

Identification of first cycle *Larus dominicanus vetula*: The Cape Gull of good hope?

Chris Gibbins

The two Cape Gulls *Larus dominicanus vetula* recently found in Portugal (Birding World, 26(6), July 2013), along with the previous bird in Paris (Jiguet et al., 2004), illustrate that this is a species we should be looking out for in Britain.

Gull watching in Europe is perhaps best in the Northern hemisphere winter, because this is the time that Northern breeders move away from their breeding areas and displaced birds may find themselves on our shores. For the same reason, the chances of finding Southern hemisphere taxa here may therefore be best in the months following their breeding season; i.e. in the Austral winter, our Northern summer.

All three European Cape Gulls have been adult or near adult birds. However, given that younger individuals are more likely to occur here as vagrants, anyone keen to find a Cape Gull is perhaps best advised to have a working knowledge of what first cycle birds look like during the Northern summer. The aim of this note is to showcase this age group at this time of year, and highlight one or two features that should make them stand out among our local gulls. The main argument put forward is that because of their absolute age and related absence of primary moult, along with the presence of a remarkably striking secondary skirt, in the Northern summer first cycle birds offer good prospects for out-of-range identification – they are the Cape Gulls of good hope.

Taxonomy and terminology

Before discussing identification, a few words on taxonomy and the terminology used in this note may be useful.

Cape Gull (*vetula*) is the African subspecies of the very widely distributed Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*. So far it seems that all European records of Kelp Gull have been *vetula* (Jiguet et al., 2004), so at least for the moment this seems the most meaningful taxon to discuss. All the photographs and observations upon which this note is based relate to birds observed in the SW Cape Province of South Africa between 26 June and 6 July 2013. Hence, all birds are assumed to be *vetula*.

Comparing age classes of Northern and Southern hemisphere gulls is made complicated by respective breeding seasons. Terms such as ‘first winter’, ‘first summer’ are confusing when comparing Southern and Northern species, because the seasons are effectively reversed. Moreover, because breeding times differ by around 6 months, at certain times of the year the use of calendar years does not work. For example, the laying period of Kelp is November-December (Jiguet et al, 2001) so by April first

calendar year (1cy) birds will be a few months old, and so could conceivably turn up in Europe; however, there is no such thing as a 1cy Northern hemisphere gull in April (as laying has not even commenced and birds reared in the previous season have 'ticked over' into their second calendar year) so meaningful comparison using calendar years is not possible at this time.

The solution is therefore to talk about 'cycles' (as per Howell and Dunn, 2007). A first cycle bird is defined here as a bird that has not completed its first primary moult. For Northern taxa this moult occurs in the summer of their second calendar year (e.g. in Scotland Herring Gulls start primary moult around 1 May), so first cycle birds in the Northern summer are around a year old. In Cape Gull this primary moult commences in October-November, when birds are a little less than a year old. The main advantage of using cycles when comparing immature Cape to our Northern gulls is that birds in the same cycle are the most likely cause of confusion, even though their absolute ages differ by several months.

	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
LBB/HG																		
	First calendar year										Second calendar year							
											First cycle							
Cape																		
											First calendar year							
											First cycle							

Table 1. Periods of primary moult, juvenile independence and age terminology of Cape Gull, relative to indicative Northern Hemisphere taxa (Lesser Black-backed Gull (LBB) & Herring Gull (HG)). There is subtle variability in exact timing of moult and breeding across the broad geographic range of each species (e.g. differences between *argenteus* and *argentatus* Herring Gulls), so periods are meant only to be broadly representative. Primary moult timings are taken from Malling Olsen and Larsson (2003) and breeding times from Jiguet et al (2001). ■= Main period of primary moult. ■= Juveniles become independent and so start to be seen away from nest sites. The shaded green box shows the time period dealt with in this note, a time when individuals of all of these taxa are in their first plumage cycle.

Moult: Why we should not throw the baby out with the bath-water

Moult is often cited as being useful for field identification of gulls. Due to reversed breeding times, Southern hemisphere gulls such as Cape have completely different moult periods to Northern ones; they are in moult when our birds are not, and vice versa. This should make them look strikingly different. However, the opposing argument is that displaced birds may adopt (or 'correct' to) the moult cycle of the birds in their new location. Indeed, Malling Olsen and Larsson (2003) specifically make this point in relation to Kelp/Cape Gull:

'Note, however, that Kelp Gulls in the Northern hemisphere may adopt moult cycles similar to Northern hemisphere gulls, as has been observed in US and Mexican adults' (p144)

The Paris Cape Gull supports this argument, as it was moulting in accordance with our Northern hemisphere gulls (Jiguet et al., 2004). So perhaps we should abandon any thought of moult being useful for picking out a Cape Gull?

