

**Audouin's Gull at Dungeness:
a new species for Britain
David Walker**

Audouin's Gull by Norman McCanch

It was with very little expectation of the events that I strolled to the seawatch hide on the morning of Monday May 5th 2003. After 45 minutes all I had seen was an Arctic Skua so in desperation I had begun looking at a large gathering of gulls feeding along the surf line. After a few minutes I noticed an unfamiliar gull flying towards me, initially about 300 yards away. It had an upper wing pattern somewhat similar to that of several first-summer Mediterranean Gulls *Larus melanocephalus* present in the area but this was clearly something very different, much bigger, and as it flew by I was convinced that it had a red base to the bill. I almost instantly recognised the bird as an Audouin's Gull and exclaimed to the one person nearby that he should "get on this bird". In stunned silence we watched the bird as it circled around the hide and then above the power station before it flew east towards the fishing boats and out of sight.

I was convinced that it had to be the same bird that had been in The Netherlands a few days earlier (we had even joked about the possibility of it appearing at Dungeness) It was a first for Britain but would it be accepted on such brief views. I telephoned my assistant Andy Wraithmell who quickly joined me and I related what had happened. We split up in search of the bird and 15 minutes later Andy relocated the bird flying along the beach, then over the power station and inland towards the RSPB Reserve. Having confirmed that I had not gone mad, I called Ray Turley at home and suggested that he might like to go the Reserve to check the gulls whilst we maintained a watch at the Patch. RT rushed to the Firth hide which was full of birdwatchers enjoying a quiet Bank Holiday afternoon. With his first scan of the islands Ray picked out the bird amongst the roosting Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. Immediately, radio and telephone calls were also being made and within a few seconds the hide quickly filled with the Reserve staff and members of the Dungeness birding community and others from further afield.

At 1.10pm, the bird flew off in the direction of the power station. It was assumed to have gone back to the 'Patch' where it was eventually relocated at 1.45pm again flying above the power station and then back towards the Reserve. A telephone call to me still sitting in the Firth Hide allowed it to be quickly relocated as it flew back onto the island. This time photographs and video were recorded.

The bird showed well for the rest of the day and throughout the following day. An estimated 1400 birders saw the bird and over the two days generously donated over £500 to the Dungeness Bird Observatory funds. It was not seen again on the 7th May until the evening when it came in to roost on the RSPB Reserve and what proved to be its final sighting.

This record has been accepted by the BOU and British Birds Rarities Committee as the first record for Kent and Britain.

