

OCCURRENCE OF HEUGLIN'S GULL *LARUS HEUGLINI* AND STEPPE GULL *LARUS (CACHINNANS) BARABENSIS* IN IRAQ

OMAR F. AL-SHEIKHLY¹ & ALI N. AL-BARAZENGY²

¹College of Science-University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq (alsheikhlyomar@gmail.com)

²Center of Sustainable Management for Natural Ecosystem, Iraqi Ministry of Environment, Baghdad, Iraq

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The “large white-headed gull” group is among the migrant/wintering waterbirds of Iraq, with the status of various taxa somewhat confused as a result of revisions in taxonomy and morphometrics, as well as contradictory literature. Moreover, the identification of the various plumages within this taxonomic complex remains a subject of contention. Through recent field observations, we confirm the occurrence of Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini* and Steppe Gull *L. (cachinnans) barabensis* in Iraq. The majority of the observations were made at Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra Province, on the northern edge of the Persian Gulf in extreme southeast Iraq. There, large numbers (more than 160) of white-headed gull taxa congregate. There had been no previous records of these taxa in this area, thus muddling the migration/wintering status of the large white-headed gulls in Iraq and the Middle East.

The taxonomy of *L. heuglini* is still unclear. Genetic studies have shown that it is very closely related to the Baltic (Lesser Black-backed) Gull *L. fuscus* (Liebers & Helbig 2002, Liebers *et al.* 2004), but it is regarded as distinct taxon (Yésou 2002, Malling Olsen & Larsson 2003). It is unclear whether *L. heuglini* should be treated as a subspecies of *L. fuscus* (i.e. *L. f. heuglini*) or accorded species status (i.e. *L. heuglini*; Gibbins 2004). Despite the taxonomic difficulties, it is possible to identify *L. heuglini* in its wintering grounds. In the Middle East, gulls with dark grey upperparts (birds paler than *L. fuscus* but slightly darker than the Steppe Gull *L. barabensis*) can be confidently identified as *L. heuglini* (Gibbins 2004). Heuglin's Gull breeds on the Russian tundra from the White Sea/Kola Peninsula westward to Taimyr and the Gydan/Yamal Peninsula. As a northern steppe breeder, *L. heuglini* is a long distance migrant, which affects its moult strategy and timing. The last stage of primary moult takes place on the wintering quarters in: the eastern Mediterranean, north of the Red Sea, Black and Caspian Seas, south of the Red Sea, and on the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf states; the moult is suspended during migration (Malling Olsen & Larsson 2003).

The Steppe Gull *L. barabensis* is another enigmatic taxon, considered a subspecies of the Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* and regarded as the “Baraba Yellow-legged Gull” *L. (cachinnans/armenicus) barabensis* (Johansen 1960, Garner 1997). The taxon *barabensis* has been regarded as a southern subspecies of Heuglin's *taimyrensis*, having evolved as a result of introgression of *cachinnans* genes into the *heuglini* population when the latter extended its range southward. Recent mitochondrial DNA studies indicate that *barabensis* is closely related to *L. heuglini* (Panov & Monzikov 2000, Liebers *et al.* 2001, Yésou 2002). However, *barabensis* has been treated as a subspecies of Caspian Gull *L. (c.) barabensis* (Malling Olsen & Larsson 2003).

The Steppe Gull breeds in the steppes/lake margins of the southwest Urals to northern Kazakhstan; its main wintering areas are in the Persian Gulf and Oman, where large flocks have been observed (Fig. 1j). It also winters in the southern Arabian Peninsula, southern Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Socotra and Indian Ocean (Malling Olsen & Larsson 2003, Venn *et al.* 2005).

