

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2189: Remove legal protected status for gulls to help reduce their numbers in residential areas, lodged by Ian Boyles.

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Often referred to simply as seagulls, there are in fact several individual species of gull in Scotland. The five most encountered are the great black-backed, lesser black-backed, common, black-headed and the herring gull. A recent [BBC News article](#) highlights Inverness, Eyemouth and Aberdeen as having experienced “gull-related incidents”.

Urban areas may have become more attractive to gulls due to food availability, lack of predators, availability of nesting sites and reducing traditional habitats. However, the most recent [Seabirds Count](#) (2023) shows that all five species of commonly encountered gull that breed in Scotland are in serious decline, with [numbers down by between 44% and 75% depending on the species](#). Common gull, great black-backed gull and herring gull are now all red listed [Species of Conservation Concern](#) in the UK, while lesser black-backed gull and black-headed gull are amber listed.

NatureScot’s blog on [Understanding urban gulls](#) provides useful context, and notes that whilst:

[...] we might be seeing more gulls in our day-to-day lives, this does not mean that there has been an increase in the population as a whole. In fact, we know the opposite to be the case. Gulls are struggling in their coastal habitats and numbers are down overall, so any move inland or to urban areas, especially where urban areas are coastal, has to be seen in that context.

The 2023 Seabirds Count did however show that herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls now appear to have a higher proportion of their UK breeding population nesting in urban and inland nest sites.

Like all wild birds, gulls, along with their nests and eggs are protected by the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) as amended by the [Nature Conservation \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#). It is therefore illegal to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, or take any gull, and an offence to take, damage, or destroy an active nest, or its contents. In Scotland it is also illegal to also obstruct or prevent gulls from using their nest.

Whilst all wild birds have these core protections under the 1981 Act, NatureScot has powers under the Act to license activities – for defined legal purposes – that may otherwise be an offence. Those purposes include, for example, “preserving public health or public or air safety”. Importantly,

NatureScot must be satisfied that, as regards that purpose, there is “no other satisfactory solution”.

In 2019 NatureScot (then using its statutory name Scottish Natural Heritage) strengthened the licensing regime for control of gull species, and [guidance was updated in 2024](#) which sought to “reduce the number of licences that are issued to control gulls in towns and cities each breeding season, following new evidence on the extent to which populations are struggling”. NatureScot’s [Gull Management Guidance](#) states:

Whilst many actions can be undertaken to help prevent or minimise problems caused by gulls without contravening the law, sometimes it may be necessary e.g. by removing nests or eggs where problems are evident or expected. In these instances NatureScot is able to licence such activities as a last resort in order to preserve public health or safety.

Actions to help prevent or minimise problems (that do not require a licence) could include physically preventing establishing a nest, removing potential nesting materials, human disturbance, or automated scaring devices. Actions requiring a licence include nest removal, egg removal, or pricking eggs.

On 23 September 2025 the Scottish Government held a summit in Inverness on [tackling urban gull problems](#). This brought together local councillors, housing associations, business representatives, waste management organisations and community groups, scientific experts and NatureScot. It was announced that £100,000 would be invested in local authorities “to support efforts to limit the damage caused by gulls, ahead of next year’s breeding season. Deterrents can include measures such as the use of [lasers](#), [noise](#), roof spikes and netting to prevent nesting”.

Alasdair Reid
Senior Researcher
31 October 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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