

The Origin of Black-headed Gulls Wintering in Edinburgh

The Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* is a common winter visitor in Lothian. Since the year 2000, I have been collecting information by reading the inscriptions of ringed Black-headed Gulls in and around the city of Edinburgh. This activity resulted in a large amount of data about the origin, age, and site fidelity of wintering Black-headed Gulls in Edinburgh. This short article gives an overview of the results obtained so far.

Method

The best locations for reading rings of Black-headed Gulls around Edinburgh are parks with ponds where people regularly feed the local waterfowl (especially swans and geese). Black-headed Gulls, often accompanied by Common Gulls, gather here during the day before they fly off to their night roosts. Roughly 1% of the Black-headed Gulls wear small metal rings with uniquely encoded inscriptions. These inscriptions can be read with the use of a telescope or binoculars (sometimes this requires a fair amount of patience). Once the code of a ring is completely read, it can be submitted to the BTO who update their database and send back a recovery form with ringing details about the bird in question. The places that I regularly checked are Duddingston Loch, Dunsapie Loch, St. Margaret's Loch, Figgate Park, Lochend Loch, Blackford Pond, Craiglockhart Pond, Inverleith pond, Seafield, Fisherrow, Musselburgh (lagoons and River Esk), and Cramond.

Results

So far I have managed to see a total of 101 different individuals ringed in six different countries. As illustrated by Table 1, roughly half of the ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh are ringed in Britain. Of these British gulls, around 50% are ringed as nestlings in the North Esk reservoir colony in the Pentland Hills.

Table 1. Origin (country) of metal ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh in the period 2000-2003. (includes 3 colour-ringed birds)*

Britain	54
Norway	28
Finland	8
Sweden	4
Denmark	4*
Lithuania	3

For 57 Black-headed Gulls, I was able to reveal the complete inscription and hence get information about the exact origin and ringing date of these birds. Figure 1 shows a map with the ringing locations of Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh (only included in the map are birds ringed outside Lothian). The map nicely shows that wintering Black-headed Gulls come from the north, northeast or east. There are no recoveries west of Glasgow, nor are there any recoveries south of Manchester.

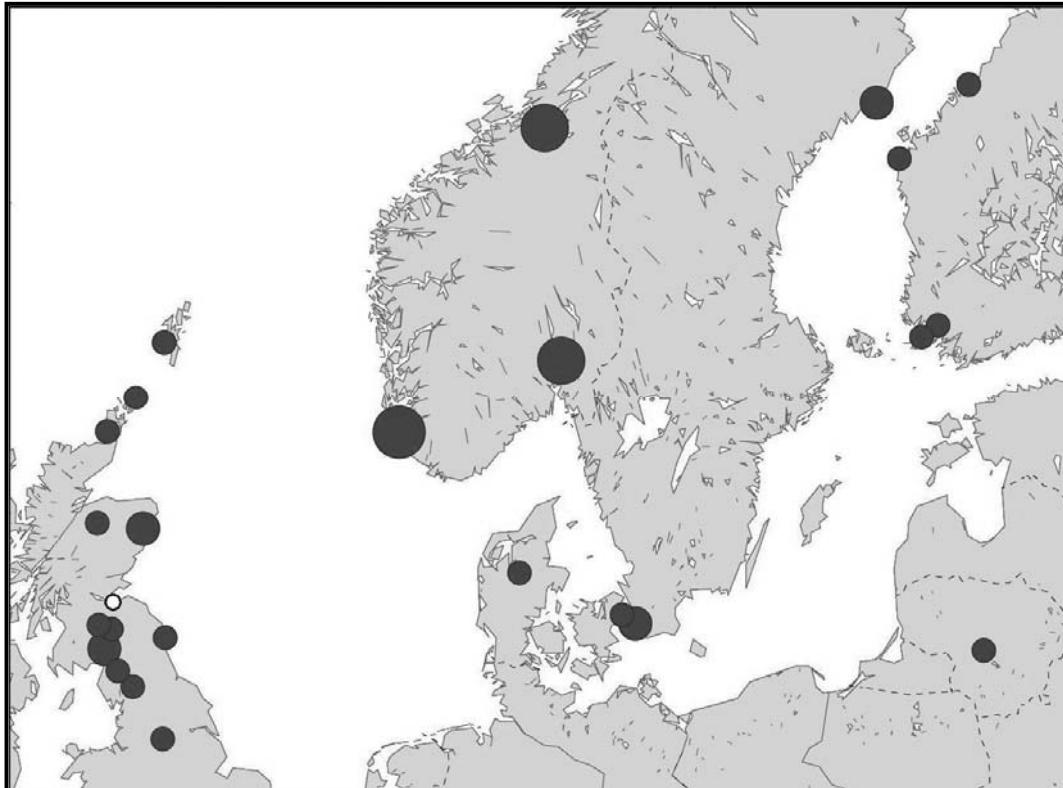


Figure 1.
Ringing
locations
(black dots)
of Black-
headed Gulls
seen in
Edinburgh
(white dot)
from 2000-
2003. Size of
dots
corresponds
to number of
recoveries of
birds ringed
in that
location.

Black-headed Gulls wintering in Edinburgh are on average in their 5th year. The oldest Black-headed Gull recorded is a bird ringed as "2 years +" in Cumbria/England in June 1986, which was last seen in Musselburgh on 22 September 2002, yielding an age of at least 17 years.

The results suggest that the winter population of our Black-headed Gulls are mostly British birds (with roughly half of them ringed in Lothian), accompanied by substantial numbers from Scandinavia and Finland. However, a proper analysis requires quantification dependent on the relative annual ringing numbers in the respective countries. This goes beyond the scope of this small overview.

Black-headed Gulls are very loyal to their wintering locations. A case in point is the Norwegian Black-headed Gull ringed as OSLO MB 18927. This bird was ringed in Rogaland on June 15, 1999. I spotted it the first time at Duddingston Loch on September 9, 2000. Since then, I saw it there another 30 times, remaining at Duddingston the entire winter, and returning the subsequent winters of 2001/2002, 2002/2003 and 2003/2004. Most Black-headed Gulls follow this pattern, although some seem more adventurous by also visiting other locations in and around the city.

I plan to gather more information by repeating this survey in future winters. I am also investigating other species, in particular the Common Gull, the majority of which seems to come from northern Scotland and Norway.

Johan Bos, December 2003

(Johan would be pleased to receive details of ringed Black-headed, Common, and Mediterranean Gulls seen in the Edinburgh/Lothian area. He can be contacted at jbos@inf.ed.ac.uk, or by post at 18 Coates Crescent, Edinburgh, EH3 7AF.)