

CASPIAN GULL

PHOTO GUIDE



1 Adult Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 8 January 2011). A clean-looking gull like this will stand out from typical mid-winter Herring Gulls because of its dark-looking eye, the smooth contours on the bill and its long-in-the-body and 'chesty' appearance. Focusing on the wing detail should help firm it up as a Caspian – even though the wing is folded, a lot of information is still visible. Working back from the longest primary (P10), which is just visible, six primary feathers can be counted; P5 looks black barred, and P4 has a black mark. The primary coverts are blackish with grey tips, probably indicating fourth winter. Thus the pattern of black seen here moves us away from most Herring Gulls, and a flick of the bird's wings should reveal the long white tongue on the inner web of the longest primary.



Martin Garner

Birdwatch

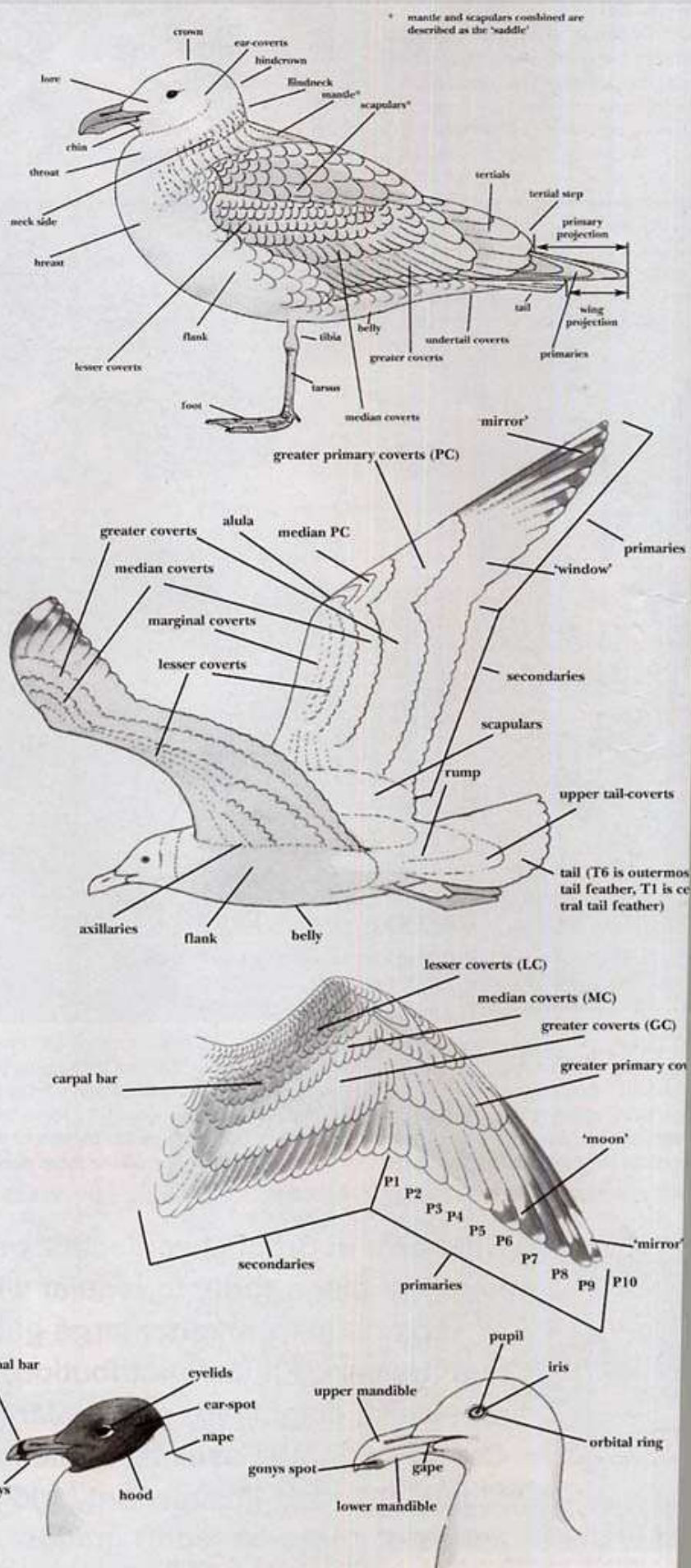
Unknown in Britain two decades ago, Caspian Gull has gone from mythical mega-rarity to regular winter visitor. Yet the difficulties of separation from other large gulls, compounded by its low numbers and limited distribution, mean that Caspian Gull remains an elusive enigma for many. *Martin Garner* found the first British Caspians on an Essex tip in the mid-Nineties; here he revisits the identification of this elegant larid in the first of an occasional new series of photo-based ID guides. Additional text: *Dominic Mitchell*.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Gull identification divides birders more than almost any other discipline – people either love it or hate it. But it needn't be so controversial, and those who are put off by myriad plumages and variability should take comfort from the fact that there are ways of simplifying the identification process. You don't need to be an instant expert: instead, you can build up your knowledge of the subject in layers. Understanding plumage terminology and the basics of moult will also make the task of identification more straightforward – this is especially so in a group as variable as gulls, which have multiple age classes (four in the case of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* and its close congeners) and exhibit significant seasonal and individual variation.

