

“Feathers are ruffled in Beccles”

Seagulls – well you either love ‘em or you hate ‘em! If you were a warden of a nature reserve, hoping to attract ground nesting birds like lapwings, then large gulls certainly wouldn’t be a friend as they are notorious predators. If you were a manager of a warehouse on which the gulls had chosen to nest, then the gulls wouldn’t be a friend as gulls’ nests would block your drainpipes and birds would defecate over your customer’s and employee’s cars (and maybe even your own!). If you were a resident, living close to an urban gullery then the gulls would hardly be a friend as you would be woken at 4 a.m. each morning by the eerie cries of squabbling birds. But lesser black-backed gulls, in particular, are a bird on the move. They are not only expanding their range, but also their nesting preferences from coastal cliffs and beaches to industrial and residential areas.

For centuries gulls have scavenged around seaside resorts and fishing harbours being accepted as part of everyday life, but when they nest at inland towns like Beccles, it’s a different story! Lesser black-backed gulls with some herring gulls have continued their relentless march across East Anglia and now it’s Beccles that is in the frontline of a pitch battle to deter the scavenging hoards. They have formerly colonised Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Felixstowe, Ipswich and pioneering birds are already in Mendlesham, Bungay and Aldeby. They have reached the northern outskirts of Ipswich and they will soon make their next leap to colonise the towns of Needham Market and Stowmarket.

Herring and lesser black-backed gulls have traditionally bred at coastal beaches and sea cliffs away from urban areas, but due to recent predation by foxes, they have been forced to find alternatives. So how about the roofs and wastelands in Beccles residential and industrial areas? To the gull’s eye, the huge, flat-topped warehouses give similar benefits to that of sea cliffs – they’re high, safe and there’s plenty of food in the surrounding area. In some instances, shingle roofs have been provided that very much resembles a beach. Unlike natural sites, the virtually predator-free inner sanctuary of a town like Beccles is ideal for nesting gulls. Attracted by discarded fast-food – a plentiful bi-product of today’s literally “throwaway” society – and the vast and seemingly ever-

increasing acreage of rooftop nesting space on the town's commercial premises, the gulls have arrived in force.

In these balmy summer days, the gulls leave their homes early in the morning. At the crack of dawn, they take to the skies and their eerie cry echo over Beccles residential estates. The gulls squabble for territory and youngsters pursue beleaguered parents. Although Lowestoft's roof-nesting gull population has reached a staggering 4,500 pairs, for Beccles this is just the start as around 150 pairs have taken up residence. They nest on wasteland beside Rainbow Stores, on Tesco's roof, on top of workshops and warehouses in George Westward Way and on the roofs of Beccles townhouses. Businesses have gone to extraordinary lengths to deter this "airborne army". They see the gulls as a public health hazard – a view disputed by many scientists. They see them as a safety hazard – despite "attacks" on humans being exceptionally rare. And they see them as a noise nuisance – despite some of the alleged "gull noise" actually being produced by klaxons installed in often unsuccessful attempts to frighten the gulls away.

The principal species involved is the lesser black-backed gull and herring gull. From a wildlife prospective, the herring gull is endangered and appears on the amber list of "Birds of Conservation Concern", the



Chicks on roof at Lowestoft – Photo Andrew Easton

same status as RSPB's flagship bird, the avocet and Britain's best-loved bird, the barn owl. Unlike these two species, however, both lesser black-backed and herring gulls have few friends and they would be an unwelcome nester on Suffolk Wildlife Trust nature reserves such as Carlton and Castle Marshes due to its habit of preying on the small chicks of wading birds.

Where have they come from?

WBC Project Officer, Steve Piotrowski, has been monitoring the gulls on Orfordness since 1968 and had watched the colony grow from a handful of pairs to its peak in 1998 of 26,000 pairs. Since then the colony has dwindled mainly due to predation by foxes. From the total of over 12,000 gulls ringed on Orfordness, nearly half have been colour-ringed. In recent years, the colony's dramatic downturn in fortunes has culminated in total failure in recent years and the colony now hosts less than 4,000 nesting pairs. This is not good news for people living at coastal resorts as the gulls will be seeking safer breeding sites and the roofs will become even more attractive.

WBC members have been heavily involved in monitoring the movements of larger gulls and teams have been to both Havergate Island and the Beccles site this summer to fit bright red, inscribed rings. In past winters, Steve, Andrew Green (WBC Recorder) and Mike Marsh have made almost annual pilgrimages to the gull's wintering grounds in Southern Morocco, Portugal and Spain. There they scour the beaches, harbours and fishing ports for colour-ringed birds and Andrew spends a considerable amount of his time looking at the legs of gulls that forage on Aldeby Tip and Earsham pig fields.

Beccles is not the only town to suffer from exodus of gulls from Orfordness. Some have moved to natural sites in The Netherlands with many in Rotterdam area and several in the Zeeland region. One was reported as probably breeding on the island of Schiermonnikoog in 2001. In Belgium, several are breeding around Zeebrugge and in France two Orfordness-reared birds are at Le Clipon (nr Dunkerque) and another at Calais. It is in England where dispersing gulls are nesting on roofs. In Suffolk, several are on port roofs at Felixstowe and on industrial estate roofs in Ipswich. At Great Yarmouth, there are one or two

Orfordness protégées on industrial estate roofs and there are others in Worcester, Harlow, Greater London and East Sussex.

