

# Lesser Black-backed Gull 1959/1960

## Title

Winter status of the Lesser Black-backed Gull 1959/60

## Description and Summary of Results

In both national and local literature published up to 1910, the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* was described as a resident species in the British Isles, but some later publications had classed it as a summer resident and passage migrant. An enquiry organised in the winters of 1949/50 and 1950/51 had found that a small, but probably increasing, number of mainly adults of the British race, was wintering in the British Isles, with the main concentrations on Morecambe Bay, near Leeds, and in London, Bristol and Cardiff. Adding maximum counts from January 1950 in places more than 10 miles (15km) apart gave a total of about 310 birds, 185 being within 45 miles (75km) of a large breeding colony in the Pennines. Several notes and local reports published during the 1950s had suggested that the number of wintering birds had increased considerably, and the aim of the 1959/60 enquiry was to investigate the extent of this change, both numerically and geographically.

Satisfactory coverage was obtained for most parts of England, N and S Wales, and a considerable part of Scotland, but was less good in C Wales, NW Scotland and in Ireland. Comparatively little information was received from some southern and eastern counties of England but this was probably due to a lack of birds rather than a lack of observers.

The survey found there had been a very marked increase in the number of Lesser Black-backed Gulls wintering in the British Isles. A conservative total of separate counts for January 1960, excluding probable overlapping, was 2800 birds, about 1000 of which were within 45 miles (75km) of the Pennine gullery. Numbers in all the main centres of mid-winter population had greatly increased since 1950, eg the Bristol area c.20 to c.150, near Cardiff from c.20 to over 100, Morecambe Bay from c.150 to over 400, and even more so in the London area from c.30 to 500-600, and especially in the West Midlands from none to 550 on three main sites and smaller numbers on some other sites. Numbers in N Wales, Scotland and Ireland were small. In most cases records indicated that the increase was steady and not just because the 1959/60 winter was especially mild. The published report gives a county by county summary of winter occurrences.

The great majority of birds were found to be the British subspecies *L. f. graellsii*, and the majority were fully adult birds.

Of the various habitat types recorded as being used, by far the commonest was rubbish dumps, with 45 tips reported as frequented, usually accompanied by Herring *L. argentatus* and often by Great Black-backed Gulls *L. marinus*. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were also reported scavenging at a tannery offal tip, around docks and harbours, at railway stations, on polluted tidal rivers, where they were most numerous at sewer outfalls, and taking galley refuse from a submarine at sea. They were found to be primarily scavengers in all circumstances. The most favoured roosting site was an inland water large enough to give the gulls a sense of security.

**Methods of Data Capture**

The enquiries of 1949/50 and 1950/51 covered the four months November to February inclusive, but it became clear that a considerable passage was still taking place in November and immigration for breeding had begun before the end of February. The new survey therefore asked for records only from the mid-winter period from 1 December to 14 February.

All records of Lesser Black-backed Gulls were requested from anywhere in this period, even of single birds. If a distinction could be made between adults and immatures and between the British and Scandinavian races then note should be made but these were not essential. It was particularly noted that negative records especially from places with Herring Gulls would have real value. Any notes of feeding habits and from other years were accepted. Forms were supplied but much information was sent in in letters.

**Purpose of Data Capture**

To determine the numbers and distribution of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in mid winter as there had seemed to be a large increase over the previous ten years.

**Geographic Coverage**

All of UK.

**Temporal Coverage**

The winter of 1959/60 with all records requested from 1 December 1959 to 14 February 1960.

**Other Interested parties**

The enquiry was organised and run by J A G Barnes with the support of the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

**Organiser(s)**

J A G Barnes

**Current Staff Contact**

archives@bto.org

**Publications**

The main report of the survey is:

Barnes, J.A.G. 1961. The winter status of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, 1959-60. *Bird Study* 8: 127-147.

The survey was noticed in *Bird Study* issues for September and December 1959 (vol. 6), and June 1960 (vol. 7).

**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**

1 folder contains a summary sheet and some letters.

**Notes on Access and Use**

**Other information**

**Notes on Survey Design**

**Specific Issues for Analysis**