

Armenian Gulls *Larus armenicus* in Egypt, 1989/90, with notes on the winter distribution of the large gulls

PETER L. MEININGER* and UFFE GJØL SØRENSEN**

* Foundation for Ornithological Research in Egypt, Belfort 7, 4336 JK Middelburg, Netherlands
** Møllegaade 21, T. v., DK-2200 Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract — During a survey of Egyptian wetlands between December 1989 and late May 1990 significant numbers of Armenian Gulls *Larus armenicus* were observed. Total winter count was 442, and the species was present until early April. It was found to be relatively common along the Mediterranean coast east of the Damietta branch of the Nile, and in marine habitats of the three lagoons along this coast. Small numbers were seen along the Suez Canal and the Red Sea coast. No Armenian Gulls were found in any of the inland waters. Other large gulls counted in winter included Yellow-legged Gulls *L. cachinnans* (2340), Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus* (120; including the first Egyptian record of *L. f. heuglini*), and Great Black-headed Gulls *L. ichthyaeus* (35).

Introduction

The Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus* is known from a restricted breeding area in high altitude lakes of Armenia (Lake Sevan, Lake Arpa), Iran (Lake Uromiyeh), eastern Turkey (Van Gölü), and at least one locality (Tuz Gölü) in Central Anatolia in Turkey (Suter 1990). The size of the breeding population is unknown, but likely to be rather small. Outside the breeding season the occurrence of Armenian Gulls is well documented on the Mediterranean coast of Israel (Géroudet 1982, Hume 1983, Dubois 1985, Grant 1987, Satat and Laird 1992). There are also reports from the Persian Gulf (Bourne 1988) and from Oman along the coast of the Arabian Sea (Bundy 1986).

Until recently there was no evidence for the occurrence of Armenian Gulls in Egypt (Goodman and Meininger 1989). However, the recent reports of considerable numbers along the Mediterranean coast of Israel suggested the occurrence in Egypt to be expected. The first reports of Armenian Gulls from Egypt were by Bourne (1988), who found it to be 'the main form' of 'Herring Gull' seen along the Suez Canal in February 1988, and by Everett (1988), who reported at least ten adult birds in the Great Bitter Lake on 11 March 1988. Hoogendoorn (1991) observed three adults near Hurghada on 22 January 1989 and two adults at Abu Rudeis on 7 February 1989. It was not until an extensive survey of Egyptian wetlands in 1989/90, that a more clear picture of the occurrence of the Armenian Gull in Egypt was obtained. Bearing in mind identification

pitfalls, observations made during this project revealed the presence of considerable numbers of Armenian Gulls in Egypt. This paper summarizes the observations of Armenian Gulls in Egypt in 1989/90. In addition some information is presented on the winter distribution of other large gull species. The systematic position of the Armenian Gull is one aspect of the highly debated 'Herring Gull'-complex (e.g. Glutz von Blotzheim and Bauer 1982, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Suter 1990). This subject is beyond the scope of this paper, where for the sake of simplicity we treat the form as a full species.

Methods

Between December 1989 and late May 1990, an extensive ornithological project was carried out in Egypt, including a mid-winter survey of most wetlands, and an intensive wader catching and counting programme in spring, focusing on Lake Manzala and Suez Bay. In December 1989 and January 1990 all major wetlands in lower Egypt were covered by a combination of aerial surveys and counts from boats and from the shore. In addition selected parts of the Red Sea coast, the Nile River and Lake Nasser were visited.

Identification

Most birds positively identified as Armenian Gulls were adults. Only a few first and second winter birds

were seen. Identification was generally based on the 'jizz' in combination with plumage characteristics. Compared to the Yellow-legged Gull *L. cachinnans*, the Armenian Gull is smaller and has a more rounded head with a relatively shorter bill; this, combined with slight differences in proportions, iris colour and bill pattern (see below) give the bird an appearance recalling a Common Gull *L. canus* more than a Yellow-legged Gull. Plumage characteristics of adult birds include more black in the wing tips, the back being a trifle darker, a dark iris, and a distinctive bill pattern: orange-yellow with a blackish subterminal band. The single first winter bird observed was identified by a combination of size and proportions (compared with adult birds in the same flock). Calls from eight adult Armenian Gulls on 9 January were noted as recalling those of Common Gull. Confusion of Armenian Gull with Russian Common Gull *L.c. heinei* may occur, particularly because of the larger size of the latter compared to the nominate *L.c. canus*. Satat and Laird (1992) presented more details about the identification of the Armenian Gull.