The aim of this photo guide is to profile Caspian Gull at all ages and help establish a 'search image' based around its key features and more subtle supporting characters. As is generally the case, there is no substitute for practice, and familiarity with the commoner confusion species will make all the difference in confirming the identification of something more difficult. In a British context, Herring Gull *L. argentatus* (including the Scandinavian subspecies *argentatus*) and especially Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* are most likely to be the problem when attempting to identify Caspian Gull.

All of these taxa were once lumped together under Herring Gull, with first Yellow-legged and then Caspian being split as separate species when more became known about their breeding ecology, distribution and separation. While their ranges overlap in places, these three species are reproductively isolated, to some extent even occupying different habitats in the breeding season. Hybrids are known, but are relatively rare, and originate mainly from areas where one species' expanding range brings it into contact with another for the first time (for example in southern Poland, where all three species can sometimes be found together in mixed colonies). So while invoking the hybrid option may be tempting to explain a 'difficult' bird, in reality it is often possible to arrive at a more convincing identification (though very occasionally some individuals may have to remain unidentified). ■



FIRST CYCLE

Juvenile first-winter first-summer

2 Juvenile Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 27 August 2011). This individual has already begun moulting into first-winter plumage, having replaced many scapulars and even a median covert; this will contrast with nearby young Herring Gulls, which should still be in full juvenile plumage in late August. On moult alone, it is almost certainly a Yellow-legged or Caspian Gull; however, the scapular pattern, skinny bill, small head and long neck point towards Caspian. To finish the identification off, a good view of a pale underwing and tail pattern would clinch it.



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3 First-winter Caspian Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 28 January 2011). This bird is streakier above than the individual in image 2 above (see also image 6 below right). It has a lot of pale at the bill base, making it more likely to be Caspian than *michahellis* in mid-winter. The contrasting Caspian colour scheme of white, grey, brown and black is visible here, and the pale underwing clinches it.



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5 First-winter Yellow-legged Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 29 January 2011). Not the normal way to see a gull! The rather uniformly dark brown upperwing, contrasting grey and black (and heavily patterned) mantle and vivid black-and-white tail pattern gives a typical look to first-winter Yellow-legged Gulls.

4 First-winter Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 7 November 2009). Caspian Gull can look distinctive in flight at this age, but experience is required, so it's advisable to work on familiarity with the commoner species first. This individual's big white head, very grey upperparts and bright white tail with a broad black band that 'bleeds' onto the paler feathers all contrast with the rather uniform wings, which show only a slight pale 'window'. Ideally, better views on the ground would confirm the bird for certain.



4

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6 First-winter Caspian Gull, front, with first-winter Herring Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 28 January 2011). Compared with the Herring Gull standing behind it, the Caspian's plainer white head with a vague 'shawl' effect produced by the flecks on the neck sides and underparts are a good clue, as are the much plainer wing coverts.

SECOND CYCLE ■ Second-winter ■ second-summer

7 Second-winter Caspian Gull (Klaipeda, Lithuania, 7 September 2010). This second-winter bird is yet to finish growing all its primaries, so it looks a little short winged; note that the new generation of feathers also appear more round tipped than first-winter primaries. This type of plumage is always a bit trickier to call, with the vague mix of grey and brown feathers above, but compared to Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls it will still stand out as having a very white head and body, black on the tail and wings and silvery-grey mixed through the upperparts. This last feature includes plain grey feathers along with those with distinct subterminal black marks of a pattern more commonly found among 'eastern' large gull taxa.



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8 Second-winter Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 27 January 2010). A tricky age at which to identify a Caspian, but the extensive area of plain blackish on the tertials, more uniform wing coverts and overall structure (head, bill, legs, and primary projection) are key. The white head with gentle nape streaking recall the distinctive character of the species in first-winter plumage.



