

Study finds life-saving trend among seagulls

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Following trends is a lifesaving instinct, at least for birds, and provides clues that can be applied across the animal kingdom. New research from Université de Montréal published in *Biology Letters*, shows that Herring and Ring-billed gulls not only watch their neighbours - they mimic their behaviour to assure their survival. Contrary to previous beliefs, this study suggests that animals don't necessarily act independently and that they cue on reactions from other members of their group.

"This is the first study to report how gulls copy the vigilance and awareness of other gulls during rest periods," says Guy Beauchamp, who authored the study and is a statistician in the Université de Montréal's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. "When their immediate neighbours were alert, the gulls we observed were more aware and rested less. In contrast, when the neighbours were relaxed, so were the subjects."

This behavioural mimicry may be advantageous when a predator is close. "If the surrounding group is agitated and ready to take flight, it may be beneficial to be similarly alert," says Dr. Beauchamp. "You don't want to be the last gull standing when a predator approaches."

How does this relate to humans?

Dr. Beauchamp spent the last two summers tracking and studying gull behaviour in the Bay of Fundy. He compared the activity of gulls that were sleeping relative to the alertness of their neighbours. "Gulls sleep with one eye open and constantly scan the group. Based on my observations, we know now that they are judging the level of vigilance of

their peers to mimic it. This adds a new complexity to understanding animal behaviour."

Dr. Beauchamp suggests this behaviour can be extrapolated into human and other mammal populations. "The theory of a collective group awareness can be applied across the animal kingdom. Although humans don't worry about predators, they do pay attention to the behaviour of their peers. For example, they assess the value of others based on their social or physical interactions - they are looking at an individual's strengths. The animals who pay attention are the ones who gain."

More information: "Sleeping gulls monitor the vigilance behaviour of their neighbours," published in *Biology letters*, was authored by Guy Beauchamp (Université Montreal). [www.publishing.royalsociety.or ... ex.cfm?page=1566-30-](http://www.publishing.royalsociety.or...ex.cfm?page=1566-30-)

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