

GULL CULL REPORT

2002 - 2003

GONHS Gull Control Unit

INTRODUCTION

The yellow-legged gull *Larus cachinnans* is considered a pest in Gibraltar. Not recorded by Howard Irby in his Ornithology of the Straits of Gibraltar published in 1897, it had become numerous enough for the Royal Air Force to commence gull culling activities in the late 1970s, mainly by destroying eggs, nests and chicks. These activities were subsequently taken over (still under R.A.F. supervision) by the Gibraltar Regiment and the private contractor SERCO International. SERCO's Bird Control Unit continues to be active in the airfield area. In previous years the Armed Forces carried out destruction of gull nests throughout the Rock. However, since 2000 there has been no significant contribution to gull culling by Forces personnel or contractors other than on the airfield.

In July 1997, the Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society (GONHS) was engaged by the Gibraltar Government Ministry for the Environment to cull gulls.

The first few years resulted in some successful culling, but also in a great deal of learning. Several methods were tried with differing levels of success, with the gulls quickly becoming aware of some of the methods and tending to avoid them. The use of 5.5 mm air rifles was introduced in January 2000, under a licence issued by the Royal Gibraltar Police.

THE GULL CONTROL UNIT

During 2002-2003, the gull cull unit was supervised by Eric Shaw, and comprised Paul Rocca, Roger Rutherford, Michael Wahnnon, Stanley Olivero and Vincent Robba. Most of the shooting was carried out by Michael Wahnnon and Roger Rutherford.

METHODS

The main method of culling employed was shooting with air rifles. During the 2003 nesting season, the Unit also targeted nests and eggs in a number of areas. In addition, the Unit responded to call-outs to deal with nests in built-up areas, which were causing a nuisance to residents. Nests, eggs or chicks were removed as appropriate.

The Unit continued to cause disturbance at nesting colonies which were not accessible for nest removal, but within reach of the rifles, in order to try to reduce nesting success. As well as shooting in these areas, this included the use of raptors by the Bird of Prey Unit. A female goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*, two gyr x saker hybrids *Falco rusticolus x cherrug* and a Bonelli's eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus* were flown, especially on the east side sand slopes above Catalan Bay, at Hole-in-the-Wall and at Windmill Hill.

The Unit is fully licensed to carry out all its activities, including falconry and shooting. Unlicensed killing of gulls is a criminal offence in Gibraltar under the Nature Protection Ordinance (1991).

OTHER ACTIONS

The efforts initiated in 2001 to organise shooting at the Los Barrios landfill site have been unsuccessful. However it appears that this site is finally going to be closed down shortly. Culling of gulls by the Spanish authorities in Algeciras now seems a real possibility.

In late June 2003 a female Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, which had been rehabilitated at the GONHS Bird of Prey Unit, and had been trained to catch and feed on Yellow-legged Gulls, was released. At the time of writing (end of August 2003), the eagle was still causing real disturbance among the gulls as it remained in residence on the east cliffs of Gibraltar and was presumably hunting gulls there. It is to be hoped that this female will attract a mate and that nesting will resume in Gibraltar, where it occurred until at least 1933. Predation by these eagles would have a disruptive effect on the gulls.

The newly-established pair of Ravens *Corvus corax*, nested successfully on the east cliffs in 2003, for the first time since 1972, apparently raising one young. These have been seen preying on gull eggs and chicks.

There are plans to release a rehabilitated Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (which apparently also nested in Gibraltar up to at least 1909). This bird is a potential predator of gulls also.

RESULTS

Appendix 1 gives the totals of gulls culled since the initiation of the programme. The tables detail whether these adults or otherwise fully-grown birds, including fledged young of the year, chicks or eggs. The figures for 2003 are illustrated graphically in Figures 1 and 2.

In addition to the totals given, during the nesting season of 2003, attendance was requested to 23 sites on or near buildings, mostly in the Town. This was down from 35 calls in 2002.

