



**EAZA CHARADRIIFORMES TAG:
INFORMATION SHEET FOR THE GULLS.**

Compiled by Jo Gregson (Paignton Zoo) with contributions from the Charadriiformes TAG members.



Red-legged kittiwake

Six gull species have been recommended by the Charadriiformes TAG.

GREY GULL: *Larus modestus* **LC:** South American medium sized gull that can be mixed with other birds. An interesting gull because they breed inland in a desert habitat. Grey gulls feed on the coast hunting for small crabs in the wave zone. The grey gull is partially nocturnal probably an adaptation to nesting in hot desert conditions where chicks would soon become over heated if left unattended during the day. They also have the largest eyes of the Laridae.

GREY-HEADED GULL: *Larus cirrocephalus* **LC:** South American and South African medium sized gull that can be mixed, may steal eggs. Plunge dives for food.

WHITE-EYED GULL: *Larus leucophthalmus* **NT:** At risk in the future because of its small habitat along the Red Sea, and growing tourism. They can be mixed though are nervous of bigger birds. Plunge diver for fish and crabs. There are estimated to be 38,000 individuals.

COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL: *Larus ridibundus* **LC:** Small gull found from Europe across to Asia. They spend a lot of time inland and breed on dry ground or near freshwater lakes, very versatile gull. Feeds along the shore or inland on farmland.

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE: *Rissa tridactyla* **LC:** Medium sized cliff nesting gull. Found in North Canada, North Atlantic, Greenland and Northern Europe. They can be mixed with other birds. Kittiwakes are surface feeding gulls they capture small inverts and fish just below the surface.

RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE: *Rissa brevirostris* **V:** Medium sized gull, similar to Black-legged kittiwake. Often found to feed at night. It is not possible to collect wild birds at the present time. Two groups are held in captivity at Living Coast in the UK and the Sealife Centre in Alaska. Breeding is slow to nil. There are estimated to be 100,000 pairs.

Seven gull species have been recommended for further research by the TAG.

Ross' gull *Rhodostethia rosea*, L C.

Ivory gull *Pagophila eburnea*, NT. 25,000 pairs

Relict gull *Larus relictus*, V. Less than 2,000 pairs?

Saunders' gull *Larus saundersi*, V. Below 5,000 individuals.

Heermann's gull *Larus heermanni*, NT. 150,000 individuals

Olog's gull *Larus atlanticus*, V. 7,000 pairs.

Audouin's gull *Larus audouinii*, NT. 16,000 pairs.

Introduction:

There are 51 species of gulls in the world. They are a group of birds that people are very familiar with as they are often found living in close proximity to man. Gulls are a very successful and adaptable group of birds. Nine species are threatened and most others are of least concern, although all seabirds are showing a decline in numbers. Gulls are found on all continents along shorelines and sometimes in more unusual niches such as desert, sewage farms and farmland. As we construct more buildings along our coasts the gulls have had to adapt from nesting on cliff tops to roof tops.

Gulls share our habitat and as such are very good bio indicators and are often used in research projects. They are near the top of the food chain and live on the edge of our seas and lakes. Alarmingly, while DDT was banned in the USA since 1972, it is still found in gull and seal populations in some areas.

Hybridisation is quite common within the Laridae which can lead to misidentification. Albinism is uncommon and melanism is hardly ever seen, leucistic herring gulls are sometimes seen. Gulls moult once a year except for the Franklin's gull which moults twice a year. This could be an adaptation because of the long migration Franklin's gulls undertake. The plumage cycle is long for most species ranging from 2, 3 or 4 years to attain adult plumage. This makes identification of young gulls quite a challenge, though they are all of a distinctive appearance and easily identified as gulls.

In Captivity:

Gulls have never been very popular with private aviculturists and there are only a few specialist holders. Zoos on the other hand have often displayed gulls in the past, because they have been an ideal bird choice for outside enclosures, they can tolerate most weather conditions and are active for most of the day. In recent years as zoos have built more mixed walk through aviaries the gull has not been such a popular zoo exhibits.

