

# It's a gull thing

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**Jeffrey Tribich considers how surveyors can cope with the growing threat of urban gulls**

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Gulls are receiving ever more publicity and were even the subject of [a debate in the UK's House of Commons in early February](#), when Oliver Colville, Conservative MP for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, declared that "as we head into the summer, we could very well see gull wars on our high streets!" Colville expressed concern about the effect on his constituents and on tourism ? but how can gulls affect us as surveyors?

## Town migration

Seagulls are a regular sight in coastal areas. However, more and more gulls are moving into towns and built-up areas to feed and rear their young as fish stocks become scarcer and the easy pickings from litter and household refuse make urban environments more attractive.

Breeding pairs start to court each other in April and nest building begins in early May, with urban birds making nests that they will use year after year. Gulls are social creatures, and once roof nesting gets a hold, other gulls will start to nest on adjacent buildings until their numbers increase to the point that a colony is established.

In England, Wales and Scotland gulls are protected by [the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#), and anyone killing, injuring or taking a bird, damaging or destroying its nest or taking or destroying its eggs is guilty of an offence. However, if there are public health or safety concerns, the government may issue a general licence to allow control measures to be taken.

Gull attacks are generally associated with them swooping to take food. However, during the nesting season, gulls are known to be particularly aggressive, and they will attack you if they believe that you are too close to a nest or chick and do not heed their warnings.

The warnings usually come in several stages. First comes the "gag call" ? a low, repeated warning that essentially means "go away". Next is the low pass, within a metre or two of the intruder?s head. Then aerial operations commence in earnest. Phase one is bombardment: gulls target the perceived threat with droppings and vomit. Phase two is all-out attack ? usually a low, raking strike to the back of the head with talons extended. Much of the colony will often become involved in the attack.

The [RSPB advises](#) that a safe distance from a gull nest or young is around 10m.

## Surveying risk

As surveyors, what steps should we take if we encounter gulls?

- Keep your eyes and ears open, and learn what the gulls are trying to tell you. Do not ignore their warnings, whether you are working on a roof or ascending in a mobile elevating work platform (MEWP).
- If gull behaviour is threatening or distracting while you are working at height, stop the inspection to assess the situation.
- If you are ascending in a MEWP and feel threatened by or uncomfortable about the risk, ask to stop the inspection to assess the situation.
- If, on assessing the situation, you cannot undertake the inspection from a suitable distance and conclude that it would not be safe to continue, abort the inspection, make your manager aware and inform the client.
- Re-arrange the inspection when the risk is removed or reduced and it is safe to continue.
- If in doubt, err on the side of caution.

Nesting in and around roofs is common, and it follows that roof or high-level inspections for engineers or surveyors will carry additional risk during the nesting season. Work at height already has a significant risk profile, and risk is increased if we are distracted by the presence of aggressive gulls. You should be aware of the additional risk during the nesting period from April to July and reflect this in your risk assessments before going on site, and in the precautions that you take while there.

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## **Further information**

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- This feature is taken from the [RICS Building surveying journal](#) (July/August 2017)
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