

# Herring Gull

Herring Gull. Note the freckling in the iris of the eye visible in this remarkably sharp image. **Photograph:** Brian Burke



**Steve Newton** reports on Ireland's Herring Gulls as they recover from a crash.

## Factfile

**Common name:** Herring Gull

**Scientific name:** *Larus argentatus*

**Irish name:** Faoileán Scadán

**Conservation status:** Red-listed (90% breeding decline over 30 years to 2000)

**Peak winter count:** 7,300 (November 2014) (Irish Wetland Bird Survey sites)

**Breeding population (at natural sites):** 5,500 pairs (Republic of Ireland 1999-2002); 6,120 pairs (all-Ireland, same period)

**Breeding population (urban/roof sites):** 217 pairs (Republic of Ireland 1999-2002).

**T**here is no such bird as a seagull. In Ireland, we have seven regular species of breeding gull, six of which also occur inland, over farmland or freshwater, or in towns and cities.

Only one of these gull species, the **Kittiwake**, is truly marine and probably dependent on fish year-round. All the others can, and regularly do, feed on worms, insects, scavenged refuse and so on, and will also search the coastline for shellfish or will follow fishing boats for discards. Even some of the larger gulls nesting on offshore islands spend a large amount of their time foraging over farmland, well away from the coast. A single foraging trip could cover as much as 200 kilometres.

**Herring Gulls** are probably the most familiar gull species. As adults, they have a white head and underparts and silvery-grey wings and back. The wing-tips are black with some white spots, the legs are pink and the

bill yellow, with a red spot on the lower tip.

However, this adult plumage is only attained when they are four years old. The juvenile and immature plumages are characterised by a streaky brown appearance, with a dark bill. Once the bird is 2-3 years old, the silvery-grey feathering appears on the back and wings and increases up to maturity.

Herring Gulls have a wingspan of 1.4 metres and weigh about 1 kg. Males are slightly larger (they weigh more) than females, but this is difficult to pick out in a flock.

They are capable of breeding at four years of age, but some may not get the opportunity to do so until a year or two later. A typical lifespan is twelve years, though one ringed

## WHAT THEY FEED ON, AND WHERE THEY FEED

Up to the 1950s, Herring Gulls are thought to have been mostly **coastal foragers** in the intertidal area or offshore. Presumably the food consumed included mussels and other shellfish, ragworms (brought to the surface by foot pattering on wet sediment) and whatever fish they could catch. The end of post-World War II food rationing probably marked a significant increase in **food waste** going into larger and larger landfill sites, and this may have triggered an increase in scavenging in Herring Gulls.

Also, the rise of **discarding** (of undersized or

unwanted fish species) in sea fisheries, and the **gutting and filleting** of fish at sea, meant following fishing boats became very profitable for gulls.

Nowadays, **scavenging** is an increasingly important feeding strategy: discarded takeaways, rubbish bins, flimsy black sacks containing food waste on the streets, green spaces in coastal cities and towns... all reward the enterprising gull. Additionally, Herring Gulls seem to wander widely over **farmland** and can often be seen feeding in recently ploughed fields, where earthworms presumably are the main attraction.

Juvenile Herring Gull searches plastic bag for food. We have to hope it did not eat the bag, but that is always a danger. **Photograph:** Brian Burke



individual is known to have lived for at least 32.8 years. About 88% of adults survive to the following year, but survival is much lower in the first couple of years.

## Nesting and breeding behaviour

Herring Gulls often breed at the same colony as their parents, i.e., where they were reared. The nest is a well-made, large cup of grasses and seaweed into which three eggs are typically laid at two-day intervals. They incubate for about 27 days, and most young hatch sometime in June and usually take their first flight at the end of July or early August.

On a typical gull-nesting island you often find two types of Herring Gull nests: isolated ones on cliff-tops or slopes and others in groups, usually on flatter ground. The latter are often mixed with other species such as **Lesser** and **Great Black-backed Gulls**.

