

CASPIAN GULL

Larus cachinnans

Adult

Barling Marsh, Essex

3rd January 2004

I visited the Rubbish Tip at Barling with the intention of spending a few hours gull watching before walking along the nearby river Roach to pick up a few year ticks however this changed early morning. The rubbish tip was active from an early hour with many gulls still roosting on the fields on the north side. I walked along the sea wall from Barling Pits and once I cleared the eastern side of the old tip I could see several thousand gulls sat in the nearest field. I carefully set the scope up and began to scan through and within 5 minutes I found a bird that I immediately identified as an adult Caspian Gull. The bird was on the nearest edge of the flock and although the flock was at least 150 yards away it was clear that the gull was very white headed with a small beady eye that was set well forward in the face.

Through the scope it was also clear that the bird had a long slender greenish yellow bill. The bird was at such an angle that made it difficult to get the upper and underwing pattern. In addition the birds legs were barely visible as it stood directly behind a small mound of earth though from the visible tibia appear fleshy in colour. After watching the bird for about 5 or 10 minutes I decided to try and get some pictures using the Nikon Coolpix 995 camera through my scope (digiscoping). Whilst I took the shots an adult Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*, landed right beside it obscuring the rear end of the bird. However there was now a direct comparison between the two gulls and the differences between the two are obvious in the shots taken. Eventually the Caspian Gull moved a little to the left and the primaries were now visible. They appeared relatively long with a large white tip to P10 and in one image the underside of P10 is just visible with a pale tongue almost reaching the white primary tip.

After a further 10 minutes of observation the whole flock took flight with a great many heading directly onto the tip. Many more headed towards the nearby river with several hundred returning to the field though the Caspian Gull was not amongst them. I then spent the rest of the day searching for the bird in the Barling area, looking at hundreds of gulls but I was unsuccessful in relocating it.

This bird was clearly not an *argenteus* type Herring Gull, of which there were many very white headed individuals present today, due to a number different identification characters that made my bird a unique looking individual.

In the past three years I have been studying local gulls at a number of locations and have been especially interested in the larger gull complexes and have constantly read and reviewed the many identification articles and papers that have been published. Although the wing tip pattern was not seen clearly or well I am in no doubt as to the birds identification as an adult Caspian Gull.

Optics

Kowa TSN824 with 32x wide angle and 50x wide angle eye pieces

Nikon Coolpix 995

Photographic Evidence

Yes though of poor or record shot quality only due to distance and dull early morning light.

Previous Experience

Two 1st winters at Dungeness, Kent January 2003.

Adult at North Woolwich King George V Dock outflow January 2004.

****Goa****



Fig 1: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004.

This image is included as outlines a few points. The high and full chest, the slightly darker grey upper-parts compared to the nearby Herring Gulls, the very white head with small dark 'pin prick' eye and yellowish green bill. This is also the only image that really gives any indication as the bird's leg length to which they look relatively long.



Fig 2: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004.
Note the slender pale yellowish green bill with a barely discernible Gonydeal angle. Also note the dark subterminal mark. The head is small, clean white with small dark eye and the high and full chest.



Fig 3: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, with Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004. The differences between these two birds is clear, note the Caspian Gulls different head shape, dark eye set well forward in the face, the high chest and the slender pale yellowish green bill. Also just visible is the difference in the upper-part tones.



Fig 4: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004. The slender bill proportions are perhaps more evident in this shot. Also noticeable is the large all white tip to P10 and the pale tongue just visible along the feather. The upper-part tone is darker than the Herring Gull standing behind and it also has a bluish quality to it.



Fig 5: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004.
Again the bill pattern, shape and colouration are obvious as is the full chest, the white tip to P10 and the corner of the pale tongue on the underside of the same feather



Fig 5: adult Caspian Gull, *Larus cachinnans*, Barling Marsh, Essex 3rd January 2004.
A good portrait shot of the bill shape and colouration. The long primaries clearly show a large white tip to P10 and well spaced white tips to P9, P8 and P7. Compare with the white headed argenteus type Herring Gull sat in the grass to the right which has a bright yellow and rather thick set bill with bright red Gonydeal spot.