

# Identification of albino Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus*

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## Introduction

The identification of individual birds whose species-specific characteristics are masked by abnormalities of colour, proportion, size, call or behaviour often requires great care. Misidentifications can easily arise if confusion with a closely related but rare and less well known species is possible. White gulls seen in the Helsinki area are a good example of such a situation.

The first white gull was identified in 1959 by myself as an Iceland Gull *Larus glaucooides* until, after several days of observation, I had to alter the identification to an albino Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*. Recently, the situation was repeated. Two or three white gulls observed in the Helsinki area were again most often identified as Iceland Gulls. This is not surprising for, without a study of details, these gulls appear as almost perfect phenocopies of third winter Iceland gulls.

## Observations

Decisive for the final identification of the bird observed in 1959 was that it was possible to trace the life history of that particular individual. According to Dr. G. Bergman (oral comm.) it was born in a mixed colony of Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* in the outermost archipelago of Porkkala, 40 km SW of Helsinki; it was the only white chick of the brood. It was captured and raised by a schoolboy, but later, when it reached the fledgling stage, it escaped. On 12

October the author detected it in the West Harbour of Helsinki. It had a weak brown stripe on its primaries (arrow in Fig. 1), a special feature which had been expressly pointed out by its raiser. During the next two years, probably the same bird was seen sporadically, for the last time in November, 1961. In the summer of 1963, an adult Herring Gull with hardly any dark colouring of the wing tip and with a very pale back was observed 15 km W of Helsinki (G. Bergman), but whether it was the albino mentioned above is questionable.

On 14 September, 1968, a white gull with some light, brownish markings on the wings and with pinkish legs was closely observed at Tvärminne, 100 km WSW of Helsinki (K. Keynäs). It was with a few Herring Gulls and appeared to be smaller than these. It could not be identified, but very probably it was an albino Herring Gull.

In 1970 the first white gull was seen at Porkkala on 23 August (J. Koistinen, T. Helenius) and on 28 August *two* individuals were observed there together (M. Tennilä). The easternmost observation was made at Nordsjö, 20 km E of Helsinki (M. Karonen, J. Ulfvens). About ten observations of white gulls were made, until one bird made its appearance in the South Harbour of Helsinki on 1 October (K.-G. Suvenvuo). It was seen there still on 25 November (the author) (Fig. 2).

The principal colour of the gulls was white with a slight yellow-brownish tint. Weak brown markings were present on the wing coverts, on the back, on the tail and elsewhere. The bill, the legs and the eyes were of normal colouring or somewhat paler. Thus, the birds were not total albinos. They appeared to be smaller than or of the same size as the smallest Herring Gulls. The closed wings projected far beyond the tail giving the bird a well-built impression. In 1970 what were probably three different albinos, according to individual characteristics, were observed: one

figured, a second with brown colouring on the primaries and a third with a completely blackish bill.

### Distinction from other gulls

The following features distinguish the two figured albino Herring Gulls from other possible gulls:

#### From third winter Iceland Gull:

— The bill is too heavy, the head is too large and the whole expression of the head is like that of the Herring Gull.

— The tail has a weak but broad and uni-colored band typical of a young Herring Gull (weakly visible in Fig. 1 but clearly in Fig. 2, inserted). The Iceland Gull never has a clearly distinct band but only narrow stripes which may be somewhat darker near the tail tip (see WITHERBY *et al.* 1947, pl. 135 and KAY 1947).

— The form of the primaries (Fig. 1) corresponds accurately to that of the Herring Gull. According to ROHWEDER (1903) those of the Iceland Gull are slightly narrower.

— The striped pattern of plumage typical of the young Iceland Gull is not visible despite the fact that the colour of the bill indicates a first or at most second winter plumage.

— The dates are very odd for the Iceland Gull.

#### From third winter Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*:

— The size is far too small and the bill is too slender.

— The dates would be very odd, because the first Glaucous Gulls are usually seen in late November or in December.

