

Information from Royal Society for the Protection for Birds

From Katie-Jo Luxton, Director of RSPB Cymru:

We get lots of calls on gull 'nuisance' from the public. We have made our cities perfect habitats for them – lots of nesting ledges and plentiful food; particularly as their natural food sources at sea have declined. It's worth noting that both Lesser Black backed gull and Herring gull are both red listed by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) so increasingly our cities are important habitats for these species.

We often talk people through the stages of defensive behaviour gulls go through if they feel their chicks are threatened by people as this can help people understand what is happening. The younger/more vulnerable the chicks the more quickly they will go for stage 4, much like humans defending their children.

Stage of threat warning

1. 'gag call', warning intruders to move away
2. 'low pass', during which gulls swoop at intruders
3. defecate or regurgitate over intruders
4. direct kick attack

Umbrellas are genuinely helpful in reducing the likelihood of actual attack, as it obscures your eyes so the gull can't see what you're looking at. They will also attack the highest point, so that means the umbrella (or any other item held above your head) rather than your head. In a garden, people could try erecting a gazebo or awning for children to play under, which might reduce the aggression from gulls. As the chicks get older the aggression from adults will reduce.

Urban gulls are more 'cheeky' in their approach to humans because they've learned to associate humans with food. This is either from people directly feeding them or through generating waste food which isn't properly disposed of. When people composted all their food waste at home prior to public waste collections starting in the 1940's, gulls didn't nest in towns and there wasn't a 'gull nuisance'; the problem behaviour is linked to the way we manage our food waste now and make it so accessible to gulls by putting it easily opened plastic bags.

I'm not sure about Swansea, but here in Cardiff, the council provides food waste caddies which are lockable. If people can't compost their own waste they should put ALL food waste in these and only put them out on bin day for collection. There should be no food waste in bin/recycling bags. Cleaning recycling before putting it in the bag also reduces the smell in the green bags so they won't be interested in pecking these open.

More here on the legal situation: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/animal-deterrents/gulls/urban-gulls-and-the-law/>

Urban Gulls and the Law (information from RSPB web pages linked above)

Gulls are a traditional part of seaside environments, but there's concern about their increasing presence in urban areas.

The situation so far

Since the 1940s, some herring and lesser black-backed gulls have used rooftops for nesting. It's not known exactly what prompted this move, but abundant inland sources of food and safe, predator-free nesting sites on rooftops were definite factors.

The 1956 Clean Air Act prevented rubbish tip operators burning waste, so gulls took advantage of the huge amount of organic material increasingly generated by our 'throw-away' society and sent to landfill. Many urban streets are also frequently replete with discarded food and accessible rubbish and some people feed gulls.

The birds nesting on roofs of houses are most likely to be herring gulls, whilst lesser black-backed gulls tend to concentrate on the larger expanses of industrial or commercial buildings with flat roofs. Although numbers of roof-nesting gulls, especially lesser black-backed gulls, are still increasing, the overall population of herring gulls is plummeting, making them a red list species. The lesser black-backed gull population has also declined in recent years.

Government licences allow the killing of urban gulls only as a last resort, where a significant risk to public health or safety has been identified. While we understand that roof-nesting gulls can cause problems, we question the appropriateness of lethal control on a declining, red-listed species and highlight the need to comply with European bird protection law.

Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the nests, eggs or downy chicks of herring and lesser black-backed gull - even fledged young look identical to all but an expert eye. This makes species-specific control measures difficult.

Tackling the issue

Some local authorities attempt to control the numbers of urban gulls by egg-oiling or nest destruction. Since urban gull populations are still increasing, these actions do not appear to have the desired effect. As long as there are suitable nest sites and available food, random nest destruction alone is unlikely to work, since the birds will simply re-nest either in the same place or somewhere nearby.

Currently, knowledge on the numbers, and nesting and foraging habitats of urban nesting gulls and their interchange with 'countryside' gulls is low. There is also some evidence that the amount of interchange between 'urban' and 'countryside' gulls varies geographically.

We believe the best approach to understanding urban gull populations starts with comprehensive research to establish these basics, followed by development of effective deterrent methods for use in situations where gulls are causing problems.

