

Evolution & Behavior

Herring gulls approach food more quickly when you're not looking

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ABSTRACT

As humans continue to alter habitats, wildlife struggles for space. However, some wild animals are finding refuge in urban areas, where food is plentiful. One such species is the herring gull, which has a habit of feeding on sandwiches and ice creams. We suggest that people may counter this behaviour by exploiting this species' dislike of being watched.



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Across the globe, humans are affecting wildlife in myriad ways. The needs and desires of humans and wild animals are often at odds with each other, and the wild animals usually come off worse. However, in some places, wildlife is making the most of human activity. This could be said to be the case for the herring gull (*Larus argentatus*), one of the species known as "seagulls". In the UK and elsewhere, herring gulls nest on roofs and forage on discarded food. People find the noise and mess irritating, but most annoying might be this bird's penchant for snatching food out of people's hands.

It is unknown how typical this behaviour is, but it certainly bothers people. Herring gulls have a poor reputation and are widely disliked. To keep residents and tourists happy, local authorities have taken many measures to try to deter hungry gulls. They prevent nesting by erecting nets, scare them with birds of prey and sometimes even cull them. But

what if we could take a look at our own role in this and try something much simpler?

Anecdotal reports suggest that pilfering gulls often swoop in from behind their targets, or otherwise catch them unaware. We wondered if this was actually true and whether gulls pay attention to where people are looking. It wouldn't be unusual: other species, including many birds, have been shown to dislike or avoid human gaze. Such "gaze aversion" can be measured by timing an animal's approach towards a desired object or location while being watched and then comparing this time to how long it takes when not being watched.

In our case, we were interested in gulls approaching food. I used chips, as the urban-living herring gulls we were studying were likely to be very familiar with this food type! I didn't actually feed the gulls though, because I only wanted to attract one at a time and

didn't want to encourage problematic behaviour. I sealed the chips in a clear bag and weighed it down. I placed it on the ground 1.5 metres in front of me and took a crouched position so I could make eye contact with the approaching gulls.

I presented the food to each gull twice, once watching the gull approach and once looking away, which enabled me to test whether human gaze changed the behaviour of individual gulls. I alternated between doing the "looking at" and "looking away" trials first in case the gulls either became accustomed to my presence or lost interest after the first trial. I gave all gulls five minutes from the start of their approach towards the food bag to touch it.

I attempted to test a total of 74 gulls but was only able to do both "looking at" and "looking away" trials with 19. This seemed to be because gulls were too afraid, as most flew away when I got near or waited until I had walked away before approaching. It is noteworthy that birds with such a reputation for being a nuisance wanted to keep well away. This behaviour indicates that it is likely to be only a small number of gulls that are snatching people's food.

I observed a fascinating range in behaviour in those gulls that did approach. Some were very quick to touch the food bag in both trials, and some wouldn't touch it at all when I was looking at them. However, all the gulls touched the food bag when I was looking away. On average, gulls took 21 seconds longer when I was looking at them. The effect of gaze held even when considering whether there were other people nearby, and how far away the gull was at the beginning of the trial.

Our findings indicate that, overall, herring gulls do pay attention to the direction of the human gaze. We don't know whether they have an innate fear of being watched or whether they learn to avoid humans who are looking at them. Perhaps they, on some level, understand that someone is watching them. We'd like to try to get at these questions with future research. Whatever the reason, it does mean that people are less likely to have their food taken by a gull if they are paying attention.

If we can reduce the potential for conflict with wildlife by making small changes in our own behaviour - instead of drastic actions that may harm populations - surely it can only be for the better for all involved.