

Inland Wintering Gulls 1963

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

Gulls wintering inland in Britain were first noted at the end of the nineteenth century, but no attempt had been made to assess the numbers until the BTO Enquiry of 1953. The report on this enquiry provided a basis, albeit rough, against which future changes could be measured. Through the 1950s some county bird reports, especially in the London area, were suggesting that numbers were continuing to rise so a repeat enquiry was organised for the winter of 1962/63. However the period chosen, December 1962 to January 1963, coincided with exceptionally severe winter weather which continued throughout the period and resulted in frozen reservoirs, from which the gulls often disappeared. As the effect of the weather on observers was almost as severe as on the gulls, the enquiry was abandoned for then, but it was rearranged and took place in December 1963.

Unfortunately coverage was very incomplete with no reports from Scotland or Wales, and none from the following counties in England: Cornwall, Devon, Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Sussex, Kent, Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. It is probable, however, that from this list only in Norfolk was there any inland roosting on a large scale.

Compared with 1953, there was a substantial increase in numbers, although the increase was understated as a number of large roosts were not counted, for example roosts on the the Norfolk Broads and on the flood water in the Great Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire. This latter roost, which had contained *ca* 100000 birds in 1953, was known to be a temporary one of gulls which otherwise roosted on the mud flats of the Wash. In the London area alone the increase was 260 per cent, and if the population on the Queen Elizabeth II Reservoir (two separate estimates by different observers on succeeding days were *ca* 50000 and *ca* 250000+) was taken at its lower figure, the population was still twice as great in 1963 as in 1953.

There were fewer roosts reported in 1963 than in 1953, although the number of likely roosts not reported on would make the numbers roughly equal. However, roosts tended to be larger, and the bigger population was not accounted for by just one or two big roosts. Several showed substantial increases and there were 21 completely new roosts, of which eleven were of more than 5000.

Overall the increase in numbers counted was of the order of 50%, from *ca* 333000 to *ca* 504000 with just over 250000 being in new and additional roosts since 1953. (Increases at previously occupied ones were 113000 and losses from disused or unreported ones 186000.)

The most striking individual species increase was the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* from 310 to *ca* 7000, and Common Gull *Larus canus* from nearly 50000 in 1953 to nearly 125000 in 1963.

Methods of Data Capture

The survey used a questionnaire which followed the pattern of that used in the 1953 enquiry. This asked for the location and description of the roost-site, and an estimate of the total numbers of each species of roosting gull placed into one of four numerical categories: 1 = up to 100; 2 = 101 to 1000; 3 = 1001 to 10000; 4 = over 10000. Observers were asked to estimate, if they preferred, the actual numbers involved. This was provided as an alternative, but most observers in fact did provide real estimates. The forms also asked for additional information on: 1) history of any roosts new since 1953; 2) details of any observed changes in feeding habits or areas; 3) reasons for any change in populations or habitats; 4) other notes of interest. A good deal of information was placed under these headings, including some notes from the abortive enquiry of January 1963, especially details of hard weather movements and behaviour. (However none of this information is now extant as it was never published and the datasheets were later destroyed.)

Purpose of Data Capture

To provide an update (*cf* 1953) of the numbers of gulls wintering inland in Britain, although a few coastal sites were also counted.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain, but in the event only sites in most parts of England supplied data.

Temporal Coverage

The survey was originally scheduled for January 1963 (ten years after the previous one), but severe weather postponed it, and most counts were carried out in December 1963.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by Ron Hickling with the help and support of the BTO.

Organiser(s)

Ron Hickling

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Hickling, R.A.O. 1967. The inland wintering gulls in England, 1963. *Bird Study* 14: 104-113.

The survey was noticed in *Bird Study* vol. 9 for 1962 (June, September and December issues) and vol. 10 for 1963 (March, September and December issues).

(Note that a comprehensive review of all wintering gull surveys previous to the survey of 2003-2007 is: Burton, N.H.K., Musgrove, A.J., Rehfisch, M.M., Sutcliffe, A. & Waters, R. 2003. Numbers of wintering gulls in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man: a review of the 1993 and previous Winter Gull Roost Surveys. *British Birds* 96: 376-401.)

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

BTO Windows network central area. Figures were input from the published paper.

Computer data -- outline contents

The 1963 data are in a single comma separated text file containing information on sites, and numbers of each species of gull.

Computer data -- description of contents

The columns of the data file are:

Site name; gridref; habitat1 (INLAND, COASTAL, OFFSHORE); habitat2 (GP=Gravel Pit, RES=Reservoir, LAK=Lake, EST=Estuary, FLW=Floodwater, HAR=Harbour, ISL=Island, OC=Open Coast, RIV=River, DL=Miscellaneous?, PLA=Platform (offshore), CW=Colliery Lagoon (only one!), CP=Clay Pit, SP=Sugar Factory); county (most as GBXX, but also YORK); BH (Black-headed Gull count); CM (Common Gull); HG (Herring Gull); LB (Lesser Black-backed Gull); GB (Great Black-backed Gull); small (unidentified small ie BH or CM); HGLB (Herring or Lesser Black-backed Gull); alltotal (the overall total).

Information held in BTO Archives

1 folder of correspondence. (The data sheets were shredded by Ron Hickling many years ago.)

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis