



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

Construction & Gulls



There is construction in my neighbourhood and frankly I find the noise, dust and traffic congestion rather irritating. But it's more than an irritant to our local gull population.

Gulls are rather partial to nesting on buildings; office and apartment blocks mimic the cliffs and rocky shores that they would naturally nest in. With all the construction currently on the go many young birds are at risk. Some of them end up in care at the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC (WRA).

Right now we have 30 young gulls in our care; about 50 percent of our current caseload. Some of them came to us because of construction; others were brought to us by well meaning citizens who found the young birds on the ground, not flying, and assumed the worst. The reality is that the gull will take up to 40 days before it figures out the flying thing. During that time they walk and run on the ground and learn how to socialize with other birds. Parents are likely nearby and ready to help if needs be.

That said gulls are quite self sufficient at a young age. They are what we call semi-precocial. A precocial bird is one able to feed itself from the day its hatches. In the case of gulls the parent normally coughs up food which the baby ingest, so if you throw food in front of it, the young gull will go for it.

The young ones have a completely different colouring from mature birds. For the first year of its life a young gull is a speckled grey, during the second year of its life it's a more solid grey and the white head begins to appear, in year three the gull takes on the attractive white and grey feathering of its species. Some gulls take four years to achieve mature colouration.

Given the slow growth of adult plumage, it's rather hard to differentiate between young gulls. In B.C. we have a number of different species . The most common is the big-billed glaucous-winged gull with its gray wing tips, pink legs and yellow beak.

The majority of the gulls currently at the WRA are housed in three outdoor aviaries. The idea with the healthy young birds is to provide a safe place, free of predators, until they are strong enough to fly. While they are in care we work hard to ensure they do not become used to humans. Any wild creature that becomes too comfortable with humans will make a nuisance of itself and could end up in conflict with us. This usually ends in tragedy for the animal.

Gulls, as a migratory species are protected by federal law. This means that eggs or young in a gull nest cannot be removed without a permit from Canadian Wildlife Service. Hard to imagine but in the 1970s gulls were almost extinct. At that time they were considered a pest and eradicated at will.

In the 30 years since gulls have been protected, they have thrived. Gulls are highly adaptable birds and do very well in our cities. At least a third of their diet is made up of our refuse. Contrary to popular belief gulls are not necessarily sea birds and will often make their homes inland, taking advantage of the bounty nature, and human waste.

If you are concerned about gulls nesting on your building, be proactive. They will mate and lay eggs in the summer. If you notice mature birds looking for a place to nest, remove the nest material and haze the animals away. Remember once there are eggs in the nest you will need a permit to remove them. Also take care to ensure your garbage is secure and don't feed them.

Nicky Fried writes for the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC located at 5216 Glencarin Drive on Burnaby Lake. The Wildlife Rescue Association cares for injured, orphaned and pollution damaged wildlife. If you have an animal in distress call the WRA at 604.526.7275.