

Have We All Missed the Point About Seagulls?

Written by Joe Reynolds, Save Coastal Wildlife, Published: 20 February 2020

Along the picturesque Jersey Shore, a remarkable drama plays out almost every time someone visits a beach. No matter the season, from summer to spring, people will encounter gulls, erroneously known as seagulls.

For me, I have a soft spot in my heart for these largely grey-and-white birds. They can be awe-inspiring sea creatures when soaring over the open ocean and dropping down out for the sapphire sky to catch a slimy fish or crusty crab.

The sight of them brings to mind a sense of the long soft sand shorelines and sweeping winds and waves over a sun-and-shelled filled beach.

Gulls are extraordinary birds. They are able to fly long distances and glide over the open ocean for hours in search of food. Gulls can fly as fast as 28 mph. They can even drink salty ocean water when thirsty. The birds have evolved to have a special pair of glands right above their eyes to flush the salt from their body through openings in their bill. This enables a gull to spend several days foraging for food atop salty ocean waters without needing to return to land just to get a drink of freshwater.

James Gorman in 2019 wrote an article in *The New York Times* entitled: “In Defense of Sea Gulls: They’re Smart, and They Co-Parent, 50/50 All the Way.” He interviewed ornithologist Christopher Elphick from the University of Connecticut who also has a soft spot for gulls. In the article Elphick provides an observation of how extraordinary gulls are in the Anthropocene Epoch. “They’ve found a way to succeed in the world,” declares Elphick. “So much biodiversity is suffering and disappearing and being lost,” he asserts, “a part of me wants to just celebrate the fact that there are some organisms that can adapt and do well.” I couldn’t agree more. Over the years I have seen gulls act with a slight grandness, strutting and striding about on the beach as if they own the place. Who knows, maybe they do. Experienced birders Pete Dunne and Kevin T. Karlson agree that gulls are highly adaptable birds; as well as a little confusing to identify. In their book, *Gulls Simplified: A Comparative Approach to Identification*, published in 2019, they write that no “other birds are so adept at foraging on land, air, and aquatic environment....gulls are intelligent, inquisitive, and socially complex, and these aerialists are able to acclimate themselves to a wide array of habitats.” Although they find gulls interesting to study, they also assert that they have the “same level of interest” in gulls as other bird groups. Speaking like a true birder.

Author Marlin Bree on the other hand is just like me and enjoys the sight of gulls for being gulls. In his book, *Amazing Gulls: Acrobats of the sky and sea*, published in 2011, he asserts that gulls “fly beautifully on their long, elegant wings...for gulls are also acrobats of the air.” He goes on to proclaim that “seeing a bit of food on the water, they can swoop down quickly....gulls can stop as if they had hit an invisible air brake and seemingly hover in place to snatch their bit of food and ascend in seconds. If you watch them carefully, you’ll see that they have an incredible sense of air.”

Unfortunately, many people are not so fascinated or amused. There are a lot of people who are angry with them. They find gulls to be “rats of the sky” or “shit hawks,” or “bags of crap with wings.” Snatching or stealing food from careless folks and releasing their poop onto unwary victims below. People have been known to chase gulls away by screaming or by avoiding the birds whenever possible. I have even seen people curse loudly and hurl pebbles at gulls for devastating their day at the beach.

In Ocean City, NJ, gulls had become such a nuisance with beachgoers that in 2019 town officials spent around \$65,000 to hire East Coast Falcons to use their birds of prey (four hawks, two falcons, and an owl) to keep its aggressive gull population at bay while summer tourists and residents enjoyed the beach and boardwalk, free from gulls dive-bombing people walking the boardwalk with funnel cakes and other tasty food in hand.

Assertive gulls are not exclusive to the Jersey Shore though. Across the pond in England, the birds can be even more aggressive at snatching sandwiches, fries, and pretzels from the hands of tourists and locals. It has gotten so nasty that gulls have been voted the most hated birds in the United Kingdom. During a 2014 poll about the behavior of birds, an astounding 95 percent of people in England who responded declared they 'detest' seagulls and many view them as the 'thugs' of the bird world. People complained the birds would routinely steal food from beachgoers and cover cars with their filth.

Yet, what many people don't realize is that spending a day at the beach is like spending a day in the wilds. Beaches are not backyard pools. Beaches are wilderness. We teach people not to feed bears, we should do the same with gulls.

Certain people tend to go too far to show their love for birds. They will literally throw food at them, but not birdseed. Instead, handfuls of human food, including crackers or breadcrumbs, or even candy bars and fries. They think wrongly that they are being kind and generous to feed human food to wild animals. It's really just the opposite.

