

The ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ in Britain

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on behalf of BBRC and BOURC

Abstract This paper summarises the taxonomic history, identification, status and distribution of ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ *Larus michahellis atlantis*. It documents the first British records of this taxon, their assessment by BBRC and BOURC, and the subsequent addition of this subspecies to the British List.

Taxonomy

The dark-mantled, large white-headed gulls that breed in the North Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores, Canary Islands and Madeira have had a turbulent taxonomic history. They were acknowledged by nineteenth-century authors in a variety of different designations but in the first modern review of the complex Dwight (1922) proposed that they be treated as a discrete taxon, a new subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus atlantis*. Dwight (1925) referred to them as ‘Azorean Lesser Black-backed Gulls’, describing them as ‘resident on the islands and coasts of northwest Africa including the Azores, Madeira, Canary and perhaps the Cape Verde groups’. Subsequently, Vaurie (1965) treated them as a subspecies of the Herring Gull *L. argentatus atlantis*, one of a ‘*cachinnans* or southern group’, a treatment also followed by Cramp & Simmons (1982) and Grant (1986).

Recent genetic studies have shown that *atlantis* is not part of a ‘*cachinnans* or southern group’ of large gulls (Liebers *et al.* 2001). Instead it belongs to an ‘Atlantic-Mediterranean’ clade, separated by a deep genetic divide from *cachinnans* and the other members of an ‘Aralo-Caspian’ clade. Within this Atlantic-Mediterranean clade, *atlantis* is closely related to the Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis*, with the former most likely an ancestral taxon to the latter (Liebers *et al.* 2004).

Since the separation of Yellow-legged Gull from Herring Gull (e.g. Sangster *et al.* 2005), *atlantis* has been treated by most authorities

as a subspecies of the Yellow-legged Gull, *L. m. atlantis* – including the British Ornithologists’ Union (BOURC) and the IOC World Bird List (IOC) (Gill & Donsker 2017). As a breeding bird, ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ is restricted to the Atlantic islands, while the more widespread nominate subspecies breeds around the coasts of southwest Europe and throughout the Mediterranean as far east as the Black Sea.

The populations of *atlantis* breeding in the Canary Islands and Madeira differ slightly from those breeding in the Azores and there is some uncertainty over how smooth or abrupt the transition to nominate *michahellis* is. The taxonomic position of the Canary Islands and Madeiran populations (as well as those on the northwest African coast) is therefore debated. Some authors (e.g. Yésou 2002) have suggested restricting the use of the name *atlantis* to birds from the Azores. Olsen & Larsson (2003) supported this proposal but nevertheless included birds from the Canary Islands and Madeira within their definition of *atlantis*, as do most authorities (including BOURC and IOC).

The Yellow-legged Gulls in northern Spain also differ slightly (both genetically and morphologically) from nominate *michahellis* and are sometimes separated as ‘*lusitanicus*’ or ‘*cantabricans*’ (Olsen & Larsson 2003, <http://gull-research.org/lusitanicus/03cyfeb.html>). This form is rarely recognised but, given all the uncertainties, the current subspecies taxonomy of Yellow-legged Gull may merit review (Collinson *et al.* 2008).



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366. Fourth-calendar-year 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Flores, Azores, 14th October 2014. The stocky, dumpy structure and heavy head and bill are readily apparent, as are the dark ash-grey upperparts, heavily streaked head, very pale iris and four-coloured bill.

The English name for *atlantis* has also proved contentious and a number of alternatives are in use. These include 'Azorean Gull', 'Atlantic Gull' and 'Azorean Atlantic Gull'. 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' has been the name adopted by BOURC and this usage is followed here.