#### From young albino Lesser Black-backed Gull:

— This species is out of question because of the form of the primaries (Fig. 1) and of the rounded wing tip (Fig. 2, inserted). The theoretical possibility of an albino hybrid of the Lesser Black-backed and the Herring Gull is extremely improbable because of the primaries, too.

### Discussion

The size and the proportions of the bill and of the head, the band of the tail, the form of the primaries and of the wing tips as well as the dates of observations together confirm the identification of the two birds shown as young

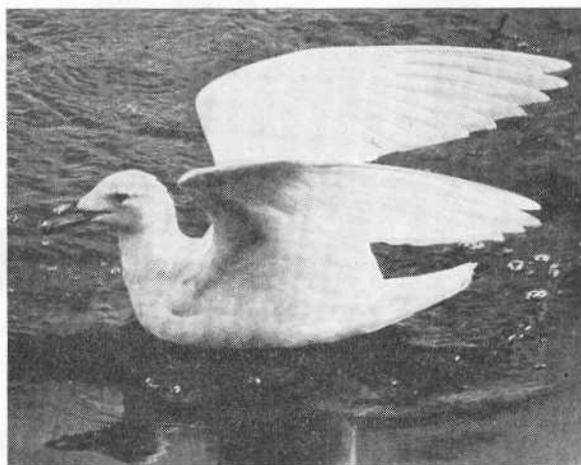


FIG. 1. An albino Herring Gull, Helsinki, October 1959. The weak brown stripe leading to the identification of this particular individual as that born at Porkkala is marked with an arrow. Note the form of the primaries and the weak band on the tail. Foto: TEUVO SUOMINEN. (*Albiino harmaalokki. Helsinki, lokakuussa 1959. Heikko ruskea juova, joka johti tämän yksilön tunnistamiseen samaksi, joka oli syntynyt Porkkalassa, on merkitty nuolella. Huomaa käsisulkién muoto ja heikosti näkyvä pyrstövyö.*)

albino Herring Gulls. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the other birds similar in appearance (in 1968 one and in 1970 one or two additional individuals) were albinos, too. The smallness of these birds, mentioned by all observers, is quite an odd feature. It seems that in young Herring Gulls the closed wings may project more clearly beyond the tail than in adults, and, that being the case, the stretched appearance of the albinos is understandable. The youthful age of albinos indicates that in different years different individuals has been observed.

Additional albino Herring Gulls may have been included in those observations of the Iceland Gull, about twenty in all, which have been reported from Finland. In fact, not many of these remain, when all cases where confusion

