

Changes to licensing of the lethal control of herring gull and lesser black-backed gull

Natural England has today [Thursday 30 January] set out changes to licences for the lethal control of herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls in England to protect these declining species.

Owing to their poor conservation status, herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls were not included in [Defra's general licences](#) issued last year. The breeding population of herring gull has fallen by 60% in recent decades, with lesser black-backed gulls declining by an estimated 48%.

Assessment carried out by Natural England has since indicated that the scale of activity carried out under licences in recent years is above a sustainable level. Continued activity at these levels is likely to have a harmful impact on the population levels of both species.

For this reason, it is necessary to scale back the lethal control of these gull species. In rural areas, where populations overall are known to be in decline, Natural England will set upper 'safe' number of birds that could be killed. Upper 'safe' levels have not been identified for lethal control in urban populations of gulls, as these are faring better.

Marian Spain, Interim Chief Executive of Natural England, said:

Populations of herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls have declined significantly in recent years and it's essential that we do all we can to reverse this worrying trend.

I hope that by prioritising the licences we issue, we can ensure that action is taken where it's most needed while at the same time securing the long-term future of these important species. Meanwhile we are working with Defra to explore options for filling current gaps in evidence around urban gull populations, so we can continue to make decisions in the best interests of people and wildlife.

What you should do if you need to undertake lethal control of herring gull or lesser black-backed gull

We have issued a class licence to permit any wild bird control necessary to preserve air safety which covers herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls.

Beyond this, Natural England will license gull control through individual licences, which will need to be prioritised. Natural England will consider the strength of need in each licence application individually but generally

protecting human life and health will be the overriding priority. Any control undertaken under other purposes such as preventing serious damage and conserving wild birds and flora or fauna will need to be targeted.

In more rural areas, where lethal control may have contributed to declining populations, we have established a sustainable number of birds that could be killed or taken – equivalent to no more than 5% of the natural mortality total of each species – without harming their conservation status.

Control levels of nests, eggs and chicks will not be limited in urban areas, where populations are thought to have better breeding success rates. However, Natural England will continue to promote the use of non-lethal methods through integrated management strategies that reduce opportunities for gulls to nest and scavenge in problem areas within the built environment. These include installing netting or wire over vulnerable roosting areas, keeping food storage and waste facility areas secure and discouraging deliberate feeding of birds by the public.

We are working with Defra to explore options for filling current gaps in evidence around urban gull populations, which would enable us to refine our licensing approach in future.

People who need to carry out licensed activities will be encouraged to submit [individual licence applications](#) in February and March in preparation for the bird breeding season, which is consistent with the majority of user needs. This period will enable Natural England to assess the cumulative scale of control across the applications submitted and take this into account in prioritising the licences to be granted. Natural England will continue to accept licence applications outside this period and will issue licences where there is an imperative need.

[Further guidance to inform potential applicants for licences to control lesser black back gulls or herring gulls is available here](#). We encourage potential applicants to refer to this information before submitting their applications. Applications that have already been made will still be considered by Natural England. In these cases, Natural England will contact applicants if any further information is required in order for Natural England to assess the application.

We have also made available a [Q&A which can be viewed here](#).

Natural England Chair, Tony Juniper's [Letter to Secretary of State](#) (PDF, 89.6KB, 3 pages)