



ANNIVERSARY FACT SHEETS THE SILVER GULL

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF MONTAGUE ISLAND SHEARWATER RESEARCH 2009

The Silver Gull

Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae

The Silver Gull is widespread throughout Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia. It is found along the entire Australian coast and its offshore islands and is common west of the Great Dividing Range in inland Australia. They are essentially coastal birds that feed mainly on small fish, plankton and other marine animals, but they also scavenge and have learnt to exploit human activities. They are familiar birds at rubbish dumps, sewerage outfalls, public parks and sea-fronts. Because of this their numbers have increased rapidly with the increase in the human population.

Although pugnacious and daring when feeding they are cautious and wary when roosting and nesting. They roost in areas that are surrounded by water so that they are safe from land predators. For nesting they retreat to off-shore islands, one of which is Montagu Island.

The breeding colony at Montagu has steadily decreased. When professional ornithologists first visited the island in 1907 it was noted 'that there were clouds of white-winged birds hovering over sea and land, while great white clusters on the slopes denoted the presence of groups of breeding birds'. There were 5000 -10,000 nests in 1973 but there are now usually only 1500-2000 nests. This may be the result of the birds moving north to be nearer to denser areas of human settlement. The colony of gulls on Five Islands near Wollongong has grown spectacularly over the past 50 years.

Silver Gulls are gregarious but also very aggressive. When feeding their social instincts are over-ridden by the competition for food and dominant birds establish a pecking order, driving off rivals that come too close. In the breeding colony there is conflict between social attraction and territorial behaviour which prevents them from nesting too close together. At Montagu they begin to arrive in August, where they congregate on the flat rocks on either side of the landing. Some time in September they move en masse to the nesting site. Historically, Gulls have nested on many parts of the island. In the early 1900s they mainly nested on the north island but in recent years they have nested around the light station and on the paths from the landing.

After the pair-bond has been established, but before the eggs are laid, the female often solicits the male for food which he regurgitates for her. This courtship feeding seems to stimulate copulation which often follows. This food also adds to the female's diet and helps her to produce eggs.

The clutch varies from 1 – 3 eggs (usually 2) with the first laid egg usually the largest. The eggs are laid in a shallow nest made of grass and seaweed. Incubation begins after the first egg is laid so that chick hatching is asynchronous. The incubation period varies from between 19 – 26 days. Both birds incubate the eggs and feed the chicks.



On hatching the young are precocious and semi-nidifugous (covered in down feathers and active immediately after hatching).

The young stay in the nest for about one week attended by either or both parents after which they then hide in the nearby vegetation.

Chicks that venture from the nesting site are viciously attacked by other gulls.

About 6 weeks after hatching the chicks are abandoned by the parents and left to forage for themselves.

On Montagu, most young birds have left by the end of January although a few remain around the nesting colony all year round. Some dispersing young birds have been known to travel up to 1200km from their natal colony.

Immature gulls are quite different from adults. They have mottled brown and grey upper parts and do not acquire the distinctive white eyes with red eye-ring and bright red bill and legs until their second or third year. Even adult birds seem to have variations in the intensity of the colour of legs and beaks at different times of the year.



Further Reading

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