

## ADVICE

# The conservation status and licensed control of large gulls in England



## 1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 The control of large gulls in England is carried out for various reasons. The largest numbers of birds killed under licence are killed on conservation grounds due to concerns that they are impacting on ground nesting birds through the predation of eggs and young. This includes rare breeding species as well as species that are more common and widespread. Concerns are also sometimes raised that large gulls may impact on the shootable surplus of gamebirds through predation.
- 1.2 Large gulls are also controlled when they nest in close proximity to humans and their aggressive behaviour in the breeding season poses a risk to human health and safety. Whilst preventative measures are often most effective in reducing these problems, control of eggs, chicks or adults is also sometimes considered necessary.
- 1.3 Until 2010, the control of herring, lesser black-backed and great black-backed gulls to conserve fauna and flora, preserve public health and safety, and prevent damage to crops/livestock etc, could be carried out under Natural England general licences. In 2010, due to concerns about a national decline in the herring gull population and the scarcity of the great black-backed gull as a breeding species in England, these two species were removed from the general licences for conservation and the prevention of damage to crops/livestock. With the exception of egg control for herring gull, they were also removed from the public health and safety general licence. Control of these species in 2010 was authorised through the issuing of individual licences.
- 1.4 The information collected from licence applications has provided an opportunity, for the first time, to assess the scale of control of herring and great black-backed gulls in England.

## 2. Overview of conservation status

### 2.1 *National population and trends*

Information on national populations and status has been obtained from a variety of sources. The most recent comprehensive census of seabirds in Britain was the *Seabird 2000* survey carried out in 1998-2002 with the results summarised in Mitchell *et al.* (2004). Previous full surveys have been undertaken as *Operation Seafarer* in 1969-70, published in Cramp *et al.* (1974), and the *Seabird Colony Register Census* in 1985-88, published in Lloyd *et al.* (1991). Information on colony counts in other years and population trends since 2000 was obtained primarily from the JNCC's *Seabird Colony Register database*.

#### 2.1.1 *Herring gull*

The herring gull is a relatively common and widespread but declining species in Britain. Breeding birds in Britain are of the *argenteus* race which is largely resident, movements between breeding and wintering areas being mainly restricted to within

the same region. Breeding colonies are primarily coastal although, increasingly, urban centres, especially those close to the coast, have been colonised. In winter the population increases substantially due to immigration, including birds from north-west Europe of the *argentatus* race.

The breeding population in Britain increased at an estimated 13% per annum between 1930 and 1970s due to increased protection and the exploitation of new food sources associated with human activities, including fishing discards and landfill sites. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the British population has declined overall, despite some local increases, for example in several urban centres in England.

*Seabird 2000* recorded 45,365 breeding pairs in England in 1998-2002, representing approximately 35% of the British population. The English breeding population declined overall by 29% between 1969-70 and 1998-2002, but showed an increasing trend of 2.4% per annum between 1985-88 and 1998-2002, largely due to increases in urban areas. Colony counts since 2000 show that the British population has declined overall by an estimated 43% over the last ten years.

The herring gull is red-listed as a species of conservation concern because of significant long-term declines in both the breeding and wintering populations in Britain (Eaton *et al.*, 2009).

### 2.1.2 *Great black-backed gull*

The great black-backed gull is considerably less numerous than the other two large gulls in Britain. Breeding colonies are almost entirely restricted to coastal sites and the English population is concentrated in the south-west, especially in Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. The species is absent or very rare as a breeding bird inland, on the east coast and along the south coast to the east of the Isle of Wight. Relatively small numbers of non-breeding, mainly immature birds occur widely throughout England during the summer. The great black-backed gull is far more numerous and widespread in winter when England supports birds from breeding areas to the north and east, including birds from Scotland, Scandinavia and Russia.

The great black-backed gull increased steadily as a breeding species in Britain during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to increased protection and the exploitation of food associated with human activities. By 1998-2002 there were 16,679 pairs in Britain, the majority in northern Scotland.

Only 1,476 pairs bred in England in 1998-2002, representing 9% of the British population. Following increases during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the English breeding population then declined by 12% between 1969-70 and 1998-2002. Since 2000, the breeding population has declined by an estimated 30% in Britain.

### 2.1.3 *Lesser black-backed gull*

The lesser black-backed gull breeds mainly at sites close to the coast, including some urban centres, but can also establish sizeable colonies well inland. It underwent a rapid increase in Britain during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to improved protection and the exploitation of food sources associated with human activities. In 1998-2002 England supported 64,208 of the 109,987 pairs breeding in Britain, roughly 58% of the British population and around 36% of the global population of the *graellsii* sub-species. The English population increased by 81% between 1969-70

and 1998-2002, although has since gone into decline. Since 2000 the breeding population has declined by an estimated 31% in Britain.

The majority of breeding birds in England occur at a small number of large colonies, the most important of which are protected through SPA designation. Some breeding birds leave Britain in the winter, moving south to as far as west Africa. However, in recent decades, a higher proportion of the breeding population has remained in Britain all year round, concentrated in England. Birds from breeding areas in Scandinavia also move to Britain in the autumn and the species is now very common and widespread in England in winter.