Winter distribution of Armenian Gull

In winter a total of at least 442 Armenian Gulls was observed (15% of all larger gulls identified), making this species the most numerous large gull in Egypt after the Yellow-legged Gull. Armenian Gulls were mainly found scattered along the Mediterranean coast east of the Damietta branch of the Nile and on the saline parts of the adjacent coastal lagoons Lake Manzala, El Malaha and Lake Bardawil. Moreover, 22 were observed along the Great Bitter Lake and the southern part of the Suez Canal and a single bird along the Red Sea coast near Hurghada. The Mediterranean coast west of the Damietta branch was surveyed only very incompletely, and the extent to which Armenian Gulls occur in this area needs further study. No Armenian Gulls were found at the two small areas visited along this part of the Egyptian coast (outlet of Lake Burullus and harbour of Alexandria). Furthermore, no Armenian Gulls were found on any of the coastal lakes in the central and western part of the Nile Delta, or in any of the inland waters visited.

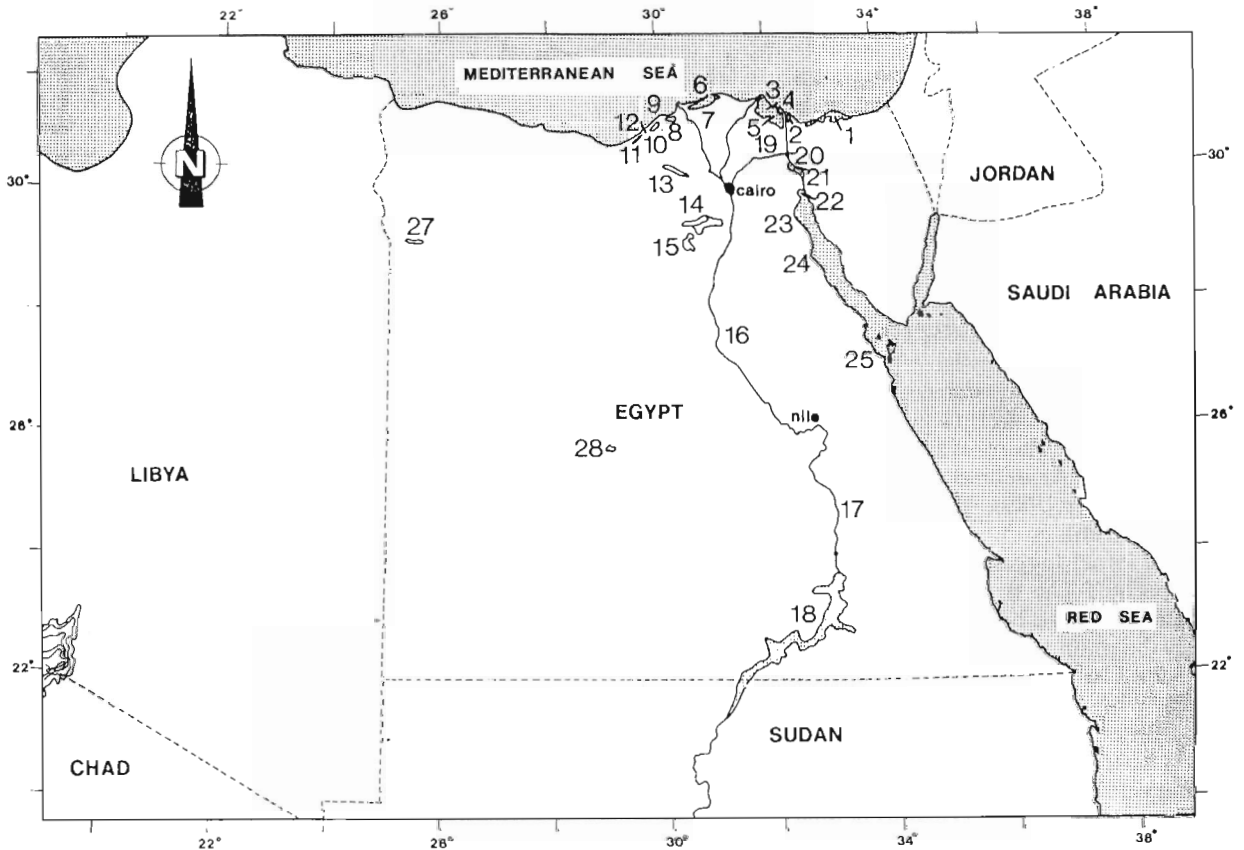


Figure 1. Geographical position of localities mentioned in Table 1.

