

Staring at seagulls could save your chips

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Staring at seagulls makes them less likely to steal your food, new research shows.

University of Exeter researchers put a bag of chips on the ground and tested how long it took herring [gulls](#) to approach when a human was

watching them, compared to when the human looked away.

On average, gulls took 21 seconds longer to approach the [food](#) with a human staring at them.

The researchers attempted to test 74 gulls, but most flew away or would not approach—only 27 approached the food, and 19 completed both the "looking at" and "looking away" tests. The findings focus on these 19 gulls.

"Gulls are often seen as aggressive and willing to take food from humans, so it was interesting to find that most wouldn't even come near during our tests," said lead author Madeleine Goumas, of the Centre for Ecology and Conservation at Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall.

"Of those that did approach, most took longer when they were being watched. Some wouldn't even touch the food at all, although others didn't seem to notice that a human was staring at them.

"We didn't examine why individual gulls were so different—it might be because of differences in "personality" and some might have had positive experiences of being fed by humans in the past—but it seems that a couple of very bold gulls might ruin the reputation of the rest."

Senior author Dr. Neeltje Boogert added: "Gulls learn really quickly, so if they manage to get food from humans once, they might look for more.

"Our study took place in coastal towns in Cornwall, and especially now, during the summer holidays and beach barbecues, we are seeing more gulls looking for an easy meal. We therefore advise people to look around themselves and watch out for gulls approaching, as they often appear to take food from behind, catching people by surprise.

"It seems that just watching the gulls will reduce the chance of them snatching your food."

The UK's herring gulls are in decline, though numbers in [urban areas](#) are rising. Gulls in these areas are often considered a nuisance because of behaviours like food-snatching.

The researchers say their study shows that any attempt to manage this issue by treating all gulls as being alike could be futile, as most gulls are wary of approaching people. Instead, people might be able to reduce food-snatching by the few bold individuals by modifying their own behaviour.

The natural diet of [herring](#) gulls is fish and invertebrates, and the researchers will next investigate how eating human foods affects the gulls, and their chicks, in the long term. The paper, published in the journal *Biology Letters*, is entitled: "Herring gulls respond to human gaze direction."

More information: Herring gulls respond to human gaze direction, *Biology Letters*, royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsbl.2019.0405

Provided by University of Exeter

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