Figure 1

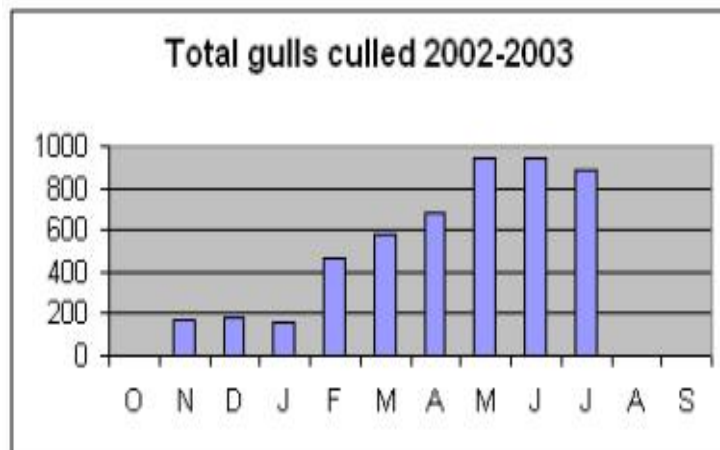


Figure 2

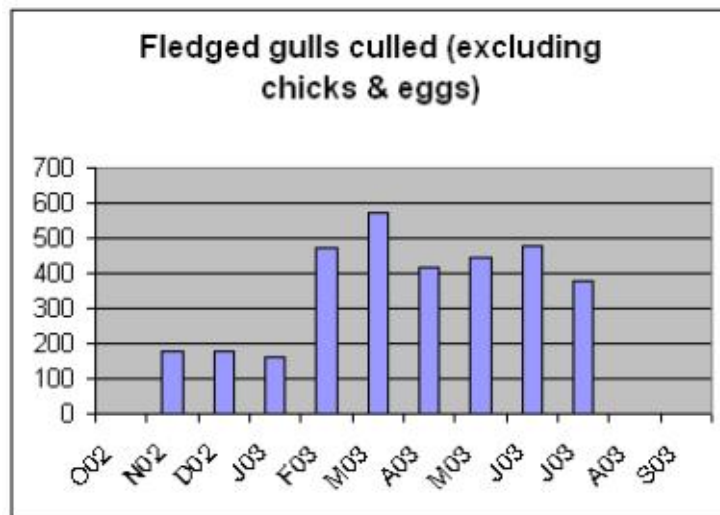
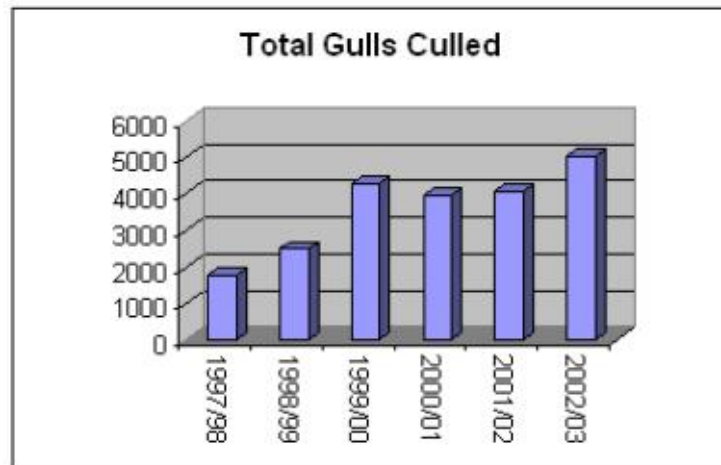


Figure 3 illustrates the totals of gulls culled since 1997, except those between July and September 1997 (a total of 50). The 2002-2003 has been the season with the highest number of gulls culled.

Figure 3



NESTING GULL SURVEY - 2002

During the spring of 2002, members of RAFOS (The Royal Air Force Ornithological Society) were in Gibraltar assisting GONHS with a survey of nesting yellow-legged gulls. The full results of this survey will be published separately. However, for the purpose of this report, it is important to note that a total of 1846 breeding pairs were counted. When compensated for methodology, the result is an estimate of 3653 breeding pairs or 7306 adult birds. Estimates of non-breeding birds suggest that there is about one non-breeding bird for every breeding pair, making a total of about 11,000 birds present in Gibraltar in the spring. If all the 3653 breeding pairs were to successfully rear two young each to fledging, the total number of birds present in Gibraltar at the end of the nesting period, would be:

Adult nesting birds 7306

Non-breeders 3653

Fledged young 7306

TOTAL 18265

If we assume these figures were similar in 2003, and we deduct the total number of eggs, chicks and juveniles culled (1648) from the "fledged young" total, we arrive at an estimate of 16,617.

DISCUSSION

Continuing use of birds of prey to harass gulls resulted once more in failure of nesting in former colonies, including Windmill Hill Flats and Hole in the Wall.

Observations once again suggested some birds were nesting with sub-adult plumage. Not enough data could be gathered to arrive at any firm conclusions. However, nesting by sub-adults is generally taken as suggesting that there is a shortage of adult birds available and those members of established pairs that lose a partner (for example through culling) have to accept sub-adult birds instead. The consequent reduced nesting experience of the pair may result in reduced nesting success.

In the seven years since the GONHS Cull Unit was created, a total of 20,944 yellow-legged gulls have been accounted for directly.

The estimated number of gulls at the end of the breeding season, given in the Results section, is 16,617. Previous estimates of gull numbers at Gibraltar have been based on less extensive surveys, but have placed the post-nesting population in Gibraltar at around 30,000. Based on these figures, the yellow-legged gull population in Gibraltar is now at 55% of the 1996 figure.

It should be noted that it is unlikely that there are 16,617 gulls in Gibraltar at any one time. The timing of fledging varies, and the gulls, both adults and juveniles, leave Gibraltar very soon after leaving the nest. The above figure in any case assumes two fledged young per pair. This is likely to be unrealistically high as there will be nest failure attributable to such factors as disturbance from shooting, disturbance from trained birds of prey and inexperienced pairs.

