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Hybridisation between Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* and Black-headed Gull *L. ridibundus* in Irkutsk, Russia

IGOR V. FEFELOV

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* breeds from the Iberian peninsula to Central Asia, between 20°N and 50°N. It breeds as far east as western Pakistan, Tajikistan and the Novosibirsk region in western Siberia (Zubakin 1988, Ryabitsev 2001). The species was first recorded around Lake Baikal in June 1989 when an adult male was collected in a colony of Black-headed Gulls in the Selenga delta, in south-western Baikal on 15 June (Tupitsyn and Fefelov 1995). Another was seen in June 1991 between Irkutsk and Angarsk, in a flock of non-breeding individuals of Yellow-legged Gull *L. cachinnans* (Popov and Salovarov 2000). A third record was documented in June 2001 at Gusinoye Ozero lake in Buryatia, south-east of Baikal (Tebb and Ranner 2002). Other vagrants have occurred in east Asia (Moores 2002, Tebb and Ranner 2002).

OBSERVATIONS

On 25 May 2003, we found a Slender-billed Gull near Black-headed Gull colonies in a wetland on the edge of Irkutsk (52°19′N 104°13′E). Black-headed Gulls first bred here during the 1980s, and c.300 pairs have nested since the early 1990s. By the end of the month the Slender-billed Gull was found to be paired to a Black-headed Gull, and building a nest in a small colony of seven pairs of Black-headed Gulls in a marsh with reedmace *Typha latifolia*. On 3 June this contained three eggs measuring 53.4–36.7 mm, 53.0–35.5 mm, and 52.2–35.4 mm. They were brownish-green with blackish spotting. The egg-coloration was at the lighter end of the range found in Black-headed Gull. We assume therefore that the female of the pair was the Black-headed Gull, as the eggs of Slender-billed Gull have a significantly lighter background colour: white with a pinkish or cream, but not green, tinge (Zubakin 1988). The structure and size of the nest showed no consistent differences from nests of Black-headed Gulls in the vicinity.

No displays between the pair were seen. Both birds incubated the eggs. When the Slender-billed Gull was flushed from the nest, it flew 30–50 m away, showed no aggressive behaviour, and called less frequently than Black-headed Gulls normally do. Only twice during our observations did we hear it give the species's distinctive 'ka-ka-ka' alarm call.

On 11 June, the Slender-billed Gull was found dead near the colony, having been shot. It was an adult male in breeding plumage. The following biometrics were taken: wing length: 315 mm, tail length 116 mm, tarsus: 52 mm, bill length: 42 mm. The dimensions of the testicles were 15x8 mm (left) and 8x7 mm (right). The skin has been transferred to the Zoological Institute, St. Petersburg, Russia.

As incubation by single parents is atypical in gulls, the clutch was exchanged with that of a pair of Black-headed Gulls nearby, in order to increase the chance of survival. Two chicks of the mixed pair hatched on 23 June and the third followed on 24 June. In the first few days, their coloration was generally similar to, but lighter than, similarly aged Black-headed Gull chicks. The distinctive grey colour on the upperparts of Slender-billed Gull chicks (Zubakin 1988) was absent. The second chick had less black spotting, and a large (10x12 mm) black patch on the front of the crown instead of many small spots as found on Black-headed Gull chicks. Zubakin (1988) studied Black-headed Gull around Moscow and Slender-billed Gull in the Black Sea, and noted that some Slender-billed Gull chicks may have an almost entirely black head, but that this is never observed in Black-headed chicks. Photographs of the chicks show that they are intermediate in appearance between the two species (V. A.

Zubakin *in litt.* 2003). There appear to be few published photographs of young Slender-billed chicks; one in Sauer (1982) closely resembles the second chick described above.

On 26 June, the two younger chicks were ringed in the nests (the older one had already disappeared). As juveniles, the birds had lighter-coloured upperparts, being greyish rather than brownish as in Black-headed Gulls. The base of the bill was pink contrasting with the dark tip, rather than the greyish-pink bill base and less contrasting dark tip of juvenile Black-headed Gull. The last date when the juveniles were seen was 27 July, when they could fly well.

This appears to be the first case of hybridisation between Slender-billed Gull and Black-headed Gulls, and occurred c.2,000 km east of known breeding areas for Slender-billed Gull.

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Notes on the population density and feeding ecology of the Collared Falconet *Microhierax caerulescens* in Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

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The Collared Falconet *Microhierax caerulescens* is found from India, Nepal and Bhutan through to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). In India, the species is found throughout the lower Himalayan foothills from Garhwal eastwards to Assam, the north-eastern hill states and Arunachal Pradesh, usually up to 900 m occasionally to 2,000 m (Ali and Ripley 1987). It occurs in deciduous, moist-deciduous and evergreen forest, and is most often observed in man-made clearings, natural open spaces and forest margins (Ali and Ripley 1987). Relatively little has been published on the species, apart from observations of allopreening (Sparks 1965), and breeding (Naoroji 1997, Kemp and Van Zyl 1998). Here we present some observations on the feeding ecology and population density of the species in Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India.

STUDY AREA

Buxa Tiger Reserve (26°30–55′N 89°20–55′E) is located in the north-eastern corner of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, India at 60–1,750m. It covers an area of 760 km^2, with a core area of 385 km^2 and a buffer zone of 375 km^2. The habitat is mainly tropical moist-deciduous forest (Champion and Seth 1968) dominated by sal *Shorea robusta*, plus evergreen forest, riverine forest, scrub, grassland, and plantations of sal, teak *Tectona grandis* and jarul *Lagerstroemia reginae*. The temperature ranges from 12°C to 32°C, and the average annual rainfall is 4,100 mm.

METHODS

Falconets were observed during a study on raptor ecology carried out in the reserve during 1998–2000. A 45 km transect was driven every two weeks from January 2000 to December 2000 from Damanpur to Checko via Panijhora, Pambubusti, Rajabhathkawa, Santrabari, Jainty and '23rd mile tower'. A 50 m band on each side of the transect was searched, with one person observing each side from a slow-moving (20 km/h) jeep. Each census was carried out during 07h00–11h00. Cloudy and rainy days were avoided.