

SURVEYING THE GLOUCESTER GULL COLONY

Although the Severn Estuary Gull Group has been in existence formally since 1988, it had not attempted a survey of the breeding birds in the Gloucester area (nor any of the other breeding locations in Gloucestershire). Our main efforts are put into ringing gulls on landfill sites, but we have done some ringing of pulli in the past. A breeding survey has always been on our wish-list but we have been daunted by the situation of the colony. Not only is the area very flat, with very few vantage points, but there are also high concentrations of gulls in several locations.

The entire colony is spread over quite a wide area. If the centre of Gloucester City is taken as a datum, individual 'sub-colonies' extend some 7.5 km to the south-west, and 6.5 km to the south-east. The colonisation is broadly linear in these directions.

Although we were aware that Seabird 2000 was taking place, we didn't really feel a part of it due to our inland location. So, it wasn't until February 2002, when Ian Mitchell contacted us for information on breeding gulls in Gloucestershire, that we became more interested, the more so when Ian suggested the possibility of an aerial survey, funded by a grant from the Seabird Group. And having contacted the local flying school, we decided to undertake the exercise, albeit relying on other advice for the effectiveness of aerial photography.

We had decided on 17 May 2002 as the date for the survey, on the basis that the majority of birds would still be on the nest, and there would be very few hatched. In the event, the British weather intervened, and it was 29 May before we got airborne. We had three people in the aircraft, although the observer behind the pilot could see very little, as the aircraft banked to make photography easier. The observer behind the photographer found counting

from the air very difficult due to the density of birds. In spite of having been warned beforehand and taken the pills, the photographer (your author) succumbed - briefly - to the occupational hazard of airsickness towards the end of the flight, which took 90 minutes.



Lesser Black-backed Gull
(photo Chris Wernham)

We used a 150-300 mm zoom lens and 200 ASA slide film. The photos were taken from 1,500 feet, mostly from an oblique angle as the pilot had advised that it would be easier to operate from inside the aircraft. Our analysis of the photos also showed something rather surprising - that it was better to shoot against or across the sun, rather than with it, as the shadows made counting easier. The background of the roofs frequently made nest counting difficult, and the resolution available did not always enable us to distinguish between Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Herring Gulls. However, counts on some roofs suggested the number of birds exceeded the number of nests by 50%. Also, from separate observations, we judged that Herring Gulls formed about 10% of the total population.

So down to the nitty gritty - scrutinising slides in midsummer with all the curtains drawn (what did the neighbours think?). We came up with a total colony of 2,335 pairs of gulls; 2,100 pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and 235 pairs of Herrings Gulls. This is far higher than we had anticipated beforehand, but the results have been borne out by a separate survey carried out for part of the colony by Peter

Rock for Gloucester City Council. This gave a central estimate of 1,300 pairs (lower and upper estimates of 1,200 and 1,500 respectively), compared with 1,299 (honestly!!) from our survey. Our thoughts for this area prior to the survey were around 800 pairs, showing how cautious one should be of top of the head estimates.

The first breeding gulls appeared in Gloucester in 1967, and the colony had grown to 98 pairs by 1976 - all Lesser Black-backed Gulls, except for 5 pairs of Herring Gulls in 1971. In this period, estimates of the colony were published annually but were much more sporadic subsequently. In 1980, it was judged that there were at least 206 pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and 126 pairs of Herring Gulls, though it was acknowledged that the total could have been much higher. However, by 1986, it appeared that there were only 26 pairs of Herring Gulls, whilst the Lesser Black-backed Gull population was not counted but was judged to substantially exceed the 1980 level. In 1999, the population was estimated at 400 pairs of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and 75 pairs of Herring Gulls. It is clear from the work carried out this year that these numbers for 1999 were substantial underestimates.

A great deal was learned in the exercise, and we would happily pass on our experiences.

We are grateful to the Seabird Group for providing a grant to cover the hire of the aircraft and purchase of the film. We also wish to acknowledge the advice provided by John Davies and Alan Leitch on the aerial photography.

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