



A decent view of a Yellow-legged Gull in Greater Manchester is possible! Above and below, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



This article is not intended to be a definitive treatment of Yellow-legged Gull, for such on its identification already widely exists but I intend to bring the main features for identifying adult (and which can also be useful for sub-adult) Yellow-legged Gulls and the pitfalls we may and indeed have encountered. Immature plumages are not dealt with in this article; they are rather more complicated and perhaps requires even more of a degree of understanding but they may well feature at a later date. The most comprehensive and instructive publications for the identification of Yellow-legged Gulls (including immatures), written by far more eminent birders than myself, remain the basis for increasing your knowledge and understanding, they are: -

Garner, M., Quinn, D., & Glover, B. 1997. Identification of Yellow-legged Gulls in Britain. *British Birds* 90: 25 - 62, 369 - 383.

Grant, P.J. 1986. *Gulls: a guide to identification*. Second edition. P & A D Poyser.

Jonsson, L. 1998. Yellow-legged Gulls and yellow-legged Herring Gulls in the Baltic. *Alula* 4: 74 - 100.

Olsen K.M. & Larsson, H. 2003. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Helm.

Rather than intending to be definitive or ground-breaking, this article aims to bring Yellow-legged Gull to the attention of those birders with modest gull experience but a yearning to further their knowledge; those with nagging questions or doubts; or perhaps those just intent on merely adding a tick! Either way, it is blatantly intended to be cautionary, purposefully intent on advising 'walking before running' and advocates that the whole foundation for identifying Yellow-legged Gull (as with all other gulls) is that familiarisation with other, commoner species of gulls remains the key.



'On the safe side'- a dark mantled, pristine and pure white-headed 'Herring Gull' during September in a gull roost should always attract further attention and as in this case, ought most often prove to be a fine adult Yellow-legged Gull but caution is still advised and they really are 'more than just a mantle'! Audenshaw Reservoirs, Greater Manchester, September 2007 (Rob Adderley)

There is no excuse for not learning the commoner and more familiar large gull species first; winter county gull gatherings are easily accessible and some often have daytime gatherings also. For those with a burning passion (or screw loose!) refuse tips can undoubtedly provide perhaps the premier viewing of vast gull numbers and often bestow views as close as your heart's desire. They do though smell awful, look disgusting, are bounded by more red tape than you can shake a tripod at and gulls feeding on them caught up in a 'feeding frenzy' can be particularly frustrating.

The key though, is to really get to know the larger species; study them for birds that look different. Are they really different? If so, then why? Field notes are the best way of ensuring you're really studying them, so draw and scribble the pattern of those greater coverts, scapulars or tertials or of the variation in head shape and jizz. Photos too provide an excellent reference although relying on them solely, especially when little actual field study of the bird may have taken place, can be a potential recipe for disaster.

Caspian Gull has purposefully been omitted from discussion within this article as whilst they are clearly a potential pitfall and are often mistaken for Yellow-legged Gulls, their identification and separation from Yellow-legged Gull is beyond the intention and scope of this article.



Taken in the UK in July it's got to be a Yellow-legged Gull right? Wrong! This bird is in fact an *argentatus* Herring Gull; all too often a pitfall for the unwary. Dumfries and Galloway. (Pete Berry)



Above: Fourth winter Yellow-legged Gull, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, January 2009 (David Winnard)



## IDENTIFICATION



Above: A typically immaculate and elegant adult Yellow-legged Gull at Audenshaw Reservoirs, Greater Manchester, late December 2006 (Rob Adderley)

Whilst the identification of adult Yellow-legged Gulls may seem straightforward enough, there are in fact many variables and pitfalls for the inexperienced, let alone the experienced! Very few birders take the time to familiarise themselves with the huge variation in Herring Gulls; ask yourself these questions: exactly what is the distribution of black on the primaries on an adult Yellow-legged Gull and how does this compare to the *argentatus* Scandinavian race of Herring Gull; how variable is their head shape; and what is the moult timing of primaries in adults? If you've answered these questions confidently then you're likely one of those odd birders for whom gulls hold a special and often 'unnatural' attraction!

