

HOW TO SURVIVE A SEAGULL ATTACK

An attack of seagull : Ouch! A woman is attacked by a seagull on Liskey Hill Crescent in Perranporth,



It's no joke, being attacked by a seagull. Pensioners have been hospitalised, blood gushing from cut heads. Others have been knocked to the ground, breaking bones. Small dogs have bled to death, children's lips been sliced open, and an elderly man died of a heart attack following a particularly vicious assault in his back garden (3). News that the Royal Mail has temporarily halted deliveries to an otherwise peaceful Cornish cul-de-sac because of the danger should come as no big surprise; it's happened before.

A diving herring gull is a missile: special attack talon on the heel, razor-sharp two-inch beak, 1.4-metre wingspan, more than a kilo of angry bird travelling at 65kph. No wonder there's blood. And there are more and more of them, at least in built-up areas: Britain's urban gull population – thriving on takeaway scraps, open-topped litter bins and landfill sites to scavenge from, and wide ledges and flat rooftops to nest on – is growing by 20% a year. Seagulls can live for up to 40 years, and their survival rate in cities is 95%

They have, consequently, become less afraid of us. Often, we positively

THE ROYAL MAIL HAS HALTED DELIVERIES ON ONE CORNISH STREET BECAUSE OF GULL ATTACKS ON POSTMEN. BUT WITH THE BIRDS THRIVING IN URBAN AREAS, WE CAN ONLY EXPECT MORE SUCH STORIES INVOLVING THESE HEAVILY ARMED BIRDS

encourage them: leaving leftovers on tables, even feeding them (despite an abundance of notices, particularly in seaside towns, imploring us not to). The problem has become so acute that some towns have turned to deterrents such as hawks, netting, egg-oiling, high-frequency sound systems, rooftop spikes, electrified wires and even ersatz eggs (5). Killing or harming most seagulls is illegal without a permit: while urban populations are increasing, gull numbers overall are in decline.

Swooping gulls can be annoying at the best of times, but at this time of year they can be positively dangerous. From mid-May to late July, when fledglings have hatched but are not yet able to fly, adult gulls become highly territorial and protective of their young. If you get too close, they will use a

variety of tactics to try to drive you away.

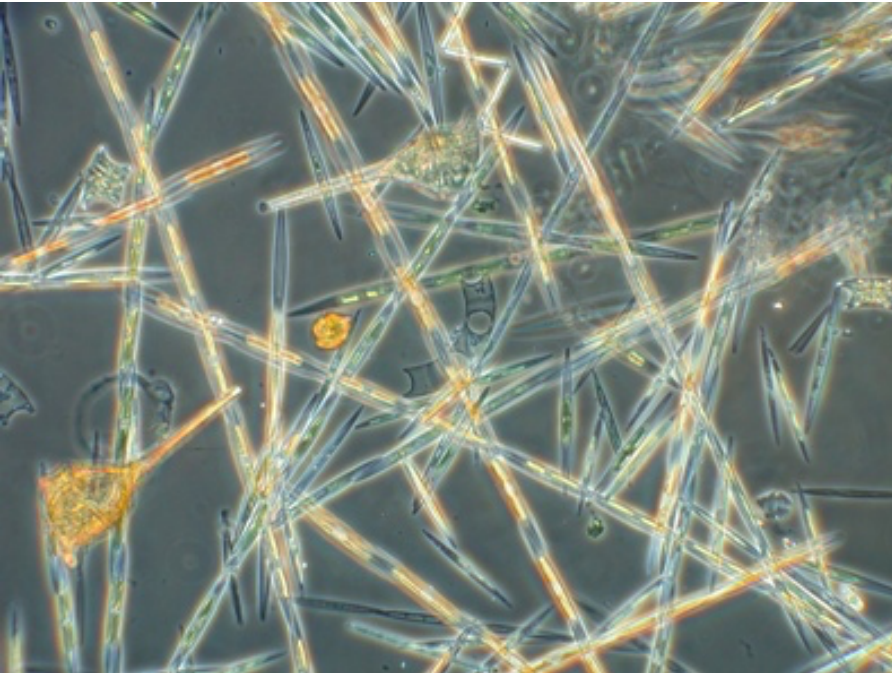
First comes the "gag call" – a low, repeated warning call that essentially means: Go away. Next is the low pass, within a metre or two of the intruder's head. Then aerial operations commence. Phase one is bombardment: gulls target the perceived threat with droppings and vomit. Phase two is all-out attack – usually a low, raking strike to the back of the head with talons extended.

Once things get to this stage, obviously, there's not a lot you can do beyond duck and try shield your head. Best advice? Keep your eyes and ears open, and learn what the gulls are trying to tell you. Our ignorance of their warnings is their greatest weapon.



Moviemaker Alfred Hitchcock appears to have drawn some inspiration for one of his classic thrillers, "The Birds," with the help of toxin-producing algae. The algae, whose single cells are encased in glass walls, have been the prime suspects for some time, but now scientists have confirmed they were present at just the right time. On Aug. 18, 1961, a local newspaper reported that thousands of crazed seabirds were sighted on the shores of North Monterey Bay in California. The birds, called sooty shearwaters, regurgitated anchovies, flew into objects and died on the streets

- See more at: <http://www.livescience.com/17713-hitchcock-birds-movie-algae-toxin.html#sthash.fNdnEdqp.dpuf>



Hitchcock lived in the region, and called the newspaper, the Santa Cruz Sentinel, for more information, according to Sibel Bargu, a biological oceanographer at Louisiana State University and one of the study researchers.

The frenzy helped inspire Hitchcock's 1963 thriller "The Birds," which was adapted from a short story by Daphne du Maurier. In the movie, flocks of birds attack and kill residents in a community on the California coast. [Top 10 Scariest Movies Ever]

The cause of the outbreak in 1961 was not identified. Then, 30 years

later, disorientation and death struck brown pelicans in the same area.

"It looks like attacking, but it's actually crashing into walls, because they are very disoriented," Bargu said.

But this time, it was found that the birds had eaten a toxin, domoic acid, produced by multiple species of *Pseudo-nitzschia*, which are diatoms, a type of algae.

Domoic acid can cause confusion, disorientation, scratching, seizures and death in birds that eat the stuff, which gets concentrated as it moves up the food chain.

Domoic acid also affects mammals; humans can contract life-threatening amnesic shellfish poisoning, which causes, among other things, short-term memory loss, by eating shellfish that have eaten toxin-filled plankton.

Bargu and colleagues looked back about half a century by examining the gut contents of tiny floating marine animals, called zooplankton, collected July-August of 1961 in Monterey Bay and now housed in a collection at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

They found that toxin-producing species of *Pseudo-nitzschia* accounted for 79 percent of the diatoms present in the guts of these tiny animals at the time.

"We suggest that domoic acid generated by these diatoms accumulated in the food chain and led to the poisoning of migratory flocks of shearwater that foraged in these waters," Bargu and her team write in a study published in the January 2012 issue of the journal *Nature Geoscience*.

Warm-water, low-wind conditions favor the growth of these toxin-producing diatoms, according to the researchers.

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