Gull and Pigeon Control and Protection for Historic Buildings and Conservation Areas

Introduction

Many historic buildings and buildings within Conservation areas can provide valuable nesting and roosting sites for protected birds and bats, and so provide important habitat for wildlife. Most species cause no harm or problems for the buildings or their occupants. Their nesting presence can often go unnoticed, whilst their presence in the neighbourhood is highly valued, the recognition and celebration of swifts as the signal of summer being a prime example. However, there are some species, notably some gulls and feral pigeons, which do cause problems and which need to be controlled.

This short guidance note seeks to provide advice on a hierarchy of available methods, solutions and strategies to deter and control pest or "problem" bird species, and sets out the pros and cons and suitability of each one from a historic built environment perspective.

Three predominant bird species that have become a particular issue within the urban environment of B&NES: herring gull (Larus argentatus); lesser black-backed gull (Larus fuscus) and feral pigeon (Columbia livia). Other than the lesser black-backed gull, which is legally protected, these birds are officially categorised as 'pest birds' within the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1991 and are therefore exempt from the protection provided by the Act for other bird species. However, generally it is illegal to capture, injure or destroy any wild bird or interfere with its nest or eggs. Licences can be issued by Natural England on behalf of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to allow measures to be taken against certain species of bird on certain grounds including the preservation of public health or public safety. Where problems do exist and need to be managed there are various measures that can be adopted. For listed buildings and conservation areas these measures need to be carefully considered as detailed below.

Key issues for the historic environment

Bird guano can cause stone decay from the acids produced by the bacteria contained within it and local limestone is particularly vulnerable. It is also visually disfiguring to historic buildings and the conservation areas that they are often located in. Debris from nests and dead birds can block and cause failure of rainwater goods and roof drainage that can result in external and internal damage to historic fabric. For instance, Bath box guttering, that is usually located internally either in the roof void or in the attics and takes rainwater from the front lead gutters to the rear downpipes, is particularly vulnerable and sensitive to blockages. Solutions to deter birds can also be visually detracting to historic buildings and conservation areas including netting and anti-perching devices.

Initial considerations

In deciding which bird deterrent strategy to implement the initial considerations and assessment should include:

- Is requesting one of the Council's treatment services the most appropriate approach as a first consideration?
- Identification of bird species – this is key because each bird will have its own specific habits that will inform the approach
- Are the birds roosting or nesting?
- Identifying and understanding the nature and magnitude of the problem being caused
- Establishing if the problem is affecting neighbouring buildings
- Is any intervention required and can it be justified?
- Location of building and is it in a prominent location?
- Is the problem recent or is it historical?
- Is the building listed? If so listed building consent may be a requirement for bird protection measures and interventions. Planning permission may also be required
- Is the building in a conservation area and will the measures and intervention have an adverse impact?
- Is the building an undesignated heritage asset that makes a positive contribution to the conservation area that would be adversely affected by the proposed measures and intervention?

- How visible is the proposed location for the measures and intervention, are they appropriate and how can the visual impact be mitigated, reduced or avoided?
- How will the measures and intervention physically impact on the building and how can this be avoided or minimised?
- Consider seeking pre-application advice from the Local Planning Authority to discuss and identify appropriate measures, intervention and locations

Hierarchy of intervention

Egg replacement

The most appropriate approach to dealing with pest birds is adopting a hierarchy of intervention: i.e. the least visually and physically intrusive method should be considered first. For instance, first consider contacting the Council's Environmental Services that offer a treatment service that involves an egg replacement programme where real eggs are replaced with fake eggs during the nesting and breeding season. This ultimately results in the dispersal of a colony of nesting gulls. It has proven to be an effective method of deterrent that does not require any alteration to a building and therefore regarded as the most desirable approach.

Physical deterrents

There are broadly two main categories of physical bird deterrents: anti-perching and anti-entry. However, there are also other miscellaneous strategies including high-tech, low-tech and traditional. The following provides more detail on each method; its appropriate application and advantages and disadvantages:

Anti-perching devices

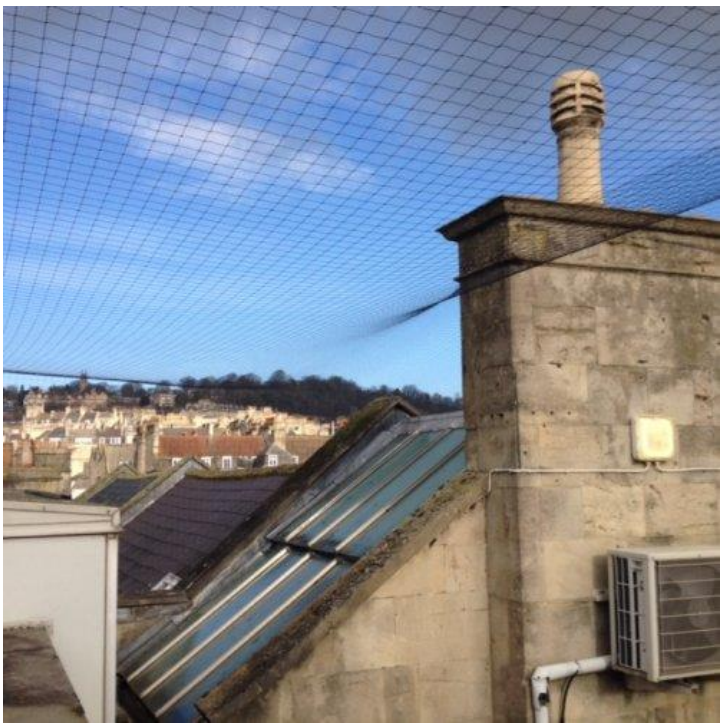
- Anti-perching wire/sprung wire (**listed building consent required if listed building**) – Anti-perching wire methods are commonly used to prevent large birds from perching in specific areas such the leading edges of sills and ledges and therefore appropriate for deterring pigeons and herring gulls. It is generally regarded as effective and relies on the springing quality of the wire to discourage perching due to causing discomfort. Birds, particularly pigeons, tend to perch on leading edges whilst looking for food and at the same time foul the stonework of the building with acidic guano. Whilst they are relatively visually discreet sightlines that are visible from prominent public places should be avoided.

