

News and notices

BOOK REVIEWS

KLAUS MALLING OLSEN & HANS LARSSON 2003. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Helm, London. ISBN 0-7136-7087-8, hardback, 608 pp, 83 plates, 823 photographs. Price £45.

For many of us gulls have become the ultimate avian soap opera. Peter Grant set the scene with *Gulls: a guide to identification* back in 1982 and then added more characters to the plot four years later in a second edition enlarged to include North American species. At this stage, the storyline adhered solely to identification complexities; nobody imagined that the denouement was destined to swirl around challenges to the taxonomic status quo, never mind searching for clues to evolutionary relationships among the DNA of the birds themselves. Gull-watching became addictive in the 1990s. In Ireland, a veil was lifted from previously overlooked American Herring Gulls and Thayer's Gulls, while a succession of pioneering identification papers murmured that big changes were afoot on continental Europe and beyond.

Although just a decade ago, this was an era of portentous smoke signals on the far horizon. Hard news was difficult to come by, unless you could read Swedish or German, never mind comprehending terminology such as 'P10', Kodak Grey Scale, and a proliferation of subspecies names in Latin. I remember feverishly photocopying an English language 'bootleg' translation of Lars Jonsson's 1996 paper in *Var Fagelvarld* on Yellow-legged and Caspian Gulls (subsequently repeated and updated in *Alula* in 1998) and taking out a subscription to *Limicola* to pore over photographs of these 'new gulls' in Detlef Gruber's blitzkrieg articles on field recognition. Since then, perceptive Young Turks have spearheaded advance after advance, at times being derided by a stuffed shirt establishment unwilling to grapple with a changing orthodoxy (warranting the creation of additional species) among, in particular, the 'large white-headed gulls'. Within the last decade, gull identification websites on the internet and periodicals (principally, *Alula*, *Birding World*, and *Dutch Birding*) have been the *modus operandi* by which the growing pool of knowledge has been disseminated. In essence, a quiet but sweeping revolution has taken place. However, one thing has been lacking: an oracle describing, portraying and synthesizing all that has happened.

Klaus Malling Olsen and bird artist Hans Larsson seem to have carved something of a niche for themselves in identification guides. Their two previous books on terns (1995) and skuas (1997) set an acceptable standard, especially by

the inclusion of many well-reproduced photographs (more trustworthy than all but the best illustration plates). How did they rise to perhaps their greatest challenge – all the gulls of the northern hemisphere? Presumably, they were aware that, given root-and-branch taxonomic changes coupled with burgeoning identification information, the book was assured a massive audience. The result is a monograph aspiring to cover the gull universe: from straightforward species such as Ivory Gull or Heerman's, to the vexing subtlety of Vega and Heuglin's.

With so many photographs per species, it could be argued that plates were unnecessary. Good photographs have an authenticity that cannot be questioned, whereas artwork relies upon personal interpretation. By any yardstick, Larsson's skills are worth having. His style smacks of a Lars Jonsson wannabe (nothing wrong with that), he has a natural touch with colours, and many of his gulls are fresh, life-like, and not over-egged with the beauty salon treatment of illustrators like Killian Mullarney. Larsson seems to be more comfortable with birds at rest than in flight, although I suspect he is really at his best when he paints a species he knows well. Top among the smaller gulls are his standing Common Gulls and quite the best (at rest) Laughing and Franklin's Gulls I have ever seen. By the shape of his Saunder's Gulls, I suspect he has never seen one (once airborne, the bird has weird, long and sickle-shaped wings). His adult Audouin's Gull is in a familiar rut: I have yet to find a painting that shows the striking grey-washed body of the species. I winced at a range of jarring depictions, from rakish wing-tips on Little Gulls to odd leg colour on second-winter Mediterranean Gull. Furthermore, it is about time that the nearly parallel, 'broken Polo mint', eye markings of breeding plumage Mediterranean Gull were committed to paint. For good measure, flying juvenile Sabine's Gulls are floppier on the wing than adults, which is probably a by-product of their blunter wings and shorter, less deeply forked tails. These Real World differences are yet to catch a bird painter's eye.

