

Great Black-backed Gull 1956

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

The Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* was known to breed along the west coast of England and Wales with no records from the east coast or from Carmarthen, Denbigh, Flint, or Cheshire. In 1933 Tom Harrison and H G Hurrell had published estimates of the population, based on a privately-run enquiry to correspondents around the country in 1930. The 1956 survey was run to get some specific information on numbers and distribution along the whole stretch of coast and on some of the islands and to compare with the 1930 survey.

The breeding population was estimated at 1800 pairs in 1956, with a total adult population of about 4000, and not more than 5000 birds. This meant an approximately threefold increase since 1930. Along the Channel coast breeding had extended eastwards since the early 1940s from Dorset to the Isle of Wight, but the small population already established by 1930 from Dorset west to Falmouth appeared to have remained unchanged. Elsewhere there were records scattered all along the west coast with large increases on Steep Holm in the Bristol Channel and in the Isle of Man, as well as the Pembrokeshire Islands and in Anglesey, and moderate increases in the Channel Islands and on Great Saltee Island. Elsewhere population changes since the 1930s had been small.

The published report gives comprehensive details of each area including history of numbers, coverage, and the present distribution and numbers in some detail.

The main breeding habitats were sea-girt islands and stacks and the more rocky coasts. All the traditional inland breeding localities had been deserted during the 20th century, especially since the 1930s, but a few pairs were found on moors at Tarnbrook Fell (Lancashire), and one pair was seen nest-building on a temporary island in Chew Valley Lake (Somerset), both as a result of recent colonisation. Other maritime habitats were shingle banks and estuaries.

The proportion of the population breeding on islands compared with rocky coasts was about 7:1, and the main increases were on islands. Great Black-backed Gulls preferred sites intermediate between those most favoured by Herring and by Lesser Black-backed Gulls, but overlapped with both to a considerable extent: top or bottom of cliffs, steep grassy or rocky slopes, buttresses, rock pinnacles and knobs, wide ledges, and rarely even small narrow ones on perpendicular cliffs. On islands the majority of nests were on top. The majority bred socially, either in groups and colonies of their own, or with other gulls, although when with other species they usually kept together as a separate group within the colony.

Notes on the food were received from only a few observers, and conclusions were tentative. The commonest food item was fish, mostly obtained by scavenging. Next in amount was rubbish, the remains of birds, mainly young of other gulls, auks or petrels, and eggs. They were also recorded as taking other carrion and prey on an opportunist basis.

Methods of Data Capture

The questionnaire asked observers to count the numbers of birds wherever they were found nesting: the number of colonies, and of occupied nests in each; the number of solitary nests; the number of pairs found but not proved to be breeding; and the estimated total population of the area covered. Unpublished records of the history of use of sites were welcomed (and gleaned from local reports as needed) as were any notes on foods (including pellets) as it was suspected that there were differences between areas. It was noted that the ideal time to do the census was 10-30 May but some clutches were complete by end of April and some replacements were well into June.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the distribution and numbers of breeding Great Black-backed Gulls in England, Wales (and Isle of Man and Channel Isles) and to compare the results with a survey of 1930.

Geographic Coverage

All of England, Wales, Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and Gt Saltee Island off the Wexford coast of Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1956 with a stated note that the best time was 10-30 May.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by T A W Davis as a Trust-aided enquiry.

Organiser(s)

T A W Davis

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Davis, T.A.W. 1958. The breeding distribution of the Great Black-backed Gull in England and Wales in 1956. *Bird Study* 5: 191-215.

The survey was noticed in all four issues of *Bird Study* for 1956 (vol. 3).

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

Nothing found.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis