

# The potential impacts of licensed control of large gulls in England on conservation status and Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

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## **1. Introduction and background**

- 1.1 The control of large gulls in England is carried out for various reasons. The largest numbers of birds are killed on conservation grounds when they are perceived to be impacting on ground nesting birds through the predation of eggs and young. Large gulls can have adverse impacts on very rare breeding species where the loss of just a small number of eggs or young can threaten small populations. Concerns are also sometimes raised that large gulls may impact on the shootable surplus of gamebirds through predation.
- 1.2 Impacts of large gulls on the breeding populations of common and widespread species are less well understood. Whilst predation of eggs and chicks undoubtedly occurs opportunistically, for most individual large gulls it will form only a small part of the diet and it is unlikely to have impacts at the population level in most situations. The great black-backed gull is itself a rather scarce breeding species in England which should be taken into account when considering control to prevent impacts on other, often far more numerous, species.
- 1.3 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 required in order to prevent problems.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 The information collected from licence applications has provided an opportunity, for the first time, to assess the scale of control of these species in England and the potential for control to impact on populations and internationally important protected sites. Although the lesser black-backed gull remains on the general licences, it has been included in this review because, (i) it is highly likely that some birds shot under individual licences issued for the great black-backed gull are, in fact, this species (see below), and (ii) there are several SPAs which include this species as part of the qualifying interest, including in areas where large gulls are frequently controlled.

## 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* (accessed online).

#### 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 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

This species 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**

<b>Site name and location</b>	<b>Data from Seabird 2000 (occupied sites)</b>	<b>Most recent data, occupied sites (year)</b>	<b>Trend since 1998-2002</b>
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**

<b>Site name and location</b>	<b>Data from Seabird 2000, occupied sites</b>	<b>Most recent count, occupied sites (year)</b>	<b>Trend since 1998-2002</b>
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 under licence
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 (Suffolk)	5,790	–	The Seabird 2000 figure represents a 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

### **3. Overview of numbers of gulls killed under licence<sup>1</sup>**

- 3.1 When this review was being prepared figures showed 111 licences had been issued to allow 4,304 herring gulls to be killed, and 88 licences had been issued to allow 1,594 great black-backed gulls to be killed in 2010. In addition, licences were issued to allow 101 herring gull nests and 150 herring gull eggs to be destroyed; and 157 great black-backed gull nests and 150 great black-backed eggs to be destroyed. Licence returns received so far show that 1,263 herring gulls and 737 great black-backed gulls have been reported as killed under licence. Almost all birds were licensed to be 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 (see Table 4). There is no information available on the numbers or distribution of lesser black-backed gulls killed in England in 2010 because there is no reporting requirement under the relevant general licences.
- 3.2 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. The figures below were calculated using only the subset of licence applicants who provided details for numbers killed in previous years. The mid-point was used where applicants provided a range rather than a specific figure.
- 3.3 For herring gull, applicants estimated that they killed a total of 3,256 birds annually in previous years. The same applicants received licences allowing 2,079 birds to be killed. Even if all birds licensed were killed, which is unlikely, this would represent a drop of 36% in numbers killed in 2010 compared with previous years.
- 3.4 The equivalent figures for great black-backed gull are 1,569 killed by applicants in previous years compared with 986 birds licensed to be killed in 2010, a reduction of 37%.

### **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 the major reason behind the recent declines, the introduction of a system of individual licences does provide some welcome reassurance. Firstly, figures provided by applicants suggest that it has led to a substantial reduction in the numbers of birds killed in 2010, reducing the likelihood that licenced killing is contributing to population decline. Secondly, for the first time, it has provided information on the extent and distribution of control activities undertaken. Over time this will provide valuable information on numbers and trends in licenced killing and improve our understanding of the potential for impacts at the population level and on protected sites.

It is possible that some herring gulls from coastal SPAs, including Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs, the Ribble and Alt Estuaries, Morecambe Bay, the Farne Islands,

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<sup>1</sup> The final licensing figures for 2010 will require updating when all licence returns have been received and added to Natural England's licensing database. Although major changes from the numbers licensed to be killed are not expected, this update will also provide information on the numbers of birds actually killed under licence.

Coquet Island and the Alde-Ore Estuary may have been killed under licence on inland moorland sites or adjacent coastal sites. However, this is likely to have involved only a small number of birds given the distances involved and the fact that the majority of coastal breeding herring gulls will be foraging mainly offshore during the breeding season. A very small number of herring gulls were killed on Coquet Island SPA in order to protect the rare breeding population of Roseate Terns.

