

Die Vogelwarte 33, 1985: 64–68

Rare palaeartic gulls in Kenya in the 1983–84 winter

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Introduction

Observations made by the authors in Kenya from October 1983 to July 1984 indicated that an unprecedented number of rare palaeartic gulls wintered at some inland localities during this period. Three species were involved, Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, Great Black-headed Gull *L. ichthyaetus*, and White-eyed Gull *L. leucophthalmus*. This paper gives details of the observations, which are summarised by locality for each species. An attempt has been made to estimate the total wintering population of Slender-billed Gulls at Lake Nakuru on the basis of observations made at least once every month. Of the localities where these three species were found, 14 visits were made to Lake Nakuru during the study period, Lake Elmenteita was visited at least once every two weeks, and twice-weekly visits were made to Dandora Sewage Works, Nairobi. Ferguson's Gulf, Lake Turkana was visited from 12 to 21 December 1983 and from 2 to 9 April 1984.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

This species was recorded by the authors at three Rift Valley lakes — Turkana, Nakuru and Elmenteita. All birds were seen in association with large flocks of Grey-headed Gulls *L. cirrocephalus* and the Slender-billed Gulls were occasionally harassed by their larger congeners. Some Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus* were also present in these flocks. Notes and photographs of the Slender-billed Gulls are filed at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, England. Individuals were classed as either adult or first-winter birds according to plumage and bare parts colours; there are no noticeable differences between second-winter and adult winter birds (GRANT 1982, CRAMP & SIMMONS 1983, contra STEVENSON 1982).

Lake Turkana (Ferguson's Gulf). The following counts were made at various points along a 15 km stretch of lakeshore:

	Date	No. adults	No. 1st winter
December 1983	14	1	1
	18	3	2
	19	2	0
	21	1	2
April 1984	2	2	6
	3	2	0

On the basis of plumage and bare parts features it was thought that at least nine individuals (six adults and three immatures) were present in December, and eight individuals (two adults and six immatures) in April. It could not be judged whether any of the April birds were the same ones as those present in December but this was thought to be possible. Assuming this to be the case, there were at least 12 birds (six adults, six immatures) at Ferguson's Gulf in the 1983–84 winter.

Lake Nakuru. Detailed notes were made of plumage and bare parts features of all birds seen on each visit, and photographs were taken whenever possible. It was found that there was sufficient individual variation in the observed features to make it possible to recognise individuals; this was especially easy with the more distinctively-coloured

first-winter birds. Some adults were more difficult to recognise, showing relatively little individual variation, but even with these birds close study revealed useful minor differences. The features on which recognition was based were: (1) Colour of bill and presence or absence of dark or pale tip. (2) Eye colour and presence or absence of eyering. (3) Leg colour. (4) Presence or absence of grey spot on ear-coverts or in front of eye. (5) Extent and intensity of pink in plumage. (6) Wing-pattern, fading and abrasion of remiges (first-winter birds). (7) Projection of central pair of rectrices. (8) Physical peculiarities eg. lameness, loss of one leg.

13 adult and six immature birds were recognised and the duration of their residence at the lake was noted (Table 1). If an individual was not seen on all visits during its assumed period of residence it was assumed to have been present but overlooked: it was impossible to identify Slender-billed Gulls out on the open water with Grey-headed Gulls, while some parts of the lakeshore were inaccessible on some visits and could have held gulls at such times. It was unlikely that local movements took place to the nearby Lake Elmenteita as this locality was also regularly watched and no evidence of such movements was found. The estimated number of individuals present at Nakuru each month is given in Table 2. The population estimate represents the minimum number of birds thought to be present, no attempt having been made to allow for the presence of two or more individuals with identical features or to include any estimate of birds present but not seen.

The pattern of occurrence shown in Table 1 indicates that adult Slender-billed Gulls arrived in October, November and December-January and that some of these birds stayed for long periods. Of the birds present for more than 30 days, one was last seen in January, two in February, four in March and one in May. Single birds, presumably on passage, were present in March and May, while two of the January arrivals were not seen subsequently and were possibly undergoing movements. The population of immatures fluctuated less than that of adults (Table 1): a total of four birds arrived in October, November and December-January and all these birds left in the second half of April. Singles in February and May indicate movements at this time.