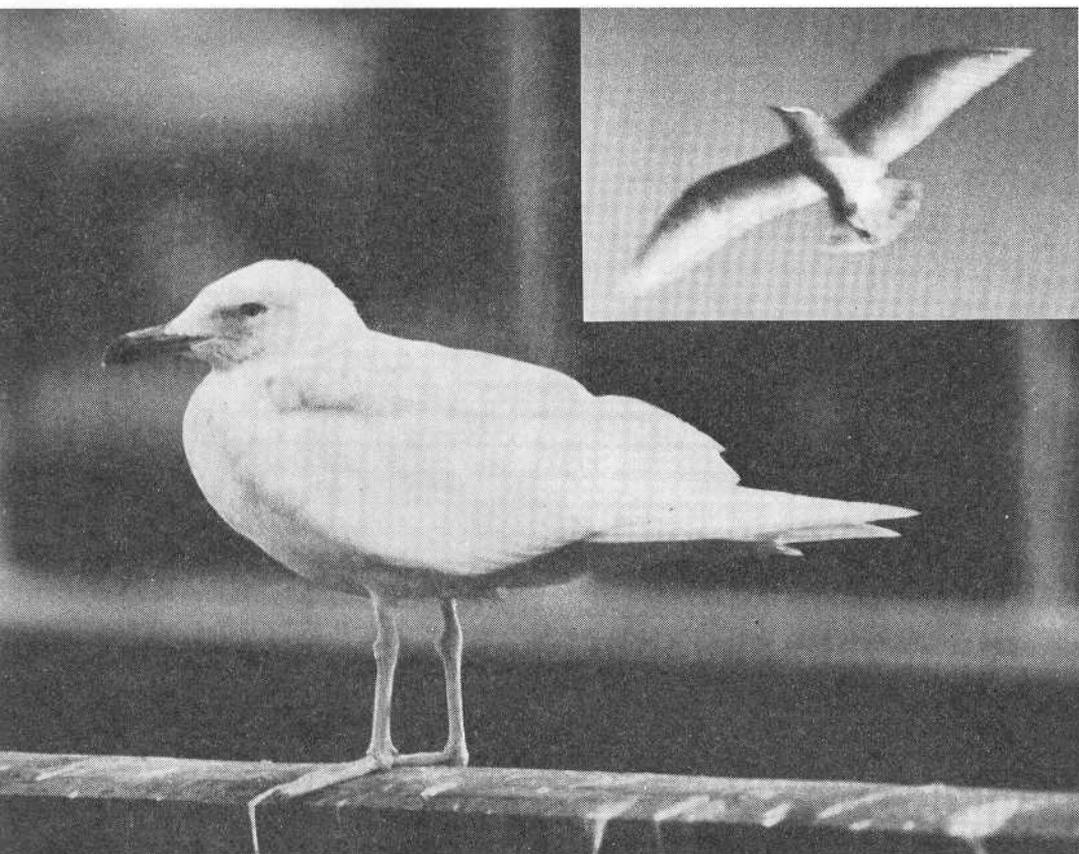


FIG. 2. An albino Herring Gull. Helsinki, October 1970. Note the projection of the wings beyond the tail, the brown markings on the shoulders, the quite heavy bill and the relatively pale legs. Inserted: The same bird flying. The band of the tail is visible in an exaggerated manner because of the direction of light. Fotos: KAURI MIKKOLA. (*Albiino barmaalokki. Helsinki, lokakuussa 1970. Huomaa siivenkärkien ulottuminen pitkälti pyrstön yli, ruskehtava täplitys hartioilla, jyrkevähkö nokka ja vaaleat jalat. Yläkulma: Sama yksilö lennossa. Pyrstön vyö näkyy liioitellusti vastavalon vuoksi. Kuvat: Kauri Mikkola.*)

with a Glaucous Gull or with an albino Herring Gull has been possible are excluded. Even the three individuals labelled as Iceland Gulls in the Zoological Museum of the University of Helsinki proved to be small Glaucous Gulls.

In literature, I have found only one definite report of a full-sized albino Herring Gull (GROSS 1964): an adult male at the Bay of Fundy, Canada, in 1931 and 1932. In the latter year it had with a normal female one normal and one albino chick (the genetic composition of the parents could accordingly be

inferred). In the same colony, an additional white chick was noted in 1947 (GROSS 1964). In Michigan, two white chicks were found, in 1962 and in 1963, being the only albinos out of 7716 Herring Gulls ringed in that colony (NICHELL 1964). In 1937, an albino chick was found at Green Bay, Lake Michigan, and according to a local person, two adult albinos had been seen earlier in the same locality (LYON 1938). GROSS (1964) points out two old cases where birds identified as Iceland Gulls may have been albino Herring Gulls.

Notes in literature on Iceland Gulls at odd times or at odd places may include observations of albino Herring Gulls: e.g. Sweden "in the autumn" (Sveriges . . . 1970), Denmark: "singly July/August" (SALOMONSEN 1963), Madeira: an old undocumented observation (BANNERMAN & BANNERMAN 1965) and southern England: seen in 1939 and 1940 in the London area and in Surrey and Middlesex (The London . . . 1964). In fact, MORGAN (1939) wrote of the last mentioned bird that it seemed strikingly white at a distance, which points to the possibility of an albino. Problematic adult gulls with little or no black markings on the wing tips (e.g. MACMILLAN 1967) may be results of hybridization between the Glaucous and the Herring Gull, observed especially in Iceland (INGOLFSSON 1970).

