

## SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

*Hydrocoloeus minutus* (wintering)

English name: <b>Little gull</b>	Scientific name: <i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i> (wintering population)	
Taxonomical group: Class: Aves Order: Charadriiformes Family: Laridae	Species authority: Pallas 1776	
Subspecies,Variations,Synonyms: <i>Larus minutus</i>	Generation length: 5.3 years	
Past and current threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): Breeding: Alien species (I01), Competition and predation (I02), Climate change (M01.03), Human disturbance (G01), Other threat factors (Loss of specific habitat features, J03.01), Contaminant pollution (H01) Wintering: Oil spills (H03.01)	Future threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): Breeding: Alien species (I01), Competition and predation (I02), Climate change (M01.03), Human disturbance (G01), Other threat factors (Loss of specific habitat features, J03.01), Contaminant pollution (H01) Wintering: Oil spills (H03.01)	
IUCN Criteria: <b>D2</b>	<b>HELCOM Red List Category:</b>	<b>NT</b> <b>Near Threatened</b>
Global / European IUCN Red List Category LC / LC	EU Birds Directive: Annex I	
Protection and Red List status in HELCOM countries: <i>Subject of special conservation measures in the EU Member states (Birds Directive, Annex I)</i>  Denmark: RE, Estonia: VU, Finland: LC, Germany: "particularly protected" under Federal Species Protection Decree (Bundesartenschutzverordnung)/ R (Extremely rare), Latvia: –, Lithuania: 3 (R, Rare), Poland: –, Russia: –, Sweden: LC (breeding)		

**Range description and general trends**

Little gulls have a patchy distribution in Central and Northern Eurasia. Besides, a small population occurs at Hudson Bay and at the Great Lakes in North America. In Europe, breeding is concentrated in northern Scandinavia, the Baltic States, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. Occasionally, breeding birds are found far away from their usual range, e.g. in Britain, the Netherlands and Germany. The wintering grounds extend from W Europe to the Baltic Sea and from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Birds breeding in Europe overwinter in the North and Baltic Seas, as well as in the Atlantic off W Europe and NW Africa (Mendel et al. 2008, BirdLife International 2013). The European breeding population of little gulls underwent a moderate decline between 1970 and 1990. The decreasing trend reversed during the following decade, showing stable, fluctuating or increasing trends across the vast majority of its European breeding range. The population has, however, apparently not yet recovered to former levels (BirdLife International 2004). In Finland, the population trend is currently increasing and the distribution trend expanding (Valkama et al. 2011). For Sweden, a strongly increasing long-term trend (30 years) and an increasing short-term trend (10 years) has been reported (Ottvall et al. 2009). In contrast, the breeding population in Estonia strongly decreased in the period 1991–2008 (Elts et al. 2009). According to BirdLife International (2004) the breeding population is increasing in Sweden and Norway, stable in Belarus and fluctuating in Lithuania and Russia, resulting in a moderate increasing trend of the overall European breeding population. The European / W Mediterranean breeding population was estimated at 72 000 to



*Hydrocoloeus minutus* Photo by Nicole Sonntag

147 000 birds for the period 1990–2000, with increasing population trend (Wetlands International 2013).

### Distribution and status in the Baltic Sea region

The main wintering areas of little gulls in the Baltic Sea are located in the Gulf of Riga, the Irbe Strait area, in the south-western part of the Baltic proper and in Danish waters (Fig. 1). Large numbers of birds arrive at the coasts of Latvia and Poland in late July and August to moult (Durinck et al. 1994). In August and September, high numbers of foraging little gulls concentrate in German waters along the coast of Usedom and in the Greifswald Lagoon (Schirmeister 2001, 2002, Mendel et al. 2008). Eventually, the majority of little gulls migrate overland across Western Europe to the Atlantic, while some birds remain in the Baltic Sea, especially in mild winters. When the Gulf of Riga freezes up, little gulls either concentrate in the Irbe Strait or move south to the central parts of the Baltic proper and to Danish waters. In severe winters, little gulls seem to leave the Baltic Sea area. In 1988–1993, the Baltic Sea winter population was estimated at 2 245 birds (Durinck et al. 1994). Spring movements from the main wintering areas take place in April and May. Most gulls migrate overland, but some birds are also observed along the coast of the Baltic Sea (Durinck et al. 1994).