The Paris bird was an adult. In theory it could therefore have been in the Northern hemisphere for several years; this is ample time both for it to need to adjust its moult to Northern seasons and be physiologically able to do this. Younger birds, especially first cycle ones, by definition can't have been here so long. A first cycle Cape reared in the austral summer will only be a few months old by the time the Northern summer comes around; unlike our birds whose primaries are a year old, a first cycle Cape should have much fresher feathers that do not need replacing, and in any case if it has only just arrived, it may not be physiologically capable of moulting feathers rapidly enough to catch up to our first cycle birds (i.e. our 2cy, 'first-summer' gulls; Table 1).

So, while we should always be careful when using moult, in the Northern summer it seems likely to be more useful for first cycle Cape Gulls than adults. In addition, as birds may be more prone to be displaced or wander in their first year of life, the Northern summer is likely to be a productive time for first cycle Cape Gulls in Europe. At this time, because they will only be a few months old, their moult and extent of feather wear and bleaching should be markedly different to our birds.

Picking out a Cape Gull

The starting point for picking out a Cape is to be familiar with first cycle Northern gulls during the summer when they are moulting primaries. A safe window for picking out a Cape would be May-August inclusive, as this covers the start and mid part of the moult period of Northern taxa, but is well before first cycle Cape Gulls might be expected to drop their first primary (Table 1). Because of feather grey tones and the inner primary patterns (detailed later) first cycle Lesser Black-backed Gulls (LBBs) are most similar to Cape, but actually the key distinguishing features suggested here also apply to separation of Cape from Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls. Plates 1-3 show what a typical first cycle *graellsii* or *intermedius* LBB looks like in mid summer, while Plate 4 shows a Yellow-legged Gull. The key points to note in these images are the extreme wear on remaining first generation primaries and wing coverts and the fact that birds are in primary moult.

There is considerable variation in the moult strategy of *graellsii* and *intermedius*, far too much to describe here (for those interested in the details, refer to the Gull Research Organisation web site <http://www.gull-research.org/lbbg2cya/lbbg2cymay.html>). Despite this variation, the general point remains valid – LBBs (and indeed Herring and Yellow-legged) should be in primary moult in summer. In these species, remaining first generation feathers in the wing coverts and tertials, and indeed the primaries and tail, are more or less a year old and so are very abraded. By way of comparison, a first cycle Cape Gull is shown in Plate 5. Note the absence of primary moult, along with the relative freshness of its first generation primaries and wing coverts.

So, unless a displaced first cycle Cape Gull suddenly dropped 4 or 5 primaries on arrival in the Northern hemisphere, the ***absence of primary moult and relatively fresh***

retained first generation feathers should make a vagrant stand out quite obviously among moulting LBBs in the middle part of the Northern hemisphere summer.



Plate 1. First cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull, Sines, Portugal, 20 June 2009. Chris Gibbins. This bird is now more or less a year old. Note the extreme state of wear on the visible remaining first generation primaries, and on the wing coverts. The primaries are faded and worn to a point and many coverts have only the shaft remaining. At this time of year, LBBs can have anything from all first generation tail feathers to all second generation ones (see <http://www.gull-research.org/lbbg2cya/lbbg2cymay.html>); many or most will be in active tail moult. Like the primaries and coverts, first generation tail feathers in LBB will be worn in mid summer. At this time, first cycle Cape Gulls should only have first generation feathers, and these should be relatively fresh.



Plate 2. First cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull, Sines, Portugal, 13 June 2008. Chris Gibbins. Again note that the first generation feathers remaining in the wing are worn.



Plate 3. First cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull, Sines, Portugal, 20 June 2009. Chris Gibbins. Primary moult has commenced; some new grey inner primaries are visible and the remaining first generation (outer) ones are very worn. The first generation primaries are brown and pointed, while the second generation (newly in-growing) ones are much more rounded, blacker and have a white fringe around the tip.



Plate 4. First cycle Yellow-Legged Gull, Sines, Portugal, 20 June 2009. Chris Gibbins. Note the active primary moult and the extent of wear in the remaining first generation primaries and tail feathers.



