

From the Rarities Committee's files:

Presumed hybrid gull resembling adult Franklin's Gull

Gary Pullan and John Martin

ABSTRACT A small gull in the evening roost at Boddington Reservoir, Northamptonshire, on 17th March 2001, was initially identified as a Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*. Further observations on subsequent evenings revealed a number of anomalies that suggested it was of hybrid origin. Assisted by the cautious comments of the finders, BBRC concluded that it was indeed a hybrid, most probably between Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus* and Common Gull *L. canus*. The fact that such a hybrid can closely resemble Franklin's Gull emphasises the requirement for careful and detailed notes when a suspected Franklin's Gull is found in Europe.

At 17.30 hrs on 17th March 2001, Gary Pullan (GP) found a small, dark-mantled gull with a partial 'hood' at Boddington Reservoir, Northamptonshire. It seemed to be about the size of a Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* and showed obvious white spots on the black primaries, a white eye-ring and a rather short, dark bill. GP was sure that the bird was an adult Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan*, a species he had seen previously in North Yorkshire in 1991 (*Brit. Birds* 86: 485). A few local birders managed to see the bird that evening, and it was subsequently seen by many observers each evening until 20th March, and again on 26th March. The following description, submitted to BBRC, is compiled mainly from GP's notes, with additional comments from M. R. Alibone (MRA) and Mick Ketley (MK).

Description

Size and structure

Quite dumpy and plump, especially around the breast, while the head consistently appeared rather small and rounded. The wings looked rounded when seen in flight briefly (it was never watched in the air for a prolonged period). At rest, on the water, the visible

primary tips created a blunt, rounded impression to the rear of the bird. The total length, from bill-tip to wing-tip, seemed comparable with Black-headed Gull, or slightly shorter. It therefore looked less attenuated and 'broader in the beam' than Black-headed Gull, and its posture on the water always appeared hunched, horizontal and rather flat. When watched preening vigorously on 26th March, its head appeared small and even more rounded, while the neck seemed thin and scrawny. It was rather inactive throughout its stay, rarely interacting with other gulls and, when the roost was disturbed, it was one of the last birds to take flight. [Structure close to that of Black-headed Gull, perhaps with a thicker neck, while the head appeared more rounded (MRA). Size as Black-headed Gull, or fractionally smaller (MRA); larger and bulkier than Black-headed Gull, it matched Common Gull *L. canus* in size (MK).]

Mantle colour

On 17th March, the mantle colour was noted as dark grey, much darker than on Common Gull, with obvious white scapular and tertial crescents, broader and more striking than Common, owing to the greater contrast with the mantle.

On subsequent evenings, the mantle tone looked closer to that of adult Common Gull, occasionally seeming slightly darker at some angles, but never paler than the Common Gulls present. Only one exceptionally dark Common Gull, present on 20th March, was conspicuously darker. [Mantle grey, like that of Common Gull, not darker (MRA). Exactly the same tone as Common Gulls on either side of it (MK).]

Wing pattern

The wings were strikingly patterned, both at rest and in flight. At rest, four large white spots on the tips of the folded primaries contrasted strongly with the black of the outer primaries. The spots on the two longest primaries appeared to merge into one larger spot on the folded wing. The tips to the inner primaries looked whitish enclosing a dark mark. On the open wing, the resulting impression was of a black area near the wing-tip surrounded by a white border (fig. 1). There was a striking white trailing edge along the whole of the upperwing. The underwing appeared whitish with an obvious white trailing edge and a pale dusky subterminal area, which merged with the off-white of the rest of the underwing. The black of the wing-tips was also visible below. [The exposed parts of visible primaries were black, each with a neat white tip. A white band separated the black of the primaries from the grey of the rest of the wing, this band appearing prominent and contrasting with the grey (MRA).]

Tail

The tail appeared white but was not seen well in flight.