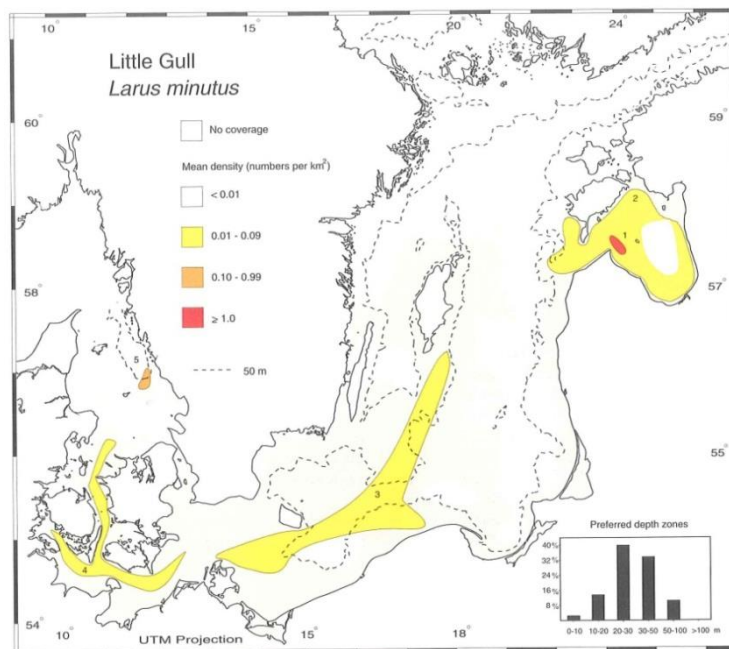


Fig. 1. Distribution and density of wintering little gulls (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) in the Baltic Sea, 1988–1993. The histogram shows the proportion of birds recorded in different depth zones during the surveys. From Durinck et al. (1994).

### Habitat and Ecology

Little gulls breed on floating water plants on the shores of islands, often fringed by reeds, and on other secluded locations on the edge of freshwater lakes, marshes, river basins and fish ponds, showing a preference for eutrophic waters with lush vegetation and emergent or floating plants. Along the eastern Baltic Sea coast, the species also nests in brackish water areas. Little gulls often breed together with terns or in small colonies of black-headed gulls. In winter, the birds occur in river mouths, along the coast and at sea, foraging in shelf areas rich in plankton and small fish or at steam or sewage outlets. They usually winter in small groups, but sometimes they form very large flocks of many thousand individuals. In the Baltic Sea, little gulls mainly occur in offshore areas of 10 to 100 metres water depth (see Fig. 1). During migration the species is also found on large inland lakes or rivers (Durinck et al. 1994, Mendel et al. 2008, BirdLife International 2013). When breeding and in inland staging / wintering grounds, the diet mainly consists of aquatic insects and small fish. Little is known, however, about the

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diet of migrating or wintering birds at sea. In the North Sea, little gulls probably feed on zooplankton like fish larvae, fish spawn and copepods as well as on floating insects (Schwemmer & Garthe 2006). During migration through the Baltic Sea, the species is often associated with frontal systems and floating seaweed, probably feeding on small crustaceans, floating insects and small fish (Sonntag unpubl. data).

### Description of major threats

In the breeding areas in Central Europe, the species is vulnerable to **environmental pollution** and to **threats to aquatic water bodies**, entailed by natural causes (e.g. **flooding**) or **habitat alteration / destruction** and **disturbance** due to **human activities**. Besides, locally high losses can be caused by **predation** (Bauer et al. 2005). In the wintering areas in the Baltic Sea, little gulls are threatened by **oil pollution**, as they sometimes form large flocks of swimming birds. Besides, they might be adversely affected by a **reduction of small fish stocks** as an indirect effect of fishing activities. However, the species is assumed to benefit from the increasing availability of small fish and other prey items due to eutrophication and overfishing of large predatory fish (see Mendel et al. 2008).

### Assessment justification

According to Durinck et al. (1994), about 2 245 little gulls occurred in the Baltic Sea during the winter periods 1988–1993. More recent information on the winter population is, however, lacking as no winter surveys for gulls are undertaken in most Baltic Sea countries. The European breeding population of little gulls underwent a moderate decline between 1970 and 1990. The trend reversed during the following decade. Although the population has apparently not recovered to former levels, the overall European breeding population shows a moderate increasing trend (see above). The overall European winter population is fluctuating, with stable or probably stable trends in Finland, Estonia and Latvia and probably increasing trends in Poland (BirdLife International 2004). The flyway population breeding in Europe / Russia is considered increasing by Wetlands International (2013). Based on predominantly stable or increasing trends of the breeding and wintering population in several Baltic Sea countries during the last two decades, the Baltic Sea winter population is assumed not to reach the level for a Red List category under criteria A and C. The species has a large range and hence does not meet the criteria for a Red List assessment under criterion B (see Fig. 1). However, although gulls are usually widespread during winter, the distribution of little gulls in the Baltic Sea seems to be concentrated to less than ten locations. According to Durinck et al. (1994), more than 95% of the Baltic winter population were concentrated in five areas, three of which are quite restricted. Thus, there might be an imaginable threat that can make the species capable of becoming *Vulnerable* or *Endangered* within a very short time (e.g. oiling). Accordingly, the species is classified as *Near Threatened* according to criterion D2.

### Recommendations for actions to conserve the species

Management measures to reduce or prevent overgrowing and flooding of breeding habitats, reduction of contamination with environmental pollutants, reduction of disturbances near the nesting sites and predator control are some options to improve the breeding success of little gulls. In the Baltic wintering areas, the prevention of accidental and chronic oil pollution will benefit the species.

### Common names

Denmark: dværgmåge, Estonia: väikekajakas, Finland: pikkulokki, Germany: Zwergmöwe, Latvia: mazais ķīris, Lithuania: joudagalvis kiras, mažasis kiras, Poland: mewa mala, Russia: Малая чайка, Sweden: dvärgmåås

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