Plate 5. First cycle Cape Gull, Hermaness, SW Cape, South Africa, 4 July 2013. This first cycle Cape Gull is more or less 6 months old, having been reared in the austral summer. It has a complete set of first generation primaries, secondaries and tail feathers (i.e. no moult), all of which are very fresh.

Other clues

The plumage and structure of Cape Gulls vary considerably. The overall plumage pattern of first cycle birds is generally similar to many other large Northern hemisphere gulls, with pale head and body overlain to a variable extent with dark brown streaks and blotches, brown wings with pale fringing or notching; the post juvenile moult brings in a second generation mantle and scapulars which have a pattern which is subtly different to the first generation feathers they have replaced.

Looking through large numbers of Cape Gulls it is difficult to identify plumage features that they all share; e.g. Plates 6-16 show birds with a range of feather patterns. Certainly a frequent plumage type has first generation feathers have simple pale fringes which lack the notching seen on Herring and LBBs. Similarly, second generation feathers in the scapulars and coverts of these birds can be very simple, with a uniformly dark grey feather combined with a blackish basal diamond and/or shaft streak. However, there is much variability – many birds have more complex and heavily marked first and second generation feathers, with notched and anchor type patterns. There is also considerable variation in the number of coverts and tertials included in the

post juvenile moult of Cape; rather like Yellow-legged Gull, some seem to include many coverts and tertials in this moult (e.g. Plate 13) while others retain most or all of their first generation feathers. Some are heavily streaked on the head and body (notably with a dark eye mask) but others are very pale. The bill structure also varies a lot – some have large bills with a very strong gonys, but others have rather unimpressive bills.

First impressions of first cycle Cape Gull can therefore be a bewildering. However, one thing that all of the birds in these plates show is a 'skirt', formed by the projection of the secondaries beyond the tips of the greater coverts. This feature is rather striking; in some birds the visible skirt is half as deep as the greater coverts, so it is very obvious. Conversely, in most normal circumstances the secondaries do not project beyond the greater coverts on LBB, Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls so they lack a clear skirt. Occasionally the tips of the secondaries are visible in these Northern species, as a result of either an odd pose, or a combination wear and moult of the greater coverts which reveal underlying secondaries, but this is clearly different to the consistent, deep skirt shown by Cape..

Skirts are normally discussed in the context of adult gulls. Adult Cape Gulls have broad white tips to the secondaries, and these were noted as sometimes being visible as a skirt on the folded wing by Howell and Dunn (2007) and Jiguet et al. (2004). Plates 6-16 illustrate that the skirt is also very apparent on first cycle birds; to my knowledge this has not previously been mentioned as a possible feature for Cape Gull of this age.

So, there are two things to look for in first cycle Cape Gull– moult (or lack of it) in the primaries and tail, and a skirt.



Plate 6. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, 30 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 7. Cape Gull, Cape Town, 26 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 8. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, 30 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 9. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, 30 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 10. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, 30 June 2013.



Plate 11. Cape Gull, Cape Town, 26 June 2013. Chris Gibbins. This bird has some retained first generation scapulars.



Plate 12. Cape Gull, Cape Town, 26 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 13. Cape Gull, Cape Town, 26 June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 14. Cape Gull, Cape Town, 26 June 2013. Chris Gibbins. This bird has rather patterned first generation coverts. Its bill has the trademark bulging gonys associated with Cape/Kelp, giving it a droopy look, but not all are like this.



Plate 15. Cape Gull, Kommetjie, Western Cape, 27 June 2013. The plumage details, and hence the overall impression, of Cape Gull varies considerably. With its simply patterned wings and rather pale grey and sandy tones to the scapulars, this bird manages to give an impression not entirely unlike a Caspian or even Heuglin's Gull. Chris Gibbins



Plate 16. Cape Gull, Kommetjie, Western Cape, 27 June 2013. Chris Gibbins.

Additional features

Once a candidate Cape Gull has been picked out as having a skirt and no primary or tail moult, other features can be checked to firm up identification. These features are already described in the literature, but are mentioned here for the sake of completeness.

