



From mountain to sea

A Survivor's Guide to Living with Urban Gulls



The Gull Problem

Growing numbers of Lesser Black-backed and Herring gulls now build nests on the roofs of homes and businesses in towns across Aberdeenshire, rather than on coastal cliffs. Life in town is easier for the birds - some people deliberately feed them and discarded food provides a feast. Our roofs are warm and chimneys provide shelter. Streetlights mean they can even feed at night. Although some gulls live in town all year, problems caused by them are more serious during the breeding season when more birds arrive.

Problems include:

- Noise - raucous calls and squabbling start at dawn and go on all day.
- Mess caused by droppings, and the litter strewn from bins as they scavenge.
- Damage to property and vehicles.
- Attacks on people and pets.

Herring gulls are large; around 55cm from bill to tail with a wingspan of 85cm when mature. They have silver-grey wings, pink legs and a yellow beak with a red spot.



Lesser Black-backed gulls are slightly smaller, with dark grey to black back and wings, a yellow bill and yellow legs.

Gulls begin mating in April and nest from early May onwards. Courtship is noisy, and can disturb people in nearby buildings all day. Two or three eggs are laid, taking 28 to 30 days to hatch.

The first chicks appear in early June and stay in the nest for 5-6 weeks. At this stage, parents can become aggressive in defending their nests. Some chicks fall out and cannot return to safety, so parents protect them by swooping on anyone who approaches. This can be frightening. Young gulls begin to fly in late July. Aggression increases as they squabble over food and noise nuisance gets worse. It can be hard for the birds to find enough to eat, leading to attacks on people carrying food. A gull may fly towards its victim to scare them into dropping their snack, which the gull then steals. People have been injured by sharp beaks and claws. Pets can also be attacked. Gulls are clever and learn from each other. They choose vulnerable targets, with children and elderly people most at risk.

By early September, young birds head out to sea. Most of the parents leave too, returning the next year.



Tackling the Nuisance



It takes four years for a gull to reach maturity and breed, and many return to nest where they were born. Gulls live in colonies and once a pair gains a foothold others follow. If they breed successfully, they will return year on year and problems will grow rapidly. Gulls pair and mate for life but if they fail to rear chicks they will split up.

There is no quick fix to the problem of nuisance gulls and control measures need to be kept up for several years to be effective. The key lies in reducing their ability to breed successfully and limiting the supply of food. Action needs to be planned early in the year – once the chicks have hatched it's too late to do much to reduce bird numbers.

The Law



Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is illegal to capture, injure or destroy any wild bird, or interfere with its nest or eggs. Penalties can be severe. However, the law also provides a general licence system, which

allows property owners to take action against gulls nesting on buildings by destroying nests or eggs. This can ONLY be used for the purpose of preserving public health, public safety, and preventing the spread of disease and is specifically for the control of Herring, Black Backed and Lesser Black Backed gulls. If action is taken for any other reason, or if other species of gull are targeted, then an offence is committed. More information can be found on Scottish Natural Heritage's website: <http://bit.ly/SNHgulls>

Only an owner or occupier can take action against gulls nesting on buildings, but they can give someone else permission to act on their behalf.

Action taken must be humane and should only be used where scaring or proofing is either ineffective or impracticable. Any method that could cause suffering is illegal. The use of poisons or drugs to take or kill any bird is specifically prohibited, except under very special circumstances and with a government licence.

Although Herring gulls can be killed under the general licence, this can only be done to protect public health, prevent serious damage to agriculture or to conserve wild birds. The Council's policy is not to kill or harm live gulls or chicks.

Aberdeenshire Council has installed deterrents on some of its buildings and uses the services of a falconer. The Council has no statutory duty to take action against gulls, but does recognise the need to protect communities. However, the Council cannot do this alone, and everyone has a role to play.

How YOU Can Help

1. DO NOT FEED GULLS or drop food scraps as this encourages them to stay in residential areas. Gulls are scavengers and will feed on litter and waste. Put refuse in secure, enclosed containers. Dropping litter or food scraps is an offence and you could be fined.

Please be a good neighbour, and don't attract gulls to your garden to feed. While the wish to help wildlife is understandable, this is not in the birds' best interests. Their natural diet is based on shellfish and other small sea creatures, bird eggs, insects and earthworms. Too much human food is not good for them, and if you feed them regularly they will expect everyone to do the same. From there, it is only a short step to attacking people and stealing food. Your kindness could lead to other people being frightened or injured, and a diet of scraps and fast food is bad for the birds' long-term health.

2. In spring, owners or occupiers should check the roofs of premises regularly for signs of nest building. Tenants should report nests to their landlord as soon as they are seen. If possible, the property owner should arrange to have the nest or eggs removed.

3. Property owners can discourage gulls from nesting by erecting deterrent devices on chimney heads, flat roof areas, and other possible nesting sites.

If all owners of buildings which have (or may attract) roof-nesting gulls took appropriate measures, it would be easier to reduce or break up the gull colonies, and the whole community would benefit.

The principle deterrent methods include:

- Fitting long spikes to places like chimney stacks.
- Fitting short spikes to dormer roofs.
- Fitting wires or nets to prevent gulls landing.
- Disturbance of nesting sites, including removal of nests and eggs.

If you have a problem with gulls nesting on your property you can contact a specialist company for advice or a quotation. Because of the risk of trapping, nets should only be used after taking advice from a competent specialist.

4. If gulls nest on your property, you can either have the eggs and nests removed or arrange for the eggs to be pierced or oiled to prevent hatching. Remaining or rebuilt nests will have to be checked every three weeks between early May and the end of July to make sure new eggs have not been laid.

Aberdeenshire Council strongly recommends you take advice from specialists before undertaking any work like this, and ideally you should have the work carried out by an experienced contractor.

Please advise the Council's Environmental Health Service of the locations of any rooftop nesting sites in your area. The Service will contact property owners and request they take action as necessary.

Safety First

Work on roofs should only be carried out by a competent person aware of safety requirements. All roof fixtures should be suitable for the specific roof and not constitute a safety or fire risk.

Finding a Contractor

The simplest way to make sure you stay safe and within the law is to use a local, experienced pest control contractor. They will have the training, knowledge and equipment to make sure everything is done correctly and legally.

To find a properly trained and insured pest controller who operates to a strict professional code, look for members of either the National Pest Technicians Association (NPTA), or the British Pest Controllers Association (BPCA).

National Pest Technicians Association

Tel: 01773 717 716

Email: office@npta.org.uk

www.npta.org.uk

British Pest Controllers Association

Tel: 01332 294288

Email: enquiry@bpca.org.uk

www.bpca.org.uk



For More Information

You can contact Aberdeenshire Council's Environmental Health Service on 01467 539039, or e-mail environmental@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

For further advice on the law regarding gull control, visit www.snh.gov.uk or call 01463 725 364 and ask to speak to a Licensing Officer.