A few other people think it's funny to feed gulls and post pictures on social media of birds suddenly swooping down in large numbers to eat. People will even scramble to post a photo or video on social media of gulls carrying off food from a person's hand, regardless of how dangerous that may be for the person or the bird.

Tragedies with wild animals can almost always be avoided if people just learned to stop feeding wildlife, including gulls. Please watch wildlife from afar, but don't ever feed them, except of course from your backyard birdfeeder with healthful birdseed.

Feeding highly processed or nutritionally inferior human food items, like fried foods, chips, crackers or candy bars to birds is unhealthy at best and can be wholly dangerous to their well-being. Human food is a really poor substitute for natural foods, like wild fish and shellfish. Highly processed sugary, salty, and fatty human food can lead to health problems in birds including malnutrition. Although gulls might be taking in more calories than their body needs from eating fries, chips and sandwiches, a bird can still become malnourished since it's not eating the proper combination of natural foods to provide its body with the required amount of nutrients for its constant active lifestyle. This type of avian malnutrition can lead to wing and foot disorders to leave a bird crippled, and eventually die.

Research in central Massachusetts from the Department of Recreation and Conservation shows that gulls get most of their food from people through handouts at local parking lots or from unsecured garbage cans. Studies have shown that the birds have learned that more time spent in parking lots, rather than time spent in the open water will lead to free and easy food. Gulls have discovered that human food is easier to find rather than more natural sources and healthy types of foods. If people stopped feeding gulls, the birds would likely move to areas where their natural food choices are more abundant.

I think Abigail Williams said it best in her 2016 *HuffPost* article entitled, “For The Love Of God, Stop Feeding Seagulls. Here's Why: If you don't, we may have a Hitchcock situation on our hands.” She writes that if you are feeding gulls out of love, you’re actually doing the birds more harm than good. “Unfortunately, this feeding behavior teaches gulls to lurk near humans for a free handout, and even emboldens them to get aggressive.” Even if you don’t personally feed a gull, the birds have learned to follow people around and hang around groups of people for a quick and easy meal. Gulls are scavengers and can get very aggressive when hungry. This is especially true of juvenile gulls or adults who are less experienced at foraging for natural food.

Gulls are not particularly long-lived animals. They generally live between 5 to 15 years in the wild. It takes a gull many years to achieve adult plumage, up to four years to become sexually mature in some species. This extended period of early life is meant to help juvenile gulls acquire the foraging skills they need before raising a family of their own. Juvenile birds need to learn to hunt well, watch older birds, and acquire the talents necessary to go fishing. But if young gulls are constantly feeding on a diet of human food, they will quickly lose their natural abilities and desire to hunt. Would any human teenager you know ever say no to a free all-night buffet table of yummy junk food?

Gulls have been sadly mistreated and misunderstood for a very long time. It’s nothing new, people and gulls have always had a complicated relationship.

In his book, *Gulls: A social history*, originally published in 1975, author Frank Graham, Jr., writes that even John James Audubon, the famed American ornithologist, naturalist, and the country’s foremost wildlife artist had a love-hate relationship with the Great black-backed gull. He called the bird a “tyrant,” and “painted the bird writhing on the ground, it’s left wing smashed and bloody (from his own shot?).” Except for a few other animals, like a black snake, Audubon often “portrayed his birds alive and well in their natural surroundings.”

It’s possible Audubon at the time wasn’t fond of this bird’s role or niche in a coastal food web. The Great black-backed gull is a scavenger and the largest species of gull, just slightly smaller than a Bald Eagle. Due to their great size, these gulls have been known to harass other birds to steal their food, and prey on smaller birds, eggs, and chicks. While not always pretty, the bird has the natural capital to help provide population control within a coastal ecosystem.

Audubon did appreciate, however, the gull’s flying skills. He wrote that the flight of the Great black-backed gull can be “firm, steady, at times elegant, rather swift.” Nevertheless, on land I think it’s safe to say this gull was not one of his favorites.

Author Frank Graham goes on to describe that “as early as 1934, the U.S Biological Survey (the predecessor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) started a program to control an expanding Herring Gull population along the Atlantic Coast.” Herring gulls are common birds and have adapted well to human society. Federal government employees responded by not enforcing people to control their garbage, but by “needling” gull eggs. This involved people puncturing holes into eggs to kill the young. But gulls are prolific breeders. When one nest fails, they will just continue to lay more eggs. So when needling didn’t work, the government retaliated by spraying gull eggs with “a mixture of high-grade carrier oil and ten percent formaldehyde in water – the oil to suffocate the embryo and formaldehyde to prevent the eggs from rotting and bursting and thus alerting the incubating adults to the fact that all is not well.” Yet, by 1944 the “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began to believe this program was a waste of time,” as gull populations continued to rise by 12 percent between 1940 and 1944. In 1952, “the spraying program” of herring gulls was totally abandoned by the federal government.