Head pattern

A conspicuous black (not brown) partial hood extended from the crown to the level of the eye. This hood was incomplete and marked by two conspicuous areas of white feathering. The first of these crossed the loreal region and extended onto the fore-crown, although there was some black streaking on the forehead. The second was a narrow band of white feathering that extended from the eye up onto the crown. By 26th March, the hood had developed further, with dark feathering appearing on the loreal area and above the eye. An obvious white eye-ring was present, although this was broken in front and behind the eye. [Sides of head and crown black, but forehead was white (giving the impression of a 'black cap and earphones'); rear crown and upper nape also black. A few pencil flecks on the forehead, particularly around the 'join' between the top of the white forehead and start of black crown. White eye-lids were striking and obvious at long range, when those of Black-headed Gull were invisible (MRA). Head pattern superficially like that of a Franklin's Gull (MK).]

Bare parts

Bill short and straight, appearing quite thickset and blunt-tipped, marginally shorter than that

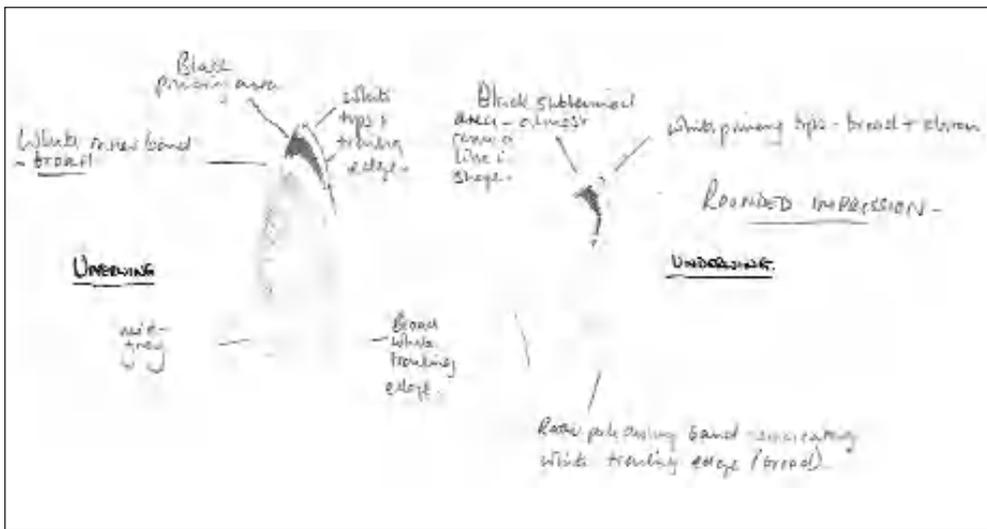


Fig. 1. The extent and distribution of black and white on the outer primaries of the Boddington gull created a pattern apparently identical to that of adult Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*.

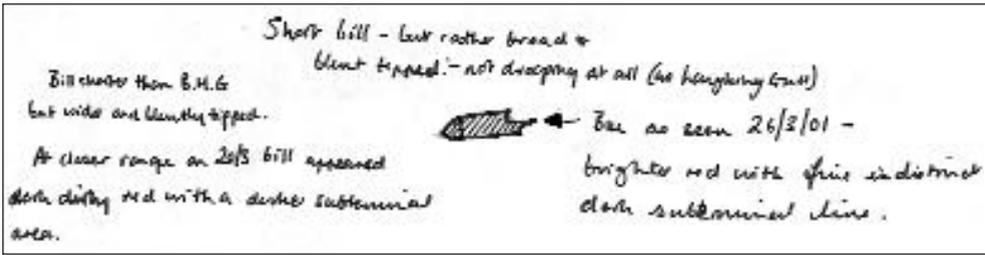


Fig. 2. Steve Howell (pers. comm.) commented that, in winter, Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan* shows a distinct orange tip to the bill, which appears almost like a pale nail to the dark bill. This feature was not apparent on the Boddington gull, further evidence that it was not Franklin's Gull.

of Black-headed Gull, and not as broad as on Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus*. Rather dark in colour, almost blackish at a distance but actually dirty, dark red with perhaps a lighter base (fig. 2). At the end of its short stay, the bill appeared redder and brighter, with a faint darker line about a quarter of the way from the tip. This brighter colour was quite obvious even at a distance. Leg colour and structure not seen. Eye dark, but highlighted by the obvious white eye-crescents. Eyes often looked half closed. [Bill structure slightly shorter and deeper than that of Black-headed Gull, with a blunter tip. Bill colour dark brown, with only basal quarter appearing deep red (MRA). Bill pale red with a thin subterminal band (MK).]

