as far as Italy, the Netherlands, England and France. In 1998 another 300 chicks were colour-ringed in Ukraine by Tatiana Ardamatskaya and Antonina Rudenko.

LIGHT BLUE IN GERMANY

In Germany, there are three ringing centres: 'Vogelwarten' Helgoland, Hiddensee and Radolfzell, respectively. At the Vogelwarte Radolfzell, responsible for the southern parts of Germany, until 1994 not a single Mediterranean Gull had been ringed. In the northern parts of the country, covered by Vogelwarte Helgoland, from 1951 to 1996 only nine birds (no chicks) were ringed, but none of them with colour rings (Martin Boschert *in litt.*). Only in the eastern parts, covered by Vogelwarte Hiddensee, Mediterranean Gulls have been ringed regularly: 240 between 1964 and 1996 (Köppen & Scheil 1997). Between 1968 and 1982, 12 Mediterranean Gulls and two hybrid Black-headed X Mediterranean Gulls were ringed with two coloured, 7 mm high celluloid rings in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Hans Wolfgang Nehls *in litt.*). There are several sightings from the Netherlands, France and England of Mediterranean Gulls with narrow, coloured rings on the tarsus, not fitting the combinations reportedly used in Germany; the origin of these birds remains unknown.

In 1994, Martin Boschert and Christian Dronneau started a bi-national (German-French) project, colour-ringing with light blue rings in the Rhine Valley near Gambsheim (France) and Rheinau-Freistett (Germany), on the French-German border. The colony is situated on an artificial peninsula in the middle of the river Rhine, but the Mediterranean Gulls actually breed in France (just a few metres across the border). At the start of the project Camille Duponcheel and Pascal Ravael provided the team with light blue colour rings. From 1999 onwards, this colour-ringing project will continue with green rings, engraved with a combination of letters. These green rings will also be used in a few other German colonies (Martin Boschert *in litt.*).

HUNGARIA JOINS!

After reading three metal 'Budapest' rings at Le Portel in the 1993 autumn, Ted Hoogendoorn contacted the Hungarian ringing centre, and suggested a colour-ringing programme be started in Hungary. The French ring-readings proved to be the firsts of

Hungarian-ringed Mediterranean Gulls ever, and formed the inspiration for two short papers on 'Colour-ringing programmes of Mediterranean Gull and the Hungarian-French connection' (Hoogendoorn *et al.* 1993ab). The Hungarian ringing centre, in the person of Lajos Varga, enthusiastically reacted to the suggestion of a colour-ringing programme in Hungary, and the first series of red colour rings was used in the spring of 1994 (Varga *et al.* 1999). In spring 1994, Ted also visited several Hungarian colonies, but a visit to Le Portel by the Hungarian team could not be realised, until September 1998! The ringing efforts in Hungary proved to be very rewarding, and resulted in the publication of a beautifully illustrated article summarising the results (Varga *et al.* 1996).

Outside of Hungary, red colour rings have been used in Vojvodina, Yugoslavia, in 1995 (three) and in the Czech Republic in 1998 (12) (Lajos Varga *in litt.*).

ENGLAND IN YELLOW

After some correspondence between Pete Findley (PF) and various continental Mediterranean Gull fanatics (PR, RF, PLM), it was decided to start a colour ringing programme in the UK as well. In late 1996, 100 yellow rings were sent to Pete Findley. He has been successfully catching non-breeding Mediterranean Gulls at Folkestone, Kent, since the 1996/97 winter. While PF and his ringing team provided much technical advice to their Channel counterparts at Le Portel (resulting in a memorable cannon-netting meeting at Le Portel in February 1998), the French ringing team supported the start of the British programme.

BLACK BECOMES MORE BEAUTIFUL!

Already in 1985, Vassilis Goutner and colleagues colour-ringed Mediterranean Gulls at Alyki near Thessaloniki, Greece. They used 39 yellow, 66 dark blue and 75 green rings on the left tarsus, in addition to a metal ring on the right tibia (Vassilis Goutner *in litt.*). It is not known if these colour rings ever produced any sightings. Up to and including 1988, Mediterranean Gulls have been ringed with metal rings in Greece (Vassilis Goutner *in litt.*). In 1996, Renaud Flamant contacted Vassilis Goutner, to inquire about the possibilities of colour-ringing in Greece. This resulted in the colour-ringing of 146 chicks in 1997. No chicks were ringed in Greece in 1998 due to a failed breeding season. In Turkey, Sühendan Karauz and her team colour-ringed 80 chicks in 1997 and 225 in 1998. In Romania, an attempt by Tamás Papp to organize ringing, failed due to a lack of co-operation by the manager of the reserve. The administration of all black rings is co-ordinated by Renaud Flamant.