Are you starting to understand what many ornithologists already know? Gulls are highly resourceful, cunning, and extremely adaptable animals. From the 1950s through the 1970s, as many people were leaving the waterfront around New York City due to increasing crime and pollution; and poor economic conditions, it was gulls that found a way to adapt and survive around a filthy harbor when others, including people, failed.

Sometime gulls are even smarter than people. In December 2012, a father and son had to be rescued near Whangarei, the northernmost city in New Zealand, while fishing on jet skis during a high wind warning. Police reported that the high winds and strong swells were enough to keep gulls around the bay on dry land, but not crazy people.

The existence of gulls can be traced back to an early ancestor. The species called *Gansus yumenensis*, which was first found at Changma in northwestern China. A June 15, 2006 article in *Nature* suggests that nearly all water birds, including loons, grebes, penguins, pelicans, and gulls, share a single common ancestor. The fossils found in China indicates that the ancestors of present-day birds may have been waterfowl some 110 million years ago, in the early part of the Cretaceous period. The article reveals that, “an international team of paleontologists found remains of some 50 specimens of a bird thought to be closely related to the last common ancestor of today's birds. With webbed feet and a body halfway between that of a duck and a seagull, it has all the hallmarks of an aquatic bird.”

Today, there are over 45 species of gulls found throughout the world. They belong to a large family of birds named *Laridae*, which also includes terns, kittiwakes, and skimmers. The word is from the Greeks meaning “ravenous sea bird.” Their genus name is from Latin *Larus*, which means a gull or other large seabird.

Search far and wide in any bird identification book and you will never find any bird referred to as a “seagull.” There is not one gull in the world with the name, "seagull." The word seagull is a lazy expression used by lazy people used to identify any species of seabird. When someone calls a bird a "seagull" the term often reminds me of an old joke. There are black-backed gulls, herring gulls, and even bagels (ha!), but not a single bird called a seagull.

At least one gull species is found on every continent, including Antarctica. This makes gulls one of the most widespread families of birds in the world. Maybe it's time we got to know their names a little better.

Along the Jersey Shore there are essentially four species of gulls that can be found in abundance, three of which also nest in New Jersey. While gulls have had a long presence along the coast, gulls were primarily winter visitors to New Jersey during the early 20th century. As populations increased and food sources became more plentiful along the coast, the birds started to nest here and call the Jersey Shore home. Look closely with binoculars in hand and maybe you will be able to spot all four species during your next visit to the beach. The most common gull in North America is the American herring gull (*Larus argentatus*). The bird's name comes from the fish. Herring was their favorite food, at least before people started leaving trash on the beach. *The Birds of New Jersey* book written by William J. Boyle Jr, published in 2011, tells us that the first recorded nesting of a herring gull in New Jersey was not until 1946. Since then the population has increased considerably to around 60,000 birds in the Garden State today. Herring gulls are large birds, between 22 and 26 inches long, with bulky bills and robust bodies. Adults have light-gray backs, black wingtips, and white heads. In the winter, dusky streaks can be seen on their heads. Herring Gulls take four years to reach adult plumage and juveniles can often be seen in varying hues of gray and brown. Their legs are dull pink in all ages.

The largest gull in New Jersey and the largest gull in the world is the Great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*). It measures 25 to 31 inches long with a chunky body, thick neck, a round yellowish bill and pinkish legs. As the name suggests, adults are mostly white in color with a dark grey to black back and flight wings. It takes over four years for juveniles to mature. The first nesting of a Great black-backed gull in New Jersey, according to *The Birds of New Jersey*, was recorded in 1966. The current state-wide population is between ten to twenty thousand or more.

The next most abundant gull in New Jersey is an iconic gull. It's a common breeder along the Jersey Shore, but a rare winter visitor. This bird frequently spends the winter along the coast from North Carolina southward. The Laughing gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) is a medium sized bird that measures between 15 to 17 inches in length, about the size of a crow. Adults have black feathers on their face white arcs around the eyes, and a clear reddish bill. But as their name hints, their call sounds like the bird is laughing at you, sort of. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, their call "is a loud, descending series of laughing notes lasting 3 seconds or more." It can be heard anytime, when the bird is flying, feeding or even resting. They are very vocal birds and their calls probably transfers information to other laughing gulls, such as danger, food sources, or when to take flight.