Most Armenian Gulls were found in small flocks, up to c. 20 birds. An exceptionally large concentration of 253 individuals was seen in the northern, saline, part of Lake Manzala on 7 January. Most of these birds were resting on the lake, but several were observed hunting in flight for insects over a reed-bed together with Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus*. This behaviour was never noted in Yellow-legged Gulls.

In winter, seven flocks of 1-14 birds (40 birds in total) along the Mediterranean coast of Lake Manzala included 37 adult, two second winter and one first winter birds. The sample is too small to draw general conclusions on the age-classes involved. In addition to this sample, 22 adults were noted in a flock of large gulls near Suez on 2 January and one adult near Hurghada on 10 January.

Spring distribution of the Armenian Gull

During the spring 1990 survey, Armenian Gulls were still present until early April. In the eastern part of Lake Manzala, which was counted weekly between early March and late May, there were several observations: six adults on 5 March, 45 on 11 March, 36 on 19 March, 64 on 25 March, and four on 3 April. Other spring records include one adult at Abu Sultan on 11 March, and single adult birds at Suez on 12 March, 20 March and 3 April. Apart from the few birds at Suez (see Meininger 1992), no other migratory movements were noted in Egypt in spring 1990.

Winter distribution of large gulls in Egypt

In total, 3551 large gulls were recorded during the 1989/90 winter survey, of which 83% were identified

Table 1. Large gulls observed in Egypt in winter 1989/90 per area.

cach. = *Larus cachinnans*, arme. = *Larus armenicus*, fusc. = *L. fuscus*, icht. = *L. ichthyaetus*, spec. = unidentified large gull. See figure 1 for position of localities.

Area	habitat	cach.	arme.	fusc.	icht.	spec.
1. Lake Bardawil	marine	58	14	11	4	315
2. El Malaha	marine	9	47	4	-	-
3. Lake Manzala, beach	marine	165	70	6	1	-
4. Lake Manzala, lake north	salt-brackish	293	284	1	-	166
5. Lake Manzala, lake south	brackish-fresh	982	4	-	-	50
6. Lake Burullus, beach	marine	116	-	2	1	-
7. Lake Burullus, lake	brackish-fresh	47	-	-	1	-
8. Lake Idku	brackish-fresh	314	-	33	-	-
9. Alexandria harbour	marine	50	-	21	-	-
10. Lake Maryut	brackish-fresh	89	-	-	-	-
11. Lake Maryut, depression	saline	-	-	-	-	-
12. Lakes near Burg el Arab	brackish-fresh	-	-	-	-	-
13. Wadi el Natrun	saline	-	-	-	-	-
14. Lake Qarun	saline	7	-	8	9	-
15. Wadi el Rayan	brackish	-	-	-	19	-
16. Nile Valley, north	fresh	-	-	-	-	-
17. Nile Valley, south	fresh	-	-	2	-	-
18. Lake Nasser	fresh	-	-	1	-	-
19. Sarqiya lakes	fresh	-	-	2	-	-
20. Lake Timsah	marine	2	-	1	-	3
21. Bitter Lakes	marine	96	22	1	-	60
22. Suez Bay	marine	42	-	22	-	20
23. Red Sea, Suez-Ain Sukhna	marine	50	-	-	-	-
24. Red Sea, Ain Sukhna-Zafarana	marine	4	-	-	-	-
25. Red Sea, Hurghada	marine	16	1	4	-	-
26. Nile Delta, various	fresh	-	-	1	-	-
27. Siwa Oasis	saline	-	-	-	-	-
28. Dakhla Oasis	fresh	-	-	-	-	-
total:		2340	442	120	35	614

to species (Table 1). Most numerous was the Yellow-legged Gull (2340 individuals, 80%), which was the dominant species along the Mediterranean coast and in the Nile Delta lakes, but scarce in inland saline lakes and absent from freshwater habitats in the Nile Valley. The Armenian Gull (422, 15%) was the second-most numerous large gull. It was found almost exclusively along the coasts, most numerous along the Mediterranean Sea, where it made up 25% of the large gulls. Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* (120, 4%) were present in small numbers in almost all wetlands visited, including freshwater habitats. One adult Lesser Black-backed Gull at Alexandria harbour on 18 January showed characters of *L.f. heuglini* (large, robustly built, pale yellow legs, bold blotching on the neck). This is the first indication of the occurrence of this subspecies in Egypt (Goodman and Meininger 1989). A total of 35 Great Black-headed Gulls *L. ichthyaetus* was seen: on 5 January one first winter at the northern part of Lake Manzala (10 km west of Port Said), on 12 January four at Lake Bardawil, on 14 January one adult at Lake Burullus, on 16 January one adult along the Mediterranean coast of Lake Burullus west of El Burg, on 21/23 January seven adults and two second winter birds on Lake Qarun, and on 22 January 19 in Wadi el Rayan. The mid-winter total of 35 Great Black-headed Gulls is the highest for about 70 years, as a flock of 50 was reported from Lake Qarun on 20 January 1920 (Meinertzhagen 1930, Goodman and Meininger 1989).

