

Top Gull

Writer: Alex MN
axmn.co.uk

timeline

Seagulls are ancient creatures, having existed on Earth for **at least 30-33 million years**. A gull's lifespan is around 30 years, but our story starts a little over 100 years ago when gulls were driven inland to inner London to survive the harsher coastal conditions of the late 1890s severe winters. This is when gulls made the **cultural and behavioural shift** from just being seagulls to all-terrain gulls. We retrace their journey into the present day.

Happy times between man and gull



Winter of 1887-8: first appearance of gulls in Victorian London, arriving in large flocks as far up the Thames as Putney

Winter 1894-5: another severe frost sees the reappearance of gulls; they **remembered the generosity of humans** from the previous year in feeding them, and ventured from the Thames into St. James' Park too. Many of them settled there each winter from then on. They returned with their young ever since; **a tradition formed.**



Feeding The Gulls In St. James' Park

1940's-onwards: some herring and lesser black-backed gulls begin to use rooftops for nesting. It's not known exactly what prompted this move, but abundant inland sources of food and safe, predator-free nesting sites on rooftops were definite factors. Seagulls began to be viewed as pests due to this.

1953: Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

1956: The Clean Air Act prevented rubbish tip operators from burning waste, so gulls took advantage of the huge amount of organic material increasingly generated by our 'throw-away' society and sent to landfills. Many urban streets were also frequently replete with discarded food and accessible rubbish and some people continued to feed the gulls.

Nationalisation and prosperity in the UK during the **1950s** and **60s** before industrial strife and a global economic downturn took its toll during the **70s. Gull population booms.**

1980s-1990s: Gulls are increasingly seen as pests; their protected status means humans can do little to stop them from nesting on their homes, places of business and other areas. **Human-gull relations plummet.** Humans fail to see their impact on the environment.



21st Century Britain - life in the modern day UK

Gull population begins to decline **1981-2010**

Winter 1892-3: reappearance of gulls in London during long and severe frosts. Shooting of gulls was made a public offence by police and for the first time, humans began to feed the gulls scraps and leftovers from their lunches on the bridges and embankments of the Thames. **"The sight of this midday crowd hurrying down to the waterside with welcome in their faces and food in their hands must have come 'as an absolute revelation' to the gulls."** - W.H. Hudson, Birds In London (1898)

1900-1930s: Victorian Britain transforms into Edwardian Britain, Urban poverty a distinct UK feature up until and throughout WW1 and throughout the 1920s and 30s. Post-war urban regeneration and expansion meant **the beginning of the loss of countryside.**

Modernisation of transport during this period also contributed to this.

1937- King George VI, WW2 Era



London, 1938

1980s - All species of gull are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. This makes it **illegal** to intentionally or, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, recklessly injure or kill any gull or damage or destroy an active nest or its contents. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, it is also illegal to prevent birds from accessing their nest and, in Northern Ireland, it is illegal to disturb any nesting bird.

Times are changing for gulls in the UK:

- **Declining numbers of fish** in our waters are forcing gulls further inland once more. This is due to climate change.
- A gull moment – 30 years or so – is **coming to an end**. Little food waste is now going into landfill. We are still too wasteful, but now, most gull-edible rubbish is being composted or incinerated. Humans are starting to learn about their 'throw-away' habits.
- This is better for the environment, but what about the gulls?
- **They will have to shift their behaviour once more.** We've seen them do it before – but will they manage again?
- All seven breeding gull species are birds of conservation concern. **The herring gull is now red-listed** due to the severe decline in its national breeding population. The other species are amber-listed for differing reasons.
- **Man and gull have an increasingly fraught, almost warfare-like relationship now.**