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Laughing Gull Larus atricilla in Malaysia: the first record for Asia

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On 1 April 2000 we visited a power station on the west coast of peninsular Malaysia near the small town of Kapar (3°07′N 101°20′E), approximately 25 km south of Kuala Selangor and 40 km west of Kuala Lumpur. The cooling ponds of the power station are well known among local ornithologists as a roost for waders. We arrived around 16h30, timing our visit to coincide with high tide, when the highest concentration of birds is to be expected. In addition to a large number of waders, a flock of terns (Gull-billed Tern Gelochelidon nilotica, Caspian Tern Sterna caspia and White-winged Tern Chlidonias leucopterus) was also present on the pools. Amongst them we noticed a single gull. Even a brief look was sufficient to reveal that it was neither of the two species listed in our field guides (Jeyarajasingam and Pearson 1999, Robson 2000a) as occurring in Malaysia. Our initial thought was that the bird was a Laughing Gull Larus atricilla, a species with which we are very familiar, but in the absence of any other literature we were unable to eliminate the possibility that it was a species unknown to us. We thus observed the bird for about an hour, taking careful notes. The
light was good: the sky was slightly overcast but there
was no precipitation and the sun was behind us.
Unfortunately the bird never approached closer than
150 m and we were unable to photograph it.

The following description was recorded at the time.
The gull was noticeably larger than a Gull-billed Tern but
smaller (although naturally more ‘massive’) than a
Caspian Tern. It was seen standing next to both of these
species. Its bill was blood-red (darker than that of
Caspian Tern) and approximately three quarters of the
length of the head. The hood was very dark slate in
colour and extended over the nape to the hindneck (in
the same fashion as in an adult Mediterranean Gull L.
melanocephalus rather than in a Black-headed Gull L.
ridibundus). The eye was bordered by pronounced
white crescents above and below. The body was white
with a slight pink suffusion on the breast. The legs
were dark. The mantle and greater coverts were slate-
grey. Particular attention was paid to the wing pattern:
the tertials were very narrowly tipped white (seen clearly
when the bird perched) and the primaries were very
dark, with the wing-tips noticeably darker than the inner
upperwing. In flight the bird showed absolutely no wing-
mirrors at all but a white trailing edge could clearly be
seen across the secondaries. The underwing revealed
dark primaries and paler secondaries. The contrast was
seen particularly well when the bird landed. The tail
was uniformly white above and below. Several times
the bird took to the air and landed again, and on two
occasions it was seen to chase White-winged Terns. It
also called (a single yelp), with the head pointing
upwards.

When we returned to Europe, we checked our
provisional identification and were immediately
confident that the bird we had seen was an adult
Laughing Gull in breeding plumage. The three authors
independently spent a considerable time with the
literature available (e.g. Harrison 1983, Grant 1986, del
Hoyo et al. 1996) and each independently reached the
same conclusion. The following sentences present a very
brief summary of our considerations. The ‘hooded’ gulls
recorded from South-East Asia were all easily
eliminated. Pallas’s Gull L. argentipes has prominent white
mirrors in the outer primaries. Black-headed Gull shows much less
black in the primaries and the wings are overall much
paler; in addition, the underwing dark primaries and the wings are
much paler; in addition, the nape is white. Breeding Saunders’
Gulls L. Saundersi have shorter, darker bills, the outer
primaries are largely white and the underwings show
characteristic dark ‘windows’. Finally, the rare Relict
Gull L. relictus also shows white-tipped primaries. We
thus turned to a consideration of extralimital species.
Both Mediterranean and Little Gull L. minutus have
much paler upperwings, while the underwings of
Mediterranean Gull are pure white and those of Little
Gull uniformly dark, none of which would fit the bird
we observed. Andean Gull L. serranus shows extensive
white on the primaries and very large mirrors (and has
to our knowledge never been recorded outside of South
America). Bonaparte’s Gull L. philadelphia is relatively
small and shows an all-dark bill, extensive white in the
outer primaries and a white leading edge to the outer
wing. The species most frequently confused with
Laughing Gull is Franklin’s Gull L. pipixcan, but this
shows prominent white mirrors on the outer primaries,
and the bird we saw had none. In second-year plumage,
Franklin’s Gull frequently shows a wing pattern similar
to that of Laughing Gull, but the large bill, the broken
white ‘eye-lids’ and the all-white tail eliminate the
possibility that the bird was a Franklin’s Gull in this
plumage. The light pinkish tinge to the underparts is
more frequently seen in Franklin’s Gull than in
Laughing Gull, although it is not unknown in the latter
species (K. M. Olsen in litt. 2002). We recognize that
identification of gulls is notoriously difficult but the fact
that the bird we observed was an adult in breeding
plumage made identification comparatively straightforward. No part of the description is at variance
with the identification as a Laughing Gull.

