

Experts call for action on aggressive gulls, following spate of attacks

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One of the country's leading experts on gull control is warning that the current spate of gull attacks across the UK will only increase if action is not taken by more local authorities and businesses. Already this summer, a teenager has been air-lifted to hospital, a four year old was lucky not to lose an eye and a blind woman is too afraid to walk to work: all the result of gull attacks.

Whilst measures to deal with problem birds become more limited once gulls have established a territory and laid eggs, John Dickson, managing director and founder of NBC Environment (<http://www.nbcbirdandpest.co.uk>) is urging organisations to take preventative steps during the autumn months to mitigate gull issues for next year and protect the public.

The iconic image of the serene gull may be a symbol of seaside fun, but the reality can be very different. Traditionally, gulls (also known as seagulls) would follow sea trawlers to collect discarded fish but, like humans, they have adapted to find new food sources. An easier option is to scavenge from landfill sites and waste bins; this brings them further inland and into direct contact, and conflict, with people.

Gulls cause a variety of serious problems:

- Aggressive behaviour: as has been seen in the media this year, gulls are confident and aggressive, especially during the breeding season. Motivated by food, they will regularly steal from people, causing fear and injury
- Damage: gull faeces builds up on roof areas and guttering, causing blockages and damage which can result in costly repairs to buildings and solar panels
- Noise nuisance: as gull numbers increase and they compete with each other to feed their offspring, noise becomes a major problem for residents and workers
- Health: gull faeces can cause a number of serious diseases, presenting a real hazard to people living, working and holidaying in an area with a large gull population
- Safety: As well as being unsightly, gull faeces is a serious slip hazard, opening up businesses and local authorities to potential litigation

All UK birds are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, making it illegal to kill or injure a bird, or to move or destroy an active nest. Whilst gulls are increasingly being acknowledged as 'pests', even the familiar Herring Gull has amber protected status, despite the fact that the gull population is increasing and rooftop nesting has quadrupled over the past 15 years.

"Gulls often return to the same nesting spot, year after year, bringing their offspring with them," explains John Dickson, founder of NBC Environment, a company committed to responsible pest control. "Gulls can live for up to 35 years, start breeding at only three years old and can produce around 30 chicks in a ten year period. As the chicks grow and reach breeding age they may return to the same nesting spot so the number of birds, and associated problems, increases year on year. A colony of gulls will remain at the nesting spot for around six months of the year and once in situ it's very hard to remove or disperse them."

For many towns and cities, by September the pain of nuisance gulls is starting to ebb as the birds migrate to other parts. But autumn is the ideal time to plan action to be taken to prevent the same problem occurring next year.

John Dickson explains: "It's possible to discourage gulls from nesting at a particular site on a permanent basis, by modifying patterns of gull behaviour, reducing breeding and deterring colonies from returning to their habitual nesting spots. A successful control programme taps into gulls' natural instincts. For the bird, the key motivator is self-preservation and they choose a nesting site based on its benefits to them. If a regular nesting area can be made less attractive, inaccessible or more risky for a gull, they will be less likely to select it."

Once adult gulls and fledglings have left nests, buildings can be proofed using deterrents such as lasers, netting, barriers and taste aversion gels. Birds select different areas for different purposes – resting, roosting and nesting – so different proofing techniques need to be employed.

Whilst it is illegal to remove eggs or disturb nests, there are exceptions to enable gull control. Under certain licence conditions - depending on the risk, the gull species, and the timing of the gull management plan – specialists are able to employ breeding control methods. This can include nest removal or replacing eggs with replicas within a specific time-frame.

John Dickson concludes: "Each year we see gull horror stories in the press and all-too-often in the same locations. Unfortunately there seems to be an attitude that attacks are isolated incidents. They are not: the risks grow each year in direct relation to the size of the gull colony.

"In terms of solving this problem it seems that we're at a stalemate. Businesses expect the local authority to deal with the problem but are unwilling to take on any responsibility of their own. This generally means action won't be taken until there's a critical mass of complaints."

NBC Environment is offering organisations a free gull consultation; providing advice on how to take action to reduce the gulls' negative impact on towns, cities and people.

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About NBC Environment

NBC Environment is an independent environmental consultancy which provides practical commercial advice and services to the public and business sectors.

Working in partnership with its customers, NBC Environment provides strategic environmental planning and sustainable bird, ecology and pest solutions. Services are designed to remove risks of nature adversely impacting commercial activities by delivering business protection for every type of commercial activity – facilities management, health and safety, construction, property management and much more.

The business was founded in 1993 and has grown to cover the whole of the UK. The team includes a country-wide network of trained, specialist falconry staff. NBC Environment strives to ensure its customers can achieve their commercial goals safe in the knowledge that conflict with nature has been managed considerately.

<http://www.nbcbirdandpest.co.uk/>