

## NESTING SITES OF THE YELLOW-LEGGED GULL *Larus michahellis* IN NORTH-WESTERN MOROCCO

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The Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* is a common resident in the area of the Strait of Gibraltar, with the largest nesting population located on the Rock of Gibraltar itself. A review of the status of the Gibraltar population, and of efforts to control its growth, is given by Cortes *et al.* (2003). Other nesting colonies have been present for some decades now on cliffs at Barbate and on offshore islets at Punta Carnero and smaller breeding nuclei have become established since 1990 elsewhere along the northern shore of the Strait, particularly on buildings in the cities of La Linea and Algeciras.



Adult Yellow-legged Gull (C.Perez)

As part of an ecological study along coastal northern Morocco, the area between the Ceuta/Morocco frontier line and the town of Al Hoceima was surveyed between May 3<sup>rd</sup> and May 5<sup>th</sup> 2006. The coastal road was followed over a distance of approximately 180km, with stops made at regular intervals and wherever there was evidence of the presence of Yellow-legged Gulls. The co-ordinates of these locations were noted on a Garmin GPS 60C and the coastal area was scanned through binoculars for signs of sitting gulls. The behaviour of the gulls was also studied for evidence of nesting, such as aggression towards observers. An estimate

of the number of pairs was then made visually. A similar survey was carried out on May 6<sup>th</sup> along the shore of the Strait at the base of Jebel Musa, covering a distance of about 15km.



Location of Yellow-legged Gull colonies

Experience at Gibraltar (Cortes *et al.* 2003) indicated that gulls would be sitting on nests at this time and that the number of sitting gulls represents approximately the number of sitting pairs present. All the colonies observed were small, making counting easier, although the numbers presented in the Table below are considered to represent the minimum number of pairs at each location.

Location and estimated population size of the four colonies observed

Site	Latitude	Longitude	Minimum Population (pairs)	Habitat
A	35°54.827	05°26.000	c.300	Offshore islet (Layla)
B	35°54.135	05°26.559	10	Sea cliffs
C	35°24.064	05°02.499	10	Sea slopes among scrub
D	35°15.554	04°54.644	15	Sea slopes among scrub
E	35°10.436	04°21.566	60	Offshore islet

The largest colony was at Site A, on the islet of Layla, about 300m north of site B. Activity here suggested a fairly large colony of several hundred pairs but this

is only a very rough estimate as it could not be accessed,.

The colony at Site B was on steep coastal cliffs at the base of Jebel Musa, on the south shore of the Strait. The nests at colonies C and D were located on the ground among low scrub. Colony E was on the slopes and cliffs of an offshore islet. All the habitats are similar to those used in Gibraltar.



Colony B (*J. Cortes*)

It is interesting to note that the largest colonies were located on offshore rocky islets where presumably pressure from disturbance by humans and by grazing animals is reduced. The two colonies on the Strait (Sites A and B) were close to several small villages and to Ceuta, as well within 1.5km from a rubbish dump. Colonies, C, D and E were within 1km of the villages of Targha, Afirkane and Kalah Iris respectively.



Yellow-legged Gull in flight (C. Perez)

It appears therefore that the Moroccan population of Yellow-legged Gulls between the central area of the Strait and Al Hoceima is much smaller than that on the northern coast of the Strait, where the Gibraltar population alone comprises some 10,000 pairs (Cortes *et al.* 2003). The small size of the Moroccan population may be due to a shortage of nest sites which are protected from disturbance by humans but which are still able to benefit from the nearby presence of human activity.

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### Reference

Cortes, J.E., Shaw, E, Blair, M. & Candelin, G. 2003. The control of the Yellow-legged Gull in Gibraltar. *Almoraima* 31:199:215.