It can be a rather long-winded subject, complicated by the changing appearance of various similar species through the year but close, careful study and a full suite of characters from any suspected Yellow-legged Gull should facilitate a correct identification. This article is not intended to cover everything involved in the identification or pitfalls of Yellow-legged Gull; it is intended to be a first step, an introduction and those wanting more should consult the excellent literature mentioned on the previous page.

All photographs utilised within this article were taken within Greater Manchester unless otherwise stated.

### **In a nut-shell...**

In comparison with Herring Gull, Yellow-legged Gull is on average an altogether more elegant bird; the head is fuller (especially on the forehead), rather more flat-topped and squared in profile. Their bill is often rather thick and particularly blunt tipped with a steeply curving culmen and they have longer wings with the distance from the tip of the tail to the tip of the longest primary clearly equal to or longer than the distance from the longest tertial to the tip of the tail (see the image above again to re-iterate these features).



Above: Although this individual is in fact a third winter bird (fourth calendar year), it demonstrates the head shape and thick, blunt bill to very good effect, Heaton Park Reservoir, March 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: This bird too shows the same characteristics of head and bill shape as well as the long looking wings and is also a third winter bird (fourth calendar year). Heaton Park Reservoir, March 2008 (Ian McKerchar)





Above: Even here in this somewhat 'record shot', this adult exhibits typical characteristics for the species, especially considering it is taken in September. It's combination of such a dark shade of grey on the mantle and wing coverts combined with a generally whitish head with only neat, fine streaking and that fuller (especially on the forehead), squarer head shape is conclusive. The wings however appear short due to moult, itself often a distinguishing characteristic at this time of year. Heaton Park Reservoir, September 2007 (Ian McKerchar)

The mantle, back, scapulars and wing coverts of Yellow-legged Gull are a shade darker grey than our own British *argenteus* Herring Gull and are similar, if often even a shade darker, than those of Common Gull though the nominate Scandinavian *argentatus* race quite often approach or equal the mantle colouration of Yellow-legged Gull and pose problems for the unwary. The wingtip pattern is of more black and less white than Herring Gull, displaying black on six and sometimes seven of the outermost primaries, a feature not dissimilar from our own *argenteus* Herring Gull (but which has of course a significantly paler grey mantle) but usually visibly different from that of the darker mantled *argentatus* which has a pattern of more white and less black. The fifth primary (counting from the outermost) is p5 and should have a broad and unbroken black band across the tip, something *argentatus* again lack.



Above: This individual is in primary moult and is missing the outer three primaries but the broad black tip to p5 is still evident as are the yellow legs and the darkness of the grey mantle and wings. On average Yellow-legged Gulls moult their primaries earlier than Herring Gulls and the primary moult (if present) of any potential Yellow-legged Gull should be noted. Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: The same bird as in the above image; concentrating on the far (right) wing, we can clearly see the outer three primaries (p8-p10) still very short and growing. Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: Note the amount of black in the primaries, appearing as a broad 'wedge' and the thick black band on p5. Note also the small white mirror on p10 and the tiny mirror on p9. Pennington Flash, January 2009 (David Winnard)



Above: This terrific shot again demonstrates the amount of black in the wing tips of this near adult bird (in fact a fourth winter). Any Yellow-legged Gull should display black on at least six outer primaries (p10 down to p5 at least) and occasionally even more. The thickness of the bill is evident even in this flight image and the bird's wings are rather broad although difficult to judge without comparison. Pennington Flash, January 2009 (David Winnard)





Above: Again the black in the wingtips is palpable here as is the bulk of the bird's bill. In the field this individual's size and overall bulk was such as to suggest it was a male but the slight black subterminal marks on the bill and black in the primary coverts of the wings suggest the bird was in fact a fourth winter. Pennington Flash, January 2009 (David Winnard)



Above: Extensive black is again visible in the primaries here although in this instance the white tip to p10 is virtually complete with the mirror and the black band on p5 is perhaps at the extreme end of what is acceptable for the species. Audenshaw Reservoirs, December 2006 (Rob Adderley)



Above: Highlighting its not all plain sailing however, this adult's head shape appears altogether less 'normal' and in fact slightly more Caspian Gull like in this particular image and the un-cautious observer could well jump to the wrong conclusion. Once again, this proves the need for a full suite of characteristics to be obtained. Audenshaw Reservoirs, October 2006 (Rob Adderley)

