

First confirmed record of Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri* for Colombia with notes on the status of other gull species

*Primer registro confirmado de la Gaviota Peruana *Larus belcheri* para Colombia
con notas sobre el estado de otras especies de gaviotas*

Trevor Ellery¹ & José Ferney Salgado²

¹ Independent. Email: trevor_lotan@gmail.com

² Corporación para el Fomento del Aviturismo en Colombia.

Abstract

We present photographic records of a Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri* from the Colombian Caribbean region. These are the first confirmed records of this species in the country.

Keywords: new record, range extension, gull, identification.

Resumen

Presentamos registros fotograficos de un individuo de la Gaviota Peruana *Larus belcheri* en la region del Caribe de Colombia. Estos son los primeros registros confirmados para el país.

Palabras clave: Nuevo registro, extensión de distribución, gaviota, identificación.

Introduction

Belcher's Gull or Band-tailed Gull *Larus belcheri* has long been considered a possible or probable species for Colombia, with observations nearby from Panama (Hilty & Brown 1986). It was first listed for Colombia by Salaman *et al.* (2001) without any justification or notes, perhaps on the presumption that the species could never logically have reached the Panamanian observation locality from its southern breeding grounds without passing through the country. It is a rare vagrant to the Pacific coast of Ecuador (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001) where it is currently considered hypothetical, lacking confirmed records (Remsen *et al.* 2018). However, there is a recent photographic record from Ecuador, details of which will be published shortly (D. Brinkhuizen *in litt.* 2018; Freile *et al.* *in press*). The species has also been recorded wandering to the Atlantic in the Falkland Islands / Islas Malvinas (Remsen *et al.* 2018). It is rare north of its core breeding and wintering range in Chile and Peru. Restall *et al.* (2006) considered the species to be "rare" in the Colombian Pacific but likewise provided no details of records. Estela *et al.* (2010) found no records but Donegan *et al.* (2010) tentatively maintained the species on the national checklist, but as unconfirmed, on the basis of Restall *et al.* (2006) mapping it for the southern Pacific region. Avendaño *et al.* (2017) omitted to recognize the species as occurring in Colombia at all. McMullan *et al.* (2018) mapped it for the Caribbean and the Pacific, referring to the confirmed records now reported here in more detail.

The broader Band-tailed Gull *Larus belcheri* is often split into Belcher's Gull *L. belcheri* which occurs principally in

the Pacific Ocean coasts of southern South America, and Olrog's Gull *L. atlanticus* of southern Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina (Howell & Dunn 2007, Remsen *et al.* 2018).

A good rule of thumb for gulls in Colombia is that if it's not a Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*, then it's interesting. A second good rule of thumb for Colombian gulls is that if it's not a Laughing Gull, you are probably watching it at Los Camarones or Santuario de Fauna y Flora Los Flamencos, in dpto. Guajir. Of the eight species of gull that TE has definitively identified in Colombia, five of them (Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*, (American) Herring Gull *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*, Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan* and now, as discussed below, Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri*) are species that TE has only seen at Camarones. Of course, Laughing Gull is common at Camarones, like it is everywhere else in northern Colombia and the Pacific coast. A seventh species, Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini*, was observed on the Caribbean coast (at Ciénaga, Magdalena, some 150 km to the west of Camarones) while an eighth species, Andean Gull *Chroicocephalus serranus*, is a specialist of Andean lakes that occurs in the far south of Colombia near the Ecuadorian border near Pasto in Nariño. TE has also observed what were probably Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* and Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* in Colombia, although probably with insufficient certainty to claim as acceptable records of those species.

Camarones is very much Colombia's premier "gulling" spot, although that may partly be due to the coverage provided by visiting birding groups, who often use the site as a

convenient stop to pick up Guajirá endemics, see the Greater Flamingoes *Phoenicopterus roseus* and add several nationally rare waterbirds to their trip list. There may well be other interesting gulling sites to be discovered along both coasts of Colombia and especially on the Pacific coast, where there has been far less intense observer coverage in recent years.

Methods

In January 2017, TE was at Camerones leading a birding tour and observed species in the mixed seabird flocks there.

Results

During TE's observations, species present included Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*, Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*, Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* and Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*. An unusual, large *Larus* gull immediately stuck out from the flock, given its dark plumage. The observers identified this as a second winter

Belcher's Gull using McMullan & Donegan (2014). It was observed on subsequent days by other observers including Oswaldo Cortés and Jose Luis Pushaina Epiayu (*in litt.* 2017).

A number of photographs, shown in Figs. 1-3, were taken. These allow Belcher's Gull to be identified. The bird in question is clearly a second cycle bird in the Band-tailed Gull group on account of its large size, dark head and chest and tricolored bill (yellow proximally, dark distally and reddish at the tip), together with the plain greyish upper mantle. In Olog's Gull, second cycle birds tend to have more extensively white plumage, including on the head and face. The standing birds in our images are also rather long-legged, which is again consistent with Belcher's Gull (Howell & Dunn 2007, McMullan & Donegan 2014). Trevor Ellery alerted the birding community to this find promptly via facebook. The same bird appears to have returned the following winter, as JFS observed the species and took further photographs of a bird in more adult plumage on 6 December 2017 (Fig. 4).



Figure 1. Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri* at Camarones, foreground, with Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis* and Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*; and below with Laughing Gulls *Leucophaeus atricilla*. © T. Ellery.



Figure 2. Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri* at Camarones. Above: to the right of the shot, with Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Laughing Gulls *Leucophaeus atricilla* and Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis*. Middle and below: sitting mostly with Royal Terns *Thalasseus maximus* and Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis*. © T. Ellery.



Figure 3. Belcher's Gull *Larus belcheri* at Camarones. Top and two middle shots: towards the back with Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Laughing Gulls *Leucophaeus atricilla* and Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis* and a Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*. Below: sitting with Royal Terns, Sandwich Terns and Laughing Gulls. © T. Ellery.



Figure 4. Possibly the same bird returning to the same locality, Camarones, 6 December 2017. © José Ferney Salgado.

Other records

Andres Trujillo (*in litt.* 2018) reported an earlier sight record of Belcher's Gull, also at Camarones, from 2010.

Discussion

It is perhaps not surprising finally to be able to confirm the presence of Belcher's Gull in Colombia. However, the locality of this discovery on the Caribbean coast is quite surprising: a largely coastal species with a distribution principally north to Peru and a smattering of vagrant records further north, clearly crossed the land bridge around Panama or Colombia and made its way further east to Camarones. There has, of course, previously been an instance of a predominantly Pacific Ocean vagrant gull occurring in Colombia's Caribbean, namely Grey-hooded Gull *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus* (Strewe *et al.* 2008) and records of Belcher's Gull in the Falklands mean that this is neither the first Atlantic record nor even the easternmost record. Although the species is very rare north of Peru, it has been found as far north as California and even Florida (A. Jaramillo *in litt.* 2018), the latter being on the "wrong" coast also, so the Camarones records are not perhaps as exceptional as one might think. This species is clearly occasionally dispersive and can travel large distances from its usual range. However, this does appear to be the first record for the southern Caribbean region.

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