Some examples of albinism in other gulls are given by DICK (1967). In Finland, albino Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* have been observed at least three times (*sec.* P. Saurola). On 17 June, 1969, a brood, probably of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, with one normally coloured unhatched egg and two white chicks, one of which was dead, was found at Kustavi, south-western Finland (J. Tenovuo, S. & J. Virtanen). The live chick was pure white except for some greyish markings on the head. Unfortunately, the identification remained slightly uncertain as it might have been a Herring Gull, too.

T. Tallgren and R. Purasmaa have ringed in the course of several years, mostly W of Helsinki but insignificantly at Porkkala, a total of 11 451 Herring Gulls without seeing a single white chick. The observation of the albinos in 1970 first at Porkkala and their close resemblance to the 1959 gull (which was born at Porkkala) points to a common source of these birds. Possibly the genetic material of the Herring Gull population of Porkkala contains more

factors affecting albinism than usual or, alternatively, a pair or a few birds are responsible for the albinos observed. Thus, until now it has been impossible to decide whether the observations indicate an increasing proportion of albinos or whether the original low frequency of albinos has been observed only now during a high population density. Similarly, it is too early to speculate on the possible effect on the observed albinism of the semi-domestication of the Herring Gull, i.e. its close dependence on human settlement.

### Summary

Observations of four or five albino Herring Gulls on the southern coast of Finland are reported. The albinos resemble closely third winter Iceland Gulls and they have often been identified as such. Distinguishing features are examined. The validity of older Iceland Gull observations from Finland, references to albinism in the Herring Gull as well as in other gulls and the situation in the Herring Gull population of Porkkala as regards albinism are discussed.

### Selostus: Albiinujen harmaalokkien määrittäminen.

Albiinoja harmaalokkeja on nähty seuraavasti: Porkkalassa v. 1959 syntynyt lintu nähtiin vv. 1959—1961 Helsingissä, samanlainen v. 1968 Tvärminnessä sekä v. 1970 kaksi (nähty yhdessä) tai kolme albiinoa Helsingin seudulla. Kaikki ovat olleet nuoria osittaisalbiinoja, hienokseltaan kellanruskean sävyisesti valkeita, ja varsinkin siipien peitinhöyhenillä, selässä ja pyrstössä on näkynyt heikkoa ruskeaa kuviointia. Nokka, silmät ja jalat ovat olleet normaalin väriset tai vähän vaaleammat. Linnut ovat muistuttaneet erehdyttävästi kolmannen talven grönlanninlokkiä *Larus glaucoides*, jollaisiksi ne myös useimmiten on määritetty. Ne ovat kuitenkin olleet grönlanninlokiksi liian jyrkävänokkaisia ja ilmeeltään harmaalokkimaisia,

eivätkä pyrston heikko vyö, käsisulkien muoto, nokan väri suhteessa höyhenpukuun ja havaintoajat ole sopineet grönlanninlokkiin. Todella varmoja grönlanninlokkihavaintoja on maastamme hyvin vähän; jopa kaikki kolme Helsingin yliopiston eläinmuseon kokoelmassa olevaa ja "Pohjolan linnuissa" mainittua yksilöä osoittautuivat pieniksi isolokkiyksilöiksi. Kirjallisuudesta on löytynyt vain yksi maininta täysikokoisesta harmaalokkialbiinosta: pesivä yksilö Kanadassa vv. 1931—1932. Valkoisista poikasista on joitakin tietoja, samoin muiden lokkien albinismista. Porkkalan harmaalokki-populaation tilanne albinismin suhteen on kiintoisa, sillä myös vuoden 1970 albiinot saattoivat olla sieltä peräisin.

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