Once again, in areas where shooting was carried out regularly nesting failed completely. Gulls did not nest in areas of former colonies from which they retreated away from the shooting posts. This was particularly obvious in the lower areas of cliff around Catalan Bay.

The results confirm a stabilisation of numbers culled annually has risen to around the 5000 mark. This would appear not to reflect an increase in the gull population, but one in the culling effort and in the skill of the operatives.

For the first time there are real indications that the number of gulls in Gibraltar is beginning to decline, as predicted, after a time lag of several years to account for

the three to four years taken between fledging and first nesting. In addition to the comments above, there have been continuing casual comments by members of the public about the absence of nesting gulls in several areas and about a general decrease in numbers

There was a reduction in call-out requests to built-up areas by one third compared to 2002 (22 compared to 35).

There was only one letter appearing in the Gibraltar Press complaining about gulls in the 2003 nesting season. This was at the end of a letter referring to a problem with Barbary apes at Catalan Bay and therefore can only be considered a passing remark. There has been one formal serious complaint (to the Ministry for the Environment) referring to the area of Anglian Way.

Catalan Bay and Anglian Way probably remain the two worst areas for gulls, for similar reasons. There is a considerable area of cliff which is totally inaccessible in the case of Catalan Bay, and dangerous in the case of Anglian Way. These areas are therefore hard to tackle by the Cull Unit. Culling in both areas is also limited due to the proximity of residential areas. Birds of prey were flown in the Catalan bay area to try and impact on the gulls. In 2004 an extra effort will be made in the Anglian Way area by way of shooting of adults and attempting to reach more nests. A trial with birds of prey will also be carried out to try to reduce breeding through disturbance.

Overall the results of the culling effort seem positive and the desired results are being achieved.

Acknowledgements

In addition to the Gull Cull team already named above, GONHS would like to acknowledge the RAFOS Expedition Team, and in particular Mike Blair, for their work in censusing the nesting yellow-legged gulls in 2002.

APPENDIX I

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 2002/2003.

	O02	N02	D02	J03	F03	M03	A03	M03	J03	J03	A03	S03	Totals
Ad		176	177	162	471	575	416	445	478	380			3280
3-y								5	10	6			21
2-y								26	21	12			59
Juv								10	411	488			909
Ch							6	251	26				283
Egg							265	206	2				473
Tot		176	177	162	471	575	687	943	948	886			5025

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chicks

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 2001/2002.

	O01	N01	D01	J02	F02	M02	A02	M02	J02	J02	A02	S02	Totals
Ad		69	104	162	235	835	633	768	322	597			3725
3-y													
2-y													
Juv													
Ch						35	44	79	98	75			331
Egg													
Tot		69	104	162	235	870	677	847	420	672			4056

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chicks

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 2000/2001.

	O00	N00	D00	J01	F01	M01	A01	M01	J01	J01	A01	S01	Totals
Ad	125	486	439	425	530	725	611		458				3799
3-y													
2-y													
Juv													
Ch							18						18
Egg						46	89						135
Tot	125	486	439	425	530	771	718		458				3952

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chicks

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 1999/00.

	O99	N99	D99	J00	F00	M00	A00	M00	J00	J00	A00	S00	Totals
Ad	3	11		57	81	280	1178	752	817	604	44	0	3827
3-y													
2-y													
Juv									371	67			438
ch								9	16				25
egg								8					8
	3	11		57	81	280	1178	769	1204	671	44	0	4298

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chicks

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 1998/99.

	O98	N98	D98	J99	F99	M99	A99	M99	J99	J99	A99	S99	Totals
Ad	19	15	14	10	18	23	23	27	33	6			188
3-y			1	1	1	2			1				6
2-y				2	1	2	2	3	2				12
juv			1	1	1	1	1	1	317	221			544
ch							7	351	24				382
egg						24	646	667	29				1366
	19	15	16	14	21	52	679	1049	406	227			2498

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chicks

Totals of gulls and eggs destroyed 1997/98.

	O97	N97	D97	J98	F98	M98	A98	M98	J98	J98	A98	S98	Totals
Ad		33	17	33	43	77	61	43	39	26			372
3-y		1		2	5	5	4	2	4	3			26
2-y		1	1			5	3	4	2				16
juv		8	3			1			232	254			498
ch							3	133	84	4			224
egg							300	305	19				624
		43	21	35	48	88	371	487	380	287			1760

Ad = Adult; 3-y = 3rd year bird; 2-y = 2nd year bird; juv = juvenile; ch = chick

Totals of gulls destroyed July – September 1997

	J97	A97	S97	Totals
Ad		1		1
3-y		1		1
2-y		1		1
Juv	17	30		47
ch				
egg				
	17	33		50