The final most abundant gull, though uncommon during the summer, is the Ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*). Out of the four gulls, there is no current evidence to suggest that Ring-billed gulls nest in New Jersey. The birds generally nest northward in Canada, but the first returning migrants may appear in late July according to *The Birds of New Jersey*. The birds are sociable, often feeding and roosting together in large numbers. The Ring-billed is a medium-sized gull measuring between 17 to 20 inches long. It has yellow legs and a fairly short, slim yellow bill with, as the name implies, a black band around it. The bird also has a white head, body and tail; and their black wingtips are spotted with white.

Juveniles have feathers that are varied brown and gray with a pink bill and legs. The population in New Jersey is around 50,000 birds.

While these four are frequently the most observed gulls along the Jersey Shore, there are quite a few other gulls that come and go throughout the year. If you are in the right place and at the right time, maybe you will spot a few Bonaparte's gulls, or Franklin's gulls, Iceland gulls, Glaucous gulls, or even one or two Lesser black-backed gulls, among others. Just like love, as the theme song to the 1970's *Mary Tyler Moore* show asserted, gulls are certainly all around us too.

No matter the species, though, all gulls generally share similar breeding behaviors. Gulls typically return to the same nesting site year after year. They use a basic scrape nest or a shallow dip on sand, rocks, or similar places to make a nest built with plant material, such as grasses, twigs, or other debris. The eggs are often heavily camouflaged to blend in with pebbles or sand, and 1 to 3 eggs are typical for most gull broods. In general, gulls will nest and lay eggs on land with other gulls, especially from the same species. Sometimes, smaller gulls are joined by other species of marine birds such as terns, Black Skimmers, and American Oystercatchers.

It's true they are mostly monogamous and most mate for life. They are also good parents and will forcefully protect their offspring from predators, especially newborns. It's one reason why you will never see baby gulls. Newborn gulls do not leave the nest, or the immediate nesting area, until they are able to fly and find their own food.

The best way to identify a juvenile gull is by the color of its feathers. Almost all young gulls have a mixture of brown and gray feathers covering their bodies. These are not old gulls, as some people erroneously think, but ones who have recently left the nest.

Another aspect of gull ecology that's remarkable is how the birds handle separations during breeding. Usually when an adult pair of gulls split up due to one bird being unable to produce healthy chicks, the entire breeding colony suffers from separation stigma. A particular bird is shunned from the group, as it's seen as less desirable from other possible mates after splitting up from its partner. No doubt breeding time is a stressful time for birds.

As far as food is concerned, gulls are highly mobile and opportunistic feeders. They're quite capable of finding food on their own. An adult gull will consume approximately 20% of its body weight every day in food, that's between 5 to 10 oz of food. Eliminating human food in their diet, the birds can travel hundreds of miles in a short period of time to forage for food or to find new roosting areas. If food becomes scarce in one place, gulls can travel great distances to locate more favorable conditions in another place to catch their natural foods such as fish, shellfish, or even find carrion, insects, worms, and smaller birds and eggs to eat.

The simplest way to stop gulls from being a problem in human society is to stop feeding them and make sure all open trash containers and garbage cans are properly secure. Please don't feed the gulls or leave food on the beach to attract gulls. These birds have been around for a very long time and are able to find food without assistance from people.

Love them or hate them, gulls, tend to arouse a wide variety of feelings, fervor and passions in people. I really hope we can change our view about gulls as birds that get on your nerves.

They can't be all bad. The California gull (*Larus californicus*) has the title of being the state bird of Utah. The bird looks similar to a herring gull and has the honor of being the only gull species that is a state bird.

Ever so slowly we are starting to discover that gulls are amazing birds. No matter the weather. They can survive savage storms, harsh winds, and extreme temperatures. Like a skilled person who fishes all the time, they are out every day in all types of weather seeking a meal.

Instead of cursing at gulls, we need to learn to live with them. Gulls are extremely adaptable and smart birds, and in most cases one of the few groups of birds whose populations are actually increasing today. In an ever-changing world, perhaps we can be taught a thing or two from them on how to survive on our unpredictable Blue Planet.

To find more information about coastal wildlife, including whales, please visit the website for Save Coastal Wildlife, a wildlife conservation nonprofit organization dedicated to educating people about the preservation and protection of coastal wildlife along the Jersey Shore at www.savecoastalwildlife.org



Joe Reynolds, President of Save Coastal Wildlife, is a columnist for the Atlantic Highlands Herald website, where this article first appeared. www.AHHerald.com