

SHORT NOTE

Red-billed Gulls robbing Wrybills

On 26 March 1985, at Access Bay in the Firth of Thames, while watching hundreds of waders moving out over newly exposed mudflat as the tide receded, I became aware of consistent attacks by Red-billed Gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*) on feeding Wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*).

Of the 30 or more gulls scattered over the area under study, not more than five seemed to be involved in this food-piracy, and only Wrybills were victimised. The attacks, which were initiated occasionally on the ground but mainly from the air, consisted of an aggressive approach towards a Wrybill carrying a worm (presumably polychaete) in its bill, followed by a rapid zig-zag aerial pursuit. Whenever the food was released by a Wrybill, the 'pirate' would stoop rapidly to retrieve it from the ground. Sometimes two gulls chased one Wrybill.

Perusal of available literature confirms food-piracy as a common feature of many species of Laridae, with a wide range of other species as victims, especially other gulls and terns, auks and ducks. Waders, however, do not feature prominently among victims cited, apart from Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) by the Black-headed Gull (*L. ridibundus*) and the Common Gull (*L. canus*) (Cramp *et al.* 1974). The Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) is also recorded as a victim of *L. canus* (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Although the general aggressiveness of the Red-billed Gull is well known and its predation of eggs and chicks is mentioned in several standard texts, there appear to be few references to actual food-piracy.

J.A. Mills (1985) listed "white-fronted terns, gannets, oystercatchers, shags and even other red-billed gulls" as victims. Serventy *et al.* (1971), describing *L. novaehollandiae* in Australia, stated that "some individuals have been reported with piratical habits attacking fishing terns and pelicans".

Piracy seems to be just one option within the wide repertoire of this versatile opportunist feeder. The above case of Wrybill molestation at Access Bay raises the question of what factors might influence some gulls to be piratical while most apparently are not. R.B. Sibson (pers. comm.) suggests the possibility of extreme hunger (or 'mischievous' disposition).

Data on the incidence of piracy would need to be examined in relation to season, food supply, the density of birds and the number of species.

LITERATURE CITED

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