The isolated pairs often feed by stealing eggs and young from other seabird species nesting on the cliff, such as **Cormorants**, **Kittiwakes** and **Guillemots**. The more colonial pairs are probably those that use dumps, beaches and mudflats and maybe range over agricultural land. At most sites where we have studied the breeding success of a large number of Herring Gulls, each pair raises on average between 0.9 and 1.8 young.

## Roof-nesting gulls

Gulls were first reported nesting on roofs in Dublin city in 1972. Numbers rose slowly and, by 2001, when the first wide-ranging census was undertaken, there were an estimated 180 pairs roof-nesting in County Dublin; these included a significant number in the fishing port of Howth.

### WHAT IS THAT RED DOT ABOUT?

The purpose of the prominent red dot on the adult Herring Gull's bill was first reported by a prominent Dutch pioneer of the study of animal behaviour, **Professor Niko Tinbergen**. It is a 'target' for the chicks: when they peck at it, it stimulates the adult to regurgitate food.



BRIAN BURKE



Herring Gull resting at sea. Its natural foraging habitat is the sea and the intertidal area.

Photo: Brian Burke

## PUBLIC OPINION OF HERRING GULLS

If you have been following the media reports in recent months, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Herring Gull had rapidly overtaken the Magpie as the Irish species most people love to hate. We regularly run events in central Dublin (e.g. "Gulls on the Green" and "Gulls on the Dock"), so we meet a lot of people and talk to them about gulls. In contrast to what the media report, most people actually *like* gulls – they say they bring back memories of great trips to the seaside – and they enjoy watching them, for example on the ponds in St Stephen's Green. Many people feed them scraps or stale bread. However, we strongly urge people to refrain from feeding gulls, because this practice only serves to encourage them to beg for food.

➔ A group of keen bird-ringers is planning to start colour-ringing Herring Gulls in Dublin city and on adjacent islands, to better understand their movements and use of different habitats and their behaviours. Look out for large, red leg-rings and please report the alphanumeric codes (letters/numbers) to [colourrings@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:colourrings@birdwatchireland.ie).

Elsewhere, roof-nesting Herring Gulls in Dunmore East, Co Waterford, have been systematically counted twice since 1999 and have increased from 29 pairs in 1999 to 46 in 2008, and further to 66 pairs in 2015.

Herring Gulls have been attracted into the cities because of the availability of food – wildlife populations are ultimately limited by food supply as well as by the availability of safe places to roost and breed.

Houses and offices with flat roofs clearly offer safe places for gulls to nest – perhaps as they resemble their natural nesting habitats on cliff-tops. Our parks and streets contain plenty of edible material in the form of discarded takeaways and easily opened bin bags.

Gulls can and do forage on worms, which they catch in parks and playing fields, and we presume that Dublin gulls can switch between coastal foraging, green-space foraging and urban scavenging or even head out to farmland to 'follow the plough.' This 'habitat-switching' aspect of the ecology of Herring Gulls needs further investigation.

## Population and trend

A new national census of all seabirds commenced in 2015 and, after two years, National Parks and Wildlife Service and BirdWatch Ireland staff have counted just over 7,000 pairs of Herring Gulls on coasts and islands in the Republic of Ireland. Although this survey is not complete, it appears that the coastal Herring Gull population is increasing – which is a welcome relief following a significant crash around 15 years ago which put them on the national **red list of birds of conservation concern**.

We have not yet started systematic counting in Dublin city but it is likely that this part of the population may have increased at a faster rate. The geographic spread of roof-nesting gulls has certainly expanded to nearly all areas inside Dublin's M50, and to quite a few non-coastal areas outside it.

Back at the coast, we have now recorded nine colonies with more than 150 pairs of Herring Gulls: Lambay, Co Dublin, is the largest with 906 pairs and both Ireland's Eye (Dublin) and Roaninish (Donegal) have over 300 pairs. Inishmurray (Sligo) is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest, with 243 pairs.