Gloucester City Council

Gulls
How to stop them nesting on your roof

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GLOUCESTER
CITY COUNCIL
Sustainable Development

Gulls

How to stop them nesting on your roof

Introduction

This booklet has been produced in partnership with the Gloucestershire Gull Action Group. Although the examples quoted are Gloucester-based, the suggestions put forward are applicable throughout Gloucestershire and beyond.

Herring Gull

Its purpose is to advise developers how to design their buildings in a 'gull unfriendly' way, and give advice to owners/occupiers of existing buildings on how to deal with nesting gulls without causing them or other wildlife undue distress.

Although it is not a formal Supplementary Planning Document, development control staff will be using the guide when assessing applications for new buildings, or applications for netting and other forms of control where planning permission or listed building consent is required.

Background

The first record of urban nesting gulls in the county was in 1967 when three pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls bred in Gloucester Docks. Numbers have increased significantly over the past 30 years to the extent that in 2004 it was estimated that two thousand pairs of Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls nested in Gloucester City. Although there are no authoritative figures across the county, it is thought that in urban areas numbers are increasing at about 20% per year. Two species cause problems in our towns and cities; the Herring Gull (Larus argentatus) and the Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus).

Lesser Black-backed Gull

There are a number of reasons why gulls come to urban areas, but in the case of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, they are here to breed.

Rooftops provide excellent nesting sites that are protected from the elements and free from predators like foxes and rodents. The availability of food in the surrounding countryside and from landfill sites means that the survival rate of young chicks is very high. Although they will take food from discarded rubbish in streets and parks, this is not considered to be a significant factor for their success within urban areas.

Although other gulls can be seen in and around our towns and cities, it is only the Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls that breed in these areas. This guide will deal with discouraging these birds from nesting.

Lifecycle

Adult birds (3 years and over) having once bred in a town or city will generally return to the same colony year after year, often to the same nesting site. New recruits (those breeding for the first time) will find a new site and come to the county from as a far afield as South Wales and Devon.

Mating activity will start in February when birds begin to identify nesting sites, courting is in full swing by March, and by April the nest will have been made. Typically, eggs will be laid in late April or May. Apart from courtship rituals the impact on we humans at this time is not too great. This all changes in June. The eggs start to hatch, the adults become very active and the young chicks call for food. Matters get much worse in July and August when the young birds fledge (begin to fly). At this time the adults are very aggressive and young chicks are falling out of nests and roaming the streets. By the end of the summer the colony begins to disperse and things quieten down until the next breeding season.

It is important to understand that Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are colonial birds, that is they prefer each others company in a large group to successfully breed. Birds on the periphery of the colony or in new satellite colonies are highly vulnerable and will tend to be those that are nesting for the first time. Making life difficult for these birds can pay real dividends. If they are

left and become established on your roof it will become almost impossible to move them on. A little forethought therefore in 'designing-out' obvious nesting sites or installing preventative measures can pay significant dividends in later years.

Nesting habits

Lesser Black-backed Gulls in wild colonies tend to nest on the ground, often on dunes or moorland. In urban areas they prefer flat roofs with a little substrate (gravel etc). They build a very simple nest of moss and other vegetation and if need be this can be done in a matter of hours.

Typically three eggs are laid in each nest. On a modern building, nests will tend to be built behind a parapet wall or where there is protection from the elements.

In wild colonies Herring Gulls prefer cliffs, though will nest on dunes and moorland. In urban areas they will tend to occupy difficult to access sites between chimney pots and tucked away on ledges. They will nest on flat roofs and can be seen nesting together with Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

There are a number of simple techniques that can be employed to make your building less attractive to gulls. Broadly these can be split into two distinct categories. The first is to 'design-out' nesting sites in the first place.

The second concerns attaching other structures to deter the birds. The latter can be retro-fitted, but the former is probably more effective.