Lake Elmenteita. One first-winter bird was seen by PBT on 3 March 1984; the possibility that it was one of the Lake Nakuru birds was discounted on differences in bare parts colours and plumage.

Prior to these records there had been only six confirmed occurrences of this gull in East Africa, involving from one to four birds, and there had been no indication that the species winters in East Africa. Of these six records, four were from Lake Turkana in November-January (BRITTON 1980, STEVENSON 1982), one from Lake Nakuru in November (BERG-SCHLOSSER 1979) and one from Mombasa in October (TAYLOR 1982). Although there is evidence that some palaeartic gulls are extending their winter range in East Africa (see eg. comments in BERG-SCHLOSSER 1979 and BRITTON 1980), the occurrence of at least 19 Slender-billed Gulls at Nakuru and at least 12 at Turkana in the 1983-84 winter is unprecedented.

Table 1: Occurrences of individual Slender-billed Gulls at Lake Nakuru, October 1983 to May 1984.

Individual	Date first recorded	Date last recorded	Minimum period of stay (days)
Adult (A) 1	15 Oct 83	10 Mar 84	148
A2	15 Oct 83	14 Jan 84	92
A3	12 Nov 83	10 Mar 84	120
A4	12 Nov 83	18 Feb 84	99
A5	12 Nov 83	18 Feb 84	99
A6	1 Jan 84	1 Jan 84	1
A7	1 Jan 84	14 Jan 84	14
A8	1 Jan 84	10 Mar 84	70
A9	1 Jan 84	1 May 84	122
A10	14 Jan 84	10 Mar 84	57
A11	10 Mar 84	10 Mar 84	1
A12	12 May 84	12 May 84	1
A13	19 May 84	19 May 84	1
1st. W(I)1	29 Oct 83	14 Apr 84	169
I2	12 Nov 83	14 Apr 84	155
I3	1 Jan 84	14 Apr 84	105
I4	1 Jan 84	14 Apr 84	105
I5	18 Feb 84	18 Feb 84	1
I6	12 May 84	12 May 84	1

Table 2: Observed (Obs.) and estimated (Est.) totals of adult and first-winter Slender-billed Gulls at Lake Nakuru, October 1983 to July 1984.

Month	No. adults		No. 1st. winter		Total	
	Obs.	Est.	Obs.	Est.	Obs.	Est.
Oct	2	2	1	1	3	3
Nov	4	5	1	2	5	7
Dec*	0	5	1	2	1	7
Jan	10	10	4	4	14	14
Feb	6	7	4	5	10	12
Mar	5	6	4	4	9	10
Apr	1	1	4	4	5	5
May	3	3	1	1	4	4
Jun	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jul	0	0	0	0	0	0

* = very brief visit.

Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*

The following inland records, all of first-winter birds, were obtained by the authors (notes and photographs are filed at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring):

Lake Turkana (Ferguson's Gulf). One 18–22 December 1983 and two 2–9 April 1984, with flocks of Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus*.

Lake Nakuru. One on 1 January 1984, with Grey-headed Gulls.

Dandora Sewage Works, Nairobi. Two 30 December 1983 to 6 January 1984; one remained until 13 February 1984. The birds were in loose association with a small flock of Black-headed Gulls; they apparently fed at or near the sewage works and often rested

during the day on dry patches in partly-flooded oxidation ponds. Further drying-out of some ponds possibly encouraged the departure of the one bird in February.

In recent winters this species has been recorded in small numbers (up to three birds) at localities on the Kenya coast and has also occurred inland on three occasions at Rift Valley lakes: twice at Ferguson's Gulf and once at Lake Baringo (BRITTON 1980, East African Bird Reports in Scopus 1981—1983). The only other inland East African record is of an oversummering bird at Entebbe, Uganda in 1966 (BRITTON 1980). As there had been no records from the relatively well-watched Nakuru and Dandora localities prior to those of the authors given here, it is possible that this gull was more widespread and numerous inland in Kenya during the 1983—84 winter than is normally the case.