Identification

The identification of 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' is well described in the literature (Dubois 2001; Olsen & Larsson 2003; <http://gull-research.org/atlantis/1cyoct.html>; Gil-Velasco *et al.* 2017). In summary, typical *atlantis* (i.e. birds from the Azores) are – compared with nominate *michahellis* – small, compact, short-winged and short-legged. Adults have a darker mantle than *michahellis*, more similar to that of *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull, but perhaps the most noticeable feature is a strikingly dark, heavily streaked 'hood' between autumn and midwinter, most dense around the eye and extending to below the gape (but fainter on the hindneck). The wings contain much black in the primary tips, extending from P10 to P5 (primaries numbered descendantly, i.e. P10 is the outermost), and usually show only a small white 'mirror' on P10. The iris is pale yellow, even whitish, paler than that of nominate *michahellis*.

Younger age classes are dark and 'swarthy', and may resemble Lesser Black-backed Gull, American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus* or Kelp Gull *L. dominicanus* as much as nominate *michahellis*. On first- and second-calendar-year birds the underwing-coverts are very dark, the bill is all dark, the inner primary 'window' is faint and there are frequently dark marks (the so-called 'shin pads') on the tarsus.

As always with large white-headed gulls, there are a number of caveats. As noted above, birds from the Canary Islands and Madeira may be less distinctive, tending in appearance towards nominate *michahellis*. There are also potential problems in distinguishing *atlantis* from hybrids involving a range of other large white-headed gulls including (at least) Herring, Lesser Black-backed, American Herring and Kelp Gulls. Hybrid Yellow-legged × Herring, Yellow-legged × Lesser Black-backed and Herring × Lesser Black-backed Gulls are the most likely sources of difficulty in northwest Europe. However, adult hybrids typically show strikingly broad white scapular and tertial crescents, at least a large white 'mirror' on P10 and rather coarse and diffuse head streaking in winter (<http://surfbirds.com/ID%20Articles/adriaensgullsI203.html>).

Status and distribution

Hagemeijer & Blair (1997) gave a total of at least 8,000 pairs (6,000 on Madeira and the Desertas and 2,000 on the Azores). To this total can be added a further minimum of 7,000 pairs in the Canary Islands (Lorenzo 2007). The population appears to be growing, with Lorenzo (2007) noting a significant recent increase in parts of the Canaries and Neves *et al.* (2006) reporting 4,249 pairs on the Azores in 2004, a rise attributed to the increasing availability of human refuse on the islands. The total population may now, therefore, be in excess of 20,000 pairs.

Dwight (1925) considered *atlantis* to be 'resident' and that it 'probably seldom wanders far from its breeding range'. Vaurie (1965) referred to it as 'sedentary but possibly wandering to the Atlantic coast of Africa south to the Gambia'. Grant (1986) reinforced this view, also describing it as 'resident', although it 'may wander to west African coast'.

However, the taxon appears to roam more widely than these authors suggest. In recent years it has wandered west, reaching North America on a number of occasions. In Canada, a bird collected on the Madeleine Islands, Quebec, on 16th August 1973 represented the first Nearctic occurrence of *atlantis* (Wilds & Czaplak 1994). Another

Yellow-legged Gull was found in St John's, Newfoundland, in January 1985, and since 1995 the species has become almost annual in Newfoundland, with most or all records believed to relate to *atlantis*. Another *atlantis* was recorded on the Madeleine Islands in June 2003 (Howell *et al.* 2014). Yellow-legged Gulls, either *atlantis* or nominate *michahellis*, have also reached the USA, with records from Washington DC/Maryland (one individual), Virginia, Florida and Texas. In North America, however, problems persist in distinguishing Yellow-legged Gulls from hybrid Lesser Black-backed × American Herring Gulls (Howell *et al.* 2014).

In the eastern Atlantic, around 15 records of *atlantis* have been accepted in Ireland to the end of 2014, and since 2004 it has occurred almost annually (www.irbc.ie/reports/irbreports.php). Note, however, that these records are published as 'provisional'. The first accepted record for mainland Spain (published as 'showing characters of' this taxon) was at Playa de Louro, Muros, A Coruña, on 14th October 2012 (Gil-Velasco *et al.* 2017).

