

Black-headed Gull 1958

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

The BTO had organised a survey of Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* colonies in 1938, and by 1958 it was decided to organise a repeat to see how much change there had been.

In England and Wales coverage was fairly complete, except for NW England and parts of N Wales. In Scotland much of the west coast, Outer Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland and Aberdeenshire were inadequately covered. This was partly due to the lack of effective co-operation but also because these areas were particularly difficult to count as they included large areas of remote moorland where the existence of colonies was often unsuspected. 155 colonies were recorded in England, 30 in Wales, and 130 in Scotland. Full lists of these are given in the appendices of the two published reports. Of the colonies in England and Wales extant in 1938 only 54 (41%) were still in existence and 104 new sites were being used. The main increase was inland and seemed to be mainly because of the availability of new habitats since 1938, and which the species had been quick to colonise. (Unfortunately the number of 1938 colonies in Scotland which were revisited was very low.) The large number of sites occupied between 1938 and 1957, but deserted in 1958 (also listed in the appendix of the report) showed that the species was very adaptable in changing its nesting sites from year to year, with much of the movement brought about by water level changes and the persecution or protection (or toleration) of the birds.

The total number of breeding pairs recorded in England was 41945-47605, in Wales 4320-4845, and in Scotland 29120-36250, but numbers for both Wales and Scotland were known to have represented only a proportion of the total number present. Compared with revised totals for England in 1938 of 35000-40000 pairs, this meant an increase of about 25%. However the average colony size had decreased. The largest colony was still Ravenglass in Cumberland with an estimated 13000-16000 nesting pairs, and there had been a large increase in numbers in SE England. There was only one large colony in Scotland, at Flanders Moss in Perthshire, with an estimated 10000-12000 pairs.

Most (74%) of the English colonies were between sea level and 300m asl (with 43% below 30m); but in Wales only 34% were below 300m. About half the Scottish ones were 150-300m asl. The colonies in England and Wales were mainly in three fairly natural habitats (80 colonies in moorland pools, tarns and disused mining reservoirs; 41 in coastal marsh and dunes; and 40 in lakes, reservoirs and fresh marsh), and three man-made habitats (5 colonies in sewage farms, 14 in flooded clay and gravel pits and 5 in sludge lagoons of sugar beet factories). In Scotland the vast majority were noted as 'moorland lochs', or similar. These may, or may not, have had islands, or marshes round their edges but the descriptions given were not detailed enough for proper analysis.

Some large colonies in England had been deserted between 1938 and 1958 and the two largest in Wales were much reduced in numbers. Drainage, egg-collecting and other human

intervention, and competition from such as rats or large waterfowl were thought to be the cause in many cases.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were asked to record the numbers of birds breeding in all colonies found. They were asked to complete a card, giving brief details including: the number of birds present, an accurate or estimated total of nests and the date of the count, together with a description of the habitat, the locality, National Grid Reference and altitude.

In order to compare with the 1938 census a separate questionnaire was used asking reasons for increase and establishment, or decrease and extinction of colonies since that date.

Purpose of Data Capture

Overall the objective in England and Wales was to census all breeding colonies of Black-headed Gulls in 1958. In Scotland a specific objective was to visit as many of the colonies known in 1938 as possible, as well as to census every large colony on the mainland.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1958.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by Frank Gribble (in England and Wales) and Frank Hamilton (in Scotland) on behalf of BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

Organiser(s)

Frank C. Gribble in England and Wales, and Frank D. Hamilton in Scotland.

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main reports of the survey are:

England and Wales: Gribble, F.C. 1962. Census of Black-headed Gull colonies in England and Wales, 1958. *Bird Study* 9: 56-71;

Scotland: Hamilton, F.D. 1962. Census of Black-headed Gull colonies in Scotland, 1958. *Bird Study* 9: 72-80.

The survey was also noticed in *Bird Study* issues for March, June, September and December 1958 (vol. 5).

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

3 boxes containing data cards, letters etc. All have been scanned.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

One of the difficulties encountered by this survey was obtaining accurate counts or estimates of the size of colonies. This difficulty was fully appreciated at the start and an attempt was made to arrange for two, or even three, observers to cover the large colonies but very few were properly checked. This counting difficulty was highlighted by a small colony in the Spey Valley covered by at least six observers, who produced counts varying between 75 and 250 pairs. Another difficulty was the actual date on which to make the count since numbers appeared to vary tremendously between the beginning and the end of the breeding season in some colonies. In colonies where a series of counts took place there was an indication of adults joining later in May, or even June, if a nearby colony was robbed. Conversely, persistent egg-collecting caused reduction in numbers and sometimes complete desertion of a colony.

Specific Issues for Analysis