Yellow-legged Gulls tend to be very white-headed, usually lacking in extensive, strong streaking during the winter months although they can display some neat, fine streaking around the eye and over the crown early in the autumn (often referred to as appearing like earphones). Herring Gulls on the other hand, especially those darker mantled birds of the *argentatus* race show coarse streaking creating a messy head pattern but it should be borne in mind that from as early as the beginning of December many British *argenteus* Herring Gulls can be very white headed and form a trap for the unwitting but their paler grey mantles atleast, should facilitate in excluding any confusion. The Scandinavian *argentatus* race of Herring Gull form an even higher potential for confusion and are dealt with on the next page under 'pitfalls'.





Above: This adult Yellow-legged Gull exhibits the characteristic head streaking present during the autumn; it is fine and neat, confined around the eye and over the crown. Once again note this bird's very short primaries due to moult. Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: Again this bird shows neat, fine streaking around the eye and across the forehead and also encapsulates the jizz of the head and bill to good effect. Its short primaries are once again due to moult. Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)





Above: A handsome, elegant bird displaying a full suite of characteristics, including long primaries with small white tips. Pennington Flash, January 2009 (David Winnard)

The orbital ring of adult Yellow-legged Gull is blood red, creating a darker-eyed appearance when compared to Herring Gull (which can look obviously 'white-eyed') and if one is lucky enough to see one not sat in the middle of a reservoir (not too common in Greater Manchester) their yellow legs are usually obvious and particularly long looking, although they vary from a rich yellow to a more subdued yellow for adults (most often in the winter months). Of course judging the actual colour of legs is often precarious as surprisingly, differentiating yellows from fleshy tones can be subjective so caution is advised; when they're yellow, they're usually obviously so! Yellow legs are not however, confined to just Yellow-legged Gulls and Herring Gulls, particularly individuals from certain areas of Scandinavia and the eastern Baltic regions (occasionally but perhaps inaccurately referred to as the *omissus* race?) can show clear yellow legs. Such birds can present the observer with a serious headache and call for a careful assessment of jizz and primary pattern in order to eliminate Yellow-legged Gull.



Above: This individual's long legs are plain to see as is their vibrant yellow colour but its head shape is slightly less than characteristic in this instance. Audenshaw Reservoirs, October 2006 (Rob Adderley)



Above: Long legs yet again although their colouration looks less vibrant here. The head shape shows well and the head streaking is typical of the time of year. Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)

## **SHADES OF GREY**

Accurately recording the shade of grey on a suspected adult Yellow-legged Gull's mantle, scapulars and wing coverts is obviously very important but it is equally often unbelievably difficult to gauge correctly both in the field and perhaps even worse from photos or video. Lone birds present particular problems and assessing grey hues against other known species is the key to accuracy, as is realising and understanding the impact lighting and viewing angle may incur on your assessment.

When assessing grey hues utilise comparison with other gulls; Black-headed, Common and Lesser Black-backed Gull provide the most constant and accurate greys to evaluate against, as the mantle of Herring Gull's are notoriously variable in hue and might be likely to add to the confusion for the little experienced. Greys look strikingly paler in bright sunlight and by the same token can become darker in fading light; most gullers know that time during their evening gull roost when they cease to even attempt to locate darker mantled birds as everything starts to look evenly dark grey! A dull, flat light is the optimum light for assessing grey tones. Overcast conditions are ideal but not always possible so bear the light and its potential effect in mind; comparison to other known species should still offer the best outcome in even in extremes.





Above: Compare the shades of grey from the right: Yellow-legged Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull (x2), Common Gull and Great Black-backed Gull (with another two Lesser Black-backed Gulls to the immediate left of it). The light is rather overcast at this precise moment and the mantle and wing colours are fairly accurately represented. Pennington Flash, September 2006 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: The same location, date and birds as the image above but taken shortly afterwards and now in bright sunlight. Here, judging the shade of grey is all together more difficult as their respective hues are heavily



impacted on by the bright light. The Yellow-legged Gull in the centre of picture now appears closer to the hue of the Lesser Black-backed Gull to it's right due to the different angles the birds are at and the Lesser Black-backed Gull immediately to the Yellow-legged Gull's left appears rather closer to the Great Black-backed Gull on the extreme left of picture due to the former being in shadow and the latter caught in the direct sunlight!  
Pennington Flash, September 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: This pristine adult allows comparison directly against the two Lesser Black-backed Gulls and is clearly a few shades lighter. Note the contrast between the wingtips and mantles of the two species. Audenshaw Reservoirs, December 2006 (Rob Adderley)