MENNO VAN DUIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

9 Second-winter Caspian Gull (Oderdelta, Netherlands, 21 October 2007). Note the rather uniform pattern across the upperwings, which have smooth brown greater coverts merging with the secondaries and into the outer wing. The head is boldly white and heavy streaking is restricted to the nape; typically, the bare parts are duller than in Yellow-legged Gull. A small pale spot is just beginning to appear on P10.



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10 Second-winter Yellow-legged Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 14 March 2011). The immediate impression of this bird is *melanochloris*, with cold, medium to dark grey upperparts and very dark brown wing coverts. The tertials have some solid dark areas, confirming either Yellow-legged or Caspian Gull. Note also the long primary projection and blackish wing-tips.



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11 Second-winter Herring Gull (Dunbar, Lothian, 21 February 2008). Second-winter large gulls have intricate and complex patterning in their wing coverts and tertials. This is especially obvious on this Herring Gull, which has more pale areas than a Caspian would at this age. The structure, bill, legs, body and wing projection are all short and 'stocky'.



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12 Second-winter Yellow-legged Gull (Bucharest, Romania, 25 February 2011). At this age, Yellow-legged Gulls look bright and contrasty, with black in the primaries, secondaries and tail (darker than in Herring Gull at this age), deep grey upperparts and striking blackish-brown markings in the wing coverts, which also show more adult-type grey feathers than in Herring Gull.

THIRD CYCLE Third-winter third-summer

13 Third-winter Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 31 January 2009). Growing familiarity is important for the less common sub-adult plumages. There is a certain character to birds of this age which is difficult to convey in words. The dark iris, slightly thinner, contourless bill and nape spotting all add to it. This is a peculiar individual, as the outer primary and some upperpart feathers are strangely worn. Full views of the wing-tip and tail pattern might help, but much rests on aspects of the bird's overall jizz (head, bill, legs, primary projection and so on), importantly as compared with nearby congeners.



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14 Third-winter Caspian Gull (Riga, Latvia, 9 April 2009). Several points are immediately interesting on this bird. The wing coverts are very plain, while the tertials show some areas of solid dark (they are browner and more broken up in Herring). Some Caspians have this distinctive head-and-bill combination, with a dark eye set forward and a slender bill without obvious contours, as well as a long-looking gape line.



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15 Third-winter Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 13 February 2010). Sometimes the wing-tip pattern can be crucial. With the amount of dark in the primary coverts this is obviously still an immature bird, but it does have a pale tongue on P10 which extends for at least 50 per cent of the length of the feather – more than in most *melanotos* – and this feature would be expected on a Caspian of this age.



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16 Third-winter Yellow-legged Gull (Bucharest, Romania, 27 February 2011). By this age, Yellow-legged Gull is quite adult-like in appearance and poses fewer problems. The bare-part colours are often definitive, with a bright bill and legs and a pale iris, and apart from dark markings in the primary coverts, the overall wing pattern is similar to adult plumage. It's even possible to see the pattern of black on the longest primary, which has only a short grey tongue.



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17 Third-winter Herring Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 14 March 2011). Herring Gulls can occasionally show dark eyes in adult and sub-adult plumages, and the different facial expression this produces attracts attention. By checking other key features, we can see that the extremities (the bill, legs and primary tips) are all relatively short compared with Caspian. Checking P5 and P4 when the bird is preening or in flight would indicate how the overall pattern was developing.

FOURTH CYCLE

Fourth-winter/adult winter ■ adult summer

18 Fourth-winter Caspian Gull (Stubbers Green, West Midlands, 29 November 2009). Look at the long extremities on this bird – the long bill which slopes downwards slightly, the long fleshy legs and the long primary projection beyond the tail. The dark iris adds to the whole picture, while the narrow dark line across the bill tip, coupled with a slight lime tinge to the bill, is remarkably distinctive with practice, making the bird stand out among Herring Gulls.



JIM ALMOND



STEVE ARLOW



DOMINIC MITCHELL

19 Adult winter Caspian Gull (private site, Essex, 16 January 2010). The forward-set dark eye with a clean white head and body and an almost cartoonish bill all attract attention. The body and wings are long, but the chest is very full, while a quick glance at the outermost primary on the far wing seems to show an obvious white tongue (though it is best to see the full pattern). With practice, a bird like this should be identifiable.

