

Winter Gull Survey



1 General information & background

Gulls in the UK

The conservation assessment of gulls in the UK and Europe has revealed a recent decline in population numbers. There is broad uncertainty surrounding the long term cause of this decline. As a result many gull species found in the UK are now considered to be of conservation concern. The UK harbours a significant proportion of the global breeding gull population. Currently, there are 33 Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and over 20 Special Conservation Areas (SCAs) designated in the UK due to the presence of internationally important numbers of gulls, primarily during the breeding season. Additionally, the UK is

recognized as an important area for gulls during the wintering period. However, gulls have not been included as qualifying features for SPAs based on their wintering ranges, which can differ significantly from their distribution during the breeding season. The classification of protected sites requires that the gull population regularly exceeds 1% of the species' biogeographic population size.

Gull Roost Surveys

The BTO is organising the Winter Gull Survey (WinGS) for 2023/24–2024/25. The last survey took place from 2003/04–2005/06 and concluded that the UK and near-shore coastal waters supported over 3.8 million wintering gulls at that time. Population trends from the BTO/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) for gull species present in the UK in winter are variable. Updated information on population trends is necessary to contribute to and inform effective conservation actions for gulls.

The first WinGS commenced during the winter of 1952/53 and with it launched a fantastic initiative for monitoring the globally important numbers of gulls that are supported by the UK over winter. This initial survey focused on the inland waters of England, where survey efforts were targeted at known roost sites. However, as the need for representative data was recognised, the scope of the survey changed to encompass the coastal and inland regions of the whole of the UK in subsequent years. Through previous WinGS, a substantial increase in the population of overwintering gulls in UK waters was observed between 1950–70, capturing historic highs in species such as Herring Gull. More recent population estimates of many gull species have pointed towards downward trends, which the current WinGS aims to investigate further.

WinGS plays a crucial role in the current context due to the recent and ongoing challenges confronting gull

populations. This is particularly relevant in light of the outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) that has ravaged breeding gull populations in both 2022 and 2023. Up-to-date information on UK gull populations is invaluable for informing effective conservation strategies, and addressing the conservation concerns of these species, all of which are classified as either Amber or Red-listed in terms of their conservation status.

Aims and objectives of WinGS

The primary goals of the survey is to:

- produce new population estimates for wintering gulls in the UK,
- assess how populations have changed since the last survey in 2003/04–2005/06:
- assess the impact of the ongoing outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) on gull populations:
- and identify sites where the 1% threshold for the population is exceeded to recommend potential protected area designation for the species.

Photo by Teresa Frost @ BTO



The key survey dates January **21st, 2024**, and January **19th, 2025**. Additional Key Site surveys in Autumn 2024 will run from August to October which will mean that we can compare numbers across seasons for the first time. WinGS will involve coordinated visits to known major roost sites such as large estuaries and reservoirs. In order to generate complete UK wide population estimates, additional visits to random sample sites will also be carried out. Some major key sites will necessitate team coordination, and will create a fantastic opportunity to connect with fellow gull enthusiasts!

Becoming involved

The success of surveys such as WinGS is dependent on the participation of dedicated volunteers like you throughout the UK who donate their time in the name of informing conservation efforts. Please refer to Chapter 2 of the Counters Manual for detailed methods for counting gull roosts and the various site types targeted within this survey.

A clear understanding of the identification criteria for the UK's six primary gull species is essential for WinGS; Common, Black-headed, Mediterranean, Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls. More unusual gull species such as Glaucous and Iceland Gulls may also be present at roosts so broad knowledge is helpful.

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