

## HERRING GULLS NEST ON SLANTING ROOF

by William E. Davis, Jr.

On June 15, 1988, while walking back from the heron colony on Clark's Island, Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts, I noticed a Herring Gull sitting on a nest on a housetop, where two sections of the pitched roof joined. I was intrigued by the odd location of the nest and returned the following day to photograph the bird and nest. On June 18 as I was again preparing to photograph the nest, a chick, approximately three to five days old, stood up in the nest and looked around before settling back out of sight. I was unable to continue to monitor the success of this nesting attempt or to determine how many chicks were present. However, William Brittingham, a student in Manomet Bird Observatory's field biology training program (who was living in the house and studying the fledging success of ground-nesting gulls in the vicinity), later told me that the chicks



probably had not survived. Predation by Great Black-backed Gulls on the study nests in the yard around the house had been very severe, with a low fledging rate for even the more protected nests. I had observed Great Black-backed Gulls roosting on the roof peak within ten feet of the Herring Gull nest. Katharine Parsons reported that an active gull nest was on the same roof in 1987 and 1989.

I was aware that Herring Gulls occasionally nested above the ground. Katharine Parsons (paper in preparation) had documented that most of the approximately two thousand pairs of Herring Gulls at Clark's Island nest on the ground in a variety of habitats, but about one percent nest in cedar trees. Moreover, a literature search revealed that roof-nesting is widespread in Herring Gulls, other gull species, and many other bird species as well. This practice is rapidly increasing and causing nuisance problems in many urban areas.

Erma J. Fisk (1978) documented roof-nesting by twenty-two species of birds, including fulmars, Ospreys, oystercatchers, three plovers and sandpipers, five terns, and nine gulls. Herring Gulls were first reported nesting on roofs in 1894 at a Black Sea port (Cramp 1971). The practice was widespread in England by 1976 and rapidly expanding, with ninety-two colonies listed for the British Isles. Fifty of these were settled between 1969 and 1976, probably due to the saturation of normal nesting sites and an expanding gull population (Monaghan and Coulson 1977). Raymond A. Paynter, Jr. (1963) reported one hundred and fifty Herring Gull nests atop a large building on a Boston waterfront pier, the first North American record for roof-nesting gulls. Buckley and Buckley (1980) reported Herring Gulls nesting on rooftops on Long Island. Their report included a photograph of a Herring Gull nest at the juncture of two sections of a slanting roof, a site structurally similar to the nest site of the Clark's Island gull.

The nesting of Ring-billed Gulls on rooftops was documented by Blokpoel and Smith (1988) in Ontario, Canada. They also reported seven Herring Gull



*Photos by William E. Davis, Jr.*

nests atop one building in 1986 and forty-four on the roof of the Bruce Nuclear Power Development in Bruce, Ontario. The fouling and associated problems necessitated control measures. Several hundred pairs of Glaucous-winged Gulls have nested atop buildings in Vancouver, British Columbia (Vermeer et al. 1988). The authors included a photograph of a gull nesting on a shingle roof, wedged against a chimney, in Sidney, Canada.

It appears that the increase in population of many gull species, due in part to open dumps and other human-caused habitat changes, has expanded nest-site selection in these behaviorally plastic species to include man-made structures such as roofs. Nesting success, where it has been studied (Vermeer et al. 1988), has not been good due to lack of cover and gull predation. Many rooftop-nesting attempts have caused problems which led to the adoption of control measures, thus insuring nesting failure. Most roof-nesting gulls choose to nest near chimney or vent structures on flat roofs, presumably for support and shade, and use similar structures for support on slanting roofs. In the case of the Herring Gull nest at Clark's Island, the angle between two sections of the roof apparently provided more support than the pitched surface of the roof alone.

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