- In flight, the ***largely black tail*** of Cape ***contrasts with a pale central rump area***. The tail appears either wholly black (Plate 5) or with piano key pattern restricted to outer 2-3 feathers (Plates 17-18); a few have a pattern better described as pale stippling or vermiculation in the outer tail feathers (Plate 19). The upper and lower rump/tail coverts have some widely spaced dark bars but the central part of the rump is typically clean. The overall impression of the rump and tail is not quite like any other taxon.
- ***Inner primaries most typically appear wholly dark***, like a Baltic Gull, with only very limited difference in tone between inner and outer webs. Some have slightly paler inner webs to the inner 4 or 5 primaries and so look like a Yellow-Legged Gull. Others have a pattern like Caspian, with distinctly paler inner webs and pale patches on both webs near the feather tip.
- ***The bill is often cited as being bulbous in Cape/Kelp, as a result of a bulging gonys***. While this is indeed the case for some, it by no means applies to all; e.g. the accompanying plates testify to the fact that many Cape Gulls have a bill shape which overlaps with LBB and Herring Gulls.



Plate 17. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 18. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 20. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 21. Cape Gull, Hout Bay, Cape Town, June 2013. Chris Gibbins



Plate 19. Cape Gull, Kommetjie, Western Cape, 27 June 2013. Chris Gibbins. This is the same bird as shown in Plate 15; even in flight it resembles a Caspian Gull, but the presence of a full set of relatively fresh primaries and tail feathers at this time of year help rule out this and other Northern hemisphere taxa.

Some final thoughts and caveats

1. Subtle differences between adults of the various Cape and Kelp Gull taxa are detailed in existing literature. However, this literature treats immature plumages in an aggregated way, and this may obscure inter-population/taxon differences. We do not yet know whether any differences exist between the taxa in their immature plumages, but until we start describing them separately we will not know this. This note has therefore focussed only on *vetula*.

2. The text has been kept to a minimum, rather than run the risk of losing key points within lots of fine detail on plumage, structure, subtle variation in post juvenile moult etc. The key points connect to what I think is a really nice two stage process articulated by Peter Adriaens and Bruce Mactavish in their 2004 paper on American Herring Gull: i.e. the first stage is to pick out a candidate amongst your local gulls, then the second stage is to identify correctly. The presence of a skirt and the extent of feather wear and moult simply relate to stage 1 – they allow you to pick out a candidate Cape Gull. Once you have a candidate, more work, looking at a range of plumage and structural features, is needed to be fully confident of identification.

3. The subject of moult is potentially more complex than I've portrayed here in a few short paragraphs, and much work is needed. This is the case particularly in relation to the moult of those Cape Gulls which nowadays appear to breed close to or North of the equator. If a bird arriving in Europe is from these outpost populations, its moult may not be as described here for birds from the Cape region of South Africa. This would mean we run the risk of overlooking some Cape Gulls.

4. Some care needs to be taken when judging whether or not a bird has a skirt. In some cases a skirt may be visible on LBB (Plate 22), Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls so the trick is to judge this over a range of poses/positions/angles, to make sure it is consistent. Also, when moulting and missing greater coverts, the secondaries will be visible on northern gulls, so make sure you are actually judging extension beyond the remaining greater coverts.

5. Due to their plumage variability, some Cape Gulls resemble some Northern taxa. One or two birds I encountered had a plumage pattern reminiscent of Caspian or perhaps Heuglin's (e.g. Plate 15), while some were note unlike classic Baltic Gulls (Plate 22). The similarity to Baltic (in terms of very simply patterned feathers in the mantle, scapulars and coverts, and fresh primaries) comes from the fact that by mid summer of their second calendar year, Baltic Gulls are typically a whole moult cycle ahead of Cape (and indeed the LBB taxa), so the feather tracts are each a generation ahead and relatively fresh. While at first glance the general impression is similar, Baltic is more slender, has much longer wings, and the bill colours will be more advanced, while the fresh black primaries (being second generation) have more rounded tips than the first generation ones. Most Baltic Gulls will also have a complete second generation tail and secondaries and so should not cause prolonged confusion.



Plate 22. First cycle Lesser Black-backed Gull, Sines, Portugal, 18 June 2005. Chris Gibbins. This bird has its secondaries exposed by missing greater coverts; don't confuse this with a skirt.



Plate 22. Baltic Gull, Finland, July 2007. Chris Gibbins. Note the dark slate feathers in the scapulars and wing coverts (probably third generation feathers) mixed with very simply patterned brown ones (second generation feathers), and the very fresh and blackish primaries. Although resulting from different generations of feathers, the general impression of the upperparts is therefore similar to some Cape Gulls at this time of year (e.g. Plate 6).

6. A critical question is whether our European records are (African) Cape or (new-world) Kelp. So far their plumage and bare parts suggest that all three have been Cape, so I hope these observations on immature birds of this taxon are relevant.

References

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