

Laridae

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GULLS - INDIA

8 March, 1980

Maha-baliapuram

Yesterday and this morning, I noticed gulls flying along shore. Obviously Larus brunnecephalus. Wing pattern is unmistakable (front white triangle, dark underneath, etc.).

Appearance of species in flight is distinctive. Plump-breasted, pigeon-like. Somewhat reminiscent of Franklin's Gull (also common in the non-breeding season - but see below). A little less reminiscent of semmanni (also breeding at high altitudes). L. brunnecephalus ("Brunni") may be as plump as semmanni, but it is thicker-billed and looks less small-headed.

I start out to walk along beach to Maha-baliapuram 1:10 p.m. Sunny hot. Very windy. Heavy surf. Tide is high.

A few Brunni fly by (going south into wind) singly or in small groups (from 2 or 3 up to at least 10 inds.) Mostly adults. A few inds. in immature plumage. All or almost all in non-breeding plumage. Perhaps a few with traces of brood.

A single Brunni, non-breeding plumage, lands on shore. It stands and runs at very edge of waves. Presumably interested in feeding, but it does not actually peck at anything.

1:45 p.m. See group of approximately 25 gulls floating on water, approximately 50 m. offshore. Mostly Brunni. All Brunni apparently in non-breeding plumage. But group also includes 3 much larger birds with full broods. Must be L. ichthyactes ("Ichthy")

Ichthy is even more distinctive in appearance than Brunni. Combination of yellow bill and dark head is very peculiar. The birds are float

ing with necks rather "drawn in". Look almost alcid-like! Shape of head is difficult to determine precisely in this posture. Perhaps it is "gull". Or it may show a trace of "mask-like" cut-out on nape. But almost certainly not as much as in the "true" marked gulls. The mantle of the Ichthyas also seems to be slightly darker and browner than that of the Brunnis. At this distance at least, color of hood appears to be matte. Could be brown-black rather than pure black.

When first seen, all the gulls in this raft are close together. Only 1-3 ft apart in most cases. And the Ichthyas seem to be very well integrated with Brunnis. 2 Ichthyas, presumably a pair, in one part of group. The 3rd Ichthyas 6-10 ft away in another part of group.

None of the birds is obviously feeding. Although the Ichthyas do dip bill into water quite frequently. Can't tell if this is bathing or not.

The unpaired Ichthyas disappears without my seeing its departure.

The Brunnis are much more restless than Ichthyas. Many birds of Brunnis fly up (ahead, into wind) for short or longer distances. Even the Brunnis that do not fly seem to swim faster and more vigorously than the Ichthyas. As a result, the Ichthyas gradually get left behind as the Brunnis move on. They make no attempt to catch up.

Then I notice what seems to be a 2nd pair of Ichthyas about 80 m. behind the front. Also isolated. One member of the pair seems to have complete hood. The other seems to be largely white-headed. The members of each pair tend to stick remarkably close together.

One would suppose that the Ichthyas, as a whole, are more advanced in the annual cycle than are the Brunnis. Viz. relative frequency of hoods. And I certainly can see no traces of pairs among the Brunnis. Presumably Brunnis start to breed later, at these high latitudes, than do the (lowland) Ichthyas.

Looking ahead to the moving group of Brunnis, I see that 1 ind. seems to have, or to be acquiring, a hood.

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2:05 p.m. Sillies gradually drifting further and further from shore getting difficult to see among the whitecaps. So I go on, 2:10

See a single Brunnia in non-breeding adult plumage on shore. Definite feeding edge of waves. Food is unrecognizable. Presumably very small.

Go on to town of Mahabalipuram itself. Then start back 3:10 p.m. Still sunny and windy, but not quite so hot. Tide is going down now. See adult Brunnia in non-breeding plumage feeding edge water on shore. As before.

NOTE: Brunnia looks more like BHG on water or on land than it gets. Only bill is slightly thicker.

Then find whole group of Brunnias (ca. 25 inds.) on shore. All white-headed except for one which has nearly complete hood. Presumably same group seen on water earlier. Mostly just resting. Occasional picking up food at edge water.

Sillies definitely gone.

The Brunnias on shore fly away short distances when a human being approaches. Often in V before flight. But there is absolutely no other sign of ritualized behavior. I can't even hear any 1st's or other notes. Of course, the sound of the surf is loud, but it also seems possible (or probable) that this form is less vocal than the BHG, at least during the non-breeding season.

I keep on walking. 3:55 See group of 4 Brunnias on beach. Nothing new.

I start out again in the direction of Mahabalipuram 5:50 p.m. There are patches of Brunnias flying into the wood along shore line. Past the Silver Sands Hotel, I see very large group of Brunnias 150-250 yds offshore. Group probably includes at least 150 individuals.

Most of them are very active. Flying about and repeatedly feeding from surface of the water. Indeed of an hour? Some inds. also rest on

water from time to time. Almost all birds are white-headed.

This is by far the largest and most active group of *Bronnias* that I have seen. It would appear that this species is primarily marine during the non-breeding season and presumably littoral. (Both Silem Ali and Ben Xing state that it also occurs on rivers. But I have never seen it on inland waters around here - not even at the canal.)

Schistops may also be marine, but perhaps less littoral, more oceanic ???

By 6:10 pm the birds of this group are gradually moving S (again). Mostly out of sight by 6:20 pm.

COMMENT: It is possible that there were a few terns mixed in with this feeding group of *Bronnias*. There certainly are a variety of terns in the region as a whole. At least 2 species. All red-bellied. But some with light primaries, and others with dark ones. Perhaps a *Sterna s.s.* and a "*Thalasseus*"? But the terns certainly do not associate closely with the gulls.

And it is interesting that I have never seen a real *r. ridibundus* anywhere around here!!!

9 March, 1980
Maha-balipuram

Another sunny windy day. From hotel, at noon, I see *Bronnias* flying along shore. South into wind as usual.

Starting out singly at 1:40 pm. Tide is getting high.

Large *Bronnias* still flying by.

Also feeding from surface of water occasionally.

2:13 pm. Usual place, halfway to Maha-balipuram. Find 2 adult *Bronnias* in non-breeding plumage on shore. Behaving as usual. Then one adult *Bronnias* (identification definite) flies in, lands beside

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one the birds already on beach. This new-comer seems to have complete hood! It stands in extreme Agg V and HF's. Then assumes short-necked, but otherwise extreme F. I can't tell if there is an intermediate "Upward" or "Oblique" phase or not. Nor can I hear any sounds (the surf is too loud).

"Partner" of hooded bird fails to respond. Hooded bird walks away in semi-U, opens bill briefly (presumably "Keen" type note), and is looking for food.

Then I see that there is a big raft of Brunnias in water, about 100-150m away. All or almost all white-headed. Some fly into shore to join others. No visible greetings.

Certainly no Schatts; anywhere.

NOTE: Almost all the Brunnias that I have seen along the coast have been adults. Juvs. do occur, but they are relatively very rare (1 to 25?).

All the Brunnias on the beach fly out to the water. Then call to beach. No greetings on landing. But, a few seconds later, one white-headed ind. in middle of group does 1 HT movement in about posture. I think that this ind. is adult!

I start back to Hotel 2:20 pm. Nothing of much interest.

2:35. Find large group of white-headed Brunnias on beach right in front of Golden Inn! Also a couple of inds. with partial hoods. Miscellaneous terns flying over head. Including at least one Gull-billed Tern. Gull-billed lands among the gulls. No interaction. Then all fly up when child walks by.

Stop observations 2:45 pm.

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