Discussion

Current knowledge on the Armenian Gull in Egypt suggests that it is probably a relatively common winter visitor, which is widely distributed along the Mediterranean coast, at least east of the Damietta branch of the Nile, and in smaller numbers along the Suez Canal and along the Red Sea coast. Occurrence along the Egyptian Mediterranean coast is a continuation of the occurrence along the Mediterranean coast of Israel. Occurrence of the Armenian Gull in Egypt is probably not a new phenomenon, but has simply been overlooked hitherto due to a lack of knowledge of field identification. Data on the winter distribution in Egypt indicate a difference in habitat preference compared with the other three large gull species. The Armenian Gull was almost exclusively recorded in or close to marine habitats along the coast. In Israel it is also mainly found in marine habitats, including

coastal fish farms, along the Mediterranean coast. The almost strictly coastal occurrence of Armenian Gull in both Egypt and Israel could indicate that the species is perhaps more pelagic in its ecology than the other large gulls in the region.

Acknowledgements — The Egyptian Wetland Project 1989/89 would not have been possible without the grants of the *National Geographic Society* (grant 4031-89), the *Swiss Office Fédéral de l'Environnement, des Forêts et du Paysage* through the Ramsar Bureau, the *Foundation Tour du Valat*, and grants received through *WIWO*. All participants in the field work are thanked for their efforts. Dr Gamil A.M. Atta was instrumental in the success of the project. Ted Hoogendoorn made valuable comments on an earlier draft.

References

- Bertault Y., Dubois P.J. and Frémont J.Y.. 1988. Some comments on the Armenian Gull in Turkey. *Bull. Orn. Soc. Middle East* 20: 20-21.
- Bourne W.R.P. 1988. Ornithological observations at sea around Arabia. *Bull. Orn. Soc. Middle East* 20: 7-11.
- Bundy, G. 1986. Notes on seabirds in south-eastern Arabia. *Sandgrouse* 7: 29-42.
- Cramp S. and Simmons K.E.L. (eds.) 1983. The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Vol. 3. *Oxford University Press, Oxford*.
- Dubois P.J. 1985. Considérations sur le Goéland d'Arménie *Larus armenicus* Buturlin en Israël. *Alauda* 53: 226-227.
- Everett M. 1988. Selected spring observations from the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Suez. *Bull. Orn. Soc. Middle East* 20: 3-5.
- Géroutet P. 1982. Le Goéland d'Arménie *Larus (cachinnans) armenicus* en Israël. *Alauda* 50: 310-311.
- Glutz von Blotzheim U.N. and Bauer K.M. 1982. Handbuch der Vögel Mitteleuropas, Band 8. *Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Wiesbaden*.
- Goodman S.M. and Meininger P.L. (eds.) 1989. The birds of Egypt. *Oxford University Press, Oxford*.
- Grant P.J. 1986. Gulls: a guide to identification. 2nd edition. *Poyser, Calton*.
- Grant P.J. 1987. Notes on Armenian Herring Gull. In: P.J. Grant *et al.* (eds.). International meeting on bird identification, *Proceedings of the 4th International Identification Meeting in Eilat, 1st-8th November 1986*: 43.
- Hoogendoorn W. 1991. Gull records from the northern Egyptian Red Sea coasts in January and February 1989. *Bull. Orn. Soc. Middle East* 26: 32-36.
- Hume R.A. 1983. Herring Gulls in Israel. *Brit. Birds* 76: 189-191.
- Meinertzhagen R. 1930. Nicoll's Birds of Egypt. *Rees, London*.
- Meininger P.L. 1992. Visible migration of some waterbird species at Suez, spring 1990. *Courser* 3: 35-42.
- Satat N. and Laird B. 1992. The Armenian Gull. *Birding World* 5: 32-36.
- Suter W. 1990. Comments on the breeding range of the Armenian Gull. *Bull. Orn. Soc. Middle East* 25: 12-15.