In Iraq, the literature on these taxa is confusing. All previous records of large white-headed gulls have been referred to Herring Gull *L. argentatus*. Ticehurst *et al.* (1922, 1926) listed *cachinnans* under *L. argentatus*, and both *fuscus* and *taimyrensis* subspecies under *L. fuscus* as the common wintering gull in Al-Faw (Fao) Peninsula of southern Iraq. Allouse (1953) listed *heuglini* under *L. argentatus*, citing the Ticehurst *et al.* (1922) record, despite the fact that Ticehurst had not included it (Salim *et al.* 2012). Allouse (1953) indicated that no information existed about the distribution of either *L. a. cachinnans* or *L. a. heuglini* in Iraq. Moor & Boswell (1956) reported *L. argentatus* and *L. fuscus* in Iraq, suggesting the last was from the subspecies *taimyrensis*. Moreover, Allouse (1961) mentioned that both *L. a. heuglini* and *L. a. taimyrensis* are probably present in Iraq. Mahdi & George (1969) listed both *heuglini* and *cachinnans* (under *L. argentatus*) and *L. fuscus* in Iraq without providing further details. Large flocks (1709 is the highest count) of *L. argentatus* were reported from Haur Al Hammar in southern Iraq without providing information on the subspecies involved (Scott & Carp 1982). Al-Dabbagh (1998) listed *L. fuscus* from the Tigris River and Al-Tharthar Lake in central Iraq. Abed (2007, 2008) listed *L. argentatus* from the restored southern marshes, but indicated there were no observations of *L. fuscus* during 2004–2006. Salim *et al.* (2009) listed *graellsii*, *intermedius* and *fuscus* subspecies under Baltic gull in the marshes of southern Iraq. Salim *et al.* (2012) listed *L. cachinnans*, *L. fuscus* and Armenian Gull *L. armenicus* in Iraq and regarded *L. heuglini*, *L. barabensis* and Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* as distinct taxa, although they were not included in the Iraq birds checklist. Both *L. heuglini* and *L. barabensis* most surely pass through Iraq, although none have been recorded to date (Salim *et al.* 2012, ORL 2015).

Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini* (Siberian Gull)

We observed four birds of the *heuglini* type. The first observation was of a sub-adult (4cy) Heuglin's Gull (Fig. 1a), on 26 October 2011, at Al-Razaza Lake (32°36'20.30"N, 43°50'33.62"E), Karbal'a Province, central Iraq. The Al-Razaza Lake *heuglini* was observed in a mixed flock of at least 200 *L. armenicus* and *L. cachinnans*. The subsequent analysis of multiple photographs of the gull supported the identification of Heuglin's Gull. It had slim jizz and a small, flat, white head with fine brown streaks on the crown and around the eyes and ear-coverts. It had dull yellow legs and a