'Designing-out' nesting sites on new build

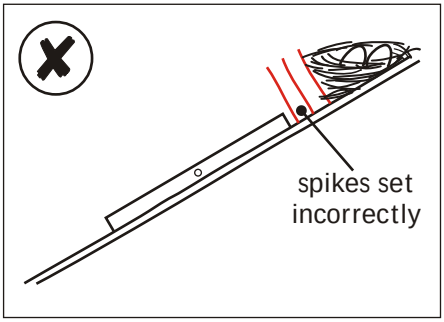
As discussed, flat roofs are the favourite nesting sites for these birds. Modern office and commercial buildings provide ideal sites. Without suggesting that the whole design process should focus on gulls, a few points should be kept in mind.

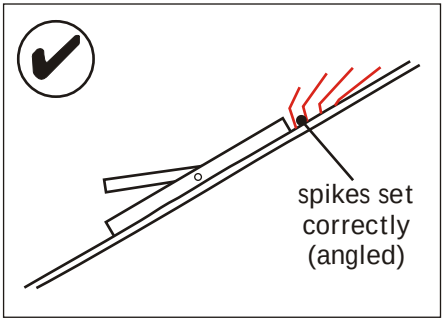
Pitched roofs

Nests require something to grip onto. If the roof is on a slope then a smooth surface will be less attractive. Generally, on a smooth roof such as a typical commercial 'crinkly tin' building, a roof plane of more than 25 degrees will tend to be too steep. Any less than this and gulls will be attracted to it.

Small interruptions in the roof plane on any building can provide enough purchase for a gull nest.

This may have to be included in your design to accommodate a stairwell or some plant housing. If it can't be designed-out, make sure a nest cannot be easily built by using spikes or wires (see below). Erecting these at a later date will be significantly more expensive.





Flat roofs

Modern flat-roofed office and residential buildings provide ideal nesting areas. Designing-out nesting sites in such buildings may well be

impractical. Netting or other protective measures may not be wanted for aesthetic reasons or because of the cost of installation and maintenance. If this is the case then ease of access can make a significant difference to any owner/occupiers ability to deal with the birds in a cost effective way. Access to all the roof area without the need for climbing boards or ladders can make the maintenance of the roof far more straightforward. If gulls do take up residence, blocked gullies, vents and similar will become a problem. Easy roof access can help deal with this.

If the eggs are to be treated in some way, for example, through the City Council's egg oiling service, easy access is fundamental. If access is not straightforward and safe the City Council will not take it on. The harder it is to get to nests, the more a private company will charge to treat them.

For residential buildings, roof gardens are seen as preferable. They allow easy access and, if used frequently, they will be a deterrent in themselves to a colony establishing on a roof. Roof gardens have other benefits, such as attenuating rainwater run off and insulating buildings, though care must be taken

with over-looking and in historic areas.

For flat and pitched roofs, if rain water is harvested, precautions should be taken to prevent contamination with guano and other debris.

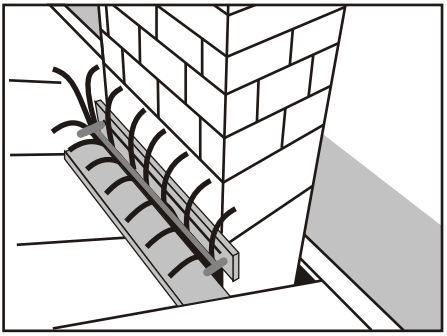
‘Designing-out’ nesting sites on existing buildings

There are several companies offering a wide range of services (see below for a list of installers). There are also a number of different systems. The main ones are summarised below with tips given on their usefulness and how to mitigate their visual impact.

Spikes

These are typically a series of upturned spikes that deter gulls from roosting or, in certain circumstances, from nesting. Spikes can be effective on ledges where, if enough of them are used, they will deter the birds. They are generally ineffectual if placed around parapet walls or installed at low densities.

In certain circumstances, spikes can be visually intrusive and should be used with great care in conservation areas and on listed buildings. They are most useful when restricting access to certain localised sites typically inhabited by Herring Gulls. For example they can be effective on sites around chimney stacks, with the ‘Nesthog’ or similar devices being particularly useful (see below).



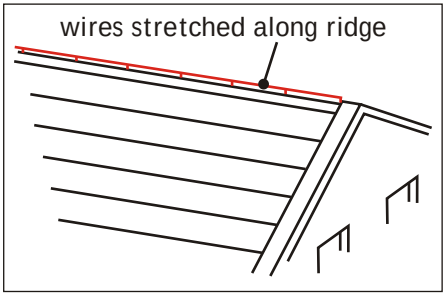
Again, if this is done properly at the outset, it can save problems later on.