Above: With Lesser Black-backed Gull below and *argenteus* Herring Gull above we can once again evaluate the Yellow-legged Gull's (middle of picture) shade of grey subjectively but note also in this image just how long the primaries are compared to the Herring Gull and their projection beyond the tail; all leading to the bird's attenuated look to its rear end. Audenshaw Reservoirs, December 2006 (Rob Adderley)



Above: This videograb illustrates the mantle grey tones of Yellow-legged Gull (left and preening), *argenteus* Herring Gull (middle) and *argentatus* Herring Gull (right) with Great Black-backed Gull (top). Whilst the Yellow-legged Gull and *argentatus* Herring Gull are rather similar in tone, their distribution of black in the wingtips tells a completely different story, which is evaluated further down this page. Heaton Park Reservoir, January 2009 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: This Yellow-legged Gull (displaying typical head streaking) can be compared with the Common Gulls around it and it is visibly a shade darker grey and even more clearly darker than the Black-headed Gull above it. They grey hue of the latter would be more comparable to *argenteus* Herring Gull. Audenshaw Reservoirs, September 2007 (Rob Adderley)

## **PITFALLS**

There are really quite a few pitfalls in the identification of Yellow-legged Gull. The more you dig and find out, the more confusing it can become but experience is vital and this article is purposefully intended not too dig too deep as it's a fairly complex subject sometimes and I really only want to scratch just below the surface here.

As detailed in the section above, assessing the grey hues accurately is fundamental to begin in ensuring any errors are omitted in identification but Herring Gulls show considerable variation in the hue of their greys and this often lends itself to the largest area of mis-identification for the incautious. Scandinavian Herring Gulls of the race *argentatus* are generally obviously darker grey than our own British *argenteus* Herring Gull and although their hue is often slightly more bluish and less lead-grey than Yellow-legged Gull, their tones can be very similar indeed. *Argentatus* however, especially during November and December show considerably extensive and heavy dark head streaking but by mid to late January they too can appear very white headed and lend themselves to be easily mistaken for Yellow-legged Gulls and just to muddy the waters further I have seen some *argentatus* as early as November sporting particularly white looking heads and summer individuals are not unheard of by any means. It is imperative to concentrate on a full suite of features when encountering such dark mantled gulls in the late winter; the full extent of black on the wingtips must be vigilantly assessed, *argentatus* generally showing much less black in the wingtips with more white and grey tongues projecting deep into the black outer primaries (particularly p9) but once again (!), not all *argentatus* necessarily follow this rule. To further confuse a would be observer (and by now who would even bother) some fortunately rather rare *argentatus* can show yellow legs but fortunately should also show a suite of pro-*argentatus* characteristics to boot.



Above: This adult Lesser Black-backed Gull is caught in the strong sunlight that often causes confusion and in this particular image it appears quite similar in hue to what we might expect of a Yellow-legged Gull (though is still just slightly too dark). Note importantly, this bird's relatively long, slim bill with gently sloping culmen and smoothly profiled, rather rounded head shape clearly at odds with those of Yellow-legged Gull. Always compare the colour of the mantle to that of the primaries (which are black); there is less contrast in Lesser Black-backed Gull than there is in Yellow-legged Gull especially. Pennington Flash, January 2009 (John Tymon)





Above: Look again at the same bird in the above image but this time in consideration to other known species whose greys are in equal and comparable light. There are four *argenteus* Herring Gulls (top centre of the image) whose grey hues only marginally darker than the Black-headed Gulls surrounding them. All are being made to appear severely paler due to the strong sunlight but given the available comparison, the actual darkness of the Lesser Black-backed Gull's grey becomes instantly apparent. This highlights the necessity of using caution when judging the shade of grey on lone individuals, especially in extremes of lighting conditions and the importance of judging them at the same distance, from the same angle and in the same light becomes paramount. Pennington Flash, January 2008 (John Tymon)



