



SHORT NOTE

Ageing Black-headed Gulls on leg and bill colour – a cautionary note

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Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* in juvenile plumage are readily distinguished from older birds by the presence of feathers tipped gingery-brown and by the dull, buffish colour of the legs and the inner part of the bill (Baker 1993). Two criteria are usually advanced for separating second-year birds (EURING code 5 [Speek *et al* 2001] to the end of December and 7 from January onwards) from third-year or older ones (EURING 6/8): these are the presence of black marks on the shafts of the outer primary coverts, and the colour of the legs and the inner part of the bill. The former appears to be applicable to only a limited number of second-year birds (EURING 5/7) whereas leg and bill colour (orange in second-year birds, vermilion in third-year and older birds) are generally regarded as a more useful indicator of age. As part of a study of Black-headed Gulls wintering in Cumbria, based on reading the inscription on the rings of marked birds through a telescope, a detailed record has been kept of the birds' leg and bill colours. These data suggest that such features are not as reliable as indicators of age as previously thought.

To the end of February 2009 a total of 163 individually ringed birds had been identified and of these 64 were at least three years old when seen (EURING 6/8). They had been marked in both Britain and other countries of northwest Europe from Belgium to Finland and included some birds ringed as nestlings and others as fully grown birds. Leg colour was scored as one of six categories: buff, buff-orange, orange, orange-red, mid-red (coral red to vermilion) and dark red. Buff and buff-orange are typical of birds in their first year of life, mid-red of adults in winter and dark red of adults in the breeding season (the legs and bills of Black-headed Gulls darken slightly from February onwards at the approach of the breeding season). As leg and bill colour are virtually always the same, the following discussion centres on leg colour, but all comments are equally applicable to bill colour.

As expected birds in their second calendar year had orange legs or occasionally orange-red ones (the latter being birds seen from mid-February coming into breeding condition). Of the 64 birds that were at least three years old when seen, 30 had been ringed as nestlings and amongst

these were three with orange legs and another two with orange-red legs. These birds had been marked in Britain, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Belgian bird was seen in four consecutive winters. In 2004/05 when it was in its sixth year it had orange-red legs, but in each of the following three winters they were classified as mid-red.

A second subset of the 64 birds three years old or older included six ringed in their first year of life. Amongst these were a bird ringed in Cumbria with orange legs, and another ringed in Sweden with orange-red legs. The remaining 28 birds of at least three years of age had been marked as adults and included a Norwegian-ringed bird with orange legs, and two marked in Britain, one in Sweden and one in Finland with orange-red legs. Also worth mentioning are three birds ringed as adults in Cumbria in the winter of 2007/08 and which were classified as having orange legs. When seen in the autumn of 2008 all three still had orange legs. Two others with orange-red legs when ringed as adults in the winter of 2007/08 also still had orange-red legs in autumn 2008.

These observations demonstrate that some Black-headed Gulls retain orange or orange-red legs (and bills) into adulthood. In consequence, the colour of neither is reliable as an indicator of age in this species. Birds with adult plumage and orange legs are *mostly* second-years, but some may be in their third or subsequent years (EURING 4/6). First-year birds (EURING 3/5) can be reliably separated based on the presence of retained juvenile feathers. All others should simply be treated as adults (EURING 4/6), except those few showing black marks on the outer primary coverts, which are second-year birds (EURING 5/7).

REFERENCES

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