**Table 4**  
**Herring and great black-backed gulls licensed**  
**to be killed in England in 2010**

<b>Government Office Region</b>	<b>Herring gull</b>	<b>Great black-backed gull</b>	<b>Other licensed control</b>
North East	934	401	Destruction of 30 herring gull and 32 great black-backed gull nests and eggs
North West	580	116	Destruction of 45 herring gull nests and eggs
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,254	508	None
East of England	166	278	Destruction of 26 herring gull and 50 great black-backed gull nests and eggs
East Midlands	190	270	Destruction of 50 great black-backed gull nests/eggs, and 150 eggs
West Midlands	0	0	None
London	0	0	None
South East	106	20	Destruction of 150 herring gull eggs and 25 great black-backed gull nests/eggs; relocation of 15 herring gull chicks
South West	1,074	1	Also 35 herring and 12 great black-backed gull nests
<b>Totals</b>	<b>4,304</b>	<b>1,594</b>	

#### 4.2 *Great black-backed gull*

The large numbers of birds apparently killed under licence in the north and east of England is a potential concern, given the rarity of this species as a breeding bird in England and its declining population trend. However, comparison between the locations where licences were issued and the distribution of this species in the breeding season strongly suggests that a high proportion of the birds killed under great black-backed gull licences will, in fact, have been other large gull species. Great and lesser black-backed gulls in particular can be difficult to separate in the field, especially with birds in flight if a direct comparison between the two species is not possible.

Any great black-backed gulls killed under licence are likely to involve mainly over-summering, non-breeding immature birds rather than breeding adults. The rarity of this species as a breeding bird across most of England means that the killing of even

small numbers of breeding birds would be a concern, with the potential for significant impacts on local populations and reductions in the breeding range.

No licences were issued for the Isles of Scilly in 2010, this being the only SPA in England to support substantial numbers of breeding great black-backed gulls.

#### 4.3 *Lesser black-backed gull*

Very large numbers of this species have been killed in the past at some breeding colonies, resulting in substantial declines in colony size. For example an estimated 50,000 were killed and tens of thousands of clutches destroyed at the Bowland Fells colony in 1978-82, reducing the colony from 25,000 to less than 10,000 pairs. Control of breeding birds continues within this SPA due to concerns about potential impacts on water quality.

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 2010 it is impossible to reach any firm conclusions about the role that control activities carried out under general licence may have played in these declines.

### 5. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 5.1 The numbers of herring and great black-backed gulls licensed to be killed in 2010 are sufficient to suggest that impacts on regional, national and SPA populations are possible in future and should be subject to regular review. This initial assessment, based on licensing information from just one year, represents the first stage in what will need to be an ongoing process.
- 5.2 Licences to allow the killing of anything other than very small numbers of herring and great black-backed gulls within 10km of an SPA for which they are part of the qualifying interest have the potential to impact on SPA breeding populations. It is recommended that such applications are subject to an appropriate assessment as required under the Habitats Regulations.
- 5.3 Given the difficulties in distinguishing between great and lesser black-backed gulls in the field, there is currently confusion about the numbers of great black-backed gulls killed, both under individual licences for this species and under the general licences for lesser black-backed gull. The loss of even small numbers of breeding great black-backed gulls away from its south-west England stronghold is a cause for concern for this very scarce breeding species. It is suggested that licences for this species within 10km of all known breeding sites are only issued when there are very strong grounds for doing so. There should be a general presumption against issuing licences for conservation purposes for this species within 10km of known breeding sites
- 5.4 Consideration should be given to publicising the fact that the two black-backed gull species are (i) difficult to separate in the field and, (ii) have a very different conservation status as breeding birds in England. With the recent changes in approach to licensing, anyone carrying out control of large gulls must be aware that they risk prosecution if they kill a great black-backed gull without an individual licence for this species.
- 5.5 Consideration should also be given to specifying on licences for great black-backed gulls that a sample of carcasses should be retained for examination by wildlife advisors or should be photographed and the images submitted to Natural England as

part of the licence return. This would allow the species and ages of birds killed under licence to be determined.

- 5.6 There are a number of SPAs in England that include lesser black-backed gull as part of the qualifying interest and several SPA populations have declined substantially in recent years. This, together with the fact that lesser and great black-backed gulls are easily confused, means that the licensing situation for this species should also be kept under regular review.

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