The Control Of Roof - Nesting Gulls

Introduction

Roof-nesting by gulls is a fairly recent phenomenon and colonies are now commonly found in many towns and cities. There are several species of gulls which can be seen locally and to many people they are just seagulls, only the lesser black backed and herring gulls commonly nest on buildings.

The Problem

Many people who have gulls on their property find they cause a nuisance; commonly cited problems include:

- Noise, caused by calling gulls and by their heavy footsteps.
- Mess caused by their droppings, fouling on washing, gardens and people.
- Damage to property, caused by gulls picking at roofing materials and by nests, which block gutters or hold moisture against the building structure.
- Birds can dive and swoop on people and pets. This usually occurs when chicks have fallen from nest and adult.
- birds attempt to prevent them coming to harm by frightening away potential threats.
- Blockage of gas flues by nesting materials can have serious consequences if gas fumes are prevented from venting properly.

Natural History

Herring gulls are large birds. Mature birds are on average about 55cm (22") from bill to tail with a wingspan of about 85cm (34"). They have silver / grey wings and pink legs.

Lesser black backed gulls are usually slightly smaller. Adult birds have a slate grey back and yellow legs instead of pink legs.

Both species begin mating in April and commence nest-building from early May onwards. In towns, the nest is constructed from straw and grass, twigs, paper and any other material the gull can conveniently use. The nest can be quite large and, if made of material accumulated over several years, very heavy.

Eggs are laid from early May onwards with two or three being the usual number. The eggs take about three weeks to hatch so the first chicks are generally seen about the beginning of June.

The chicks grow quickly but generally do not leave the nest for 5-6 weeks and are quite active. They often fall from the nest and in towns this will almost certainly mean they cannot return to the nest. Small chicks will die unless returned but larger chicks will be protected and fed by their parents on the ground. Parent birds protecting fallen chicks are often the ones which dive and swoop on people and animals that often do not realise a chick is down on the ground. Chicks generally begin to fly in late July early August and then take normally four years to reach maturity and breed.

Lesser black backed and herring gulls tend to nest in colonies and once roof nesting birds gain footholds other gulls nest on adjacent buildings. If left unchecked, a colony starts to develop.

Gulls and the Law

The principal legislation dealing with the control of birds is the Wildlife and Country Act 1981.

Generally, it is illegal to capture, injure or destroy any wild bird or interfere with its nest or eggs. The penalties for disregarding the law can be severe.

The law does, however, recognise that particular species of common bird, such as herring and lesser black- backed gulls, can cause nuisance and allows measures to be taken against such birds in limited circumstances.

Action can only be taken under general licences made under the 1981 Act for the purpose of preserving public health or public or air safety, preventing the spread of disease or for preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops etc. An offence would be committed if action could not be justified or defended for any of these purposes.

Only the owner or occupier can take action against gulls nesting on their buildings, or they can give someone else permission to act on their behalf.

Any action taken must be justified in terms of the law and can include:
• the killing or taking of gulls.
• the damaging or destruction of their nests.
• the taking or destruction of their eggs.

Action taken must be humane. Any inhumane method, which could cause suffering, would be illegal. The use of poisons or drugs to take or kill any bird is specifically prohibited except under very special circumstances and with a government licence.

In practice, there are very few humane methods to kill birds, which are likely only to affect that particular species and skill, and experience is needed to deploy them. One should be particularly keen to discourage shooting of gulls.

NOTE
Culling and egg and nest removal are all measures, which come within general licences, and any such action must be justified.

Egg oiling
Use of liquid paraffin BP to prevent eggs of certain birds from hatching Practical Guidelines

The treatment of certain bird eggs, especially those of ground-nesting species, with liquid paraffin BP offers a cheap and efficient way of preventing hatching. If done correctly and at the right time of year (see below), this technique is 100% effective in preventing the hatching of eggs. The technique has been approved under the Control of Pesticides Regulations (COPR) but can only be used under a licence issued by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) under Section 16(1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.

Liquid paraffin BP (also known as paraffin oil or light white mineral oil) is available from major chemical suppliers, usually in 500ml or larger bottles. It can also be bought over the counter, in smaller quantities, in some high street chemists.