As a general theme, the book's artwork follows a stereotyped layout, presumably for easy comparison. Unfortunately, for the large gulls, the birds themselves look stereotyped. I could easily believe that Larsson used the same template for every large gull in the northern hemisphere. After a while, turning page after page of similarly shaped and identically posed subjects (albeit nicely painted) became like counting sheep. German-born Joseph Wolf, one of the greatest bird painters of all time (from the nineteenth century) lived by the artistic mantra 'Life! Life! Life!' Good drawing, he felt, needed to capture personality. I felt that was missing from the larger gulls. Not many of them were wrong, but where was the benign face, guardsman stance, and chopstick legs of Caspian Gull; the mincing strut of Ring-billed; the 'Great Black-backed Gull in sheep's clothing' structure of Yellow-legged Gull; or the inelegant lines of Kumlien's, compared with more shapely Iceland Gull? On a technical level,

Larsson seems to think that every time, after first-winter, a large gull moults its coverts and scapulars, it replaces them with a full set of new, homogeneously-chequered 'second winter' feathers. In practice, this is almost never the case. Uniformity of pattern breaks down, and a variable, individualistic patchwork is the norm. Hence, I cannot relate to several of his pristine-plumaged second-winter large gulls. For Caspian Gull, it would have been helpful – and more representative – to depict at least one first-winter with the species' often-characteristic wingbar (formed by dark-based greater coverts), which can be so noticeable at rest.

I was disappointed by Larsson's occasional failure to echo information presented in the accompanying text. In this regard, he does not show the striking, raspberry-coloured legs of adult Thayer's Gull (sometimes also evident in other ages) and none of the Glaucous-winged Gulls in his plate bear a close facial resemblance to the species in the flesh (long lore, pig eye in asymmetric position high on head, peculiar drooping bill). But hold on a minute. Inexplicably, when you scrutinise the four pages of adult gull taxa near the beginning of the book, you find that here he has caught the Glaucous-winged Gull almost to a tee. The paintings of age development on page 15 are useful (although only standing gulls are shown). However, as laid out, the progression from one age group to the next forces the eye to zigzag across the page. Perhaps this is not Larsson's fault, nor perhaps are the several (to my mind sloppy) labelling flaws in the gull topography charts.

In terms of quantity, the text is impressive. It is chock-full of all the paraphernalia of the modern gull-watcher from forensic descriptions of individual feathers (and variation in the pattern) to copious notations of grey plumage tones index-linked to Kodak's patented 'grey scale'. My mind could hardly take it all in. Then I remembered that churning out detail does not necessarily facilitate good communication – that requires lucidity and clear explanation. In a nutshell, there is far too much text in this book. Worse, it is not so much Olympic torch quality, more overblown pedantry. Malling Olsen has thrown in everything that seems to have been written about gulls since Grant, but he is not much good at interpreting it. You cannot fault him for effort. Every species and each age class is discussed under 'Identification' in good detail; then discussed again under 'Description', but this time suffocated with techno-speak and intrusive (and often needless) referencing. Bizarrely, sometimes several references are lumped together inside a single bracket – reducing subsequent literature searches to a game of 'Whodunit'.

I wondered whom the author had in mind when he was writing the text. Anoraks who would be impressed with a nice big red hardback drenched with gull-speak? With other authors, especially Lars Jonsson (even after translation), you get the feeling that layers of confusion are scraped away, that myths and