The lesser black-backed gull is an amber-listed bird of conservation concern by virtue of the fact that the breeding population is concentrated at a relatively small number of important sites in Britain (Eaton *et al.*, 2009).

## 2.2 Special Protection Area populations

Details of the Special Protection Areas for which large gulls form part of the qualifying interest were taken from the UK review of the SPA network undertaken by Stroud *et al.* (2001). All SPAs which qualify because they support an internationally important assemblage of breeding seabirds are included below for each species that breeds on the site (and is therefore considered to be part of the qualifying assemblage). This is in addition to SPAs which qualify because they support more than 1% of the international breeding population of a species. Count data is from the 1998-2002 *Seabird 2000* survey, with more recent counts primarily from the JNCC's *Seabird Colony Register database* (accessed online). Other sources are given in section 6 below.

### 2.2.1 Herring gull

Morecambe Bay qualifies as an SPA for this species because it supports more than 1% of the international breeding population. Six additional sites qualify on the basis of supporting an internationally important breeding seabird assemblage which includes breeding herring gulls.

**Table 1 SPAs for herring gulls in England**

Site name and location	Data from Seabird 2000 (occupied sites)	Most recent data, occupied sites (year)	Trend since 1998-2002
Morecambe Bay (Lancashire/Cumbria)	10,129	3,040 (2009)	Strong decline of 65% since 2000
Ribble and Alt Estuaries (Lancashire)	752	c. 460 (2008)	Strong decline of 39% since 2000
Farne Islands (Northumberland)	574	530 (2008)	Slight decline
Coquet Island (Northumberland)	44	1 (2009)	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage
Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs (North Yorkshire)	722	–	No recent data
The Alde – Ore Estuary (Suffolk)	825	501 (2008)	39% decline since 2000
Isles of Scilly	748	715 (2006)	Continuation of long-term decline of 68% since 1974

### 2.2.2 Great black-backed gull

Four SPAs support breeding great black-backed gulls as part of their internationally important breeding seabird assemblage. Of these, only the Isles of Scilly supports substantial numbers of this species.

**Table 2 SPAs for great black-backed gulls in England**

Site name and location	Data from Seabird 2000, occupied sites	Most recent count, occupied sites (year)	Trend since 1998-2002
Ribble and Alt Estuaries (Lancashire)	8	13 (2008)	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage
Farne Islands (Northumberland)	2	8 (2009)	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage
The Alde-Ore Estuary (Suffolk)	4	3 (2009)	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage
Isles of Scilly	807	901 (2006)	Increase of 12% since 1999-2000

### 2.2.3 Lesser black-backed gull

Five SPAs include the lesser black-backed gull as part of the qualifying interest based on the presence of more than 1% of the international breeding population of this species. An additional three SPAs support this species as part of their internationally important breeding seabird assemblage, of which only the Farne Islands supports a substantial number of birds.

**Table 3 SPAs for lesser black-backed gulls in England**

Site name and location	Data from Seabird 2000, occupied sites	Most recent count, occupied sites (year)	Trend since 1998-2002
Morecambe Bay (Lancashire/Cumbria)	19,487	10,670 (2009) – estimated	Rapid decline of around 45% although 2009 figure is an estimate
Bowland Fells* (Lancashire)	18,518	c. 6,072 (2009)	Major decline since 2000 due to ongoing control within the SPA
Ribble and Alt Estuaries (Lancashire)	4,108	4,117 (2008)	2008 figures is an estimate but suggests that population is roughly stable
Coquet Island (Northumberland)	9	10 (2009)	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage
Farne Islands (Northumberland)	665	509 (2008)	Relatively minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage. Decline of 23% since 2000
Flamborough Head to Bempton Cliffs (North Yorkshire)	1	–	Only a minor part of the breeding seabird assemblage. No recent data available
The Alde – Ore Estuary			The Seabird 2000 figure represents a

(Suffolk)	5,790	–	huge decline on the 22-23,000 present in the late 1990s. No recent data available
Isles of Scilly	3,608	3,335 (2006)	Decline of 8% since 1999-2000

\* Natural England is currently consulting on the proposed inclusion of breeding lesser black-backed gull as an additional feature of Bowland Fells SPA.

### 3. Overview of numbers of gulls killed under licence

- 3.1 Table 4 provides a summary of licensed control for herring and great black-backed gull over the last three years. In 2012 a total of 1,470 herring gulls and 190 great black-backed gulls were killed under licence. The majority of birds were killed in the breeding season when potential impacts on other species or on public health and safety are most often reported. Licences were issued covering a wide range of areas throughout England with the highest numbers of birds licensed for large areas of upland moorland in northern England. This is reflected in significant regional differences in the number of licences issued. In 2012, 89% of licences issued were within the North East, North West or Yorks & Humber regions. The East of England contributed only 6%, with only a handful of licences issued for the East Midlands, South East and SouthWest regions.
- 3.2 Comparable information in relation to lesser black-backed gulls is not available because there is no reporting requirement under the relevant general licences. Although the culling of birds at the colony within the Bowland Fells SPA has been well publicised, it is not known how many birds have been killed under general licences away from protected sites for this species.
- 3.3 Information supplied by licence applicants suggested that considerably higher numbers of birds were killed in previous years than the numbers licensed to be killed in 2010-2012. For applicants that provided this information the figures suggest that in 2010 (the first year that individual licences were required) 36% fewer herring gulls and 37% fewer great black-backed gulls were licensed to be killed than were killed in 2009.

