

The Marloes Glaucous Gull

At the bottom of the steps down to Marloes beach is a long-dead seal and this has recently been the favoured food supply of an unusual gull. It is very large - as big as a Greater Black-backed - but it is very pale in colour. It is basically whitish with pale brown checkers. It has a big pink bill with a black tip while the most significant feature is that the wing-tips are snowy white. You have probably never thought about it but almost all our familiar gulls of the area, in all their different plumages, have dark wing tips.



This bird is a juvenile Glaucous Gull. There are usually one or two to be seen each year in Pembrokeshire often frequenting the marsh at Newgale or Fishguard harbour. The Marloes bird is unusual in that it rarely moves far from the favoured dead seal. Sometimes it flies to the Mere for a wash in fresh water and a preen, and sometimes flies very aerobically along the top of the cliffs in the strong winds when the almost luminous white wing-tips can be clearly seen.

Glaucous Gulls breed in the far north – all around the Arctic from Spitzbergen, northern Norway and northern Russia to the far north of Alaska, Canada and Greenland. The adult birds look like a very large, mean Herring Gull with pale wing-tips. They are the top avian predator in these areas and pairs sit confidently on prominent rocks just like the Greater Black-backs do on Skomer and Skokholm. In the winter they move south ahead of the ice but usually only the juveniles wander as far south as the UK.

Have a look at the Marloes website www.marloes.org.uk if you want to see some photos.

In the first paragraph I used the word “almost”. The reason is that there is another uncommon gull with pale wing-tips – this is the Mediterranean Gull. This gull is very like a Black-Headed Gull but has a heavier bill, a different jizz, and pale wing-tips – again this is a key identification feature. A number of Mediterranean Gulls can usually be seen around Dale and Pickleridge during the winter but they can be surprisingly hard to pick out in their winter plumage. From colour-ringed birds we know that most of these Mediterranean Gulls breed in Eastern Europe and drift westwards to spend the winter here. There is also now a breeding population in the UK, especially in southern England, but as far as we can tell we don't see these birds in Wales.

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