DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

FEATURE

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HERRING GULLS ON THE NORTHEAST COAST--TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Herring gulls, those aggressive "moochers" of tidbits along many East Coast beaches, are increasing in numbers, and therein lies a sad story of other species suffering because of the increase.

Adults are easily recognizable by their pearly gray backs and black-tipped wings. These big gulls are taking over the more desirable nesting sites along New England coasts, muscling out terns and other sea birds.

The reason: Open dumping of municipal garbage, improper treatment of sewage, and discarding of leftovers by fish and other food processing plants has made available tons of scraps for these scavenging gulls.

And they have responded by reproducing rapidly, much to the dismay of other birds--and of conservationists who want many kinds of birdlife rather than a few species.

This prompted a cooperative research project that began in 1969, between the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and the Massachusetts Audubon Society to find ways to control herring gull populations along the Massachusetts coast. Findings of the project could be of value to other States along the Atlantic that have similar gull problems.

Dr. William H. Drury, research director for Massachusetts Audubon, asked the Bureau's Division of Wildlife Services to participate in a cooperative project. He emphasized, however, that "we don't seek extermination of herring gulls. We find them attractive and even essential, but if we are to have a rich variety of birdlife surviving, we must control herring gull populations."

Natural controls such as predators would be preferable, everyone agrees, but in their absence, researchers are experimenting with chemicals and baits.

One chemical, known as DRC-1339, has already had a degree of success. On Tern Island near Chatham, Mass., gull population was reduced with this chemical in the spring and summer of 1969 and 1970. Field studies in 1970 showed that the tern population has increased.

But exceptional care is required in working with DRC-1339 because it is a toxicant that can kill other birds. The approach tried in the BSFW-Audubon project is to apply the chemical to food preferred by herring gulls and in strategic places rarely frequented by other birds. Baits not taken by the gulls are retrieved.

Herring gulls build nests in spring in colonies, near the water. Often the nests are on the ground in hollows or in plain sight on sand, gravel, rocks or in grassy fields; but herring gulls also have been known to nest in trees.

Usually a single brood of up to three is reared each year, but the gulls sometimes have re-nested when their eggs were destroyed.

After a 30-day incubation period, the young quickly develop a buffy yellow down, marked with black spots above. The bill is horn color and slightly hooked. By autumn, the young have become fully feathered, thriving on a diet of just about anything edible the parents can bring to the nest.

Some of the more polar flocks migrate southward to warmer climates in the winter, but on the East Coast of the United States these gulls stay year-round and breed from Maine to the Middle Atlantic States. Presumably, more southern flocks migrate northward to breed.

Except for crowding out other birds, herring gulls are useful scavengers that help keep harbors and beaches free from decaying fish and refuse.

Their excellent flying, gliding, and diving abilities are another reason for their survival, as they can keep aloft for long periods in search of food.

Among their more interesting traits are their shrill cries of considerable variety, used to communicate to each other about the presence of food and potential danger.

But like park pigeons, herring gulls often adapt to humans and develop the ability to live off discards and even "mooch" for more.

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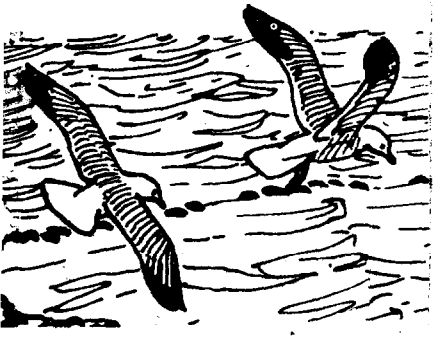

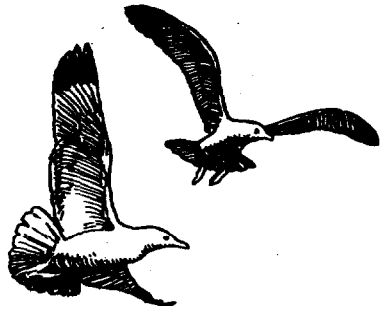

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