

AN INCIDENT OF HERRING GULL BEHAVIOR
By Mabel Gillespie

During the summer of 1963, Grace Meleney and I decided we should try to band adult herring gulls as well as fledglings. We each invested in a stout net and visited the various open dumps on the island of Martha's Vineyard. We were unsuccessful for various reasons which need not be elaborated on.

Then we tried an experiment in capturing them in Ocean Park, Oak Bluffs. Here the road runs between the park and the edge of the bluff facing Nantucket Sound. The several acres of park are bordered on the other sides by rows of closely placed homes most of which are occupied only during the summer.

It is interesting to note the change in herring gull habits in September. A great exodus of summer residents comes early in the month. It seems as if the gulls had marked Labor Day on their calendars. With a regularity like that of Capistrano swallows they celebrate the Tuesday after Labor Day by an invasion of areas formerly occupied by human beings. They take over Ocean Park which has no trees, some formal gardens, and expanses of grass.

Just off the main road is a house occupied the year round whose occupant regularly puts out food for the gulls in the near corner of the park. Immediately some gull signal is given and flocks gather for the feast.

This seemed a good place to try for adult gulls, but we were in doubt as to how to plan our strategy. Wind is an almost constant factor on the Vineyard, and it was particularly strong in this area. It would be difficult to anchor poles securely enough to support the heavy net in the wind. And the net, in spite of its weight, would flap warningly.

Grace then made a suggestion which, at the time, seemed inspired. "Why," she said, "can't we spread the net on the ground covering the food. Then when the gulls come down maybe their feet will get entangled."

We concentrated the food, spread the net over the bits, and retired to watch. Twenty or more gulls promptly arrived and settled down on the net. At once they became suspicious and spread their wings for flight. As they rose the net, in which their feet were entangled, rose with them. With shouts of triumph we ran to band our victims. But our joy was short-lived. A few flips freed their feet and the net dropped to the ground.

We spread out the net again and brought more food. The gulls gathered in a solemn circle outside the net, but not one ventured near the food. Our "hostess" brought out more and daintier tidbits, and still no gull would put

foot on the net. Finally she produced a live and wriggling eel of medium size. This, she declared, would be sure temptation. The eel wriggled over the heavy meshes of the net and the gulls watched, but not one ventured over the edge. The eel grew weaker and finally died, and its remains adhered stickily to the net.

Eventually we got the eel remains scraped off the mesh and rolled up the net. No sooner had we left the park than the gulls swarmed over the food scattered on the grass.

In spite of the fact that the island population is largely bird-minded, it probably regards the two women banders as a bit crazy, but entertainingly so. The next time I went to the Oak Bluffs post office the clerk in attendance said, "What were you doing out in Ocean Park with a snake?"

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