

Gull Scaring at Landfill Sites

John Sanders

September 2011

The numbers of gulls nesting on roofs in our towns and cities have increased to such an extent that they have become a serious nuisance, and councillors are under great pressure to ‘do something about it’. A great many schemes have been employed to try and deter them, from plastic owls, to the netting of roofs, right through to egg oiling and wholesale culling, but none has been successful. The reason is that the numbers of urban nesting Lesser Black-backed Gulls are rising so rapidly that, even if it was possible to cull every single one in the county next summer, they would quickly return to former levels, since birds from surrounding areas would move in to take the places of those that had been killed. This population explosion is being fuelled by the ready availability of waste food on landfill sites, and the discarded remains of fast food takeaways in our streets. It is true that residents in Cheltenham and Gloucester have recently been recycling all their kitchen waste, but some hotels, restaurants and cafés have not.



Fig. 1. A typical scene at Gloucester landfill site, last year.



Fig. 2 When the weather was really cold the BHGs arrived in greater numbers.

Our councillors, in conjunction with the Environment Agency, have now devised a new plan. There is to be an absolute zero tolerance to gulls at the three landfill sites in the county. The theory is that once the gulls are driven away, then they will not return to breed. Falconers have been engaged and began work at Stoke Orchard and Bishop's Cleeve on 11th July, and then at Hempsted, near Gloucester on 15th August. This new scheme must be very attractive to our elected representatives, since there is no direct cost to ratepayers, all the considerable expense is being borne by the waste management companies. The reason that the falconers' starts were staggered was that, when the gulls were previously scared from Hempsted, they immediately flew to Stoke Orchard, right over Staverton Airport, so it was thought wise to try and minimise any possibility of a bird strike on an aircraft.

It is early days to try and judge the effects of the scaring, but at Bishop's Cleeve the gulls soon learnt the hours of the falconer, and descended in great numbers when the tip closed at 1630 hours. Now scaring continues until 1900 hours each weekday, yet there are still gulls in the area at weekends, the only difference being that they are now nervous and unapproachable.



Fig. 3 The Culprit

So what are the long term prospects for this new plan? For a start the timing was unfortunate. Lesser Black-backs are mainly migratory, so a majority of the individuals that nest in Cheltenham and Gloucester spend their winters in the Iberian Peninsula and coastal regions of north-west Africa. The birds that will be scared in the coming months will be mainly winter visitors from breeding areas further north, plus Black-headed Gulls that visit the tips in huge numbers, yet have never been known to nest on a roof in the county. Observers from other parts of the country have reported that gulls tend to ignore the falcons in periods of very cold weather, when natural food is in short supply, and they are extremely hungry. We shall have to wait and see whether this is the case here. And then, during the summer, when the breeding birds return, the daylight hours will be longer, so that the gulls will have the opportunity of feeding on the tips before and after working hours. They are very opportunistic and adaptable, that is why they are so successful, so will be quick to change their habits in response to the new conditions. In this respect it is

interesting to consider what has happened at Cardiff. A falconer has been operating at the local landfill site at Lamby for several years, yet the Cardiff city rooftop colony has increased in that time to 3,200 pairs, making it one of the largest in the country. It could be that our councillors are in for a nasty surprise!



Fig 4 GLS in September this year

But one thing is certain, my and Gordon Avery's study of colour ringed gulls, in association with the Severn Estuary Gull Group, has come to an abrupt end. Within days of the falconer arriving at Hempsted the Lesser Black-backs that we had been recently watching were arriving in north-west Spain, and the birds that remained became so nervous we could not get close enough to them to read the ring codes. Added to which, readers of the *Gloucestershire Bird Report* will notice a sharp fall in the number of records of 'white-winged' gulls, since they will be much harder to find away from the landfill sites. In any event, it will be interesting to receive reports from other birdwatchers around the county, particularly if they notice changes in numbers and habits of gulls in the coming months. Then next summer, will the Lesser Black-backs return to nest as usual, or will they be deterred in any way? There will much to discover.