

# Wintering Gulls 1953

## Title

Wintering Gulls in Britain 1953

## Description and Summary of Results

Over the first half of the 20th Century there was a great increase in the numbers of gulls wintering inland in Britain. In the winter of 1952/53 it was decided to try to document the main localities used and the numbers of birds involved by counting at inland roosts in Britain, to use as a baseline for any future trends. The original intention was to count just at inland roosts but it was found during the planning stages that it was difficult to draw a clear distinction between inland and coastal wintering gulls, and so coastal birds were included as well. However, there were many practical difficulties in observing scattered and constantly-changing roosts round the coastline and, in the event, very few coastal records were received.

The counting of roosting gulls also proved more difficult than was anticipated, both due to the need to journey to distant and isolated lakes and reservoirs at dusk on winter evenings, and actually to count closely-packed flocks of birds whose plumage merged cryptically with the darkening surface of the water. But in spite of these difficulties, good cover was obtained for the whole of England, and it was thought that no large or important roosts were missed. In Scotland good cover was obtained only in Midlothian and Peebles; one roost only was reported in Ireland, and none in Wales. Altogether 68 inland roosts were reported (61 in England, 6 in Scotland and 1 in Ireland), and 18 coastal or estuarine roosts of over 1000 birds.

It was noted in the report of the survey that much additional information was given on the recording cards. However these were later shredded so the information is no longer available in its raw form. From all the information available at the time it was estimated that the total number of gulls roosting inland in England in January 1953 was of the order of 350000. Most were concentrated into two main areas: East Anglia including the Broads and neighbouring fens, with about 175000; and the reservoirs in the London area, with about 75000 roosting birds. The chain of roosts across the Pennines into Cheshire contained about 25000.

Of the inland roosting birds in England about 250000 (70% of the total) were Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*. Only 8 roosts had over 20000 birds, 29 between 1000 and 10000 birds, 21 under 1000, and 3 roosts had no Black-headed Gulls at all. Common Gulls *Larus canus* totalled nearly 50000 in England (about 14% of the total) in 26 roosts, 3 of which (Slimbridge, Eye Brook Reservoir, and the Ouse Washes) held 85% of the species, and a single roost at Gladhouse Reservoir (Midlothian) had 40000 Common Gulls.

Herring Gulls *L. argentatus* totalled about 34000 (10% of the total) at 35 roosts with over 30000 birds in just 11 of these. Great Black-backed Gulls *L. marinus* totalled just over 2500 in 8 roosts, with Wroxham Broad (Norfolk) holding 2000. Only 165 Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus* were reported.

Only 38 cards were submitted for coastal roosts in England and Scotland, and it is uncertain if all major roosts were reported. The scarcity of large roosts was striking -- only four roosts

exceeded 20000 birds in England and one in Scotland. In most coastal and estuarine roosts Black-headed Gulls again predominated -- 50% - 90% of the total. Herring Gulls made up most of the balance, with few birds of other species.

### **Methods of Data Capture**

Observers were asked to count the numbers of each species of gull at their main roosts. Unlike later surveys (when birds were counted as they flew in) it was suggested that counts be made when the birds were on the water. The number of each species was placed into one of four numerical classes: under 100; 100-1000; 1001-10000; and over 10000. Counts for other months were noted and information was also collected on the history of the inland wintering of gulls at the sites, and on the behaviour and feeding dispersal of inland wintering birds although this information was not reported on as part of the survey.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

To count the numbers of gulls wintering in Britain by counting at the major roosts.

### **Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain, but in practice the considerable majority of counts were received from inland sites in England.

### **Temporal Coverage**

The winter of 1952/53 with a stated preference for a visit 1-20 January 1953.

### **Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by Ron Hickling as a Trust-aided Investigation.

### **Organiser(s)**

Ron Hickling

### **Current Staff Contact**

archives@bto.org

### **Publications**

The main report of the survey is:

Hickling, R.A.O. 1954. The wintering of gulls in Britain. *Bird Study* 1: 129-148.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual Report* numbers 19 and 20, and in *BTO Bulletin* numbers 46-50 inclusive.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

BTO Windows network central area. Figures were input from the published paper.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

The 1953 data are in a single comma separated file containing information on sites, and numbers of each species of gull counted.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

The columns of the data file are:

Sitename; gridref; habitat1 (INLAND, COASTAL, OFFSHORE); habitat2 (GP=Gravel Pit, RES=Reservoir, LAK=Lake, EST=Estuary, FLW=Floodwater, HAR=Harbour, ISL=Island, OC=Open Coast, RIV=River, DL=Miscellaneous?, PLA=Platform (offshore), CW=Colliery Lagoon (only one!), CP=Clay Pit, SP=Sugar Factory); county (most as GBXX, but also YORK); BH (Black-headed Gull count); CM (Common Gull); HG (Herring Gull); LB (Lesser Black-backed Gull); GB (Great Black-backed Gull); alltotal (the overall total); and Unknown (unidentified species).

**Information held in BTO Archives**

A few letters in 1 Folder. The original data cards and information were shredded by R A O Hickling.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**