

# Seagulls

## Biology

Seagulls are quite large birds and can measure up to about 68cm from beak to tail. Their wingspan can be around 85cm. There are many species of gull, many of which are not considered to be pests. It is generally the following three species that cause problems in urban and coastal areas:

- Herring Gull (common grey seagull)
- Lesser Black-backed Gull
- Greater Black-backed Gull

## Behaviour

More and more seagulls are moving into towns and built-up areas to feed and rear their young. This is because fish stocks are becoming scarcer and the easy-pickings from litter and household refuse make such areas more attractive to gulls.

Breeding pairs start to court each other in late March and April and nest-building begins in early May. Urban birds build nests that they will use year after year.

## Life Cycle

Eggs are laid from the beginning of May and a clutch usually consists of three eggs. After three weeks the eggs begin to hatch and the chicks are usually seen in June. Gull chicks grow very quickly and are quite active which means that they sometimes fall from nests. Small chicks usually die if they are not returned, but the larger chicks will continue to be fed and protected even while on the ground.

The chicks fledge in early August and take three to four years to reach maturity when they will begin to breed. Gulls generally have a lifespan of around twenty years.

Gulls are social creatures and once roosting gets a hold, other gulls will start to move into an area and nest on adjacent buildings, until their numbers build up sufficiently that a colony is established.

## Gull Control

The principal legislation relating to gulls and all other birds is the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981. Under the legislation it is illegal to capture, injure or destroy any wild bird or interfere with its nest or eggs. The penalties that can result from prosecutions under the act can be severe.

General licenses issued by Natural England and DEFRA (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) allow specific measures to be taken against species of birds on grounds which include the preservation of public health or public safety. Any action that is taken must be humane and the use of an inhumane method which could cause suffering to the birds would be illegal. Only the owner of a building or its occupier can take action against the gulls on it and only if those gulls are of the three species mentioned above. They may however give permission to someone to act on their behalf. Shooting is not encouraged, particularly in urban areas because of the risks to others and private property. If shooting does occur it must be carried out with reference to the Fire Arms Act 1968.

**The local authority has no statutory obligation to control gulls and is unable to offer any practical help to resolve issues involving gulls.**

## Seagulls: Frequently Asked Questions

### Is there anything that can be done about the noise seagulls make?

There is very little that can be done to prevent seagulls from causing a nuisance through the noise they can make. Proofing a building or structure can deter the birds from roosting or nesting and this can cause birds

to search for another suitable place to roost or set up a nest. Where birds have settled on an adjacent building and are causing problems you should speak to the owner or occupier of the building and ask them whether they would be willing to consider proofing their property. It is likely that the birds are also causing a nuisance there.

Any commercial pest control contractor would usually be happy to advise you in this respect.

### **What can be done about fouling?**

Again, other than proofing premises against alighting birds there is very little that can be done.

### **What can be done about gulls that swoop on people and try to attack them?**

Gulls will often try to snatch food from people, especially when people are dining outside or walking along the street eating and this can be very frightening. However, when gulls are rearing young chicks they can become quite aggressive and will attack anyone whom they consider a threat to their offspring. Legally, the owner or occupier of the building on which the chicks are being reared will have responsibility for the birds and it is possible that a civil action could be taken against that person because they have not taken reasonable action to resolve the problem.

Where birds are actually attacking people and it is considered that the birds are a threat to the health and safety of the public it is possible that a 'general license' will be granted by Natural England to a competent pest control professional, acting on behalf of the owner or occupier of a building. However, all other non-lethal methods of control must have been considered before a license is granted.

### **Can I prevent seagulls from alighting or nesting on my property?**

Proofing is the only available method for deterring gulls from using a building as a nesting or roosting site and proofing can involve:

- **Netting.** This is used to protect the face of a building, the spaces between a sloping roof and a light-well etc.
- **Post and wire systems.** These consist of metal wire or nylon filament and are used in a 'criss-cross' pattern to cover a flat roof and ridges to deter gulls from alighting or roosting.
- **Spike systems.** Pre-fabricated plastic or stainless steel tines which are spaced along a strip of material and protrude vertically to deter birds from alighting or roosting. This method is perfect for proofing rain hoppers, small parapets, window cills, chimney stacks and rows of ridge tiles.
- **Electric systems.** This is a fairly new concept which involves laying lines of insulated copper strips that conduct a small electrical charge which gives alighting birds a 'jolt' and causes them to fly off. There are many competent service providers around who can advise on what needs to be done and how much the work may cost.

### **What can I do about seagulls nesting on my property?**

Gulls are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. However if there are public health or public safety concerns, a General Licence may be issued by Natural England to allow control measures to be taken or for further advice you could contact Natural England by telephone on: 0845 601 4523. The license allows an owner / occupier or person authorised by them to take, damage or destroy nests, take eggs or kill birds in accordance with the requirements and conditions set out in the Licence.

The sorts of scenario that could pose a risk to health and safety might involve birds nesting on or over a boiler ventilation flue, resulting in a build-up of noxious fumes. Problems involving bird noise, fouling and property damage are not reasons for which a license will be granted.

The responsibility for resolving any gull problem is yours if you are the owner or occupier of an affected building. The cost of any works required to resolve the problem will also have to be met by the owner / occupier.

### **What can the local Authority do to help residents/businesses who are affected by gulls?**

The local authority has no responsibility and can only provide the advice contained on these pages.

### **Is it illegal to feed seagulls?**

It is not illegal to feed seagulls. However, doing so will encourage birds to remain in the area and cause problems for other residents, businesses and members of the public. More importantly, bird feeding encourages other pests like rats, mice and foxes.

### **What can be done about seagulls ripping open refuse sacks?**

Gulls now associate plastic refuse sacks with food and they will easily rip open sacks and spill the contents around the area, often attracting rats and mice. Household waste should only be put out on the collection day and should be stored in a dustbin with a securely fitting lid.

### **Injured Birds?**

Gull chicks sometimes fall out of the nest and end up lying on the ground. Unless the chick is injured it should remain where it is and the parent birds will continue to look after it. If the bird is injured it can be moved a short distance away from traffic or predators and the [RSPCA should be contacted](#).