These could include rendering nest sites inaccessible, reducing the organic waste taken to landfill sites and, in towns, preventing street littering, and making public waste bins, domestic and business waste containers and collection arrangements 'gull-proof'. Those best placed to do this include landfill companies, local authorities and statutory bodies with a wildlife management remit, but the behaviour of private individuals is also important.

Gulls and the law

All species of gull are protected under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

This makes it illegal to intentionally or, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, recklessly injure or kill any gull or damage or destroy an active nest or its contents. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, it is also illegal to prevent birds from accessing their nest and, in Northern Ireland, it is illegal to disturb any nesting bird. In addition, the Mediterranean gull is protected under Schedule 1 of both acts. This makes it illegal to intentionally or recklessly disturb the birds at or close to their nest or to disturb their dependent young.

However, the law recognises that in certain circumstances control measures may be necessary. Simple nuisance or minor damage to property are not legally sanctioned reasons to kill gulls. The UK administrations can issue licences, permitting nests to be destroyed or even birds to be killed if there is no non-lethal solution and if it is done to prevent serious damage to agriculture, the spread of disease, to preserve public health and safety and air safety, or to conserve other wild birds.

These licences can be specific - issued to individuals on a case-by-case basis or general granted annually by the country administrations for use by an 'authorised person' (usually the landowner, occupier or someone authorised by them).

The general licences their terms and conditions and the species to which they apply vary in different parts of the UK - they can be altered or withdrawn at any time. Anyone considering action against any gull must first consult the appropriate country agency for the current licence terms and conditions. See the links on the right. These agencies should also be contacted for information on specific deterrent or control measures - we are not in a position to advise on these.

Actions outside the terms and conditions of a general licence or those which have not been permitted by any other individual licences are criminal offences.

Gull breeding habitats and nest sites

Gulls are semi-colonial nesters and, in some instances, form colonies of thousands of birds, especially kittiwakes.

Nest sites for gulls

Traditional nest sites include sea-cliffs, sand dunes, islands on the coast and inland and other inaccessible locations. Some lesser black-backed and herring gulls have successfully adopted roofs for nesting.

The nest is a well-constructed cup made of twigs and grasses. The clutch of two to four eggs is incubated by both sexes for up to 30 days in May and June. The chicks hatch fully covered in down and are fed by both parents. With the exception of the kittiwake, the chicks leave the nest and move to the relative safety of nearby vegetation when only a few days old. The parents look after them until they fledge after five or six weeks and for a period afterwards.

Gulls are long-lived birds - the larger species only start to breed when four years old and some can live to their upper twenties.

Why are some gulls nesting in urban areas?

- Gulls are found mainly on the coast in summer, although black-headed gulls also nest inland. Large numbers of some gull species move inland in winter, roosting on lakes and reservoirs and feeding on farm fields and refuse tips.
- Kittiwakes feed on small surface-shoaling fish and crustaceans caught offshore, and will also scavenge at fishing vessels. They do not forage inland. Large gulls (herring, lesser black-backed and great black-backed) feed on almost anything of suitable size.
- Herring gulls generally forage within 10km of their nests while lesser black-backed gulls will travel much further to feed. They hunt fish and other sea creatures, but also take carrion, rubbish, litter and waste food, as well as eggs and chicks of other seabirds. They are natural scavengers and take advantage of organic waste at landfill sites and in towns.
- All gulls, except kittiwakes, will feed on ploughed fields. Herring and black-headed gulls in particular can be found 'charming worms' on pastures, playing fields and other grassy areas.

Conservation status

The kittiwake, with more than a third of a million pairs is the most numerous of all the UK gull species. Herring, lesser black-backed and black-headed gulls each have in excess of 100,000 breeding pairs, while the others have significantly smaller populations.

All seven breeding gull species are birds of conservation concern. The herring gull is now red listed due to the severe declines in its national breeding population. The other species are amber listed for differing reasons. The Mediterranean gull is the only species whose numbers are currently not declining.

Why are gulls declining?

Kittiwake numbers are declining primarily because of shortage of their preferred prey of sandeels. It is thought that this is being driven by climate change.

The cause of the declines in other species is not yet known, but could be the result of changes in their maritime environment, including pollution or changes in commercial fishing practices. Research is urgently needed to establish the causes of these declines so that measures to reverse them can be set out.