Generally gulls do not acclimatise well to being in enclosed buildings, for this reason they should always have access to an outside area where they can clearly see the surroundings.

Shade from high sun and shelter from wet weather should always be available. All gulls need a clean open water source where they can bathe; otherwise their plumage can degrade quickly if kept in dirty conditions. A small fountain or moving water would be beneficial to them. Substrate should be clean at all times, sand or small round pebbles are easy to clean and are often used to form a nesting scrape.

The smaller species of gull will live quite peacefully with other taxon of equal size. The larger gulls might eat eggs, chicks and even adult birds of smaller species. They can also cause a lot of disturbance by hawking and ostracizing other aviary inhabitants. Gulls should not be pinioned; but short term wing clipping is recommended for difficult introductions.

Breeding:

Both adults are responsible for choosing a nesting site. Approval is shown by a display where the head is held close to the ground while mimicking regurgitation. Both birds carry out this display at many sites until they both display on the same plot and an agreement is reached. For this reason there should be more than one nesting area in an aviary. Dry grass or seaweed is used by some species to place in the nesting scrape.

Most captive gulls will nest on the ground near to a stone or bush. Cliff nesting gulls will rarely adapt to nesting on the ground and need to be offered a high vantage point such as a ledge or rooftop to encourage breeding. If successful, gulls will use the same nest site year after year. Breeding starts at two to five years of age, the smaller species nest at younger ages. Incubation is 24-30 days.

Eggs are laid one or two days apart and incubation begins with the first egg. Both parents incubate the two to three eggs and brood the chicks for two weeks. Fledging takes place at between four to seven weeks. Chicks in ground nests can leave the nest at about eight days though they will not wander far from the breeding area. Gulls are single brooded unless they lose eggs in the early stages of incubation. Breeding goes on for around three months of the year except in the Galapagos where the Lava gull breeds for ten months.

Handling:

Care should be taken when handling gulls. All gulls should be held away from the keepers face. Gloves and eye protection should be worn when handling larger species. The head should be held firmly once the bird is restrained.

Diet:

Gulls are adaptable in all things including to their diet. Only one gull has a specialist diet the Olrogs gull which feed solely on crabs. Gulls will eat live or dead fish; they will follow tractors for unearthed worms or rodents. Many colonise our rubbish tips and sewage outlets, while those in cities will raid street bins for left over cheese burgers. All appear to thrive on their new found diets. In the wild gulls get away with eating all sorts of rubbish and seemingly enormously large items are swallowed, while if that kind of food were offered in captivity there would be dire consequences.

In captivity gulls are one of the easiest birds to feed, but the diet offered needs to be controlled or they will easily become obese. Sea fish should be fresh and not too oily. Day old chicks should be chopped up and have the yolk sac removed before feeding. Minced beef is a good food but lacks fibre and roughage. Gulls are able to regurgitate waste pellets; and so roughage in the form of skin, scale, feather and bone should be a regular part of their diet each day. Inland gulls such as the black headed gull can be offered rodents once a week.

Many vitamins are lost from frozen fish and so a good supplement should be added to the food such as Calcicare or Vionate. Commercial fish eater tablets can be crushed and used when birds have lost condition or the diet is poor.

The Grey gulls diet at Paignton Zoo:

Chopped Sprat, minced beef, Mazuri soaked diet A, chopped day old chicks, mealworms, dusted with Calcicare supplement.

The Red-legged kittiwake diet at Living Coasts:

Chopped squid, chopped sprat, whitebait, smelt, mealworms and sandeels.

Ground up Mazuri fish eater tablets. Each tablet contains vitamins, maltodextrin, yeast, silica, stearic acid, magnesium stearate and cellulose.

Vitamin A 10,000 i.u

Vitamin D3 2,000 i.u

Vitamin E 160 i.u

Vitamin B2 1.2 mg

Vitamin K 0.5 mg

Nicotinic acid 5.7 mg

Pantothenic acid 6.7 mg

Folic acid 0.16 mg

B1 50 mg

B6 1.5 mg

Biotin 0.028 mg

Vitamin C 47 mcg

B12 1.5 mcg