

Removal & Transportation of Gull Chicks & Eggs to Rescue Centres - Logistics and Welfare Considerations

When removing eggs or chicks to be reared by rescue centres, it is essential that the rescue centre in question is contacted prior to removal and agrees to take in the number of eggs and/or chicks. Therefore, it is important to determine the numbers of each, and agree a date with the centre that they will be brought in to them.

Section 1.0

Removal & Boxing

1.1 Timing of Removal

Wildlife rescue centres tend to have a higher capacity for chicks than eggs since egg incubators can fill up quickly. Therefore, taking young chicks to centres is better than taking eggs in terms of both space requirements and survivorship of chicks. Eggs are usually laid and incubated for 28-30 days before hatching.

The removal of chicks should, ideally, occur within the first week of hatching; two if necessary. After this time, gulls become more mobile and harder to catch, which presents greater risks to both birds and people. Younger chicks will also be smaller, so more can be transported with more space available per bird.

Do not remove eggs which are within a few days of hatching, or which are in the process of hatching. The risk of death is heightened if they are handled or their environment changed during hatching. Do not, under any circumstances, 'help' a chick to hatch from an egg. This can result in suffering, deformity and death of the chick, as hatching can take a whole day.

1.2 Logistics of Removal

Care must be taken to safely move eggs/chicks from roofs/nest sites to ground level. They can be put into a bag, closed to prevent escape, and carried, with care being taken not to apply pressure to the bag. Eggs cracking will almost certainly lead to chick death, so care must be taken to avoid this. Preferably, eggs and chicks should be moved separately, and care must be taken to prevent eggs from hitting off one another during movement.

Any eggs removed need to be handled carefully and moved to a secure, warm holding container as quickly as possible. Care must be taken to handle eggs without rapid movement or dropping, so as to protect any chicks or embryos inside. If artificial heat of no more than 38°C (37-38°C is optimal) can be provided, then this is ideal. However, chicks in eggs can survive up to two hours in room-temperature environments.

___ Chicks and eggs must be removed separately so that both can be immediately transferred to the correct holding container without any mixing of eggs and chicks. The following scenario should be avoided by carrying out a site survey prior to gull jobs, however, if there is not enough room in the vehicle or transport containers for all chicks or eggs then chicks need to be prioritised over eggs. Where there may be room for some but not all eggs, lighter eggs must be prioritised, as eggs lose weight

during incubation, so these may be further along (not including any deformed eggs). Again, this event should not occur, as previous site-checks should allow for decisions to be made in advance with regards to how many chicks/eggs can be transported.

In the event that a pest control technician can only adequately transport either eggs or chicks, not both, then chicks must be prioritised, while being aware of the fact that eggs may be close to hatching. Licensing rules mean that eggs should be removed or destroyed long before the point of hatching.

In the event that there is space for some but not all chicks to be transported for rearing, it is better to transport those which there is room for only, than none at all. No matter the size of gull chick present on the roof, it should not be assumed that any gull chicks are old enough to fly or fend for themselves if they are catchable by the pest control technician, even if they look like they are large enough to fly. These should be taken along with any small chicks, but housed separately for the duration of the journey as they may pose a risk to the smaller chicks. If a gull chick ends up on the ground then it must be taken in to the rescue centre along with any others, as a parent will continue to defend its young on the ground, and any that fall may be injured.

The following should not occur because a site survey should have already been carried out, but if the number of chicks or eggs at the nesting site is more than was agreed with the rescue centre, contact them before removal to confirm that the total number is manageable for the centre. If it is not possible to get through to the centre or they cannot take the extra, only remove the ones that they have capacity for. A separate license needs to be applied for if the remainder cannot be taken to a rescue centre.

Section 2.0

Transportation

2.1 Necessary Time Limitations

For the purpose of welfare and survival of both chicks and eggs, the maximum suggested time between any egg being removed from a roof and delivered to a wildlife rescue centre is two hours. All efforts should be made to make this time as minimal as possible. See below for exceptions.

Transportation for eggs especially needs to be carried out in as little time as possible. Chicks may be transported over a longer period of time than two hours providing that they are transported in adequate containers which keep them comfortable and safe when it comes to temperature, stocking density, stress mitigation, food and water needs, and cleanliness of down or feathers. See below for more specific requirements regarding these points.

In the event of portable incubators being in possession of pest control technicians, the transportation of eggs can be longer than this two hour window, but it is advised that chicks and eggs are checked upon at least once an hour above the two hour window and chicks are provided with fresh water no less than every two hours – water must be removed when the vehicle is on the move to prevent gulls from getting wet or dirty. For journeys of a longer duration, it may be necessary to have a change of towels, blankets or newspapers to keep the housing container(s) clean. See Section 2.5 below for further details.