SYNTHESIS

Since 1990, when colour-ringing programmes of Mediterranean Gulls were started in Italy and The Netherlands, comparable programmes have been started in most other breeding areas of the species in Europe. Up to and including August 1998, over 5,300 Mediterranean Gulls have been colour-ringed in Europe (Table 1), resulting in an enormous amount of information in movements, migration, wintering areas, survival, site fidelity etc. It is obvious that 10 years of colour-ringing of limited numbers of birds has yielded much more information than could ever be achieved by the use of metal rings alone, even when much larger numbers of birds would have been ringed with metal rings. The continuation of colour-ringing, and - just as important - reading, will undoubtedly result in new and better insights

into the fascinating biology of Europe's most beautiful gull. This will require the help of you all

Table 1. Total number of Mediterranean Gulls *Larus melanocephalus* colour-ringed in Europe (including Turkey), 1990-August 1998.

Tableau 1. Nombre total de Mouettes mélanocéphales *Larus melanocephalus* munies de bagues de couleur en Europe (y compris la Turquie) de 1990 au mois d'août 1998.

country	colour	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	total
NL	white	59	53	38	109	112	81	139	165	228	984
B	white	-	-	30	1	1	10	116	81	245	484
I	blue	103	166	192	143	60	22	34	163	458	1341
F	green	-	23	15	66	17	61	39	93	19	333
D/F	light blue	-	-	-	-	6	3	21	22	39	91
UKR	black	-	-	-	-	296	-	-	-	300	596
H	red	-	-	-	-	107	180	204	233	269	993
YU	red	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3
CZ	red	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	12
GB	yellow	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	4	19
GR	black	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	146	-	146
TR	black	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	80	225	305
Total		162	242	275	319	599	360	553	998	1799	5307

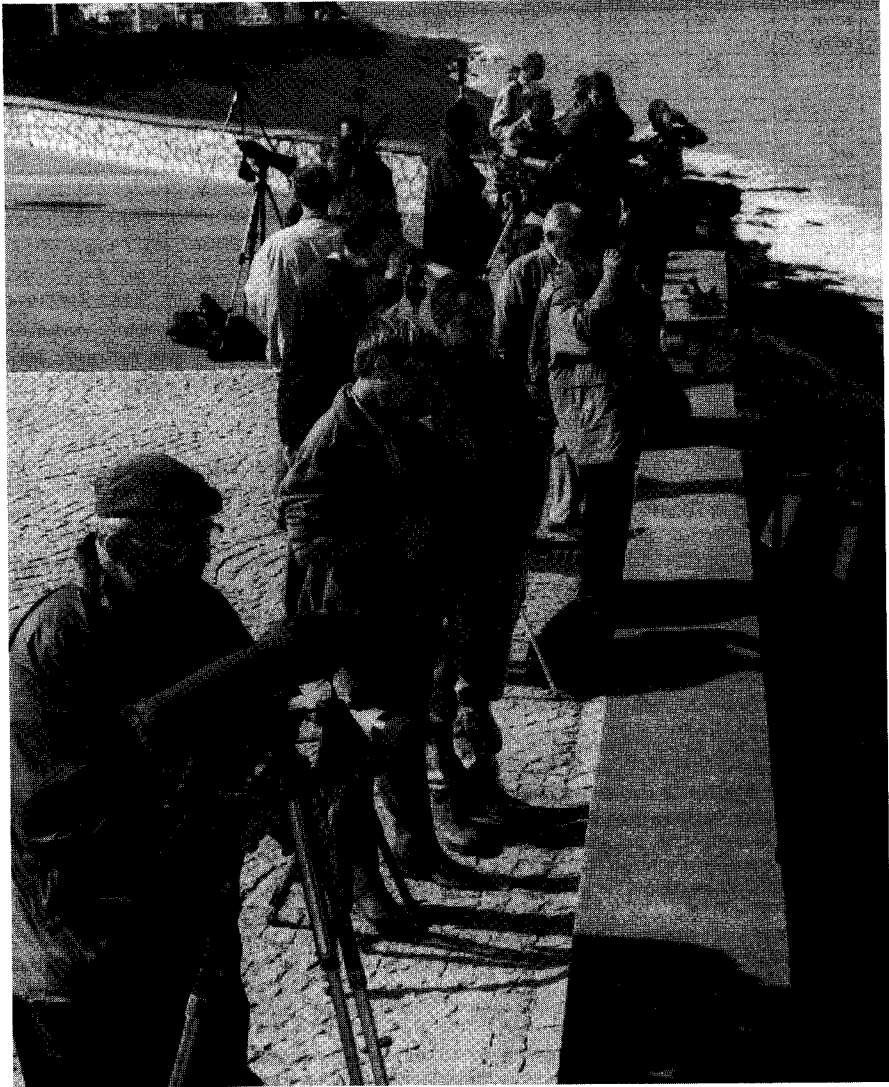
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Watching Med Gulls during the 1st IMG, Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, France, 6 September 1998 (photo Serge Deroo & Pascal Raevel).

Observation de Mouettes mélanocéphales lors du Premier Colloque International sur la Mouette mélanocéphale, Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, France, le 6 septembre 1998 (photo S. Deroo & Pascal Raevel).