Black-headed Gull Casting a Pellet

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Birds are known to regurgitate pellets, indigestible parts of their food item like bones, fur, feathers, bills, claws, teeth, shells, chitinous exoskeletons, seeds, plant matter, etc (Seyfe, *et al.*, 2024; Gill, *et al.*, 2019). Although owls and raptors are well known to cast pellets, many other birds also cast pellets including herons, cormorants, gulls, terns, kingfishers, crows, jays, swallows, bee-eaters, most shorebirds, flycatchers and spiderhunters (Seyfe, *et al.*, 2024; Wang, *et al.*, 2009; Amar-Singh HSS 2017; Amar-Singh HSS 2024). The International Bird Pellet Study Group listed 18 orders comprising 67 families and 316 species of birds that cast pellets (Wang, *et al.*, 2009).

On 24 February 2025 at the waterfront of Sandakan, Sabah, North Borneo, Malaysia, we heard of a flock of migratory Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*. We visited the site and observed 50 migratory Black-headed Gulls (Plate 1). This number was unusual for the east coast as most reports on eBird in the past were between one to 18 birds for all of Sabah, with only two reports of 50 birds near Pulau Mamutik in January 2006 and 30-60 birds at Likas Lagoon in February to March 2024 on the west coast.



Plate 1: Black-headed Gulls, Sandakan, Sabah, North Borneo, Malaysia, 24 February 2025.

As we watched, we saw one Black-headed Gull disengaged itself from the flock, dropped to a lower level and began to retch. We realised that pellet casting was happening and took serial images to document the episode (Plate 2). We were unable to retrieve the pellet due to limited access to the site and it would also have scared all the gulls away.

Black-headed Gulls are known to cast pellets. An analysis of pellets showed frogs in their diet (Vernon 1972). A study that included the foraging ecology of Black-headed Gulls using pellet composition showed that gulls from urban colonies regularly exploited human-derived food resources as opposed to rural communities (Jakubas, *et al.*, 2020).

Limited work has been done on pellet analysis locally and it is important to pursue it. It will offer useful information about the feeding behaviour, ecological roles and interactions between birds and their habitat. This will assist in conservation efforts.



Plate 2: Sequential images of a Black-headed Gull casting a pellet, Sandakan, Sabah, North Borneo, Malaysia, 24 February 2025.

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