# Holidaymakers battle cunning seagulls stealing food along UK coasts



From the rugged cliffs of St Ives to the bustling beaches of Brighton, holidaymakers across the UK are increasingly finding themselves under siege from aggressive seagulls. These birds have developed a notorious reputation for their audacious antics, snatching food straight out of the hands of unsuspecting tourists and locals alike. The rise in daring behaviours can be traced back to an influx of visitors who unwittingly encourage these feathered thieves by feeding them and littering, transforming once-peaceful beach outings into nerve-racking battles for lunch.

Recent insights from behavioural ecologist Dr Neeltje Boogert from the University of Exeter have shed light on how best to outsmart these crafty gulls. She suggests a variety of tactics aimed at reducing the likelihood of theft, such as wearing contrasting patterns, maintaining direct eye contact, or even wielding an umbrella for protection. During practical tests in Brighton, some of these strategies showed promise, particularly the use of an umbrella, which provided a successful shield against the birds’ relentless pursuits. However, other methods, like wearing striped clothing, proved less effective, sparking both humour and frustration among beachgoers.

Locals in Brighton have a visceral understanding of the seagulls’ tactics. Regular visitors like Jana Kalinova, who’s been swimming at the beach for years, have developed their own methods for evading the persistent birds. Her strategy involves positioning herself against a wall while eating—a tip echoed by others who believe gulls are less likely to swoop when their approach is obstructed. Kalinova recalls a particularly memorable incident involving a slow-roasted duck sandwich, which prompted an aerial assault from a flock of coordinated birds. “There was one on my left, one on my right... I knew they were planning a heist,” she laughed.

In stark contrast, the seagulls of St Ives have a fearsome reputation for their cunning. Tourists have reported firsthand encounters where their meals were snatched almost instantaneously, with locals claiming that the gulls seem to work together to ambush their targets. Despite attempts to employ Dr Boogert’s advice, many found it challenging to keep their food safe in the face of such persistent birds. Tom Lowry, a visitor to St Ives, bemoaned the frequent thefts he witnessed, particularly of ice creams and bakery goods, remarking, “Everyone knows it’s going to happen; it’s just part of the place.” The beachgoer’s laughter at the situation betrays a shared acceptance of the gulls as unwelcome yet undeniable companions of seaside experiences.

Interestingly, Tenby’s seagull population has taken this audacity a step further. Locals describe a calculated cunning among the birds, often referring to them as a pack that targets visitors leaving popular spots like ice cream parlours. Eileen Hughes, a retired teacher, notes that these birds seem to retaliate against human activity that disrupts their natural habitats, resulting in fiercer encounters. “They’ve moved in because we’ve taken the fish from their waters,” she explained, cautioning visitors to remain vigilant as they enjoy their seaside treats.

Despite the growing fear of aggressive seagull attacks—some of which have resulted in injuries—it is evident that a collective responsibility lies in the hands of both locals and visitors to manage these increasingly bold birds. Experts advocate against feeding seagulls, citing that such actions encourage dependency on human food and ultimately lead to a worsening of the problem. By maintaining cleanliness and disposing of litter properly, holidaymakers might also mitigate the allure for vigilant gulls scouting for an easy meal.

While some may find amusement in the antics of these birds, others are genuinely fearful, particularly parents with small children. In parts of Cornwall, concerns have even escalated to a level where campaigns have begun to address the overpopulation of urban gulls. Calls for measures to reduce numbers have been echoed by conservationists and community members alike, arguing that such steps are vital for safety, especially for vulnerable populations.

As the summer months roll in, and beaches become increasingly populated, the tactics of survival against these aerial bandits will continue to evolve. From wearing stripes to startling them with eye contact, holidaymakers are finding inventive ways to reclaim their meals while acknowledging that the presence of seagulls is an inseparable aspect of the British coastal experience. The rivalry between hungry tourists and hungry gulls only seems to heighten the charm—and challenge—of a day at the seaside.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraph 6
3. Paragraph 7, 8
4. Paragraph 9
5. Paragraph 10
6. Paragraph 11, 12
7. Paragraph 13, 14

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14707681/seagull-bullies-avoid-targeted-Britains-beaches-stealing-snacks.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.aviaway.com/single-post/how-to-prevent-seagulls-from-harassing-you-or-eating-your-food-at-the-beach> - This article provides practical tips to prevent seagulls from harassing beachgoers or stealing their food. Recommendations include choosing the right spot away from high-seagull areas, securing food with covers or in coolers, eating in groups to deter gulls, avoiding feeding seagulls to prevent habituation, using visual deterrents like reflective objects or bird scarers, implementing noise deterrents such as portable sound devices or whistles, maintaining cleanliness by properly disposing of trash, and educating others about not feeding seagulls and keeping the beach clean.
3. <https://time.com/3972735/killer-seagulls-uk-babies/> - This article discusses the escalating problem of aggressive seagull attacks in Cornwall, UK, where seagulls have killed large animals, including a dog and a tortoise, and injured an elderly person. Experts express concern over the potential danger these birds pose to young children, urging caution and not leaving babies unattended outdoors. The article also mentions a petition initiated by Simon Prentis of the Gull Awareness Group to reduce seagull numbers and highlights that even Prime Minister David Cameron has acknowledged the issue, calling for a broader discussion on managing urban gull populations.
4. <https://casablancahfx.ca/seagull-stealing-food-why-do-they-do-it-and-how-to-protect-your-meal/> - This article explores the reasons behind seagulls stealing food and offers strategies to protect meals. It explains that feeding seagulls, whether intentional or unintentional, reinforces their behavior, making them more likely to approach humans for food. To deter seagulls, the article suggests not feeding them, supervising children with food, and using deterrents like visual or auditory methods, such as scarecrows, reflective objects, or whistles. It also emphasizes the shared responsibility of restaurants and businesses in coastal areas to reduce incidents of food theft by implementing proper waste management and educating customers.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-26793423> - This BBC News article addresses the issue of seagull attacks in the UK, particularly in seaside towns like Sidmouth and St Ives. It highlights incidents where seagulls have stolen food from children and adults, causing distress and fear. Conservationists advise against feeding gulls, as it reduces their natural wariness of humans and encourages food theft. The article also mentions measures taken by local businesses, such as providing water pistols to customers to deter gulls, and suggests that eating food while standing next to a wall or under an awning can prevent gulls from stealing it.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/07/stare-seagulls-out-to-save-your-snacks-researcher-says> - This article reports on a study by Madeleine Goumas, a postgraduate researcher at Exeter University, which found that making direct eye contact with seagulls can deter them from stealing food. The study observed that when humans stared at the gulls, the birds were less likely to approach the food, taking significantly longer to do so compared to when the human looked away. The research suggests that eye contact exploits the birds' reactions to perceived threats and can be an effective strategy to protect snacks from seagulls.
7. <https://fooddrinktalk.com/why-do-seagulls-steal-your-food/> - This article examines the behavior of seagulls stealing food and offers insights into their motivations. It explains that feeding seagulls, whether intentional or unintentional, leads to a dependence on human food and makes gulls more daring in their actions. The article also discusses environmental changes, such as urbanization and coastal development, which have increased the availability of food for gulls, leading them to adapt to urban life and scavenge through garbage bins and food courtyards. To deter seagulls, the article recommends securing food in tightly sealed bags or hard-sided coolers and limiting feeding in public spaces.