White-eyed gull *Larus leucophthalmus*

A first-winter bird was observed by the authors at Ferguson's Gulf, Lake Turkana from 18 to 21 December 1983, and what was apparently the same individual (on plumage characters) was present at the same locality on 2 April 1984 (observed by PBT only). The bird was seen at several points along the 15 km of lakeshore covered by the authors, and was at times in loose association with small groups of Grey-headed, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gulls at lakeshore pools; at times it also joined daytime resting flocks of Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls *L. argentatus* on the shore. This is the second record of White-eyed Gull for East Africa, the first also being from Ferguson's Gulf, in April 1975 (BRITTON 1980). A full description and photographs are filed at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring.

This gull is virtually restricted to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and its population moves southwards during the winter, birds then becoming abundant off the north coast of Somalia (CRAMP & SIMMONS 1983). Apart from the two Kenya records there have been only three recorded occurrences south of Somalia: two from Beira, Moçambique and one from Port Elizabeth, South Africa (CRAMP & SIMMONS 1983). There has been no previous indication that this species may winter south of its normal range.

Other palaeartic Gulls

Regular counts were made of all gull species at Lake Nakuru during the period of observation, and counts were also made at Ferguson's Gulf during the two visits made by the authors. Three palaeartic species were involved: Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Black-headed Gull. Observed maxima were as follows:

	Lake Nakuru	Lake Turkana
<i>L. argentatus</i>	2 on 29/10/83	8 on 2/4/84
<i>L. fuscus</i>	48 on 1/1/84	400 on 20/12/83
<i>L. ridibundus</i>	380 on 18/2/84	1000 on 20/12/83

Comparing these figures with maxima for each species given by BRITTON (1980) and in the East African Bird Reports (in Scopus 1978—1983), it is evident that none of the 1983—84 counts at Ferguson's Gulf reflect exceptional numbers of any species, while at Nakuru the only species apparently present in greater numbers than usual was Black-headed Gull. Counts of Black-headed Gull are not given in all Bird Reports, but the maximum at Nakuru in 1978 was 50 (in Scopus 1979) while the 1982 Report (in Scopus 1983) mentions „usual. . . small numbers“ at Nakuru. BRITTON (1980) is somewhat imprecise on the numbers of Black-headed Gulls recorded inland, stating only that since 1972 „hundreds have occurred [in East Africa] each. . . winter“ (localities not given) and that „numbers are still small away from [coastal localities], Lake Turkana and Lake Nakuru“. The authors are unable to find any evidence that flocks of several hundred Black-

headed Gulls are of regular occurrence at Nakuru; the implication from the Bird Reports is that they are not. Winter flocks of 500 are, however, regular at Ferguson's Gulf (BRITTON 1980).

Summary

During the 1983—1984 winter the authors observed unusually large numbers of wintering rare palaeartic gulls at inland localities in Kenya. The second East African occurrence of White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* was recorded, as were six Great Black-headed Gulls *L. ichthyaetus* and up to thirty-one Slender-billed Gulls *L. genei*. Individual *L. genei* were identified at one locality and the duration of each bird's residence was estimated.

Zusammenfassung

Seltene palaearktische Möwen in Kenia im Winter 1983-84

Während des Winters 1983—1984 haben die Verfasser eine ungewöhnlich große Anzahl von seltenen palaearktischen Möwen bei der Überwinterung im Inland Kenias beobachtet. Die Weißaugenmöwe *Larus leucophthalmus* wurde in Ostafrika zum zweiten Mal festgestellt. Weiterhin wurden sechs Große Fischmöwen *L. ichthyaetus* und bis zu 31 Dünnschnabelmöwen *L. genei* beobachtet. An einem Platz wurden *L. genei* individuell identifiziert, wobei die Verweildauer geschätzt wurde.

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Zeitschrift/Journal: [Vogelwarte - Zeitschrift für Vogelkunde](#)

Jahr/Year: 1985/86

Band/Volume: [33_1985](#)

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Artikel/Article: [Rare palaeartic gulls in Kenya in the 1983—84 winter 64-68](#)