Identification doubts

On 18th March, a handful of observers, including MK, voiced their concerns about the identification, basing their doubts primarily on the size of the bird and the mantle colour. They considered it to be too large for Franklin's Gull (slightly larger than Black-headed Gull), while the mantle tone seemed too pale, and closer to that of Common Gull. In his submission to BBRC, MK provided a detailed analysis of the bird, and concluded that it could not be a Franklin's Gull, but was, perhaps, a hybrid Mediterranean × Common Gull. On circulation of the record there was general agreement within BBRC that, although the bird closely

resembled a Franklin's Gull, it exhibited a number of features that were inconsistent with this identification. The principal concerns included the following.

Size

Observers' perception of the size of the gull varied considerably. GP considered it to be marginally shorter in length than Black-headed Gull but somewhat bulkier. This estimate was rechecked after others had expressed concerns that it was too large for Franklin's Gull. MRA also considered the bird to be slightly smaller than Black-headed Gull, but MK considered it equal to Common Gull in size. Franklin's Gull should not approach Common Gull in size; there is little or no overlap in size between these two species (table 1). Even if it was closer to the size of a Black-headed Gull, there would still be cause for concern, since Franklin's Gull is usually obviously shorter-winged than Black-headed.

As some similarly sized gull species are relatively longer-winged than others, measurement of wing length may give a slightly misleading impression of relative size. It is clear from table 1, however, that there is a considerable gap between the longest wing measurement for Franklin's Gull (286 mm) and the shortest wing measurement for Common Gull (320 mm); in addition, there is also little overlap in weight between the smallest Common Gull and largest

Table 1. Measurements of Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*, Black-headed Gull *L. ridibundus*, Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus* and Common Gull *L. canus* (wing length and bill length from Grant 1986; (summer) weights from Cramp & Simmons 1983).

	Wing length (mm)	Bill length (mm)	n	Weight (g)	n
Franklin's Gull	262-286	27-34	26	220-335	40
Black-headed Gull	280-315	30-37	12	190-340	16
Mediterranean Gull	282-311	31-38	21	no data	—
Common Gull	320-385	30-38	16	300-480	148

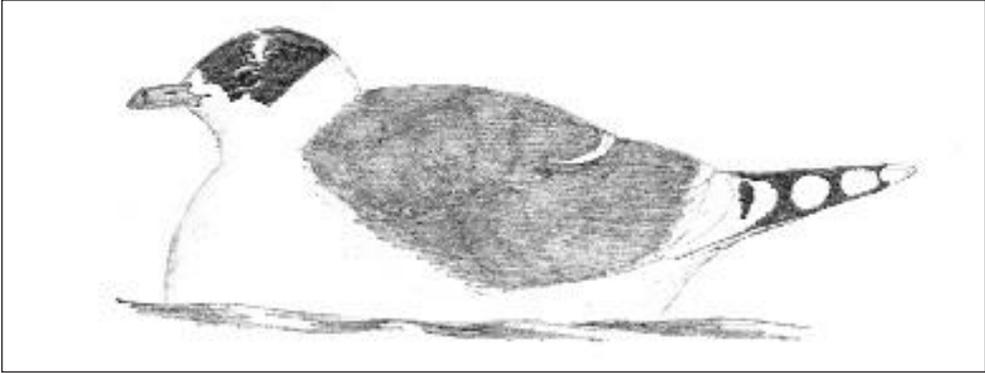


Fig. 3. When compared directly with Common Gull *Larus canus*, the mantle tone of the Boddington gull was similar. Adult Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan* should appear distinctly darker on the mantle than an 'average' winter Common Gull, being somewhere between this and Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* of the form *graellsii* in tone and, perhaps, closer to the latter. Common Gull does, however, exhibit limited variation in the grey of the mantle, with the tone of some exceptionally dark individuals seeming to approach that of Franklin's Gull, especially when viewed in dull, overcast, light conditions.

