

Here's a tale for birds

Seagulls have their unpleasant side

In the last few years there has been an enormous increase in the number of "seagulls" in Ontario. This increase has had several unpleasant side effects, which have not gone unnoticed by the general public.

Indeed, the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) has received many letters and phone calls requesting more information on the gulls and, in some cases, demanding quick and effective control. This story provides some background information on the gull problem and discusses the feasibility of different control methods.

Of the 16 gull species that have occurred in Ontario, only two are often seen in or near areas of human activities. Those two species are the Herring Gull and the Ring-billed Gull. The Herring Gull is a large gull with a wing span of some 100 cm. It can be identified by its flesh-coloured legs and by the red dot on the lower part of the bill.

Herring Gulls nest on numerous islands throughout Ontario. Most colonies are fairly small (less than 100 pairs) and sometimes single pairs are found nesting on a small shoal. The Ring-billed Gull looks like a smaller version of the Herring Gull but has a black "ring" around its yellow bill and yellowish greenish legs. Ring-bills also nest on islands and often share their colony sites with Herring Gulls.

Unlike the larger gull, the Ring-bill is extremely colonial and tends to nest in large densely packed colonies containing many thousands of nests. Most known large Ring-bill colonies are on the lower Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, often near cities and towns.

After the breeding season, gulls of both species disperse from the colonies. Many of the Herring Gulls that nest on the Great Lakes are believed to spend the winter in the Great Lakes basin. In contrast, most of the Great Lakes Ring-billed Gulls migrate to warmer areas.

During late fall they migrate south along the Atlantic Coast and by mid-winter many can be found in Florida.

In short then, because the adaptable Ring-billed Gull is clearly able to profit from man's activities it is likely that their numbers will continue to increase in the foreseeable future. Herring Gull numbers may increase as well but certainly not as

much or as fast as those of the Ring-bill.

GULL PROBLEMS

The increase of gulls in and near areas of human activities has caused several real problems:

(1) threats to flight safety at many Ontario Airports;

(2) economic damage to agricultural crops;

(3) plain nuisance to all those who like to eat their lunch outdoors without having aggressive gulls begging for food.

Ring-billed Gulls are one of the more serious nuisance species at many airports. To get rid of gulls in such areas it is necessary to remove all edible materials that may attract the birds. Runways are preferred loafing sites for gulls, so that even barren airports may be attractive, especially if there is a garbage dump near.

During the last few years CWS has received complaints of gulls fouling cars, destroying tomato crops and young vegetable shoots, and, in one case, damaging the foam insulation of a roof.

Many people are annoyed at having to share their favourite picnic area or park bench with a bunch of shrieking and decidedly "unmannered" gulls that beg and fight for food. This happens at many camping areas, city parks, playgrounds, and sites such as Ontario Place and the Toronto Zoo.

POPULATIONS

Gull populations can also be reduced by ensuring that the birds produce few, if any, offspring. This approach normally involves the spraying of eggs with chemicals (such as kerosene) that kill the embryo. The nesting adults will continue to incubate their eggs until well after the normal hatching time. When they finally desert their sprayed eggs, they have lost the breeding drive for that year and leave the colony without having reared any chicks.

Egg-spraying programs should be carried out over a large area and for a long time. Although egg spraying will result in few, if any, offspring in a given year, the adults may return to the colonies in following years. Once they have survived their first year, gulls have a fairly long life-span (often more than 10 years).

Thus an egg-spraying program would have to run for many consecutive years in order to be fully effective. It is, however, likely that during that period gulls from other colonies would establish themselves as nesters on the treated colonies.

EXCLUDING GULLS FROM PUBLIC PLACES USING WIRES

If gull population control is not feasible, then we have to get rid of gulls in places where they are a proven hazard or a definite pest. Basically, there are two approaches: (1) making the area inaccessible to gulls, and (2) scaring them away.

Outdoor public areas can be made inaccessible to gulls by stretching wires overhead. The thin, taut wires form a more or less invisible ceiling that the gulls are afraid to penetrate. This technique is by no means novel, but it has been successfully used to deal with nuisance gulls at Ontario Place and at Nathan Philips Square in front of Toronto's City Hall. At Ontario Place, hungry immature Ring-bills became a pest at outside restaurants when they started to foul tables and steal food from annoyed diners.

Most food-dispensing areas have been wired over with monofilament line with very good results. At Nathan Philips Square, Ring-bills pestered tourists and polluted the water in the pool. Installation of thin metal wires over the pool area proved highly effective in

keeping out gulls.

SPECIAL PERMITS

Although gulls can be excluded from certain places by installing a "barrier of wire", this technique is costly, requires maintenance, and is suitable only in certain areas. Runways, for instance, can not be fitted with overhead wires.

At the present time, gull-population control measures are not considered feasible. In certain outdoor areas gulls can be kept away by installing overhead wires. Where wiring is impractical, scaring the birds with gas bangers and shell crackers may bring temporary relief. CWS issues special permits to shoot gulls in cases where such permits are clearly warranted.



Hay there...

A farm-management specialist at Elmvale reports most crops in the Elmvale-Midland area have come through this summer's long (hot) dry spell with little damage. The biggest

loss has been on the second cut of hay which was shorter than normal, although you couldn't tell it by this photo.



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