Wires

There are different ways of using wires. One of the simplest methods is to stretch wires along the ridge of pitched-roof buildings. These will not deter nesting birds, but will prevent roosting.

Although generally quiet when roosting, the birds will deposit a large

amount of droppings. These look unsightly, will be expensive to clean and will hasten the deterioration of the roof fabric.



Wires can be stretched across a flat roof. These are aligned in parallel rows at a distance that will prevent a gull from landing. They have the advantage that other birds do not get snagged in them, and they can be less visually intrusive than nets.

Even so they can be fairly incongruous and siting needs to be done sensitively. Skylines that are visible from prominent public places should be avoided (see Netting). Bright colours may improve performance but should not be used. This sort of system needs to be properly installed and maintained if it is to be successful. If done incorrectly, gulls can still enter the excluded area.

Netting

Netting is the most common form of prevention and can be retrofitted to most buildings. However, it can look ugly and careful siting and design will be needed to minimise its appearance.

Netting comes in a range of colours so it is important that an appropriate shade is chosen. Where the netting will be close-fitting to the roof it may be more acceptable to choose a netting colour to match the roof materials. Where the netting is to be

located above the roof plane, so that sky is visible between the roof and the netting (when viewed from the street), a transparent or neutral colour would be more appropriate. Vivid or fluorescent colours should be avoided as they stand out unnecessarily.

The Eastgate Portico in Gloucester has been sensitively covered with stone coloured netting, which blends well into the structure so that from a distance it is not noticeable. Although done to deter pigeons it gives a flavour of what can be achieved for gulls.

On this building (below left) little thought has been given to the colour of the netting making it far more obtrusive in the street scene.

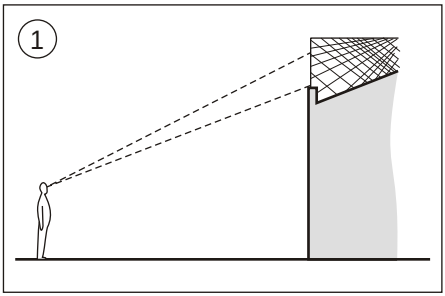
Another important consideration when using netting as a solution is the visual impact to wider views across the City. Of particular concern are views of Robinswood Hill, the Cathedral and other historic churches and monuments. These may be views from the street or from other buildings such as offices or multi-storey car parks.

Wider views are important as they impact on the image of the city and the overall visual attractiveness of Gloucester.

This is the view from a multi-storey car park used by visitors to the city. The dark netting detracts from an attractive view of the cathedral.

Siting of the netting on the building is an important consideration. Netting should be located so that it cannot be seen from the street below.

Locating the netting further back on the roof and using a combination of methods such as wires or spikes, will help to minimise the visual impact from the street.

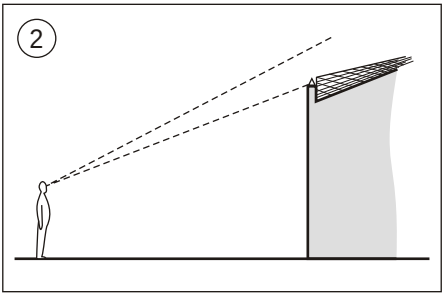


In this example (1) the netting has been located from the top of the parapet to a height that can encompass the whole pitch of the roof. This means that the netting will be clearly visible from the street. This is considered unacceptable as the netting can appear untidy and detract from the visual aesthetics of the building and the wider street scene.

In the next example (2) the netting starts from behind the parapet. Spikes or wires have been used on top of the parapet to prevent perching.

This method is much more visually acceptable.

These procedures are not necessarily foolproof and birds can make nests on top of them. Remember, gulls and other birds may become snagged in the netting. Not only does this cause unnecessary distress and suffering for the birds, but can create unfavourable publicity for the building owner. As a guide, a mesh size of 75mm is generally considered most appropriate for gulls.