20 Adult winter Caspian Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 28 January 2011). Some male Caspians can have big bills, like this bird. This image wonderfully illustrates how the primary pattern differs from most other large gulls, combining black marks crossing six of the outermost feathers and long black outer webs, but also extensive pale inner webs, creating a striking alternating black-and-white pattern.



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21 Fourth-winter Yellow-legged Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 28 January 2011). This is probably a more weakly built female Yellow-legged Gull. The extra dark marks on the bill indicate that it is not yet fully adult. There's not a mass of information on a standing profile, but comparative upperpart tone and orbital ring colour might be helpful. Careful study of the wing-tip pattern is essential.

22 Fourth-winter Herring Gull (Rainham landfill, Greater London, 11 March 2011). Only five of the outer primaries *argenteus*-type Herring Gull have a black section going right across the feather, with a small black mark on the sixth. The black is neither the extensive area cutting off the wing-tip seen in Yellow-legged Gull, nor the normally six black-banded primaries found on adult Caspian.

23 Adult Yellow-legged Gull (Mamaia, Romania, 2 January 2011). The wing-tip pattern of Yellow-legged Gull, together with its structure, can be picked out from Herring Gull, with the black almost 'cutting off' the outer section of the wing-tip. There is no indication of the classic Caspian wing-tip pattern (see image 20 above), while the bill and eye are very obviously Yellow-legged rather than Caspian.

NOW GO AND FIND ONE!

Caspian Gulls start to return to Britain in earnest in November. Numbers are likely to be highest in mid-winter, when the British population has been estimated at about 90 individuals (Musgrove 2011), or in late winter; however, this total may be an underestimate, as at favoured sites up to 10 individuals have been counted in a day (in the Rainham Marshes area, Greater London, for example) and at least 26 different individuals are believed to have been identified at a single Oxfordshire site.

Tips

Literally – tips! Landfill sites offer great opportunities for studying gulls, as do adjacent gravel pits, marshes and rivers. Public access is not available for working industrial sites, but there is overspill benefit from those not overlooked by public footpaths in suitable adjacent habitat. Even playing fields in out-of-the-way locations may see concentrations of gulls that are worth checking for Caspian.

Sites

The following sites are among those that regularly attract Caspian Gulls between autumn and spring, and all have public access or are overlooked by public footpaths:

- **Kent:** Dungeness RSPB (TR 062197)
- **Greater London:** Rainham Marshes RSPB and adjacent landfill (TQ 552792)
- **Greater London:** Beddington SF (TQ 295665)
- **Essex:** Vange Marshes (TQ 731871)
- **Oxfordshire:** Didcot (SU 525895)
- **Oxfordshire:** Dix Pit (SP 405055)
- **Suffolk:** Minsmere RSPB (TM 473672)
- **Suffolk:** Blythburgh pig fields (TM 455755)
- **Norfolk:** Blackborough End landfill (TF 675145)
- **Leicestershire:** Albert Village Lake (SK 303174)



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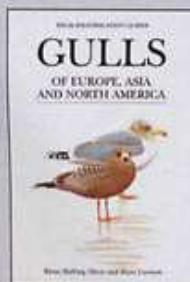
24 Adult Caspian Gull (Riga, Latvia, 11 April 2009). Look at that! The long-calling Caspian Gull, with wings open and voice bellowing, is a posture not normally adopted by other gulls in Britain. It also lets you see that striking black-and-white wing-tip pattern. Compare it with open-wing images of Yellow-legged and Herring Gulls in the preceding pages.



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25 Adult winter Herring Gull (private site, Essex, 31 January 2009). On this yellow-legged individual, note the 'ugly' look, hooky bill, pale iris and relatively short legs, while P10 on the far wing hints at an *argentatus*-type pattern. The latter are scarce birds and well worth detecting and studying as well.

Further reading



Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America
This Helm handbook remains the definitive guide to Northern Hemisphere gulls, including Caspian and its confusion species. Available now for just £43.99 (inc UK p&p).

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Online references:

- chrisgibbins-gullsbirds.blogspot.com – Chris Gibbins's blog.
- <http://tinyurl.com/gro-caspiangull> – the Gull Research Organisation's forum discussions on Caspian Gull.
- www.birdersplayground.co.uk – Steve Arlow's website.
- www.birdingetc.com – Dominic Mitchell's blog.
- www.birdingfrontiers.com – Martin Garner's blog.
- <http://tinyurl.com/BirdwatchGulls> – List of Gulls with References v2.3, compiled by Joe Hobbs.

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