errors are finally consigned to the dustbin, and that a new truthful insight is laid before you. I do not doubt that gulls intrigue Malling Olsen – but his curiosity comes across as unfocused, and obscured by impenetrable text. I am sorry to say that I quibbled and queried my way through many pages, noting down points that I felt were incorrect: from claimed statistical overlap in back colour between *argentatus* Herring Gull and *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gull, to gawking at the balderdash written concerning the alleged Mediterranean x Common Gull parentage of a slightly aberrant Black-headed Gull (plate 8). I was regularly frustrated at several presentational quirks. Examples include Malling Olsen's instruction in photo captions to compare the individual depicted in one photograph with numerous others. Yet, he often does not tell the reader which criteria should be compared or, worse, his analysis is muddled or wrong. A spread-winged adult *argentatus* Herring Gull in plate 367 is to be compared with an *argenteus* Herring Gull in plate 365, and, in turn, with an American Herring Gull (full species) in plate 321. A few glib words about *argenteus* having the most black in the wing tip is the gist of what is said. However, waffle follows about alleged P5 differences between American Herring Gull and *argenteus* (not borne out: compare left wing of each species) while a well-shown virtually diagnostic difference (the *thayeri*-pattern on P9 of the American Herring Gull) is not mentioned. Malling Olsen has a habit of saying in his captions what he 'knows' a species shows in life, even if the feature is not shown in the published photograph. In plate 375, side-by-side flying Caspian and Yellow-legged Gulls are compared. It is claimed that the Yellow-legged has (in contrast to the Caspian Gull) 'a broader bill with bulbous tip and well-marked gonys angle'. In the photo, the reverse is true. In plate 379, a first-summer Yellow-legged Gull is supposed to show worn plumage. Actually, its plumage looks remarkably fresh. In plate 314, a flying American Herring Gull shows 'tertials with extensive dark markings'. Once airborne, the lower scapulars overlap the tertials (making them invisible) on all flying gulls.

I could go on – as others already have about gaffes in wing pattern descriptions of Heuglin's Gull (*Birding Scotland* 7(4): 172). However, there is absolutely no doubt that, like many other gull-watchers, I will refer to 'Malling Olsen & Larsson' more than any other reference. It is not all smoke and mirrors! Personally, I think much of the blame for its shortcomings rests with its publisher, Helm, who have presided unprofessionally over an incoherent text and turgid layout – both of which could have been hugely improved. Is *Gulls* a spoiler, a tome that, by virtue of its monopoly status, we will just have to live with? That is my view. Until something better comes along, this book, I believe, is to gull identification what George W. Bush is to Planet Earth.

Anthony McGeehan

CADIOU, B., PONS, J.-M. & YÉSOU, P. (Eds.) 2004. *Les oiseaux marins nicheurs de France métropolitaine (1960-2000)* [Breeding seabirds in metropolitan France 1960-2000]. Biotope Publishers. ISBN 2-914817-03-7, hardback, 218 pages.

This book is the first of its kind in presenting a highly detailed analysis of France's marine bird populations. It is based mainly on data collected by several hundred volunteers, both amateur and professional, who contributed to various national bird surveys established from the 1960s. Co-ordinated by GISOM (Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique Oiseaux Marins), all data are presented to indicate historical changes in seabird populations in France up to 2000. The 27 species and subspecies considered currently total some 240,000 breeding pairs, and occur mainly along the Channel, Atlantic, and Mediterranean coasts; counts of inland breeders, including urban gulls are also presented.

The book presents the reader with a highly researched collection of information with very well written texts. Introductory chapters review the recent history of breeding of seabirds in France, their marine and inland habitats, conservation, population regulation, and survey methods used in assessing the populations. There follows accounts of the 27 species of marine birds that breed regularly in France, with a chapter also on four species that breed irregularly.

The species accounts include a short introduction in English and detailed text (in French) on the past and recent history of breeding in metropolitan France (Corsica is not included), the reasons for population change, and aspects of the conservation of the species. Each species is treated comprehensively and the accounts are well-researched and informed. The text is complemented with detailed tables summarizing historical population data by département and colony, as well as maps and various figures. Each species is illustrated by a black and white vignette, and high quality colour photographs feature in the middle of the book.

This is an impressive book that complements nicely the recent *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland* and merits a place on the shelves of all serious seabird ecologists.

Nat Hall