

## NOTES

### An Unidentified Large Gull in the Gulf of Thailand

Between 1100-1200 hours on 17 December 1977, the authors found a large gull (*Larus* sp.) perched on the end of the pier at Bang Pu, Samut Prakan Province (13°29'N, 100°46'E). Observations were made at ranges down to 10 m using 8×30 binoculars. Photographs were also taken and notes on the bird's appearance were tape-recorded at the time.

The bird was significantly larger than the Brown-headed Gull *L. brunnicephalus* and Black-headed Gull *L. ridibundus*, which were available for direct comparison. J.B., who is very familiar with both the Herring Gull *L. argentatus* and the Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* in Europe, noted that the bird was at least the same size as these two (similarly-sized) species and was possibly slightly larger. The general colouration was brown and white and the detailed plumage description indicates a bird in first winter plumage. The entire bill was dark brown and the legs were flesh-coloured. The bill was, if anything, less heavy than that of *L. a. argentatus* known to J.B. The forehead was white; the crown and nape were whitish, flecked with brown as was the breast. White edgings to the brown feathers gave a scalloped effect to the mantle and to all wing feathers except the primaries, which were uniformly very dark brown. The rump was white, graduating with brown spots to a broad, dark brown subterminal tail band. The very tips of the retrices were narrowly edged with white (Figures 1-3).

The Brown-headed Gull and the Black-headed Gull are the only species listed for Thailand in LEKAGUL & CRONIN (1974). Of the larger gulls that have so far been observed in Southeast Asia (KING *et al.*, 1975), the Great Black-headed Gull *L. ichthyaetus* can certainly be ruled out as it is usually obviously larger than a Herring Gull and the immature has a prominent scaly pattern on the mantle and scapulars, a prominent brownish lower hind neck and brownish breast patches (GRANT, 1982). The Bang Pu bird was therefore on the sides to the breast most likely to have been either a Herring Gull or a Slaty-backed Gull *L. schistisagus*, immatures of which may not be separable with certainty in the field (SONOBE & ROBINSON, 1982). Although both species breed in north-east Asia, there are only a few records of the Slaty-backed Gull from the East



China Sea (SHUNTOV, 1974) and five records from Hong Kong (WEBSTER, 1975). The Herring Gull winters commonly along the coast of China as well as along the Chang Jiang and Xi Jiang rivers (CHENG, 1976) and is the second-most numerous gull in Hong Kong, after the Black-headed (D.S. MELVILLE, *in litt.*). There are also a few records from Vietnam (DELACOUR & JABOUILLE, 1931; VO QUY, 1975). On the basis of their known distributions, therefore, the Bang Pu bird is most likely to have been a Herring Gull. However, first year Herring Gulls from the Western Palearctic typically show pale inner primaries and barred outer greater coverts (GRANT, 1982 and *in litt.*), which the Bang Pu bird lacked. If, as seems likely, this distinctive character is shared by first year Herring Gulls of the eastern races such as *L. a. taimyrensis*, *L. a. vegae* and *L. a. mongolicus*, then it would strongly suggest that the Bang Pu bird was either the Slaty-backed Gull or possibly even Lesser Black-backed Gull. Both these species apparently share all dark primaries, lacking any obvious pale area on the inner primaries, with the greater coverts forming a solid drab band, less obviously mottled and pale-edged than in the Herring Gull (DWIGHT, 1925; GRANT, 1982).

The Lesser Black-backed Gull is perhaps less likely to occur in Thailand than Slaty-backed, although it has been reported from the western shore of the Bay of Bengal (ALI & RIPLEY, 1970). KING (1983) has recorded two first winter gulls, either *L. argentatus* or *L. fuscus*, on Lake Inle, Burma, and has further commented that in India *L. argentatus* normally winters on inland bodies of water whereas *L. fuscus* tends to stay in coastal areas.

To summarise, the plumage characters of the large gull seen at Bang Pu suggest that it was most likely to have been either a Slaty-backed Gull or a Lesser Black-backed Gull. However, on the basis of probability of occurrence, Herring Gull would seem to be a more likely candidate and this species cannot be excluded from consideration without further elucidation of the plumage characters of immature birds of its eastern Palearctic races. None of these three species has been previously recorded in Thailand. Careful documentation of all subsequent occurrences of the larger gulls in Thailand is necessary if their identification is to be resolved.

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Figure 1 (top). Unidentified large gull in flight, Ban Bang Pu Kao, 17 December 1977.

Figure 2 (middle). Unidentified large gull (on right), and two immature Brown-headed Gulls *L. brunicephalus* (note : one *brunicephalus* is immediately behind the larger gull).

Figure 3 (bottom). Unidentified large gull (on right) and three Brown-headed Gulls for comparison when perched.





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