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Martin Potgieter 2025. Grey-headed Gull feeding behaviours, Eastern Cape.
Biodiversity Observations 15: 54–57

28 March 2025

DOI: 10.15641/bo.1349

ORNITHOLOGY

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Abstract

During February 2019 two observations of feeding behaviour by Grey-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus* were made at different locations in the Eastern Cape. One involved foot-paddling; the second consisted of skimming.

Observation one

I grew up in the Goldfields of the Free State, and watched Grey-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus* hanging around the municipal refuse tip, or trying to steal french-fries at the local roadhouse. At the time, I however never really paid much attention to their behaviour. During a visit to the Eastern Cape in February 2019, my wife, Melanie, and I observed two unfamiliar feeding behaviours by Grey-headed Gulls.

The first was encountered at the Seekoei River Estuary, Aston Bay (34° 05.03'S, 24° 54.21'E) on 7 February 2019. Due to the drought prevailing at the time, and the fact that the estuary was cut off from the sea, water levels were low, attracting thousands of waders. While scanning through the waders we saw a Grey-headed Gull performing a shuffling dance manoeuvre. It would shuffle and tap its feet in the shallows at the water's edge, all the while pecking up whatever prey items it disturbed.

Video footage of this observation is available on the following Google Drive link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K2z7M7O6Or4ZrvUchkevdHBQMSZ5RuSs/view?usp=sharing

Discussion one

I discussed this observation with Dr Phil Whittington, ornithologist at East London Museum; he confirmed that he has seen similar behaviour, known in the scientific literature as "foot-paddling", by Common Gulls *Larus canus* on recreation grounds in Britain, usually after rain. Tinbergen (1962) put forward the idea that foot-paddling is a behaviour to coax earthworms to the surface. which are then preyed upon by the gulls. Earthworms come closer to the surface in rainy weather. By stamping their feet on the ground, the gulls produce vibrations that are believed to mimic the sound of rain (Anon 2011, 2019). Tinbergen (1962) thought that foot-paddling is a learned behaviour with older gulls teaching younger gulls the movements, which further develops with age. There are reported observations of foot-paddling by gulls in Europe, North America and New Zealand (eg Tinbergen 1962, Fordham 1963, Buckley 1966, Dawson 1966, Hendriks & Hendriks 2006). This appears to be the first observation of the behaviour in Africa. There does not appear to be an overall review of foot-paddling.

This observation of foot-paddling is in the same inter-tidal sandy shore context as that made by Hendricks & Hendricks (2006) on Western Gulls *Larus occidentalis*. Their interpretation of the behaviour was that it dislodged small worms and crustaceans, stirred them to the surface. These then fell prey to the gull. This is also likely to be the case for the Grey-headed Gull.

Observation two

The second instance of unusual gull behaviour we encountered was at the Sunday's River estuary at 33°42'29.5"S 25°50'34.3"E, at Colchester, Eastern Cape. On 18 February 2019, at the camping area near the mouth the Sunday's River, we scanned the exposed sandbanks for waders, terns and gulls. We observed two Grey-headed Gulls behaving in a way we had not seen before.

The water along the edge of the sandbank was shallow, with schools of active small fish visible. The gulls would run (chasing the schools of fish) very fast with the lower mandible in the water, trying to catch the fish (Figure 1). Sometimes they would even fly like this, in true skimmer fashion; i.e. lower mandible in the water; snapping closed when they felt something (Figure 2). Although I was not lucky enough to capture it on video, we witnessed two successful catches. A Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* joined in and displayed similar behaviour; i.e. skimming for fish.

It was a windy day. When “skimming” downwind the gulls kept their wings folded (Figure 3). However, when “skimming” into the wind they kept their wings open in the flight position (Figure 4) and sometimes flew short distances while skimming. They seemed more in control and reached greater speeds into the wind. In contrast, they seemed a bit clumsy and off-balance on the downwind runs.

Discussion two

This skimming behaviour has been reported previously for the Grey-headed Gull (Crawford & Hockey 2005): “Sometimes runs rapidly through shallow water, ploughing with lower mandible like skimmer”. This information was included in Roberts 7 as a personal observation without date, place or context.

Skimming has been recorded in two other gull species: Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* (Buckley & Hailman 1970) and Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla* (Hailman & Reed 1982). Of relevance to the observation here is that the Grey-headed Gulls showed better control while skimming into the wind rather than with it;

Figure 1: Grey-headed Gull ‘skimming’, Sunday’s River, Colchester, Eastern Cape, 18 February 2019 .

Figure 2: Grey-headed Gull grabbing at a prey item, Sunday’s River, Colchester, Eastern Cape,18 February 2019.

Figure 3: Grey-headed Gull 'skimming' downwind on the Sunday's River estuary.

Figure 4: Grey-headed Gull 'skimming' into the wind on the Sunday's River estuary.

the skimming behaviour of the Laughing Gulls was only recorded when the birds were in flight and moving directly into the wind (Hailman & Reed 1982). Hailman & Reed (1982) speculated that the occurrence of skimming in gulls provides insights into the origin of the specialized skimming behaviour of the skimmers (Rynchopidae), which, like the gulls, is a family within the Charadriiformes.

The current observation also provides information on the context of the behaviour. It was triggered by the presence of small fish in shallow water, which the gull could see and chase The birds were skimming with the objective of catching prey, and were twice observed to do so. Dr Whittington commented that gulls are opportunistic feeders and rarely miss a trick, hence their great success in adapting to all sorts of different circumstances.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Dr Phil Whittington, East London Museum, for commenting on the original note.

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Paper edited by Les Underhill
Biodiversity and Development Institute