Attempt to minimise the time between the first and last chicks/eggs being removed from a nest site so that the first chick removed is not having to spend any longer than necessary in the transport container before being received at the rescue centre. This is especially important for eggs, whose temperatures will be lowered as soon as the nesting parent gulls are disturbed by your presence onsite.

If the transport vehicle breaks down and is unable as a result to deliver the gulls in the time that has been allowed for transportation, the rescue centre must be contacted to see if anyone can come for the chicks. This is one reason why notifying the centre of the date and time of the journey is so important, as preparations can be made for arrival of birds, and reacting to any issues such as this.

2.2 Requirements For Egg Transport Containers

Eggs must be supported so as to lie in one position without rolling or hitting off one another and risking cracking. This can be done by lying eggs on a blanket and using blankets, towels or cloths to separate eggs from one another. For short journeys under two hours only, they can be stood up in egg boxes.

Chicks and eggs must not be transported in the same container as one another, regardless of whether or not they have been from the same nest. A heat mat can be used to keep eggs warm (around 37-38°C) if possible, but it is understood that this will not usually be feasible, and short-term egg cooling is not detrimental to embryos.

2.3 Requirements For Chick Transport Containers

If you wish for chicks to be reared in captivity but transportation to a rescue centre is not possible, the nearest participating rescue centre must be contacted at the earliest opportunity – preferably days or weeks before the job is carried out after initial site survey - and before gulls or eggs are removed from any premises, for confirmation of whether or not the centre is able to provide staff or volunteers to meet pest control technicians on-site and transport the gulls/chicks back to the rescue centre. However, unless agreed in advance with the rescue centre in question, this method of gull chick/egg transportation should not be relied upon as a rule as it is likely that rescue centres will not always be able to provide staff or volunteers, or may feel pressured into providing a transportation service which they do not have the means to do adequately. Therefore, transportation is the responsibility of the pest controller to carry out or organise.

The base of the container(s) must have thick newspaper or blankets to prevent gulls from sliding around during transportation and to help absorb any droppings to prevent feather/down contamination. Ensure box bases are sturdy and won't fall through from the weight of the gulls when being carried.

Ensure that any containers used have lids or a way to cover them, so that they can be kept shut/covered while allowing air circulation into the container. While cardboard boxes with small air holes in the top can be used, these can become damp quickly if the base is not covered appropriately (see above).

Ensure containers are clean prior to each new job – if chicks have previously been in containers, make sure these have been washed and have fresh blankets or papers.

Any cardboard boxes can be re-used if they are appropriately clean.

Do not transport gulls or eggs in a vehicle without them being in boxes or carriers.

'Loose' gulls are likely to become injured during transportation.

2.4 Stocking of Chick Transport Containers

Gulls must be housed so that there is enough space for each to lie down, stand up fully, and turn around without imposing on other gulls. Chicks of very similar size can be housed together if containers have enough space, but if sizes vary they must be separated according to size, and large, feathered chicks should at no point be put alongside small, down-covered chicks for risk of predation. For this reason, it is good practice to take more transport containers than is likely to be necessary in terms of space alone.

Stock transport containers as sparsely as possible to decrease the likelihood of any gulls being pecked, squished by others, or having feathers/down soiled.

Care must be taken not to mix common or black-headed gull chicks with any other species of gull, as herring and lesser black backed gull chicks commonly attack the other two from an early age (and often earlier than humans can tell the difference between the chicks). Herring gull and lesser black backed gulls can be transported together, but any gull seen either attacking others or being attacked by others must be separated for the duration of the journey, with care taken to ensure that they are not attacking nor attacked if put in with a new group. Aggressor gulls would be best housed alone for the duration of the journey. Gull chicks will occasionally fight even if given enough space, but ensuring adequate space lowers the likelihood of this.

Keeping gulls in the dark, while minimising stress, also lowers the chance of fighting, and is good practice. (Just ensure they still have good ventilation.)

Do not allow a situation wherein gulls are forced to stand on one another or get in one another's way due to lack of space. Care must be taken before attending the removal to have enough containers and containers of the right size for housing the chicks, keeping in mind that chicks may have grown in size since the site survey. The type of container used to transport chicks or eggs should be thought through carefully. Things to be taken in to account when choosing a container include escape risk, injury risk, risk of toppling, etc. Avoid stacking transport containers if possible, as this may prevent air flow and allow droppings to fall on any chicks or eggs below.