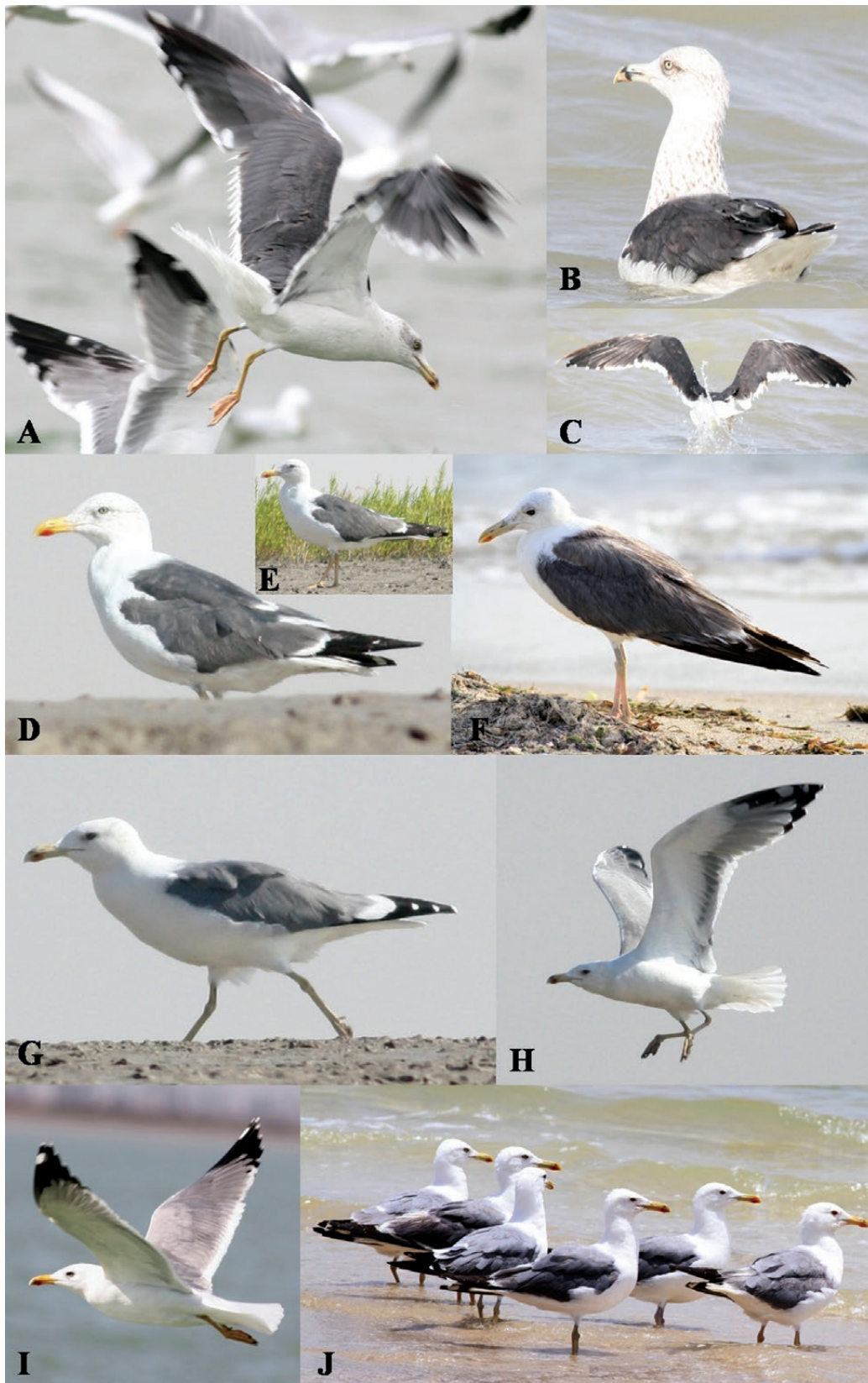


Fig. 1. (A) Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini* with Armenian Gull *L. armenicus*: Al-Razaza Lake, Karbal'a, Central Iraq, 26 October 2011; (B, C) *L. heuglini*: Rass Al-Besha in Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 5 January 2015; (D, E) *L. heuglini*: 5 km north of Um Qasir port in Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 11 November 2014; (F) *L. heuglini*: Masirah Island, Southern Oman, 6 August 2014; (G, H) Steppe Gull *L. cachinnans barabensis*: 3 km south of Khur Al-Zubair port in Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 11 November 2014; (I) *L. c. barabensis*: Shatt Al-Arab in Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 3 February 2015; (J) flock of *L. c. barabensis* in Rass Al-Had, Southern Oman, 15 August 2014. (A–I photos © Al-Barazengy; F & J photos © Al-Sheikhly).

tri-colored bill with an irregular dark subterminal bar, the dull red gonys-spot restricted to the lower mandible. The eyes were pale yellow, which is regarded as less typical: 80% of *heuglini* show fine dark peppering, creating the impression of brownish eyes; the iris spotting was strong enough (<10%) to give an impression of a darkish-looking eye from a distance (Malling Olsen & Larsson 2003). However, it is worth noting that 5% of *heuglini* have pale yellow eyes (Rauste 1999, Buzun 2002). Grey upperparts (Kodak Grey Scale 9–11, paler than *L. fuscus*) were visibly darker than *L. armenicus* and *L. cachinnans*, with a white mirror on P10 only (Fig. 1a). The inner primaries (P1–2) had recently moulted, while secondary tips appeared worn. This moult stage may indicate that the Al-Razaza Lake *heuglini* had arrived in central Iraq following a long flight from the Arctic.