**Table 4** Summary of licensed control for herring and great black-backed gulls in England, 2010-2012 (Data accurate as of 15th November 2012)

Species	Licensing purpose (section 16 of 1981 Act)	Number of licences 2010	Number licensed to be killed 2010	Number killed 2010	Number of licences 2011	Number licensed to be killed 2011	Number killed 2011	Number of licences 2012	Number licensed to be killed 2012	Number killed 2012
<b>Herring gull</b>	Conserving flora and fauna	90	2442	1187	81	2083	1424	58	1521	1219
	Public health and safety	19	1829	76	17	1162	582	5	299	251
	Preventing serious damage to crops, livestock etc (& other)	2	33	0	2 (2)	55 (10)	36 (5)	1	15	0
	Totals	111	4304	1263	102	3310	2047	64	1835	1470
	Applications rejected	34			23			21		
<b>Great black-backed gull</b>	Conserving flora and fauna	90	2442	1187	81	2083	1424	58	1521	1219
	Public health and safety (& other)	5	433	235	5 (1)	45 (10)	16 (8)	0	0	0
	Totals	88	1594	737	75	656	352	51	300	190
	Applications rejected	17			7			1		

## 4. The potential impacts of licensed control

### 4.1 *Herring gull*

The declining national population trend for this species and declines in several major colonies in England, including SPAs for which it forms part of the qualifying interest, are of concern. Whilst it is unlikely that the licensed killing of birds has been a significant factor in the recent declines, the introduction of a system of individual licences does provide some welcome reassurance. Firstly, figures provided by applicants suggest that substantially fewer birds were killed in 2010-12 than in previous years. Secondly, information is now available on the extent and distribution of control activities undertaken. Over time this will provide valuable information on numbers and trends in licensed control and improve our understanding of the potential for impacts at the population level and on protected sites.

### 4.2 *Great black-backed gull*

Large numbers of birds have been killed under licence in the north of England in recent years, relative to the small breeding populations present here. However, it is likely that the majority of the birds killed will be non-breeding birds and so impacts may be far lower than initially suggested by the numbers killed. In addition, difficulties in separating great and lesser black-backed gulls in the field (especially immature birds when a direct comparison between the two species is not possible) mean that some of the birds recorded as great black-backed gulls on licence returns may, in fact, be lesser black-backed gulls. Future control of this species close to breeding sites would have the potential to impact on small local breeding populations in England, including on protected sites, something that is factored into licensing decisions for this species.

### 4.3 *Lesser black-backed gull*

Very large numbers of this species have been killed in the past at some breeding colonies, resulting in well publicised declines in colony size, for example in the Bowland Fells. Recent substantial declines in breeding numbers in several SPAs for which this species is part of the qualifying interest is a cause for concern. However, in the absence of information on the number of birds killed in recent years it is difficult to reach firm conclusions about the significance of control activities carried out under general licence. Given the concerns referred to in 4.2 above in relation to the identification of great and lesser black-backed gulls it is possible that some birds killed as lesser black-backed gulls under general licence are in fact great black-backed gulls.

## 5. References and sources of information

Cramp, S., Bourne, W.R.P. & Saunders, D. 1974. *The seabirds of Britain and Ireland*. Collins, London.

Eaton, M.A., Brown, A.F., Noble, D.G., Musgrove, A.J., Hearn, R., Aebischer, N.J., Gibbons, D.W., Evans, A. & Gregory, R.D. 2009. Birds of Conservation Concern 3: the population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. *British Birds* 102: 296-341.

Heaney, V., Lock, L., St. Pierre, P. & Brown, A. 2008. Breeding seabirds on the isles of Scilly. *British Birds* 101: 418-438.

JNCC *Seabird Colony Register database* (accessed on line September 2010;  
[www.jncc.gov.uk/page-4460](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-4460); [www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3201](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3201))

Lloyd, C.S., Tasker, M.L. & Partridge, K. 1991. *The status of seabirds in Britain and Ireland*. Poyser, London.

Mitchell, P.A., Newton, S.F., Ratcliffe, N. & Dunn, T.E. 2004. *Seabird populations of Britain and Ireland: the results of the Seabird 2000 census (1998-2002)*. Poyser, London.

Stroud, D.A., Chambers, D., Cook, S., Buxton, M., Fraser, B., Clement, P., Lewis, P., McLean, I., Baker, H. & Whitehead, S. 2001. *The UK SPA network, volume 1-3*. JNCC, Peterborough.

---

November 2013  
*Produced by Natural England's Landscape & Biodiversity Team*