Above: Here, two adult Yellow-legged Gulls (top of centre) are amongst Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single British *argenteus* Herring Gull (just to the left of the Yellow-legged Gulls). The mantle colour of the Yellow-legged Gulls can be safely compared to that of the other gulls as the birds are all in the same light and facing the same direction but at the time of year this image was taken caution and a full suite of characteristics should still be employed as the darker mantled *argentatus* race of Herring Gull can be similarly white-headed and very alike indeed. Heaton Park Reservoir, March 2008 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: Adult *argenteus* Herring Gull (left) and two *argentatus* Herring Gulls (right). The difference in mantle colouration between the two races is blatantly apparent but 'easier' features of *argentatus* such as head shape/markings, wing tip pattern and of course in this case the obvious fleshy legs, all occlude the possibility of them being Yellow-legged Gulls. North Ronaldsay, Orkney, January 2009 (Paul Brown)



Above: An *argentatus* Herring Gull showing the key features of its primary pattern. Black in the wingtip is clearly reduced and extends to only p6 which has only a very narrow, almost W shaped black band; there are clear white 'moons' to p8, p7 and p6; and the grey tongues run deep towards the tips of all but p10. Compare directly these features with those of the Yellow-legged Gull in the image below. Heaton Park Reservoir, January 2008 (Ian McKerchar)





Above: Note in comparison to the *argentatus* Herring Gull above, this Yellow-legged Gull's more extensive and visible black in the wingtips, extending much further up the feathers and lacking any grey tongues. Audenshaw Reservoirs, December 2006 (Rob Adderley)



Above: This particular individual Herring Gull of the race *argentatus* displaying a mantle colour evidently as dark as that of any Yellow-legged Gull is at the darker end of the scale for any Herring Gull but fortunately, it also displays characteristic *argentatus* very coarsely and extensively streaked head and such limited black in the wing that in flight at least, it was almost imperceptible and appeared 'white-winged'! Heaton Park Reservoir, January 2008 (Ian McKerchar)





Above: In this videograb we can directly assess the wingtip patterns of Yellow-legged Gull (left) and *argentatus* Herring Gull (right) as both have their wings raised. Note in particular that the Yellow-legged Gull once again has rather solidly black 'wedge' on the outer primaries whereas those of the Herring Gull have deep grey tongues on their inner webs (especially pronounced on the upperwings). This particular Herring Gull has a narrow black band to p6 and the Yellow-legged Gull has a band down to p5. Heaton Park Reservoir, January 2009 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: A potential for perplexity, this *argentatus* Herring Gull provokes possible misidentification as a Yellow-legged Gull thanks to its similarly dark mantle, scapulars and wing coverts; very white head; and thick, blunt looking bill; but its primaries once again give its true identity away. The wings are visibly short, especially the distance from the tip of the tail to the tip of the longest primary (although as always be aware of moult or growing primaries making the wing appear short) and we can clearly see a deep grey tongue into the black on p8 and much reduced subterminal black to p7. Heaton Park Reservoir, February 2009 (Ian McKerchar)



Above: Another *argentatus* Herring Gull this time with a Common Gull. Note how dark the Herring Gull's mantle, scapulars and wing coverts appear and that the bird is rather white headed, once again inviting potential confusion with Yellow-legged Gull but observe that the head shape is subtly wrong and the outer primaries exhibit deep grey tongues extending into the black; the white primary tips are rather large; and the wings are somewhat short looking. Heaton Park Reservoir, February 2009 (Ian McKerchar)

### **SUMMARY**

This article was brought about through demand; demand from birders who asked me for it and demand from misidentifications and common misunderstandings I have encountered. Again, it is not intended to be definitive, comprehensive or ground-breaking and there is much, much more to say and learn on the subject of both Yellow-legged Gulls and of course of gulls in general (I did not even touch on the complex problem of hybrids). There are many further intricacies of adult Yellow-legged Gull identification that could have been included but were not; you have to start somewhere and that is the basic intention of the article but there is no substitute for getting out and looking. Be prepared to encounter confusion, frustration and despair around every corner and education, surprise and fulfilment around others but persevere and you will undoubtedly understand what drives that relatively small but obsessive group of birders known as 'gullers' but by that time it will be too late, you'll be one of us!

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Ian McKerchar, February 2009

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