Assessing the situation with a hope of bringing about a solution acceptable to the town – and the gulls, Steve said “The total nesting population in the Waveney Valley is staggering and has rocketed quickly. It is now about 5,000 pairs and the length to which some residents and businesses have gone to deter them is quite astonishing. Some have shrouded their buildings with netting and fixed anti-perching spikes to the perimeter edges. Plastic eagle owls have been erected and, in some instances, loud-hailers have been installed which transmit gulls’ alarm calls. Falcons have been flown. Whether any of these measures are effective is open to question and I would be extremely interested to find out. I am anxious to learn from local business in Lowestoft whether the methods used have had any noticeable effect as part of the feedback for this study. My knowledge to date suggests that gulls have not been deterred by any of the methods. Herring gulls are nesting immediately alongside one loud-hailer and gulls have used the anti-perching spikes that surround chimneys as added protection against airborne predators, their chicks sitting snugly amongst the prongs. Netting is an expensive and high-maintenance strategy and may only act as a deterrent for a few years. Weathering may soon cause it to sag and the gulls will then nest on top of it. Gulls are often seen perched on the plastic eagle owls. Even if firms manage to get rid of their nesting gulls, Steve fears they may simply be moving the “problem” on. Some of the methods used by commercial companies to deter gulls from breeding may well be successful, but displaced birds may then choose to breed more in residential areas, where ordinary people may either lack the funds to deter the birds or may even encourage them to nest,” he said. As for the future, the Waveney Bird Club and Steve hope to be peacemakers.

“We think there has to be a co-ordinated approach. It may be that there should be some areas in which there has to be some form of control because of perceived health and safety issues and some areas where control is not necessary because there are no health and safety issues,” Steve said.

General advice to residents:

Legal aspects

All wild birds and their eggs and nests are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under this Act, birds cannot be taken or killed or their eggs or nests (when in use or being built) taken or destroyed except under license. Please see the full details set out in Rural Development Services Technical Advice Note 13 “Birds and their control in non-agricultural environments”. Please see:

http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/naturalenglandshop/UserFiles/Files/tan_13.pdf

However, it is recognised that a number of common “pest” species (e.g. feral pigeons, starlings, house sparrows, herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls) may frequently cause problems. Defra issues a number of general licenses which allow authorised persons (e.g. an owner or occupier) to kill or take these “pest” species using certain specified methods (e.g. shooting or cage trapping). The licenses also allow the removal or destruction of these species’ eggs (e.g. using egg oiling) or nests. Nests not being built or not in use are not protected under the 1981 Act and may be removed or destroyed at any time. Action is permitted under these general licenses to prevent the spread of disease and for the purpose of preserving public health or public or air safety. The 1981 Act does not allow action against birds or their eggs or nests for the purposes of preventing damage to property or preventing nuisance problems; such problems include noise, smells and the triggering of intruder alarms by birds flying within buildings. These can only be tackled by using non-lethal methods of control, for example, scaring and proofing.

Herring and lesser black-backed gulls are listed in Part II of Schedule 2 of the Act. This means that these species can be controlled by authorised persons at all times. However, it is dependent upon a “good reason” for taking action, the onus of proof lies with the licensee should opposition to such action occur.

Management options

Before deciding on a specific course of action, the extent and nature of the problem should be carefully considered. The aspects that need to be addressed include:

- the species and number of birds involved;
- the level and type of damage or problem being caused;
- the buildings, structures or areas which are affected;

- any specific limiting or influencing factors that may affect the action proposed.
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Environmental management: A build-up of bird numbers in urban environments is normally a result of the presence of a readily accessible food supply and/or the availability of attractive habitats where they can roost or breed. Effective long-term management is normally dependent on the ability to eliminate or reduce these aspects. In urban areas, this can be difficult because numerous occupiers and individuals may have some degree of responsibility for the cause of the problem or may be affected by it. The single most important factor is the ability of the birds to gain access to a regular supply of nutritious food. If this can be denied, then problems may be resolved without recourse to other measures.

Consider the possibilities for:

- avoiding the spillage of foodstuffs
- keeping food storage areas secure and bird-proof
- ensuring that disposal and waste facilities are kept clean and tidy
- limiting or preventing the deliberate feeding of birds by the public or site staff

The chicks are flightless when small, but they grow quickly and residents may become alarmed if they find them wandering from their nesting area into their gardens and even onto the road. Others nesting on roofs may be blown off. Waveney Bird Club advise that no attempt is made to move the birds, as gulls make good parents, will recognise their own chicks call and find them to feed them.

Final Note

Origins of Lesser Black-backed Gulls breeding beside Rainbow Store in Beccles

Just in case there is any doubt about the origins of the birds breeding in Beccles, two adults were found bearing red colour rings that were ringed as chicks in the Orfordness colony. Details of the movements of both birds are as follows:



Colour ringed bird from Orfordness in Spain
Red SAZ (metal ring GA37210)

13/07/2002 Orfordness, Suffolk – ringed as pullus/chick
05/02/2005 El Musel, Gijon, Asturias, SPAIN (43.33N 05.41W)
21/06/2006 Aldeby, Norfolk
27/06/2006 Earsham, Norfolk – seen again 28/06/2006
13/07/2006 Aldeby, Norfolk
25/02/2007 Orfordness, Suffolk – seen again 10/03/2007
26/08/2007 Earsham, Norfolk
22/07/2009 Beccles, Suffolk
red RDH (metal ring GG77327)
09/07/2005 Orfordness, Suffolk – ringed as pullus/chick
01/09/2005 Gloucester Landfill Site, Hempsted, Gloucester
07/11/2007 Stoke Orchard, Gloucestershire
23/02/2008 Pinto, Madrid, SPAIN (40.15N 03.42W)
02/04/2008 Gloucester Landfill Site, Hempsted, Gloucester
26/04/2008 Orfordness, Suffolk – seen on 7 more dates to 19/07/2008
14/03/2009 Orfordness, Suffolk – seen on 12 more dates to 19/07/2009
22/07/2009 Beccles, Suffolk (TM4290) England 52.27N
Steve Piotrowski
27th July 2009