The second observation was made on 11 November 2014. Two adults *heuglini* (Fig. 1d, e) were observed perching on the muddy shores about 5 km to the north of Um Qasir port (30°5'44.05"N, 47°56'53.45"E), to the east of Al-Faw Peninsula. When comparing these Um Qasir gulls with those wintering in Oman, the distinctive jizz and grey upperpart tone was apparent (Fig. 1f). They had small and rounded heads with fine streaks on the crown and hind neck, fleshy-tinged legs, a yellow bill with red gonys-spot restricted to the lower mandible, and relatively pale yellow eyes. They had dark grey upperparts (much darker than in *cachinnans* and *barabensis*) and white mirror only on P10; the primary moult reached P6.

The third observation of a sub-adult *heuglini* (Fig. 1b, c) in Rass Al-Besha (29°55'45.73"N, 48°36'55.40"E) in Al-Faw Peninsula on 5 January 2015. This gull had slim jizz with a fierce facial expression: its flat head had brown streaks that were restricted on the hind neck and reached breast sides, with finer streaks on the crown and around the eyes (Fig. 1b). It had fleshy-tinged legs, and the drooping bill was a dull straw-yellow color with a broad black band. The iris was pale yellow with no obvious speckling. The bird had rather dark grey-toned upperparts (paler than *L. fuscus*) and small white tips on the fresh moulted primaries (outer P9–10 were still growing; Fig. 1c). Heuglin's Gull has thus been observed at Al-Razaza Lake in central Iraq, Um Qasir port, and Rass Al-Besha in southern Iraq. We suggest that *L. heuglini* is probably a regular winter visitor and passage migrant in central and extreme southern Iraq.

Steppe Gull *Larus (cachinnans) barabensis* (Baraba Gull)

We observed two birds of the *barabensis* type. The first observation of adult Steppe Gull (Fig. 1g, h) was made on 11 November 2014, about 3 km south of Khur Al-Zubair port (30°9'49.30"N, 47°54'6.97"E), Al-Faw Peninsula. This gull had jizz similar to *cachinnans* but was generally more compact and smaller in size, approaching *armenicus* or *heuglini*. It had a white rounded head with a flat-crested appearance; the iris was yellow with a faint dark pigmentation creating darkish-looking eyes (compare with full dark eyes in *armenicus*). The bill was four-colored (slender and less blunt-tipped than in *armenicus*, thicker and shorter than in *cachinnans*) with slight dark subterminal markings, a red gonys-spot reaching the upper mandible, and a pale yellow tip. It had yellow with grey, fleshy-tinged legs (shorter than those of *cachinnans*). The observed gulls exhibited a rather dark grey upper wing that resembled *armenicus* (Kodak Grey Scale 7–8.5; darker than *cachinnans*). In flight, its primaries showed extensive solid black (P3–10), with white tongues on mid-primaries (compare with triangular black, lacking white tongues in *armenicus*, and less black with long white tongues in *cachinnans*;

Fig. 1h). Evident were a small white mirror on P9 and a large white mirror on P10 (compare with small white mirror usually on P10 in *armenicus*, large white mirror or white P10 tip in *cachinnans*). The fresh primary moult had reached P9–10. In Steppe Gull, the primary moult is usually suspended during migration and completed by mid-December to January (with 1%–2% as late as mid-February) (Garner & Quinn 1997).

The second observation of another adult Steppe Gull (Fig. 1i) was made on 3 February 2015, in Shatt Al-Arab (29°56'26.67"N, 48°35'23.75"E), Al-Faw Peninsula. It had a white, rounded head, with flat crest, and pale yellow eyes with a dark red orbital ring (compare with full dark eyes in *armenicus*). The bill was four-colored with faint dark subterminal markings restricted to the lower mandible (compare with broad subterminal markings in winter adult *armenicus*), a red gonys-spot reaching the upper mandible, and a pale yellow tip. It had deeper yellow legs than *cachinnans*. The observed gull showed darker grey upper wings than *cachinnans*. In flight, it showed extensive solid black, reaching P4 with white tongues on mid-primaries, fresh primary moult, and small white mirror on P10 only. Steppe Gull has been observed in Khur Al-Zubair port and Shatt Al-Arab in southern Iraq. We suggest that *L. barabensis* is probably a regular winter visitor and passage migrant in extreme southern Iraq.

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