

# The Birds: Gulls

written by Guest Contributor | September 22, 2021



My father was a birder. Gulls were not his birds. But he taught me something about gulls and language: there is no such thing as a seagull. There is only the gull.

Seagull is sentimental. Holidaytime and anthropomorphic storybooks. Gull sticks in the gullet.

August and the gulls are nearing the end of their breeding season. By day they spread through space; crowd the pavement upright alongside smaller plumper pigeons; crouch alert on black sands at low tide; stand aloof alone atop shops, statues, spires. At night their staccato shrills slice the courtyard, cut glass and pierce my dreams.

Now dawn: not exactly picturesque, this stop-and-start with the small terrier by my side, weaving round cement slabs daubed with dull graffiti. Cars vans trucks tear over the highbridge that arches across the Clyde, touching down on the edge of Tradeston.

The gulls dip down and out. Layers of movement, human-animal-machine.

The first time I nearly tread on the bloodied body of a gull splayed on the pavement at the edge of the industrial park, I yanked instinctively on the lead, burying my disgust under a more admirable affect: care. The desire to prevent my domesticated companion from harm. From consuming the carrion. From becoming a little gull-like herself.

The dog has a humanmade name. Not the gull. But her species is collectively categorised: the herring gull. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds describes her lot as "large and noisy". Historically they are coastal birds; today they are more often found inland around tips, lakes and reservoirs.

Like the giant cantilever crane balanced on a single leg on the opposite bank, the gulls who dive for debris around Glasgow are reminders of a faded industrialisation. They came inland with the trash. But as urban-dwelling humans learn to bury and burn waste more efficiently, the birds' city days may be numbered.

Pissed-off Americans call them “bags of crap with wings”. For *Daily Mail* readers they’re thugs. The gulls lingering on British beaches are force-fed the stuff some people call food. Become camera fodder for selfies. Unwittingly star in amateur renditions of Hitchcock, their captured cries drowned by the hoots of human young, trumpeted through tweets. One big show that masks the bigger picture: dropping numbers, diminishing fishfood, warming waters, the squeeze on coastal nesting spots.

Gulls are a bit like history: all about context.

Take the ones who glide as my body slips round the 400-metre course at the West Reservoir in north London. They fit right in: squawk and soar and sunbathe on the buoys. Don’t menace while I’m shielded in this city sanctuary, oversized swimming pond edged by swaying reeds, encircled by cranes and towering glass houses.

Foragers of water, land and air, gulls have the elements covered. Some say they’re the ideal Anthropocene species. Classic adapters. Examples to follow. Saviours.

I’m not sure I want to learn from the gulls how to be a better person. To save myself or the future of humanity. I might settle for keeping an ear out, hearing the gulls fly closer, feeling the gust of their wings on my cheeks, resisting the urge to duck down or reach out. Stopping to witness the crimson corpse, to mourn. Carrying the weight of my mixed feelings and our collective histories. Letting myself be taken aback by the shadow of a passing gull on the whitewashed wall of a cloudless day.



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