Franklin's Gull. Although there is slight overlap in wing length between the smallest Black-headed and largest Franklin's Gull, any gull that is similar in size to an average Black-headed Gull, and perhaps closer to Common Gull, is clearly too large to be a Franklin's Gull.

Mantle colour

The various accounts consistently established that the tone of the mantle was close to that of Common Gull. The views on the first evening were rather distant and made in dull, heavily overcast conditions, making accurate assessment of the mantle colour difficult. On subsequent evenings, the bird was closer and seen in better light (fig. 3).

Howell (2003) devised a reliable and repeatable means of establishing the upperpart colour of adult gulls in North America using a scale of

Table 2. Comparative Grey Scale values of the mantle colour of Common Gull *Larus canus*, Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan* and Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*, taken from Howell (2003).

Taxon	Grey Scale value
Common Gull <i>L. c. canus</i>	5-6.5
Common Gull <i>L. c. heinei</i>	5.5-7
Franklin's Gull	8-9
Lesser Black-backed Gull <i>L. f. graellsii</i>	9-11

varying intensity of greys. This was based upon a Grey Scale colour chart developed by Kodak, which used 19 evenly spaced tones of grey, ranging from very pale grey (colour 1) to black (colour 19). By comparing the mantle colour of multiple series of museum specimens, Howell found that most individuals of each taxon display a consistent grey tone to the upperparts,

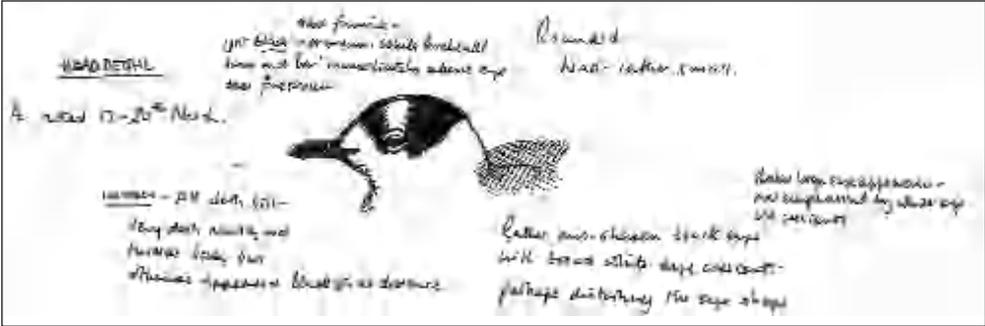


Fig. 4. Although the head pattern was superficially similar to that of adult Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan* in non-breeding plumage, there were a number of subtle differences. The most significant of these was that the hood extended only down to the lower edge of the eye. Outside the breeding season, the dark head-markings on Franklin's Gull should extend well below the level of the eye, particularly onto the ear-coverts, but also below the eye itself.

varying by only 1-1.5 Grey Scale values; and that the majority of individuals of most taxa varied by no more than half a Grey Scale value from the mean value for that taxon. Table 2 shows the Grey Scale values of species relevant to this discussion, and suggests that even an exceptionally dark Common Gull of the form *heinei* should always be noticeably paler than the palest Franklin's Gull.

Head pattern

Detailed sketches made during the first few days of its stay established that the head pattern (fig. 4) was incorrect for adult winter Franklin's Gull. By the last day of its stay, however, it had developed a more extensive hood, which closely resembled the pattern shown by a Franklin's Gull.