Historic buildings

The fitting of netting, spikes or any other structure to listed buildings or those buildings within conservation areas should be undertaken with special care and sensitivity. In most cases Listed Building Consent or planning permission will be required. Before undertaking any works please contact the City Council's Principal Conservation and Design Officer on 01452 396855.

Other measures

All manner of scaring techniques have been tried. Many appear to be a waste of money, though more innovative systems are currently being developed. The following have proved to be less than helpful.

Plastic eagle owls and similar scaring devices

As shown below left, these are quickly habituated and are of little value.

Distress calls or other noise-based products

These are also quickly habituated and essentially have little effect unless changed on a frequent basis. Most are not appropriate in an urban area as they can be a noisy nuisance in their own right.

Wind driven moving structures

Again, these are quickly habituated and have questionable long-term effect.

Summing up

Designing-out or ensuring access to potential nesting sites is considered to be the most effective method of preventing gulls from occupying a building. Anyone involved in the design process of large commercial and residential buildings will be encouraged to take on board this principle when submitting planning applications to Gloucester City Council.

For existing structures some techniques are available, but these can be costly and may have a

detrimental impact upon the urban townscape. Careful choice of system and thoughtful design can, however, minimise these impacts.

Pest control operatives and suppliers of gull management equipment

The following list is not exhaustive. No endorsement of companies included on this list or criticism of those excluded is implied. This list is alphabetical and does not indicate order of competence or preference.

Barettine Environmental Health
St Ivel Way, Warmley, Bristol,
BS30 8TY
01179 600060
www.barrettine.co.uk

NBC Bird Solutions Ltd
81A St Georges Road
Cheltenham, Gloucs, GL50 3DU
01242 541302
www.birdsolutions.co.uk

Nesthog Chimney Cleft Products
27 Freemantle Rd, Weymouth,
DT4 9EA
01305 839118
www.nesthog.co.uk

Rentokil Pest Control
11 Court Road, Frampton Cotterell,
Bristol, BS17 2DE 01454 774686
www.rentokilpestcontrol.co.uk

Herring Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gulls and the law

The following is drawn from the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1991 (as amended), as guidance and should not be taken as legal advice. Generally it is illegal to capture, injure or destroy any wild bird or interfere with its nest or eggs. However, General Licences issued by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) allow measures to be taken against certain species of bird on grounds which include the preservation of public health or public safety.

Any action taken must be humane. The use of an inhumane method which could cause suffering would be illegal. The list of birds to which this applies currently includes (November 2005) Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. This may however change. See DEFRA website for latest information.

The use of poisons or drugs to take or kill any bird is specifically prohibited except under very special circumstances and with a licence issued by DEFRA.

Egg oiling

Oiling eggs - dipping them in light paraffin oil - seals the shell and effectively sterilises them. The birds, however, are duped into thinking that the eggs are still viable and will continue to sit. At this time they are actually quite quiet and disturbance is significantly reduced. As no chicks hatch, the particularly noisy aspect of the breeding cycle is removed.

Eggs must be oiled as near the laying time as possible (preferably once a full clutch of 3 eggs has been laid). This will vary with the season but will normally be around the first week of May (Gloucestershire).

After about 4-6 weeks the eggs will start to deteriorate and they will be ejected from the nest. Mature birds will lay a second or even third clutch, and if the technique is to be successful these will need oiling as well.

Dummy eggs

Preliminary experiments carried out by Gloucester City Council show that, generally, pairs will accept and carry on incubating dummy eggs. Plastic eggs part filled with sand (used by chicken breeders) can be painted to look like gull's eggs. These are then substituted for the real thing. As they do not go off there is the added benefit that only one visit to the nest is needed. More testing will be necessary, but so far the results look promising.

As well as cutting down noise, oiling/dummy eggs may slowly disperse the colony. Although more research is needed it is thought that unsuccessful females will find a new mate and therefore nest elsewhere (this could of course be an adjacent roof). Also, it is thought that male birds may return to the natal colony, so in 3 years time there could be fewer birds returning to your area.

This document has been produced in partnership with Gloucestershire Gull Action Group. Particular thanks to Peter Rock Gull Consultant (pete.rock@blueyonder.co.uk) for pictures and technical information.

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