British records

Barra, Outer Hebrides, 10th September 2005

On 10th September 2005, Andrew Stevenson found a near-adult, dark-mantled, large gull with a 'hood' of dark streaks on the beach at Craigston, Barra, Outer Hebrides (plate 367). The following details are taken from his submission:

'It was a large gull, similar in size to the Herring Gulls present, with a stocky, full-chested build and a "square" flat-crowned head. The bill was also heavy and slightly shorter than Herring Gull in direct comparison. The legs were not as long-looking as those of Lesser Black-backed Gull. The combination of the heavy bill, heavily streaked head and very pale iris gave it a distinctive rather glaring or aggressive look. The head was neatly streaked with warm,



Andrew Stevenson

367. Near-adult 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Barra, Outer Hebrides, 10th September 2005. The stocky structure with a relatively heavy bill and short legs, very dark ash-grey upperparts and heavy head streaking can all be seen here.



Martin Elliott

368. Second-calendar-year 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Sennen, Cornwall, 28th October 2008. The stocky structure with rather broad wings and heavy bill are evident. Even more obvious, however, is the dark 'swarthy' body plumage. Note also the dark underwing-coverts and faint pale inner primary 'window'.

rather dark brown streaks. These streaks were quite fine, becoming a little heavier and coarser on the rear crown and upper nape. At close range there was a neat, almost unstreaked white area around the bill base. The streaking extended from the upper throat up across the ear-coverts towards the upper nape. The lower nape and the rest of the head and neck area were unmarked. This created a distinct "hooded" or "capped" effect.

'The underparts and tail were white with no dark markings in the tail. The mantle, scapulars and wing-coverts were a rather dark grey, only marginally paler than a *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull. It was also slightly more ashy-grey than blue-grey. The upperparts were very dark compared with the adult Herring Gulls and noticeably darker than the adult Common Gulls [*L. canus*]. There were some brownish feathers in the primary coverts and one or two in the wing-coverts and secondaries, indicating immaturity in an otherwise adult plumage. The wings were in obvious moult with ragged secondaries and the wing point formed by P7.

P8–10 were noted as still growing. P10 was only visible when the wings were held loosely, showing as a fresh white tip beyond the primary coverts. There was extensive black on P7, less on P6 (though with an obviously more black outer web) and a broad black subterminal bar on P5. On the right wing only there was a dark subterminal smudge on P4. The legs were a dull, slightly creamy yellow. The bill was dull yellow in colour, brighter at the base and paler at the tip. The red spot was large and filled the tip of the lower mandible but did not quite reach the upper mandible. There was a thin dark brown vertical smudge at the rear edge of the spot. The eye showed a strongly reddish orbital ring against a very pale, almost white, iris.'

Sennen, Cornwall, late July to 11th November 2008

In late July 2008, Martin Elliott found a large, unusually dark 2CY gull frequenting two ploughed turnip fields at Sennen, Cornwall (plates 368 & 369). The following details and discussion are abridged from Elliott (2008),

the paper that formed the submission to BBRC:

‘The bird was extremely worn and in advanced moult, and I originally assumed it to be a dark-looking first-summer Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. f. graellsii*. Given better views, however, it resembled an American Herring Gull *L. smithsonianus* in that it looked bulky and had dark underparts contrasting with a whitish head and neck. However, closer scrutiny revealed that, although the uppertail-coverts and undertail-coverts were heavily barred, they were not densely barred enough for *smithsonianus* and the underparts were, if anything, too dark, with the feather patterning consisting of dense, coarse and irregular dark brown barring. There was also too much white in the bases of the outer rectrices for *smithsonianus* and the bill was all dark.

‘The bird remained throughout August, never associating with the many Lesser Black-backed Gulls feeding in and moving through the area. In mid August, I took some photographs which clearly showed dark tarsus markings (“shin pads”). By early September, the bird had acquired a “hood” of fine, dense streaking (emphasising its pale iris) and the new body feathers were as dark

as those they replaced. At this point, the *atlantis* alarm bells rang! I obtained better pictures on 2nd September, which showed further pointers to *atlantis*. I became more convinced that *atlantis* was, indeed, the correct identification and, finally, on 12th September, I took photographs good enough to back this up. The bird completed its primary moult by late October and was last seen on 11th November.

