

Unloved birds?

European Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

The question

Round the corner from the end of the drive where I now live in Dumfries, is this rather intimidating street sign which tells us “Please Don’t Feed the Gulls”.

Where I live is a five-minute walk from the aptly named Dock Park and the River Nith, where there are other similar signs intended to discourage feeding of the Gulls. Just up from the park, is the river promenade (Whitesands) where in the middle of the river, just down from the caul¹ is an island on which the Herring Gulls generally camp out, occasionally paddling in the river itself, usually against the tide. Under heavy rains, when the river rises, this island disappears, in which case the Gulls are more often to be seen in aerial formation overhead.



Along Whitesands there are other variations on the sign at the end of my drive. This got me wondering: alongside Pigeons, are Herring Gulls also our most unloved urban birds?

The local council (Dumfries and Galloway) certainly thinks so. Their website² tells me that:

“Gulls in Dumfries and Galloway

Gulls are a nuisance in Dumfries and Galloway. We don't have a statutory duty to take action against gulls but do have some powers to tackle the problem.”

The Council also says that because of the current Covid-19 situation, they were unable to offer the normal egg and nest removal service in 2020. The Gulls are protected by law during the nesting season, but outside of that period, unused nests can be cleared away.

Amongst the advice offered is to stop the Gulls from scavenging, either from food that is visible to them (people eating taking away food as they walk along the street) or from directly feeding them; or from leaving discarded burgers and chips in litter bins.

¹ Scots language meaning weir or dam in English. You know what it is when you see it.

² <https://www.dumgal.gov.uk/gulls>

Recent press coverage³ indicates that the Council is currently looking to revamp its gull control scheme, to achieve greater coordination of the control measure across the county as a whole. However, the main reason for a revamping of the scheme is that Scottish Natural Heritage has revised its licensing regime which affords the gulls greater protection. Specifically, the council can only remove the eggs and nests as a last resort.

The press also reported that in Dumfries, expert ornithologists commissioned by the council found some 620 individual gulls from five different species (see also Conclusion below for more on this survey).

Perhaps we only love these birds when we see them at the seaside, “where they belong” (?). That got me wondering if Herring Gulls had featured on any of the stamp issues of the postal administrations in the British Isles and the Crown Dependencies. Set out below is a selection of those that I found.

The stamps

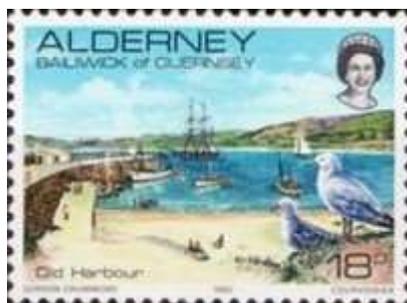
First up is this Great Britain stamp which is from a set of four celebrating sub-post offices. Clearly the Herring Gull is not the main focus of the image, but does provide a point of interest. The Haroldswick (Shetland) Post Office was Britain’s most northerly until November 1999 when it closed⁴.

Great Britain – 1997 Sub-Post Offices in Britain



This stamp is from a set of four stamps featuring local post offices in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Alderney – 1983 Local Motifs



³ Daily Record and Dumfries and Galloway Standard, 6 November 2020.

⁴ Source: Stamp Magazine, October 2020 issue which has an article on this set and looks at what has happened to these sub-post offices.

BIRD STAMP SOCIETY

This stamp is from a set of 12. It was the only one of the 12 that featured wildlife.

Isle of Man – 1983 Seabirds



This stamp is from a set of eight featuring seabirds.

Isle of Man - 1994 Postman Pat visits the Isle of Man



There are six stamps in this set and the Herring Gull features on two of them. What is not clear is why Postman Pat is on the island. If he was on holiday, perhaps you would not have expected him to have been in his uniform. On the other hand, it may be that he has brought a Special Delivery (a fresh herring?) that requires a signature form the Manx Viking.

Jersey – 1998 Birds



This Herring Gull stamp was from a set of eight stamps issued in August 1998 to celebrate birds. Jersey Post had also previously issued a set of eight bird stamps in January.

Guernsey - 2005



These white blobs on this stamp from Guernsey could really be any type of Gull.

Local issues across the British Isles and Channel Islands include the following three stamps which feature the Herring Gull:

Carn Iar (Summer Isles) – 1962 Herring Gull



British local stamp issue from a set of six stamps to mark the arrival of St Columba in Scotland.

Isle of Brecqhou - 1969 Herring Gull



Image source: <https://www.grahamlandstamps.co.uk>

Local issue from the Isle of Brecqou in the Channel Islands, from a set of six definitives.

Calf of Man - 1963 Herring Gull



Image source: <https://colnect.com/>

This stamp is from a set of six bird definitives issued by the Calf of Man.

Stamps from further afield in Europe include the following:

Finland 1974 – Protection of the Environment of the Baltic



There was just one stamp in this set marking protection of the environment of the Baltic.

Yugoslavia – 1984 Seagulls



This is one stamp from a set of four featuring seagulls. However, despite that the stamp indicates that the illustrated bird is a Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), the legs on the image are yellow, not pink, suggesting that the illustrated bird is a Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*). Something clearly went wrong here in either the brief to the artist (A Milenković) or in providing the correct description to go alongside the artwork⁵.

The other gulls in the set were: The Great black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*); the Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) and the Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*).

Sweden – 2001 Herring Gull



A single stamp from Sweden's famous coil stamps. This is a gummed stamp; these are now all self-adhesive. The Swedish postal authority (Postnord⁶) still has two birds available in its coil issues: the 40 Kr Hoopee; and the 30 Kr Redpoll.

⁵ This error was noted by Kjell Sharning on his website www.birdtheme.org. I have used his finding in the above report.

⁶ [e-butiken \(postnord.se\)](http://e-butiken(postnord.se))

Conclusion

I have focused this piece on the Herring Gull as being the “unwanted [urban] bird”, but the reality is that Dumfries, as well as other the built-up areas in Dumfries and Galloway, all have the recorded presence of other Gulls too, as documented in a recent (September 2020) survey, carried out by consultant ornithologists⁷. Within Dumfries, the surveyors found: 159 Black-headed Gulls, 58 Common Gulls, 4 Great Black-backed Gulls, 32 Herring Gulls and 366 Lesser Black-backed Gulls. That outcome provides an opportunity to look at these other Gulls on stamps of the British Isles, but for the time being, I will leave the research here.

Steven Ardron

⁷ Report by Natural Research Projects Limited, September 2020 “Dumfries and Galloway Gull Counts”.