



LIVING WITH... GULLS

There is no such thing as a “seagull”, in fact there are eleven species found in the UK; the Black Headed, Common, Great Black-backed, Glaucous, Herring, Kittewake, Iceland, Little, Mediterranean, Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gull.

Although generally marine based birds, many gulls also live inland for at least part of the year and often roost in flocks, occasionally on water at night. They are opportunists when feeding and their diet mainly consists of fish, molluscs, invertebrates and discarded human food. Gulls breed from May to July and produce one brood a year with generally between 2-3 eggs. Most young fledge within 4-6 weeks of hatching and do not return to the nest site until adulthood. Many think that young “browny” gulls will mature into the white, grey and black plumage in around a year, yet it can take up to four years for a young gull to reach maturity.

Despite the iconic status of gulls as part of the British seaside, public opinion is divided about their behaviour. The territorial calls can be very noisy early in the morning and ripping open black bin bags to access organic waste creates litter.

Immature herring gull



Herring gulls

They are also known to swoop down on people and snatch food items. But it's the nesting on domestic dwellings and commercial buildings that causes the most concern. However, these behaviours all have natural explanations and can be managed with a little care and understanding.

Of the British species, three in particular have taken well to nesting in urban environments; Herring Gulls, Great Black-backed Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Gull species benefit in a range of ways by living and breeding in urban environments. For example there are fewer predators, and a constant, abundant food source.

Are gulls and their nests protected?

All wild birds in England and Wales are protected under **the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** (as amended). It is an offence to: kill, injure or take any wild bird; to intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird that is in use or being built; and to take or destroy and egg of any wild bird. However under the Act it is possible to take action against some species, including some species of gull, using the appropriate licence.

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How can I deter gulls...

FROM ROOTING THROUGH HOUSEHOLD RUBBISH?

- Dispose of any litter that may be foraged by gulls into bins, rather than leaving it in bags or crates of rubbish.
- Gull-proof bins are easily acquired, cheap and very effective. Some councils in Cornwall and Devon have started using hessian bags as gulls cannot peck through them to get to the food.

WHEN OUT AND ABOUT?

- Snatching food is a behaviour learned and reinforced by being fed by the public. **Try to avoid feeding any gulls**, keep your food to yourself and, where possible, try to use re-sealable food containers or something that will close.
- Avoid giving young children loose food like crisps or chips if you notice a large number of gulls around.
- Avoid widespread feeding of gulls, particularly in public areas.
- Do not litter; rubbish on the floor will always attract gulls.

FROM NESTING ON ROOFS?

- Simple wire-frame structures around chimney pots have shown some success,
- Anti-perching devices, such as spines, are considered to be one of the most humane ways of trying to minimise the problems these birds can cause. The spines are either angled so that they are awkward to land on but will not impale the bird, some may be designed to bend but be firm enough to provide an uncomfortable perching or roosting place for the bird. **However it is vital these are installed appropriately by trained professionals and inspected regularly.**
- When installed properly, netting can provide humane, long-term solution to controlling birds. The correct size mesh and tension will ensure that misadventure due to entanglement is reduced. **As with anti-perch devices, netting should be maintained and inspected regularly.**
- Hazing or disturbance during early nest building can be effective on large commercial buildings with flat roofs.
- Clear all the moss and plants off your roof and out of gutters.

How can I stop gulls calling in the morning?

The noisiest time of the year for gulls is the breeding season, between May and July. The best way to avoid disturbances like this is by taking action in the winter to limit the opportunity for gulls to settle or nest on your property.

Black-headed gull



Juvenile herring gull

Between May and July it is advisable to leave gulls alone (until the breeding is over) and then take preventive action to ensure they do not return. Gulls' nests are protected while under construction or in use and it is an offence to restrict access to a nest that is being used. The RSPCA has produced a leaflet on 'Living with... nesting birds' which contains more information.

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Can gull numbers be legally controlled?

Wherever possible, the RSPCA would always prefer non-lethal solutions and only if there is a serious problem and non-lethal means are ineffective or impractical should killing be contemplated. Gulls have basic legal protection under the **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** (as amended). They can be legally controlled under the terms of the licences issued by Natural England, or Natural Resources Wales, but any action must follow the conditions specified on each licence.

Conditions for licensed control include: to preserve public health; air safety; to prevent serious damage to agriculture; or to protect other wild birds. However, it remains illegal to do anything that will cause suffering to the birds. If breeding is taking place, and there is a risk to public health or safety, then it may also be possible to remove the birds under licence.

Details of these licences are available on Natural England's website (www.gov.uk/wildlife-licences).

Gulls that swoop suddenly on people or pets are usually just trying to protect nearby chicks that have left the nest but aren't yet able to fly properly. Put your pet on a leash and try not to disturb the birds.

What should I do if a gull becomes entangled in netting on buildings?

If a gull becomes trapped behind netting, the owner of the building where the netting is situated should be informed. The owner should then take action and contact whoever erected the netting, as it is their responsibility to ensure that the netting is fit for purpose. Under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006**, an animal is protected once it is trapped and a bird suffering and dying as a result of ill-maintained netting may constitute an offence. We always encourage the owner of the building to repair the netting and put in place a system of maintenance and checking to prevent any further problems.

If a live bird or other animal is found entangled or trapped behind netting, we would recommend that you contact the RSPCA through the number below.

I have found a sick, injured or orphaned gull, what should I do?

The golden rule, as with all wildlife, is to monitor from a distance. Even if it is on the ground, the bird may not be abandoned or in danger.

If a young bird is found in the open with down feathers and is unable to fly (a nestling), contact the RSPCA on the number below.

Never attempt to return a chick to the nest.

Anyone finding a fully fledged bird (fledgling) on the ground should leave it alone unless it is obviously injured or sick, in which case you should contact the RSPCA, a wildlife centre or take it straight to a local vet.

Black-headed gull



To report an injured or sick gull to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on 0300 1234 999