

## “Sea-gulls” – Dave deCalesta

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Know those crow-sized white birds that poop all over decks, docks, and boat covers and occasionally wash up dead on your beach? Sea-gulls, right? NOT! Nope, they're properly called gulls, without the “sea” prefix. Having lived out west before coming to Keuka Lake and been assailed by a half-dozen or so different gull species, I was prepared to write a treatise on a number of interesting gull species resident on Keuka Lake. Wrong again. Despite the variety of colors exhibited by our gulls, they are almost all members of one species: the herring gull. The different colors and shades of white represent gulls of different ages as well as of differing seasons – like all birds gulls molt (lose their feathers) so there are about seven variations of white, white mottled with brown, brown mottled with white and so on.



Adult herring gull in summer



Adult herring gull in winter



Juvenile herring gull

Herring gulls are resident on Keuka Lake, but also migrate through in fall and winter. They nest in a shallow depression scraped out of the sand or beach material, sometimes lined with feathers. They nest on islands where available and generally in colonies near water and protected from predators like raccoons. One to three chicks are hatched which leave the nest ready to motor in day two.

One of the reasons we don't have too many dead fish washing up on shore is that **dead fish** is a preferred dietary item for this gull. They eat anything else, including garbage. They will drop clams from a height onto rocks to break them open. They flock to recently-plowed agricultural fields, picking up bugs, dead mice, etc. These are the birds that wheel in large flocks at landfills and garbage dumps. And they like the McDonalds fries and other freebies they can find in large parking lots. Gulls get their heads stuck through the plastic separators for six packs of beer and soft drinks: in addition to not pitching them overboard, these gull death traps should be snipped apart with scissors when you are done with them or they will get ensnared by them in landfills (next to lakes, right up there on preferred foraging grounds for gulls).

Herring gulls were nearly wiped out in the 1880s as their feathers were sought after for women's hats. And this is the species credited with saving Mormon field crops in Utah between 1848 and 1850 from plagues of grasshoppers.

Because they clean up the beaches, gulls should be viewed as beneficial rather than pest species. Many lakefront owners complain about the white-washing gulls do on docks, boat houses, rafts, and boat covers. Gulls are protected by state and Federal law (the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918) and in addition to being illegal, shooting gulls just creates a momentary void, sort of like trying to empty the lake with a bucket. An earlier issue of the KLA newsletter