- Spikes also discourage the habit of perching by causing discomfort and the birds fail to perch. Spikes can be effective on ledges where, if enough of them are used, they will deter birds. They are also effective when restricting access to certain localised sites typically inhabited by Herring gulls, for example they can be effective around chimney stacks. They are generally ineffectual if placed around parapet walls or installed at low densities. This method can be visually intrusive and detract from the appearance of listed buildings and the conservation area, however, because the spikes can be glued to the surface of the stone as opposed to inserted into masonry, it is a reversible method. There are also maintenance implications to consider due to the problem that guano and nesting debris commonly collects between the spikes and can accumulate to the extent that it renders the deterrent ineffective.

These methods require fixings to be firmly fixed to the stonework and therefore cause physical damage that can lead to fracturing and stone decay in the worst cases. However, if the pins can be fixed within mortar joints this damage can be avoided. Furthermore, standard ferrous fixings should also be avoided because they are prone to corrosion that can cause stone decay. Alternatively, to avoid this stainless steel should be used both for the fixings and wire. Where glue is proposed to secure metal fixings flexible mastic rather than a hard setting type should be used also to avoid stone decay and damage. However, where the historic stonework is in poor condition and friable applying the mastic directly to this is likely to cause damage and may also be ineffectual. Therefore appropriate stone repair using lime mortar should be undertaken prior to installing any fixings. These measures have a lifespan of approximately 10 years. However, they need to be properly installed and maintained to be effective and installed incorrectly will not deter pest birds and may cause damage to the building.

Anti-entry

- Exclusion netting (**listed building consent and planning permission required**) – this is regarded as being effective in deterring birds from central courtyards, other enclosed and recessed areas of buildings, for instance internal valleys within 'M' style roofs that are very common in Bath and also architectural features such as statuary within pediments. However, it does require relatively substantial fixings, which can cause damage to historic stonework. It can also be a visually highly intrusive method of bird deterrent and should be avoided in exposed areas on the front of buildings. Care must also be taken to ensure netting is not used in locations where it may obstruct bats' access to roost spaces, which are legally protected, or the nesting or roosting sites of other, non-target bird species, which could also breach legislation. If there is a risk of this, or if there are known bat roosting or bird nesting locations in the vicinity, it is advisable to obtain professional advice from a suitably experienced ecologist (e.g. a licenced bat worker) before proceeding. Deterrents that impact on bat roosts may require a licence.



However, in the correct location in discreet areas of the building, netting can be an effective solution and with a lifespan up to approximately 20 years if coated with a UV coating. It is also manufactured in various colours to suit that of the background material including roof coverings, which can minimise its visual impact. In addition, another important consideration is the size of the mesh and this will be informed by the assessment of the predominant species of bird needing to be deterred and controlled. If the mesh size is incorrect (i.e. too small) nesting can occur on the netting or allow entry or cause the bird, or non-target species, to become trapped if too big. There are maintenance considerations also and the netting requires regular inspection to avoid the accumulation of debris.

Other methods of deterrent and control

There are a number of other methods of deterrent however these have been largely dismissed as inappropriate or ineffectual. For instance, anti-perching gel, sonic, distress signal call system, decoys, biological control, shooting, trapping and poisoning. Therefore these methods are not recommended in this guidance.

The most effective management of these pest or problem species may require a number of strategies and a holistic approach may be the most appropriate and successful.

The guidance should be read in conjunction with all advice and guidance published by the Council's Environmental Services (See Bath & North East Somerset Council's Pest Control Service guidance - Urban Gulls: how to stop them nesting on your roof), and where applicable, professional ecological advice, and the advice of wildlife conservation bodies such the RSPB and Bat Conservation Trust.

Summary

It can sometimes be in everyone’s interest to control pest birds due to the adverse issues that can occur including general nuisance and adverse impact on the appearance of historic buildings in conservation areas. In the case of nesting colonies of birds, egg replacement during the nesting and breeding season should be considered in the first instance. However, in terms of dealing with problems outside of the breeding season it is critical to identify the specific bird species in order to identify the most appropriate method and approach not only to deter them but also, importantly, ensure that the chosen method does not harm protected wildlife or visually detract from the appearance of the historic environment in Bath and North East Somerset.