

**Distinctive and unusual behaviour of Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* (L., 1766) (Charadriiformes, Laridae)**

Paul F. Whitehead, Moor Leys. Little Comberton, Pershore, Worcestershire WR10 3EH paulpfw@outlook.com

**Introduction**

During mid-March 2023 numbers of Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* (L., 1766) built up on wet pastures in Little Comberton CP, Worcestershire (52°09'N 02°04'W SO967435 28m a.s.l.). They had been present since at least mid-January with numbers frequently exceeding 200 birds. These peaked on 17/18 March 2023 as the birds favoured wet pasture at the base of Endon Hill in Wick CP (52°09'N 02°04'W SO972442 27 m a.s.l.) when it was thought >450 birds were present. Counts made from flight photographs showed at least 397 individuals. The aerial behaviour of these birds was unusual.

**Discussion**

On several occasions during 17/18 March 2023 feeding Black-headed Gulls, accompanied by one or two other species of gull, took flight *en masse* from their feeding pastures at Wick in great cacophony. It is thought that this was due to the presence of one of Pershore's nesting Peregrines *Falco peregrinus* which, by adopting static overhead anchor-shapes, create massed disruption of gulls prior to strike-attempts. Although this was not confirmed a male Merlin *Falco columbarius* L., 1758 overflew one gull flock.

The dispersal of the feeding gulls was instantaneous followed, on each of the two days, by a clear swift pattern of behaviour *viz.*,

1. Dispersal *en masse* as an avoidance strategy (01)
2. Aerial regrouping (02)
3. Commencement of aerial aggregation (03)
4. Initiation and upward movement of increasingly cohesive aerial assemblages (04, 05)
5. Aerial displays of tightly cohesive formations of birds, the individuals more or less uniformly dispersed, the persistent deep guttural call of all birds creating a loud syncopated wave of sound, perhaps what Olsen (2003) refers to as "shorter calls in series." (06, 07)

The flight of the tightly cohesive formations was distinctive, the birds moving in unison, the mass swirling, expanding and contracting in space reminiscent of murmuring Starling flocks (06, 07). It is presumed that this behaviour is a seldom-recorded defensive tactic to confuse raptorial predators and safeguard potential breeding stocks. Other birds such as corvids reacted to the sound by actively moving away from it. Sometimes the formation of gulls would split into two smaller ones, but these also maintained tight cohesion even when drifting more distantly across the landscape. I have not checked the literature in detail but this behaviour seems rarely, if ever, to have been reported and is not cited by Olsen (2003). Historical accounts of the regional status of *C. ridibundus* are provided by Harrison, Dean, Richards & Smallshire (1982), Swaine (1982) and Harrison & Harrison (2005).



01. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Rapid dispersal of Black-headed Gulls as threat avoidance, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023



02. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Commencement of regrouping of dispersed Black-headed Gulls, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023



03. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Commencement of aerial assembly of dispersed Black-headed Gulls, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023



04. Endon Hill Wick CP. Initiation of upward movement of assembled Black-headed Gull flock, 1728 hrs, 18 March 2023



05. Over Grange Farm, Little Comberton CP. Black-headed Gulls forming cohesive flight groups at height, 1730 hrs, 18 March 2023.



06. 'Defensive' formation of cacophonous Black-headed Gulls trending north over Little Comberton CP, 1630 hrs, 17 March 2023.



07. 'Defensive' swirling formation of cacophonous Black-headed Gulls trending west over Little Comberton CP, 1631 hrs, 17 March 2023.

### References

Harrison, G.R., Dean, A. R., Richards, A. J. & Smallshire, D. 1982. *The birds of the West Midlands*. West Midland Bird Club.  
Harrison, G. & Harrison, J. 2005. *The new birds of the West Midlands*. West Midland Bird Club.  
Olsen, K. M. 2003. *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm, London.  
Swaine, C.M. 1982. *The birds of Gloucestershire*. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, Gloucester.

### Images

01. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Rapid dispersal of Black-headed Gulls as threat avoidance, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023.

02. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Commencement of regrouping of dispersed Black-headed Gulls, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023  
03. Endon Hill, Wick CP. Commencement of aerial assembly of dispersed Black-headed Gulls, 1727 hrs, 18 March 2023  
04. Endon Hill Wick CP. Initiation of upward movement of assembled Black-headed Gull flock, 1728 hrs, 18 March 2023  
05. Over Grange Farm, Little Comberton CP. Black-headed Gulls forming cohesive flight groups at height, 1730 hrs, 18 March 2023.  
06. 'Defensive' formation of cacophonous Black-headed Gulls trending north over Little Comberton CP, 1630 hrs, 17 March 2023.  
07. 'Defensive' swirling formation of cacophonous Black-headed Gulls trending west over Little Comberton CP, 1631 hrs, 17 March 2023.