‘The Sennen gull fitted the known criteria for *atlantis* very neatly. Its size and overall dark appearance meant that the only real contenders were Lesser Black-backed Gull and Kelp Gull. Second-winter American Herring Gull could be dismissed for much the same reason as mentioned above for first-cycle birds of that species, and any adult-type mantle feathers or scapulars would have been much paler grey. Moult timing alone should eliminate Kelp Gull but the Sennen bird differed further from that species, initially in its largely white juvenile outer tail feathers and later in its mid-grey adult-type mantle and scapular feathers. Kelp Gull also has a subtly different head-shape and, more importantly, a slightly droop-tipped or blob-ended bill, with a short, steeply angled gonys. The Sennen bird showed a more evenly deep bill,

with a relatively long gonys and a long, even curve to the culmen, beginning over the nostril. As for Lesser Black-backed Gull, the bill structure, heavy body, broad-based wings, short tarsus (and apparently large feet) eliminated even the stockiest male *graellsii*. The dark hood, pale eye, dark body and “shin pads” are all features which can be shown by second-cycle Lesser Black-backed Gulls but they are very rare in combination.’



Martin Elliott

369. Second-calendar-year ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Sennen, Cornwall, autumn 2008. The heavy head and bill are clearly visible, as is the heavy brown wash to the head and body with dark grey adult-type feathers appearing in the mantle and scapulars.



Ian Lewington

370. Near-adult 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Didcot, Oxfordshire, October 2009. Surrounded by nominate *michahellis* Yellow-legged Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus*, the bird appears powerfully built and heavy-headed, while its upperparts are a distinctly dark ash-grey. Most obvious are the dense head streaking, darkest around the 'face', and the four-coloured bill.

**Didcot, Oxfordshire,
5th October to 26th December 2009**

On 5th October 2009, Ian Lewington observed a near-adult 'hooded' large gull with 'swarthy' grey upperparts at Appleford Pit and subsequently at the rubbish tip at Didcot, in Oxfordshire (plates 370 & 371). The following details are taken from his submission and also draw on Lewington (2009):

'It was a striking bird and dominated its patch, vigorously defending any morsel it discovered and making aggressive advances combining open wings and "long calls" to rob others of their finds. On closer inspection, the "hood" was formed by dark streaking, densest on the ear-coverts, crown sides and malar region while ending abruptly on the nape, accentuating the hooded effect. The sooty face set off its piercing yellow/white iris and small pupil, completing the meanest of looks. The bill was equally striking, being four-coloured. The basal third, an insipid greenish yellow, was separated from the bright orange-yellow tip and

reddish gonydeal spot by a broad dark central band. The upperparts were a shade of grey unlike anything I had seen on any Yellow-



Roger Wyatt

371. Near-adult 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Didcot, Oxfordshire, 11th October 2009. The striking head and bill markings are shown to dramatic effect. Also visible are the dark 'shin pads' on the front of the tarsi.

legged Gull and made all the more arresting by the contrastingly white underparts. Its legs were a dull, washed-out yellow. It was in active primary moult and even though P10 was half-grown and P9 two-thirds its full length, the wing-tip still appeared extensively black with a band on P5 and a spot on the outer web of P4 on the left wing only. There was a mirror on P10 and the outer 2–3 primary coverts had dark centres. The latter feature, together with the bill pattern, the dense head streaking and the dull leg colour, indicated that it was not an adult but possibly a fourth-winter. Closer views obtained later in its stay revealed the retained ghosting of the dark “shin pads” on the front of the tarsi.’

Record assessment

BBRC assessment

During the assessment of these submissions by BBRC it was agreed that all three birds showed a convincing set of structural, plumage and bare-part characters which matched the current understanding of the appearance of *atlantis* and ruled out all other taxa, notably nominate *michahellis* Yellow-legged Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Importantly, the three birds had been observed for prolonged periods, detailed notes and photographs had been taken, and the observers all had much experience of large gulls. As a consequence, the three records were accepted by unanimous vote and forwarded together as a batch to BOURC for consideration for admission to the British List.

