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Cape Chatter

Gull(ible) ... Kelp or Pacific??

Some of our coastal birds are easy to identify while others can be a bit perplexing. I still grapple with identifying the different migratory shorebirds from the northern hemisphere we sometimes see over the summer months and the different types of *Terns*. Most beachgoers know the *Seagull* (real name is *Silver Gull*) which is famous for snatching and devouring your chips at the beach. But there are a couple of other *Gulls*, slightly larger, which can be easily mistaken as the same bird species. They are the *Pacific Gull* which is reasonably common along our stretch of coast, and the far less common *Kelp Gull*. But even birds within the one species can look different depending on the maturity of the bird! So here's a little guide to help you, just in case you thought you had found a rare *Skua* or wayward *Albatross* on the beach!



Kelp or Pacific ??? Key differences ...

Kelp Gull are more common in New Zealand and the sub-Antarctic areas of the Southern Hemisphere, and in Australia along the NSW and Tasmanian south east coasts.

It's all in the lipstick!

Pacific—both upper and lower mandibles are red at the tip of the bill.

Kelp—only red on the lower mandible.

What about those legs!

Pacific—yellow of course.

Kelp—the legs are much duller tending to a lightish green/yellow.

A few more white feathers?

Pacific—has a narrow strip of white feathers at the back of the wings.

Kelp—has a broader strip of white feathers at the back of the wings and a white crescent shaped marking on the back.

There are some subtle differences in tail feathers as well.

You're the Voice

Pacific—Not very vocal.

Kelp—the seagull calls in all those British seaside movies and TV shows ... that's the *Kelp*!

The *Kelp Gull* (pictured right) is the first one I have seen along our stretch of coast and observation area since starting the Bird Species list in August 2019.



Above: Mature (adult) *Pacific Gull*, at least five years old.

Below: Adult *Kelp Gull* is smaller and slimmer.



The Pacific Gull takes around 4 years to mature

They may look like different birds, but they are not. *Pacific Gulls* take around 4 years to reach adult plumage from their juvenile days. Here's a guide to what they look like at each stage of their development. All photos taken on our local Cape Paterson coast at various times of the year.



Left: The Juvenile—During the first several months of its life, it is mainly brown and the bill predominantly black.

Below: Immature 1st Year—starting to notice the change in the bill with the base turning pinkish.



Left: Immature 2nd Year—Remains largely brown but has a distinctive white rump and the bill is starting to turn yellow at the base and red is emerging at the very tip of the mandibles.

Below: Immature 4th Year—nearly there. Just a small amount of streaked brown feathers remain on the head, the legs are brighter yellow and the lips are done!



Above: Immature 3rd Year—Mottled brown remains among the emerging white plumage, the mandibles are turning stronger yellow and a small amount of black remains on the lippy!



A stroll on a hot day ... and a stunning end to the day

It has been an unusual summer with runs of successive hot days few and far between. Yesterday, I decided to try something different to see what was out and about with the temperature in the mid 30's, overcast and light winds during the mid afternoon!

A *Black-shouldered Kite* (**left**) was keeping watch from a tree snag in the central creek line. These raptors are usually day time predators with their predominant food being small rodents/skinks. It was working the creek and open spaces, stopping occasionally to hover and check things out. This particular bird looks like it is just reaching adulthood by the traces of brown feather specks. Love those piercing reddish eyes.



This *Australasian Grebe* (**above**) was enjoying itself feeding and preening in the large, most easterly pond in the east-west pondage system. This bird is still in breeding plumage, identified by the dark head, black throat and rufous sides to the neck. It was alone.



I was quite surprised when this stunning *Buff-banded Rail* appeared out of the thick vegetation in the convergence pond (the intersection of the flow from the east-west ponds and north-south creek line). These are secretive waterfowl and generally confine their activities to dusk and dawn, although this particular rail is the less shy of the bunch. I managed to sit quietly on a habitat log to watch and photograph the bird for about 15 minutes—a real treat. They certainly look like they have become permanent residents of these water features.



Above: *Buff-banded Rail* cooling down with its wings spread.

A hot afternoon (continued) ...

The *Buff-banded Rail* fortunately remained in an opening among the edge of thick wetland vegetation and quietly preened itself. It looked like it was trying to cool its body temperature by lying down and spreading its wings—something I have not seen before in this species. I thought it would have taken itself to the water! It finally emerged next to me and crossed the walking path off into the eastern section of the east-west ponds, continuing on its daily adventure.

A stunning end to a hot day ... Cape turns it on!

And the Black-shouldered Kite was still on the go ...



More reproduction time for the invertebrates ...

Plenty of action with the little bit of warm weather, and the wetlands providing ideal habitat for a lot of *dragonfly* and *damsel* activity. This pair of *Blue Skimmer Dragonfly* (**right**) landed briefly while mating. They usually fly around while mating. A pair of *Ladybirds* (*hippodamia variegata*) (**below**) were also busy reproducing while working over the tiny pests in the remains of the corn patch. The male grips the female from behind and holds on tight. They can stay together for more than 2 hours at a time copulating.



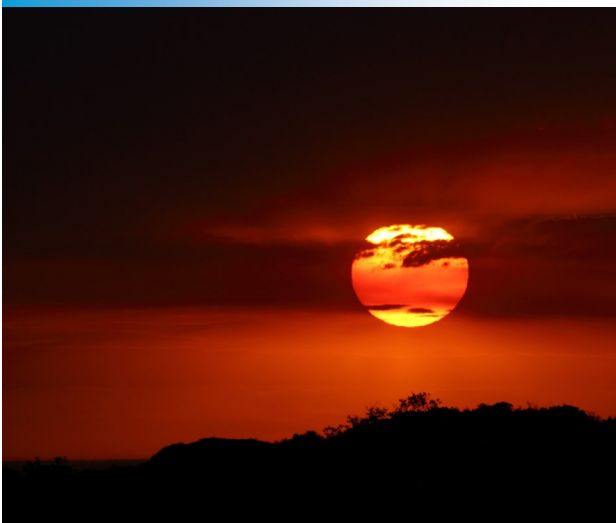
Hooded Plover breeding season gradually winding down ...

Looks like we have managed only **one** fledge this season across the seven breeding sites between Harmers Haven and Cape Paterson. Last year we had **six**. The last two chicks we were hopeful of fledging from Harmers were finally declared perished at about 21 days of age, two weeks short of fledging. The most likely cause was fox or off-leash dog predation given the signs of footprints within the chick protection zone. The parents have made a few new nest scrapes but as yet, there are no new eggs. The one great piece of news was the fledge from the Pea Creek/Undertow area which is still going strong at 47 days of age and remains with the parents—it will depart soon to find its own territory. This is the second year in a row for a fledge at this busy/highly disturbed breeding location and only the sixth bird to fledge here since 2006.



Our one and only fledged Hooded Plover juvenile this season, pictured recently at 45 days of age.

Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the
Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Feel free to contact David by email or through the website to report any nature observations at **The Cape**.

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