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A SIGHTING OF GLAUCOUS GULL (*LARUS HYPERBOREUS*) IN AZERBAIJAN

Michael Heiss

Vogelwarte Hiddensee, Zoological Institute and Museum, Ernst Moritz Arndt University of Greifswald; Hornschuchstraße 7, 17489 Greifswald, Germany
✉ michaheiss@aol.com

Abstract. On 25 April 2012 I observed a Glaucous Gull at the Caspian Sea coast in Azerbaijan. Despite the large observation distance of about 2–3 km the bird was well identifiable with a spotting scope. It showed the typical whitish overall appearance including whitish wings without any dark feathers. The bird was larger than the surrounding Caspian Gulls, which ruled out a leucistic Caspian Gull. This observation could not be documented by photographs due to the large observation distance, which may limit the acceptance as Azerbaijan's first record.
Key words: fauna, Caspian Sea, vagrant, first record.

Наблюдение бургомистра (*Larus hyperboreus*) в Азербайджане. - М. Хайсс. - Беркут. 23 (1). 2014. - Птица наблюдалась 25.04.2012 г. на каспийском побережье Азербайджана (40° 59′ N, 49° 13′ E) примерно за 80 км от Баку. Несмотря на большое расстояние (2–3 км), птицу можно было хорошо рассмотреть в телескоп. Видна была типичная светлая верхняя сторона тела с беловатыми крыльями без единого темного пера. Чайка заметно крупнее находившихся поблизости хохотуний, поэтому это не может быть лейцист этого вида. Раньше бургомистр в Азербайджане не отмечался. Наблюдение нельзя было документировать фотографиями из-за большого расстояния, возможно поэтому оно не будет принято как первая находка в Азербайджане.
Ключевые слова: фауна, Каспийское море, залет, первая находка.

Introduction

On 25 April 2012 at about 4 p.m., while seawatching in the company of I. Finkelman (non-ornithologist), I discovered a Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) with a spotting scope (25–55^{x}). The observation point is located at the coast of Azerbaijan near the mountain Besh Barmag (40° 59′ N, 49° 13′ E), approximately 80 km NW of Baku. The Glaucous Gull was never before recorded in Azerbaijan.

Description

I discovered an unusually bright coloured gull swimming at a distance of about 2–3 km from the shoreline. It attracted my attention as it was holding out its wings like a Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) does to dry them. The wings were white and showed no dark markings. The bird was accompanied by about ten immature Caspian Gulls (*Larus cachinnans*). Two of them were also holding up their wings in the same way, which clearly revealed the typical dark markings, mainly visible on the outer primaries. The wing-size of the 'white-winged' gull appeared larger compared to that of the nearby Caspian Gulls. Even when the wing was folded and the bird was swimming in a normal position close to the other gulls, it appeared noticeably larger, the folded white wings were visible and contrasted noticeably with the pale buff coloured body and head. Despite the large distance, excellent air conditions with sunlight from behind and no air turbulence or haze allowed a clear view of the bill which showed a dark tip contrasting with the pale base. The surrounding Caspian Gulls showed almost black bills.

Occasionally, the 'white-winged' gull flew off with some Caspian Gulls, chasing and fooling each other, and the bright overall appearance and the larger size was clearly observable from different angles. The observation lasted about 15 minutes and allowed us to study field guides (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003; Svensson et al., 2009) concurrently with the observation. Most of the time, we watched the gull swimming among the Caspian Gulls. For about two minutes in total the gull held its wings outstretched before flying out to the sea and landing on small rocky islands (41°1.4′ N, 49°17.4′ E) about six kilometres away.

The flight took about another five minutes and the gull was seen mainly at an angle from behind. In the short moment before it landed, when the bird spread its wings and tail, I saw once again the whitish wing and tail feathers contrasting with the pale buff coloured back at a distance of six kilometres in excellent visibility. The dark wingtips and tail-band of the immature Caspian Gulls flying around the island were also well visible despite the huge distance. However, shortly after landing, the gull disappeared in a flock of about 50 Caspian Gulls that were standing on the island. Rediscovery proved impossible owing perhaps to the huge distance, although we seawatched until 8 p.m. In the field we identified the gull clearly as a Glaucous Gull, but we could not manage to take photographs due to the large observation distance to document our sighting.