BOURC assessment

With no provenance issues to consider, BOURC’s assessment focused on vagrancy potential and identification. Committee members agreed that *atlantis* was a potential vagrant. Although its population is relatively small and it has historically been regarded as sedentary, the subsequent scatter of extralimital records in North America and in Ireland showed that vagrancy to Britain was possible.

As for identification, all three birds were considered to be *atlantis*. There is, of course, especially with large white-headed gulls, the possibility of a hybrid or intergrade origin but, given that none of these birds showed obviously problematic characters, they were given the benefit of the doubt – an approach

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372. First-calendar-year ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Terceira, Azores, 20th October 2012. This bird resembles nominate *michahellis* but is sturdy, compact and short-legged. Its head and body are also extensively washed brown while the almost wholly dark greater coverts and tertials add to the overall brown impression. The tail and uppertail- and undertail-coverts are, however, contrastingly black and white.



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373. First-calendar-year 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' *Larus michahellis atlantis*, Terceira, Azores, 8th October 2014. In flight the impression is still of a very uniform dark brown bird with a contrasting black and white tail. The dark greater coverts and underwing-coverts can be seen here but also striking is the near-absence of a pale inner primary 'window', enhancing the resemblance to Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*.

consistent with that taken for all other taxa.

The remaining task was to determine which record would provide the most 'water-tight' 'first for Britain'. The Outer Hebrides bird was well described but, owing to its moult state, there remained some uncertainty over the precise primary pattern. Furthermore, the photographic documentation, although good, did not allow a critical analysis of all features. By contrast, the Cornish bird was described in great detail and the submission was accompanied by a long series of excellent photographs. The Oxfordshire bird was similarly well described and photographed. Two members voted for the Outer Hebrides bird to be accepted as the first for Britain, while six members voted for the Cornish individual. As a result, the Cornish bird was accepted as the official 'first'.

The admission of 'Azorean Yellow-legged Gull' to the British List was announced in October 2016 (BOU 2017). Following acceptance by BOURC, all three records were included in the BBRC Report for 2015 (Hudson *et al.* 2016), the Cornish and Oxfordshire individuals in the main listing of

records and the Outer Hebrides bird in the accompanying species comment. This leaves the last bird somewhat 'in limbo' but, although not included in BBRC's statistics (which start from the official 'first'), it remains an accepted record.

Subsequent records

Since 2009 there have been a number of further observations of *atlantis* in Britain, mostly in the East Midlands. These are considered to relate to the same individual first seen in Oxfordshire in 2009 and are listed in full in the BBRC reports for 2015 and 2016 (Hudson *et al.* 2016; Holt *et al.* 2017). In summary, the Didcot bird has now been observed in each year from 2009 until 2015 and has so far visited Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Gloucestershire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. Its most recent occurrence was at Marston, Lincolnshire, on 26th October 2015, when it was recorded as a 10CY+, i.e. at least ten years old. Since large gulls can live for over 20 years (Cramp & Simmons 1982), this individual clearly has the potential to be found again.

Interestingly, all the accepted sightings in 2010–15 fell in a relatively narrow time ‘window’, between 7th September and 11th November, no doubt linked to its acquisition of the distinctive non-breeding ‘hood’ at this time of year. It seems unlikely that the bird leaves England in November but its whereabouts later in the winter and at other times of year, when it is less distinctive and probably overlooked, remain unknown.

Though now a proven vagrant to Britain, ‘Azorean Yellow-legged Gull’ is likely to remain very rare though perhaps under-recorded. Given the continuing uncertainties around the precise geographical and plumage limits of *atlantis*, its identification will continue to pose challenges and only birds showing the complete suite of requisite characters are likely to be considered acceptable. In a vagrant context, Azorean birds are the most distinctive and will therefore find most favour with record assessors.

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