



Whilst gulling at Richmond Bank, Cheshire on the 2nd December 2010 I had the good fortune for an adult Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* to fly right through the view of my telescope whilst I was searching through the perhaps 10,000 or so gulls loafing on the mud bank there. Despite only a brief flight view at a range of approximately 120 metres the indisputable classic outer primary pattern was immediately arresting. Fortunately, the bird had the common decency to land shortly after (though still at 120 metres distance) and gulling companion Pete Berry and I enjoyed the best part of forty minutes 'grilling' the bird.

Genuinely beautiful and elegant, it admirably displayed all the prerequisite features; a truly classic individual. As Caspian Gulls are still currently relatively rare in the north-west of England and fairly well photographed birds even more so, it is hoped this short photo essay may go to illustrate some of those more classic identification features and if not, then just to flaunt this cracking individual.

A CLASSIC CASPIAN



Above: Flawless! Whilst some *argentatus* Herring Gulls can portray surprisingly Caspian Gull reminiscent features, they never exhibit the full suite which provides this individual with its classically elegant look.

The bill of this bird always appeared strikingly long and slender, especially in direct comparison to *argenteus* and *argentatus* Herring Gulls around it. The tip had a particularly gentle curve to the culmen (clearly so, again in direct comparison with both races of Herring Gull) and lacked any prominent angle on the goyns, genuinely appearing rather straight edged on the lower mandible and parallel sided overall (the latter an often over or indeed misused term but seemingly relevant here). The colouration of the bill, whilst clearly weaker than most other large gulls present, was still evidently yellow though as said, rather weak and washed out. There was a very small black mark on the upper mandible, just above the goyns and this is just perceivable in the image. The very tip of the bill was patently paler and appeared whitish, whilst its eye colour was eye-catching, due to the apparent deep and fairly solid looking blackness of them. Whilst Herring Gulls can fairly regularly exhibit dark looking eyes and indeed those of Caspian are less commonly *actually* solidly black, this individual's were clearly at the very darkest range for the species and were really quite striking, which combined with the absolute pure whiteness of the head seemed to accentuate their small and 'beady' look.

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Above: Even in this pose the head appears small and 'skinny' in comparison to the body but at times this could appear extremely emphatic and its overall look both peculiar and striking. The often proclaimed 'ventral bulge' (immediately behind the legs on the underside of the body) seemed particularly conspicuous on this individual and was evident in any pose, somewhat akin to it wearing a nappy! The head shape was frankly beautiful though. Constantly smooth in profile but ranging from quite domed looking to really quite flat on the forehead. The peak of the crown was always situated just behind the eye and the actual forehead itself most often had an almost concave look to it which emphasized the long, 'drawn-out' look to the face and bill.

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Above: Its neck, even during a more 'normal' relaxed pose looked strikingly long, which when combined with the very small, skinny looking head gave rise to a most unique profile. The general look is clearly visible here (though admittedly the photo is patently not the best!). Note the 'flatness' to the contour of the mantle, back and wings, clearly lacking a distinct tertial step. As the bird is slightly more alert in this pose, its long legs are conspicuous. Peculiarly though, at the time of taking this image all the other thousands of gulls on the mud bank had spooked and taken to the air, something they regularly do at this site, but the Caspian Gull was repeatedly the only bird which seemingly refused to be moved and simply stood alone on the mud. This has behaviour has also been seen with other individual Caspian Gulls at this site, though clearly it wouldn't be considered an identification feature!

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Above: This image admirably portrays the 'high bosomed' look to the chest which was consistent and is clearly visible in the other images. The bird's rear-end looks very long and attenuated (perhaps even more perceptible in the image directly above this one) and is due in no small part to its very long primaries. The tip of the tail actually fell just marginally short of mid way along the exposed primaries. The leg colour was not surprisingly difficult to assess given the viewing distance involved but more consistently appeared greyish-flesh. In this pose the bird's head has a more domed appearance, though the front of the 'face' and bill maintain the 'drawn-out' profile.

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Above: Here we can objectively assess the grey hue of the bird's mantle and wing coverts. Clearly darker than *argenteus* Herring Gull, the Caspian Gull (centre, facing left) was approximate to nearby *argentatus* Herring Gulls. We can also evidently compare the whiteness of the Caspian Gull's head to that of the other Herring Gulls around it too. Though from December onwards many *argenteus* Herring Gulls begin to attain a clearer white head, during late autumn at least, the white headedness of *cachinnans* is striking and is often the most arresting feature when quickly scanning through a large flock of gulls. From January onwards *argentatus* too can begin to attain a whiter head and the identification of Caspian Gull then becomes slightly more complicated and for many birders, confusing and commonly misunderstood, which has led to many misidentifications at this site alone.

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Above: At last! Eventually, with luck, good judgement or just plain persistence, the bird preens and allows the underside of P10 to be clinched. An enormous long white tip (the apparent dusky subterminal bar is in fact P9 showing through from the other side) with the white tongue eating deep into the black on the inner web complete with a sharply demarcated border. Of course some *argentatus* Herring Gulls can display a near identical pattern to this but combined with the full suite of other structural features this individual is perfect! Note that the black band in between the white tongue and white tip of P10 is actually narrower (at its shortest part) than the length of the white primary tip itself. The colour of the tongue is all important; ideally clearly white in Caspian Gull and greyer (at least similar to the mantle colour) in Herring Gull.

A CLASSIC CASPIAN



Above: Unfortunately, in order to obtain anything of the open wings at all I had switched to video mode in the hope that the bird would eventually 'do the honours', so whilst these are fairly unsatisfactory videograbs I'm just glad anything exists at all! The Caspian Gull is to the left of the photo, just taking off and the outer primary pattern was especially striking; enough so that I initially picked it out in flight anyway! On the upperwing, the long white tip to P10 is very conspicuous as is a small mirror on P9 separated from the white tip by a narrow black subterminal bar. P5 can be seen here to exhibit a strong and solid (fairly even looking across both webs) black subterminal band. Although not fully visible in the image, long grey tongues were obvious on the upperside of P7-P9, extending deeply towards the wing tip with white 'moons' (crescent shaped white in between the grey tongues and black wingtips) prominent on P6-8 in particular.

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Above: Note the lack of contrast between the underwing coverts and underside of the secondaries (compared for example with Yellow-legged Gull) and the broad white trailing edge to the upperwing. The underside of the wingtip can be seen to display the classic long white tongues eating deep into the black of the outer primaries which combined with the long white tip to P10 plus meagre black subterminal band on P9 give the impression of very restricted black in the primaries and of a large white triangular wingtip.

Ian McKerchar, December 2010

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