The Draycote gull

One year later, in March 2002, a similar small gull was found by John Judge in the gull roost at nearby Draycote Water, Warwickshire. Like the Boddington gull, it too showed a partial black hood, a mantle tone similar to that of Common Gull, and black primaries with large white tips. Initially, it was assumed that this was the same individual that had been seen at Boddington the previous spring. Photographs were posted on the Surfbirds website (www.surfbirds.com/Rarities/draycote-gull-0302.html; see plates 154 & 155), however and it became obvious that there were a number of differences between this individual and the Boddington gull. In particular, the primary pattern appears to be different from that of the Boddington gull, with extensive black in the outermost primaries (P10-P8) and extensive white tips to P9 and P10, while the extent of black on the next two or three primaries (P7-P6/5) is greatly reduced. The extent of black on the primaries of a gull might vary from one year to the next, especially if not fully mature, but we would expect the amount of black to diminish rather than increase, and certainly not to increase to the degree apparent in the Draycote gull. Furthermore, the primary pattern of the Draycote gull more closely resembled that of a Common Gull, and discussion at the time concluded that this bird was likely to have been a Mediterranean × Common Gull hybrid. The mixture of features shown in the photographs certainly does seem to fit this combination.

Withdrawal of the Boddington claim

The Draycote gull revived interest in the identity of the Boddington gull. After seeing the Draycote gull, GP contacted BBRC and requested that the Boddington claim be withdrawn from circulation. He stated his belief that, if not the same individual, it was most likely that the Boddington gull was a hybrid and of the same parentage (presumably Mediterranean × Common Gull) as the Draycote gull.

Other records of presumed Mediterranean × Common Gulls

A potential first-winter hybrid Mediterranean × Common Gull was photographed at Groningen, Netherlands, in January 1991 and its identification discussed by Balten *et al.* (1993). Another probable hybrid, described by Oddie (1994), occurred on Hampstead Heath in December 1993 and resembled a second-winter Common Gull. It differed in being smaller than an average Common Gull, with a dark primary wedge, restricted white mirrors (so presumably a second-winter bird), showed finer head speckling than other Common Gulls, and possessed a head shape resembling that of Mediterranean Gull along with a dark red bill. Images of a similar bird, photographed by Mike Tarrant at Rimac, Lincolnshire, on 21st June 2002 (http://www.lincsbirdclub.co.uk/rare_birds/hooded_gull.htm; see plates 156 & 157) may also have been of the same parentage. This bird resembled the Draycote gull but differed in a number of subtle aspects. The head showed a restricted hood and much less conspicuous eye-crescents, while the primary pattern and bare-part coloration were also different. Brian Small (pers. comm.) has also observed at least two different Mediterranean × Common Gull hybrids in Suffolk in recent years, although neither resembled the Boddington gull.

Implications for observers in Europe

There is little information available, in even the most modern field guides, about hybrid small gulls. The fact that some hybrids can closely resemble individuals of other species raises obvious concerns when poorly or briefly seen individuals are involved. In this case, a previously unrecognised but obvious identification pitfall has been highlighted. Although the identification of the Boddington gull was particularly challenging, as all observers agreed that the wing pattern was spot-on for Franklin's Gull, a

Steve Valentine



'Draycote' Gull (top left), 27th March '02, copyright Steve Valentine



'Draycote' Gull (top middle), 27th March '02, copyright Steve Valentine

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154 & 155. Hybrid gull *Larus*, presumed to be a Mediterranean *L. melanocephalus* x Common Gull *L. canus*, Draycote Water, Warwickshire, March 2002.

Mike Tarrant



Mike Tarrant

156 & 157. Hybrid gull *Larus*, presumed to be a Mediterranean *L. melanocephalus* x Common Gull *L. canus*, Rimac, Lincolnshire, June 2002; plate 156 shows a Common Gull *L. canus* on the left.

similar individual seen briefly or on just a single occasion, and for which there were less detailed notes, could easily have been accepted as Franklin's Gull. This also raises the remote possibility that Franklin's Gull was actually one of the parents.

The breeding ranges of both Common Gull and Mediterranean Gull have expanded considerably in western Europe during recent decades. For example, both species now breed regularly in France, Belgium and The Netherlands (Snow & Perrins 1998) and the frequency of hybrids from such areas may be greater than in their core ranges until substantial breeding populations are established.

Post Script

Remarkably, in early November 2002, Gary Pullan found an adult Franklin's Gull at Stanford Reservoir on the Leicestershire/Northamptonshire border, where it returned to roost for

three consecutive nights. Even more remarkable was that this same individual was then relocated at Draycote Water, by John Judge, the following day...

Acknowledgments

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