Liquid paraffin prevents the hatching of eggs by blocking the pores in the eggshell and by coating the underlying egg membrane, depriving the fertilised egg of oxygen. To be effective, it is therefore essential that the entire egg is coated with oil. Coating of eggs with liquid paraffin can be achieved by immersing each egg of a clutch separately in a container of liquid paraffin whose depth should be sufficient to cover the egg. Each egg should then be rotated in the liquid paraffin to ensure that the entire surface of the shell has been coated. Suitable containers include small buckets and wide-mouthed plastic jars. Excess liquid paraffin should be allowed to drain off the egg before the egg is replaced in the nest. (NB. The use of sponges or sprays to coat the egg with liquid paraffin is not recommended as it is easy to miss part of the shell.) Removal of the egg from the container by gloved hand will not remove liquid paraffin from the shell. Operators must comply with all of the requirements of the COPR approval in respect of operator protection. This includes the wearing of protective gloves and a face shield when handling and applying liquid paraffin. The timing of the treatment of eggs will vary according to the laying periods of the species involved and their social behaviour. The following guidance should help an operator to identify when clutches are most likely to be complete and to achieve maximum control without duplication of effort or use of unnecessary amounts of liquid paraffin.

The large gulls (Herring gull, Lesser Black-backed gull and Greater Black-backed gull) are often colonial and sometimes breed in mixed colonies. They usually lay their eggs between mid-April and late June. Eggs should be treated as soon as possible after incubation commences, which means that a colony must be visited several times during the course of a breeding season in order to treat all eggs. Visits should not be more than two weeks apart, and ideally, more frequent visits should be made to large colonies at the peak of laying. On each visit, each treated nest should be marked to ensure that eggs are treated only once.

Where pairs of birds breed solitarily, the progress of laying should be followed, and the eggs should be treated after the clutch, usually of 3 eggs, has been completed.

On arrival at the site, report to or contact the responsible person i.e. owner, or person who has granted authority to carry out the work. Inform them of the number of people, vehicles, and any working creatures that you will be using on site, also show your identification tag.

Generic Method Statement
If applicable put in place the appropriate warning signs.
Then carry out a survey of the site to establish if:
1. Any non-target creatures have gained access to the site and are in danger.
2. Make sure that no protected plants or shrubs are
Our aim is to minimise the damage to the environment as well as to carry out the work safely.

Ensure you have a copy of relevant DOE licence in your possession together with a site survey and risk assessment.

Operations will commence at first light, informs the client or the contact, minimum number of their staff should be informed.

Ensure that you and at least one other technician are familiar with the site and survey plan.

Treatment at each nest must be recorded; this will include nest location, number of eggs pricked or oiled, date of return and any other relevant information.

Leave site as near as practically possible in its original condition.

**Egg Pricking**

The same procedure as listed above except that you will be using a specialised lance instead of oil.

Ensure that you have filled in all the necessary information required on DOE or MAFF licence at the end of completed operations.

**Disturbance of Birds**

There are a variety of methods of disturbing or discouraging birds from particular locations including birds of prey, bird scarers etc. For areas within towns none of these methods are successful in the long term.

**Proofing** - Methods of proofing buildings include the use of spikes, nets or wires. This is the only sure method of preventing birds from nesting on buildings.

**Education** - It is vital that the public are made aware that gulls are attracted to areas where food is plentiful. The main sources of food for gulls are earthworms and insects from pasture and waste produced from fishing fleets. However, gulls are opportunistic and will scavenge waste bins and look for food from the public.

The public are discouraged from feeding the gulls at home. The public and businesses are asked to ensure that litter and other food waste is properly stored and/or disposed of using the litter bins provided for litter and placing waste out for collection the day of collection, not the night before, particularly food waste.

Controlling gulls is extremely difficult. The best method is to deny them nesting places on buildings. Councils, however, have no legal powers to force owners or occupiers of buildings to carry out works to their buildings to prevent birds from nesting, nor can they make them take action against birds that have nested, even if they are causing problems.