We thus alerted the ornithologists we knew in
Malaysia in the hope that the bird could be relocated
and photographed. Unfortunately, however, none of the
local birdwatchers had time to visit the site. In addition,
they informed us that access to the Kapar power station
is restricted and permission must be sought in advance,
which made it impossible for them to go there at short
notice. Our sighting is thus documented solely by the
notes we took at the time, reproduced above. We have
submitted a full account to the Malaysian Records
Committee (at the Bird Conservation Council,
Malaysian Nature Society) but the Committee has yet
to reach a decision.

The Laughing Gull breeds mainly in eastern North
America, along the coasts of east New Brunswick and
Nova Scotia south to Florida, around the Gulf of Mexico
and through the Caribbean islands to the northern coast
of Venezuela. It also breeds in southern California and
western Mexico. During the non-breeding period it is
widespread on the eastern coast of the Americas from
the Gulf of Mexico south to the estuary of the River
Amazon in Brazil and on the Pacific coast from southern
Mexico to southern Peru (del Hoyo et al. 1996). Small
numbers are regularly found on the Hawaiian islands
(Pratt et al. 1987) and vagrants have occurred on several
atolls in the Pacific (Higgins and Davies 1996, and
references therein).

Gulls are among the most widely recorded of
vagrants, but the Laughing Gull, with its relatively short
migration routes, is not especially prone to vagrancy.
The species is regularly reported from Britain and
Ireland, with typically 2–3 records per year, but sightings
in the remainder of Europe are less frequent
(Hogendoorn and Steinhaus 1990, Alström et al.
1991). There have been several reports of the species
from North Africa, e.g. Morocco (Andrews 1997,
Dufourney 1997), and from West Africa (Ballon and
Dubois 1992, Yésou and Triplet 1995) but to our
knowledge there have been no confirmed sightings from
further south in Africa. There exists a single report of
an adult in Namibia from 9–13 M arch 1995 (D. Filby
in litt. 2002; see also Robertson 1995) but this seems
not to have been submitted to the appropriate rarities
commission (P. Hockey in litt. 2002). The first record
from Australia related to two birds seen in Cairns,
Other Australian records were not long in following and
by the end of 1989 the species had been reported an
additional three times from widely separated localities.
(Higgins and Davies 1996, and references therein).

As far as we have been able to ascertain, Laughing Gull was unknown in Asia before our observation (see also Robson 2000b). Shortly afterwards, however, there were a number of sightings in Japan. The first Laughing Gull for the country was observed and photographed on H asaki, Ibaraki on 17 June 2000 (H. Ikenaga in litt. 2002; we have been unable to locate any published reference to the sighting). The second record came a mere nine days later on 26 June 2000, when one in second-year plumage was photographed on Iuo tou Island, near the Bonin islands (Watanabe 2001). On 9 September 2000 a Laughing Gull (possibly the same individual) was found and photographed at Toyohashi in Aichi prefecture (Yamagata 2001; see also Onishi 2000). This bird remained in the area until at least November. We are unaware of any records from the year 2001 but an adult Laughing Gull in breeding plumage was observed several times at N amasaki, Ibaraki prefecture and at nearby Choshi, Chiba prefecture from 26 May until 4 June 2002 (H. Ikenaga in litt. 2002).

The fact that the species represents a comparatively recent addition to the bird lists of such ‘well-watched’ countries as Australia and Japan suggests that the lack of records in Asia before our sighting may not have resulted solely from a comparative lack of interest in gulls in the region. Nevertheless, we hope that the present report will encourage others to devote more attention to this group and we are confident that further discoveries will result.

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Red Phalarope Phalaropus fulicaria: a new species for Pakistan

MARK MALLALIEU

In August 1987, following the failure of the monsoon, Rawal Lake, Islamabad, Pakistan (39°42’ N 73°10’ E) had large areas of exposed mud which attracted wader species seldom seen in inland Pakistan (Roberts 1991). These included a Broad-billed Sandpiper Limicola falcinellus, several Terek Sandpipers Xenus cinereus and

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