The following day we searched the adjacent beaches and a waste dump attached to a nearby chicken farm, where several foraging Caspian Gulls had been observed, but without relocating the bird.

Discussion

In the field it quickly became clear that the observed features fit only two gull species regularly occurring in the Western Palaearctic: Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*). First-winter birds of both species show whitish/brownish wing and tail feathers and a pale brownish/buff body. The observed gull showed these features. The lack of a grey mantle and scapulars ruled out an adult of either species. These grey feathers appear in the second summer plumage and consequently I aged the gull as a first-summer (second calendar year) bird.

The two species can be safely separated on body size and wing span, the Glaucous Gull being the larger. The size overlap between the species is marginal (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003; Svensson et al., 2009). The difficulty of evaluating

size over a large distance was reduced by the presence of the Caspian Gulls in all situations, flying or swimming, appearing clearly smaller. Thus, an Iceland Gull, that would normally appear smaller than the Caspian Gulls, can be ruled out.

Furthermore, the observed two-coloured bill, which develops generally in the second winter but rarely occurs on first-winter Iceland Gulls (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003), also speaks rather against an Iceland Gull. Immature Caspian Gulls also showed a similar two-coloured bill, but always had dark in their wings and tails. Even the palest Caspian Gulls around, mainly second calendar year birds with worn and sometimes starkly sun-bleached feathers, showed dark in the wings, especially in the primaries, which were visible over long distances.

Probably the greatest danger of misidentification might come from an aberrant coloured gull. Leucistic Caspian Gulls are known from Poland (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003), but this can be excluded, as the observed gull was larger. The only gull species of that region with the size of a Glaucous Gull is the Pallas's Gull (*Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus*). An aberrant individual might possibly fit the bill but none such has ever been described (cf. Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003) and although Pallas's Gulls are common spring migrants in March in that region, they completely disappear with the onset of their breeding season. For these reasons, this solution was neglected, especially as the observed gull perfectly fit the coloration of a first-summer Glaucous Gull.

This species has not been previously recorded in Azerbaijan (cf. Patrikeev, 2004), but have been observed along the northern Caspian Sea coast. For Kazakhstan there exist few records (e.g. Wassink, Oreel, 2007; Wassink, 2009). Within the Middle East further records exist from the Turkish Black sea coast (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003; Kirwan et al., 2008) and Israel (Malling Olsen, Larsson, 2003; Perlman, Meyrav, 2009; Porter, Aspinall, 2010).

Two events probably account for the occurrence in Azerbaijan. In January 2012 an exceptional influx of Iceland Gulls in north-western Europe was accompanied by a smaller influx of Glaucous Gulls. Food shortage in their wintering areas in conjunction with severe weather conditions might be responsible for these influxes (Fray et al., 2012). To what extent the observed Glaucous Gull was part of the influx must remain uncertain owing to the great distance to the Atlantic coast, but equally, a roaming bird cannot be entirely ruled out.

The appearance of the gull is more likely to be in connection with the severe winter in Azerbaijan, which local people described as the worst they had ever experienced. Pack ice reached the observation point in mid March 2012 (own obs.), a sure sign that huge areas of the northern Caspian Sea were frozen. This probably forced the Glaucous Gull to move further south. Additionally, the nearby chicken farm waste tip was highly attractive for gulls, mainly Caspian Gulls, with up to five thousand individuals until the beginning of April. Despite the fact that most of these gulls had already left the area by the end of April, when the Glaucous Gull was observed, several hundred Caspian Gulls remained around the waste dump and the beach, and probably drew in the Glaucous Gull.

However, this observation would constitute the first record of Glaucous Gull for Azerbaijan, but it unfortunately lacks an adequate documentation by photographs. Without this basic necessity for a country's first record it would be difficult to accept e.g. by a rarity committee. This record however would appear into another light when future ornithological research in Azerbaijan produces a hopefully better documented Glaucous Gull.

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