

Media Release

Let's hear it for gulls - 'Parents of the Year'

RSPB advice on urban gulls

Herring gulls take parenting very seriously – whether they are on an unpopulated coastal island or in a town or city. Defending their nest and their young is part of their DNA. On a coastal island, if a crow or a great black-backed gull tries to steal (and eat) an egg or chick, it will be repelled with all the parent gull's strength and other gulls will come to assist. It is no different in towns and cities. If the gulls believe their eggs or young are in danger, they understandably become very protective and can be aggressive in defence of their young.

Tony Whitehead, speaking for the RSPB in the South West said, "However, if you, your loved one, or pet experience this type of gull behaviour it can be a very frightening experience. And you don't much care if the gull's motives are actually honourable because they are protecting their young."

Gulls are a natural part of our country's wildlife and have always been a feature of coastal towns and villages. But while gull populations along the coast are declining, numbers of gulls nesting in some towns and cities are increasing. The reasons are complicated.

It's only since the 1940s that household waste previously composted at home ended up at landfill. The Clean Air Act stopped it being burnt. This easily available food waste in landfill coincided with a decrease in the gull's natural marine food. Gulls are clever, adaptable, opportunistic birds. Some moved from natural sites, taking advantage of nesting sites near bountiful landfills, predator and disturbance-free urban rooftops with the added bonus of discarded food on streets and, from the 1970s, plentiful thin bin-bags easily accessible to gulls and other wildlife.

Peter Rock, who has been studying urban gulls for over 30 years, said, "Nowadays we have two populations; those breeding in the wild and those breeding in town. It is very rare for town gulls to breed in the wild and vice versa."

Mr Whitehead added, "Urban gulls have no way of knowing that they are nesting on our house or close to where we walk to the shops, school or work. As far as they are concerned, they have found a high site that

is safe from predators with a good food supply in easy flying distance so set about the business of rearing young. Gulls nesting on roofs can present problems. Some Councils advise that deterrents may work but, as with all contractors, it's always best to do some homework. And of course, a deterrent on your own roof doesn't prevent the birds nesting next door! Also, if the person installing a deterrent has little or no knowledge of gull behaviour you may find that the gulls are nesting quite happily between the spikes or getting trapped in wire or netting and you have a welfare issue on your hands.

"Parent gulls have a real issue with personal space and this is at its highest when a young gull is learning to fly. Young gulls often have trouble mastering the art of flying. They have to practise and many get it horribly wrong and land on the ground or get themselves trapped or injured. This is when the parent gull swings into full protective mode. If the gull believes you are too close to its youngster and therefore could easily harm it, it will fly over you at great speed - alarmingly close but rarely making contact the first time. This is akin to a 'warning shot over the bows'. They are large birds and this often seems like a full blown attack. It is meant to frighten and warn you off. If that doesn't work, the gull will then let you know it means business. They are big, bulky birds so the impact is not easily forgotten. If you have an anxious gull parent to contend with, the best advice is to walk with an umbrella up.

"Gulls should never be fed either intentionally or unintentionally, particularly in your garden. They are expert scavengers. Feeding them or discarding food reinforces their belief that all humans provide an 'easy food source' and reduces their natural wariness of humans. How is a gull supposed to distinguish between food offered or intentionally discarded and someone enjoying their own lunch with no thought (or intention) of sharing it? Some gulls are so skilled that the unexpected theft happens with such stealth that Oliver Twist's Fagin would have been impressed. Others seem to resort to schoolboy bullying so don't bother with stealth and may accidentally knock you."

The RSPB welcomes the fact that many Councils and Authorities are working together sharing knowledge, recognising there is no simple solution to the problems that urban gulls can cause – and local authorities can play an important role in supporting research into urban gull populations [Note 2].

The RSPB believe that gull problems in an urban environment are best tackled by managing the availability of food and nest sites because, if the features that attract gulls remain, any 'vacancies' created by controlling existing gulls will simply be filled by other gulls moving in. They recommend action by local authorities and individuals in urban areas, including:

- reducing the amount of food waste sent to landfill
- not putting rubbish out until the day of collection
- putting food waste out in gull-proof containers
- reducing the amount of 'edible litter' on streets, particularly arising from fast food outlets
- providing 'gull-proof' public litter bins
- strongly discouraging people feeding gulls

All wild birds are protected by law (the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended). It is illegal, with certain exceptions for some species, to kill, injure or take a wild bird, or to destroy its nest (whilst in use or being built), eggs or chicks. All enquiries on legal, lethal control and licences should be addressed to Natural England, the statutory agency that advises on wildlife management issues. Anyone taking action under a general licence should of course ensure they are meeting all legal requirements. [Note Three].

Ends

For further information and to arrange an interview, please contact:

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Photographs:

Hi res Images to support this story are available on request.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The RSPB 'Briefing statement on urban gulls for local authorities and the public ' is attached.

2. Councils that give advice include:

Bath and North East Somerset Council

Cheltenham Borough Council

South Gloucestershire Council

East Devon District Council

Cornwall Council

Weymouth & Portland Borough Council

3. There is more specific detail on gulls and the law here

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/gardening/unwantedvisitors/gulls/thelaw.aspx>