

STATUS OF THE YELLOW-LEGGED GULL *LARUS MICHAHELLIS* AS A BREEDING BIRD IN THE NETHERLANDS

GEELPOOTMEEUWEN ALS BROEDVOGEL IN NEDERLAND

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Yellow-legged Gulls *Larus michahellis* were found breeding in The Netherlands for the first time in 1985 in the large mixed colonies of Herring *L. argentatus* and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. graellsii* in the Port of Rotterdam (Europoort-Maasvlakte), opposite Hoek van Holland. Since then, the species has bred here annually with 15-25 breeding birds per annum. Outside this area, the species has been found breeding on the Frisian coast of the IJsselmeer, near Lelystad (Oostelijk Flevoland), on a building in the harbour of IJmuiden, and on the storm surge barrier in the Oosterschelde, south-west Netherlands (in each locality one or two cases per annum). So far, the species formed mixed pairs paired with either Herring or Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1950s, a marked increase in numbers was observed in the Yellow-legged Gulls *Larus michahellis* from the Mediterranean (Géroudet 1952), which until then was known to occur only along the coasts of North Africa, Greece, Jugoslavia, Italy, France and Iberia. At that time, little was known about its breeding status in Anatolia or its occurrence in the Black Sea area. Today, breeding is known to occur along Turkish, Bulgarian and Rumanian coasts and on roofs of buildings (Nankinov 1992; Klein & Buchheim 1997; Lars Jonsson *in litt.*).

Increasing populations in other gull species have generally been linked with the growth of the human population and to an increased availability of human waste (*e.g.* del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). As a result of the increase in numbers, gulls began to colonise new areas partly stimulated by control measures. My own data show that newly settled gull pairs may settle elsewhere once their eggs have been destroyed, with displacements of up to 30 km. The expansion of Yellow-legged Gulls was also reflected in the increasing numbers visiting the Swiss lakes after the breeding season (Géroudet 1952, 1960) and later on also along the French Atlantic coast (Marion *et al.* 1985; Yésou 1985). From the 1960s onwards, the number of observations of Yellow-legged Gulls in north-west European countries has increased, sometimes leading to heated debates as

to where the gulls come from (Kist 1961). Increased knowledge of field characters enable birdwatchers to identify these gulls nowadays, even in immature plumages. As a result we now know more about their pattern of occurrence.

Sightings and recoveries of (colour-)ringed birds show that Yellow-legged Gulls originating from the Adriatic as well from the western Mediterranean (France, eastern Spain) visit north-west Europe, including the Low Countries. The overall pattern is that adults start arriving around the middle of July, soon followed by juveniles. Immature birds may also spend the summer in north-west Europe and adults undergo a complete moult here. Around the end of October after having finished moulting, numbers drop again (Carrera *et al.* 1989; De Mesel 1990; *pers. observ.*).

COLONISING EUROPE

The process of colonisation of new areas by gulls often begins by hybridisation with closely related forms. This was shown by Brouwer (1927), Tinbergen (1929), van Dobben (1931) and Voous (1946), at the arrival of Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. graellsii* as a breeding bird in The Netherlands, when these gulls hybridised with Herring Gull *L. argentatus*. As soon as the number of individuals of the colonising species increases, the phenomenon literally dies out. The first instances of Yellow-legged Gulls breeding in Germany and south-west France, outside the traditional breeding range, were also cases of interbreeding with either Herring or Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Later, these were followed by pure pairs, when the numbers further increased (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1982; Yésou 1991; M. Boschert *in litt.*).

THE PRESENT SITUATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

In The Netherlands, breeding of Yellow-legged Gulls was first established in 1985 (van Swelm *in press*), when two males were found nesting with a Lesser Black-backed and a Herring Gull, respectively, in the large colonies of the Port of Rotterdam (Europoort and Maasvlakte). By scrutinising these very large colonies, 15 to 25 similar cases were found each year since then. Colour-ringing has proved that the pairs remained together throughout the years and that they produce young every year in the same territory. Until now, we have been unable to prove the breeding of a pure pair of Yellow-legged Gulls (*contra* van den Berg & Bosman 1999). In 1991, however, I found a pair of which both individuals had dark mantles and that produced one young. At the time, however, these birds did not have yellow legs, but I have found that yellow legs may develop with increasing age (*pers. observ.*). In this case, I was unable to verify this development, because the territory was lost due to port expansion activities. Outside the Port of Rotterdam colonies, five more hybrid pairs were discovered. One male bird paired with a Herring Gull was found at Neeltje Jans

(Zeeland) in 1992 and subsequent years (Vercruijse 1995). A female paired with a Lesser Black-backed Gull in the fishing harbour of IJmuiden (Noord-Holland) successfully raised young in 1987, 1991-93 and in 1995-96, but failed in 1994 (Cottaar & Verbeek 1994). Again in IJmuiden, an unsuccessful male was found paired with a Herring Gull in 1996. Further, a female was mated with a male Herring Gull in the Workumerwaard, Friesland, in 1997 and 1998. Eggs of this hybrid pair were found and measured in 1998 (J. Hooymeier *pers. comm.*). Finally, a mixed pair Yellow-legged Gull x Herring Gull was found near Lelystad (Oostelijk Flevoland; van Dijk *et al.* 1998). So far, the origin of only one bird has been proved through ringing. The male in Zeeland had been ringed as a chick in 1984 near Marseille, France (Vercruijse 1995).

DISCUSSION

In Germany (upper reaches of the river Rhine) and in France (Atlantic coast), the expansion of Yellow-legged Gulls also led to hybridisation with either Lesser Black-backed Gulls or Herring Gulls, but was followed by the settlement of pure pairs. In The Netherlands, however, so far only hybrid pairs have occurred since the first nesting was established in 1985. We still find new individuals of Yellow-legged Gulls in our colonies, but only in mixed pairs. It appears that the number of Yellow-legged Gulls occurring in The Netherlands outside the breeding season is increasing. However, this may also be the result of an increase of competent observers and a more complete coverage of observers. Part of the increase was initially overlooked. De Heer (1980) discussed the increase in numbers along the Dutch coast and did not mention the presence of gulls at inland rubbish tips. Nowadays, we know that a considerable part of the Yellow-legged Gull population in The Netherlands occurs there. These birds travel daily between their roost and the rubbish tip, but will only be seen at the latter sites. The slight increase in the numbers seen along the coast is probably the result of a better coverage by observers and an increased ability to identify these birds. If the number stagnates, it is possible that the expansion has found its limits in The Netherlands. In this case, the settling of pure Yellow-legged Gulls in The Netherlands may possibly never take place.

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SAMENVATTING

De Geelpootmeeuw Larus michahellis heeft zijn broedgebied in de loop van de twintigste eeuw vanuit het Middellandse-Zeegebied sterk naar het noorden uitgebreid. In Nederland werd de soort voor het eerst in 1985 in het Europoort-Maasvlaktegebied vastgesteld. Daarna heeft de soort hier

jaarlijks gebroed (15-25 gevallen per jaar). Elders is de soort op vier plaatsen broedend vastgesteld (Friese IJsselmeerkust, nabij Lelystad, IJmuiden, Neeltje Jans; in alle gebieden met één of twee broedgevallen per jaar). Alle broedgevallen hebben tot nu toe betrekking op gemengde paren met een Zilvermeeuw *L. argentatus* of Kleine Mantelmeeuw *L. grællsii*.

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