

Gulls

**Herring gull, Great black-backed gull,
Lesser black-backed gull and the Black-headed gull**

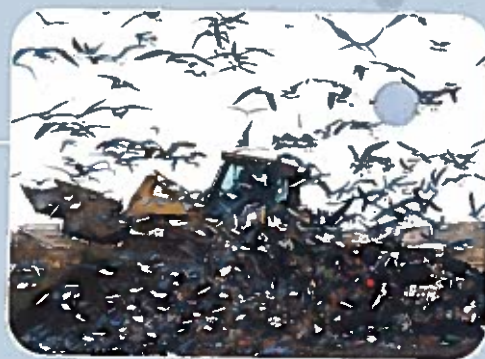
History

Once confined to coastal areas, breeding on cliffs and feeding almost exclusively in the sea and estuary areas, gulls have taken advantage of man's behaviour and moved inland to benefit from the immense and ever-ready supply of food waste produced. Herring gulls are large, and probably the most recognisable of gulls, with their young sporting distinctive brown spotty plumage. Their antics often delight local residents in seaside towns. They are highly intelligent birds with an increasing preference for inland rubbish tips, just like their cousins, the Great black-backed gull and the smaller Lesser black-backed gull, who prefers coastal areas in the summer. Black-headed gulls are actually brown-headed for half the year and white-headed for the other six months. They are commonly found almost anywhere inland but prefer the South East, where they establish their sociable and noisy colonies.

Behaviour

Gulls are supreme opportunists and have adapted well to our modern way of living, nesting on high rooftops and eating discarded scraps. Despite their apparent success, numbers for all gull species are actually in decline. The Herring gull is on the International Union for Conservation and Nature (IUCN) red list, which makes culling even more nonsensical. Their cries are potent reminders of seaside holidays for most of us, and those who are lucky enough to live by the sea can be encouraged to be more tolerant of these iconic coastal birds.

Gulls quickly adapt to and thwart our best efforts to control them. Like all good parents, they are protective of their young and may swoop to ward off people who they perceive to be a danger. They can also swoop dangerously as they attempt to take food that people are holding.



Outside the breeding season, however, the main complaint – often made by pest control companies – is that they can spread disease to people. However, there is little evidence to support this. According to the Pigeon Control Advisory Service, which also specialises in humane gull control, the likelihood of a bird passing a disease to a person is so small as not to be credible.²⁹

It has been claimed that gulls prey on other birds' eggs but their impact is considered to be very low.³⁰ In fact, gulls can have beneficial effects on other wildlife. For example, several other bird species nest within gull colonies and benefit from protection from predators.³¹

Methods of killing

Most gulls are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and cannot be killed without a specific licence obtained from Natural England, but those listed on the General Licence can be controlled if certain conditions exist. In most cases where lethal controls are used, gulls are shot or poisoned. Shooting can leave birds wounded to die a protracted death, and can put other birds and the public at risk. Shooting often just disperses a colony, which will simply return once the shooting has stopped. Furthermore, when gulls become agitated, their droppings become more acidic, so the stress caused by a colony being shot at could actually increase the damage caused by their droppings.³⁴ Poisoning can also put the public and other wildlife at risk. As gulls are long-lived and mobile, any reduction in numbers will quickly be replenished from local colonies.³⁵



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Humane deterrents

Food is the key factor in deterring gulls from an area but other humane deterrents may also be employed effectively.

- Reduce the amount of food available, as this will have the greatest impact
- Dissuade residents from feeding
- Ensure waste food is properly disposed of and streets are kept clean
- Block access to regular breeding sites
- Install 'GullWire' (consisting of parallel wires) or 'Daddi Long Legs' (a detachable, reusable wire device) to deter landing
- Employ physical deterrents such as balloon-kites
- Provide alternative roosting sites away from sensitive areas
- Oil the eggs of laying pairs *

* Sustained oiling of eggs has been shown to be effective, resulting in a 95 per cent reduction in hatching.³⁶

Gull facts

- Urban gulls are quite different in behaviour from their coastal cousins, feeding on discarded food at waste sites rather than seafood from fishing industries.
- The UK Herring gull population has declined by 72 per cent since 1969, with the Lesser black-backed and the Great black-backed gull numbers also in decline.³⁹
- Herring gulls can live for more than 35 years and mate for life, although 'divorce' does occur if breeding fails.
- Climate change can encourage two broods per year instead of one.⁴⁰
- Gulls are highly intelligent birds, quickly adapting to bird dummies, sound deterrents, birds of prey and nets.⁴¹

Useful contacts

Pigeon Control Advisory Service (PiCAS). www.picasuk.com
Phone 0844 736 6272

Humane Urban Wildlife Deterrence. www.jbryant.co.uk
Phone 01732 357355 or 07770 788566



*'Brighton and Hove City Council's strategy for dealing with the seagull problem is to concentrate on seagull food sources.'*³²