







## GULLS IN ACTION

*Editor's note:* The following humorous article by Joseph Dutton is reprinted from *Underwater Naturalist*, Bulletin of the American Littoral Society, © April 2004.

As divers, fishermen, and birders know, there are two approaches to their craft—chase, or sit and wait. One can dive on a reef, hunker in, and wait for fish to come and hang around, or the diver can chase fish, which the fish don't like. The angler can walk the beach to catch fish or choose a spot and stick with it. And birders can walk and look, or sit and watch. Recently, I have taken to sitting and watching gulls. It's been worth it.

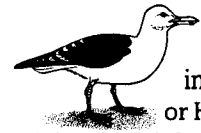
Probably my first gull study was on a beach years ago when two of us were surf fishing for northern kingfish in early summer. It was close to low tide and Herring Gulls were walking the shallow water for edibles. All the gulls except one were strolling slowly upwind (most birds, including gulls, are averse to taking wind from the rear). This one gull was standing head down on the sand just above the waterline in a non-gull-like posture. We put our rods down and walked over to the gull, and saw that its bill was held in the tight grip of a large surf clam; the gull could just about walk and couldn't take off.

To the rescue: we tossed a shirt over the gull's head to keep it calm, and while I cradled it in my arms, my friend cut the clam's adductor muscles and freed the gull's bill. What happened next took only a second or two: the gull turned and pecked a considerable hole in the back of my friend's hand, he yelled and dropped the bird, and the bird flew off. We saved the gull's life and it thanked us with a wound. Now that's a bird worth watching, I thought. Since then, gulls have been a favorite of mine. Here are some things I have seen them do:

*Gulls and Telephone Wires.* For almost 30 years, I drove to work along a sand spit, some places only 50 yards wide. Between the beach and the road there is a typical line of telephone poles strung with typical wires. The wires are about 30 feet off the ground, the poles 150 feet apart. Gulls routinely fly across the spit from the ocean to the bay. In 30 years of watching, I did not see one gull fly under the telephone wires. They might come across the beach 15 feet in the air; they unfailingly climbed in the air before they got to the wires, flew over them with a good 10 feet to spare, and then most often dipped quickly to their cruising altitude and flew out over the bay. This was true for Black-backed, Herring, Ring-billed, and Laughing Gulls in all plumages. (Since this was first written, I have seen one or two gulls fly under the wires, but the over and under ratio is still at least 500 to 1.)

*Gulls in Parking Lots.* It is well known that gulls open shellfish by dropping them on parking lots; they will use hard sand beaches for openers but seem to prefer black-top. They will use highways too, which leads us shoreline motorists to develop driving skills to avoid falling clams, broken windshields, and sitting birds. Lazy gulls hang

around parking lots and try to steal the fruits of their cousins' labors. Where I watch this performance, most of the gulls' prey is surf clams or moon snails. Here's one observation in detail: I am parked in a white pickup truck in a large almost-vacant parking lot 50 yards back from the surf. It is a cold winter day. No gulls are evident, but then an adult Black-backed (pictured) flies in from the beach,



gains a little altitude, drops a 4-inch surf clam, and flutters down to eat it. Almost immediately, two first-year Black-backed or Herring Gulls land about 10 feet from the adult, which is busy pulling pieces of clam from the shells. When I figure the Black-backed has about finished its meal, I start the engine and drive rapidly toward the Black-backed while tooting the horn; this forces the gull to abandon its meal and fly off. The immatures don't fly off, but walk away a few feet and wait. When I leave the broken clam, they move in to finish off what's left, small bits of adductor muscle. The adult has flown out over the beach.

I have repeated this tactic half-a-dozen times with the same result and conclude that adult gulls are king of the kill and more skittish than juveniles when challenged by loud accelerating vehicles in parking lots.

*Gulls Announce Their Finds.* Gulls, mostly Herring and Black-backed, do a lot of raucous calling and posturing when they come across a promising load of chow—freshly broken shellfish or raunchy sea-robin carcass. Before my recent enlightened studies, I thought this was a bragging strategy—"Look what I found." Now, it appears more than likely to be a threat of war if interlopers show up—"Stand back, it's all mine." I have reached three conclusions—big gulls are aggressive, loud, and maybe profane.

*Same Parking Lot, Different Behavior.* It's late fall but still warm. There are more gulls present this time, a few immature Herring and 20–30 Ring-billed, in a gang, preening or napping. I stop the truck about 25 yards away. Most of the gulls look at the truck and two Ring-billeds walk over closer, stopping about 10 feet from the driver's side. I bid them hello and toss them a French fry (I know this is bad behavior, but I'm doing research). Immediately, every gull on the lot is alert; they jump into the air, surround the truck, and yap, while one of the nearby walking Ring-billeds gobbles up the fry. I get out of the truck; the gulls back off a bit. Then I walk away from the truck, waving a fry high over my head; flying low, the gulls follow (I feel like the Pied Piper of McDonald's). I throw the fry, it hits the lot, and a Ring-billed nails it. Then I toss a bright penny and about half the gulls follow it, land near it; a few sample its taste and texture, but don't move it. I retrieve the penny and try again. This time only a few gulls express interest, and a third toss of the penny elicits almost no response. I walk back to the truck and get in. Two Ring-billeds walk over closer, stopping about 10 feet from the driver's side. I'd repeat the experiment, but I'm out of French fries.







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