Avoid containers with sharp edges, bars - smaller gulls may get their heads stuck - and avoid any sort of netting altogether. While cat or dog carriers can be used, ensure that these still allow any gulls within them to be in darkness by covering or keeping the carrier in a dark part of the vehicle. As gulls can be messy, it is advisable to put down old sheeting under any carriers with bars to catch any droppings which may fall outwith the carriers.

2.5 Temperature of Transport Containers & Vehicle

On hot summer's days it is possible for chicks on roofs to be overheating even before they are picked up by pest controllers. Care must be taken to house them in an environment of around 'room temperature' (18°C) for the duration of the journey

(bearing in mind that a dark vehicle boot will heat up more than a driving cabin). Do not attempt to cool any chicks down by spraying or dousing in water, as they can easily become drenched and too cold. If the area where chicks are is expected to be very warm, check the gulls regularly. The wildlife centre can be called for advice if you have any concerns about chick or egg health.

Eggs can be left at 'room temperature' if only being transported for up to two hours, but for longer periods of time they will need to be stored at between 37-38°C, although it is understood that this will rarely be feasible. It is important to ensure that gulls are not overheating. The risks can be lessened by:

- Avoiding over-crowding of holding containers (the fewer gulls per container, the better)
- Keeping windows open (if chicks are in same area as driver), and fan on if necessary
- Keeping the doors of the vehicle open at the removal site until the journey begins
- Allowing air flow into holding containers (eg avoiding weighing down containers with heavy blankets to keep them covered, which could make them become very warm), and not stacking them
- Checking on gulls regularly
- Keeping a thermometer in the area where gulls are kept, and aiming to keep the temperature no higher than 20°C, or not for long (unless transporting eggs only)
- Aiming to avoid chick transportation on days which are expected to be exceptionally warm

Gulls lying flat out and/or open-mouth breathing may be too hot and should be allowed to cool down. If undertaking a journey of over two hours, gulls should be checked hourly, and these symptoms must be looked out for. Call the wildlife centre with any concerns.

Gulls put in secure containers after removal can be put straight into the vehicle as long as the vehicle is already cool enough if it is a hot day. Otherwise, secure boxes can be kept in a safe, shaded place until all gulls are in the containers and ready for transport.

2.6 Provision of Food & Water

As transport times to wildlife centres should not be too long, there should be no need to provide food or water to chicks. On the contrary, nervous gulls commonly regurgitate and may soak and soil their feathers if they are fed before or during the journey. Furthermore, any food or water put into their transport containers is likely to be walked through or spilt and dampen or soil down or feathers, so feeding them anything is not recommended.

Any gulls found overheating may be offered water in a dish as long as this is not left unattended and is removed once the vehicle is in motion

Never attempt to force-/syringe-feed a chick food, water or any other solution. They can easily aspirate.

2.7 Minimising Stress

Avoid playing the vehicle's radio loudly or shouting

Ensure all chicks are housed in the dark if possible as this reduces stress levels

Aim to make a direct journey with no detours or unnecessary stops

2.8 Other Important Welfare Considerations

If a chick is found injured or is injured during the process of removal or transportation, the injured chick or chicks must be separated from all others and the transport container must be identifiable so that individual can be prioritised at the wildlife centre. If a bird is injured, the wildlife rescue centre is to be contacted so that they can decide whether or not it is in the interests of the gull's welfare to undergo the journey (ie, if it is treatable). If the centre cannot be reached then a vet should be called for advice.

Ensure that nothing heavy in the vehicle is capable of rolling or falling onto gull chicks or transport containers

Ensure that when driving, transport containers do not fall over or slide around the vehicle

All eggs or chicks removed from roofs are to be taken promptly and directly to participating wildlife rescue centres only.

No egg or chick is to be hand-reared anywhere other than on the sites of the participating wildlife rescue centres and by their staff and/or volunteers.

Section 3.0

Delivery

All rescue centres must have agreed to taking gulls prior to the day of removal and the number and age (i.e. chick or egg) removed agreed by both parties to ensure that the centre has the capacity. On the day of removal, aim to make the rescue centre aware of an estimated time of arrival as soon as possible so that preparations can be made.

If the wildlife centre has to back out of the agreement and another centre cannot take the chicks, ensure that your license covers dispatch of the eggs or chicks on the nesting site. The license may need to be amended prior to the work if the nature of the removal has changed.

When arriving at the wildlife centre, be sure to check on the chicks/eggs at the earliest opportunity after parking the vehicle and alert staff to any chicks which require more urgent attention, for example, as a result of injury or distress.

If, in the unlikely event a gull has died on the journey, notify staff and assess the situation as best as possible so that this can be noted and possible causes can be determined so as to reduce the chance of it happening in future.