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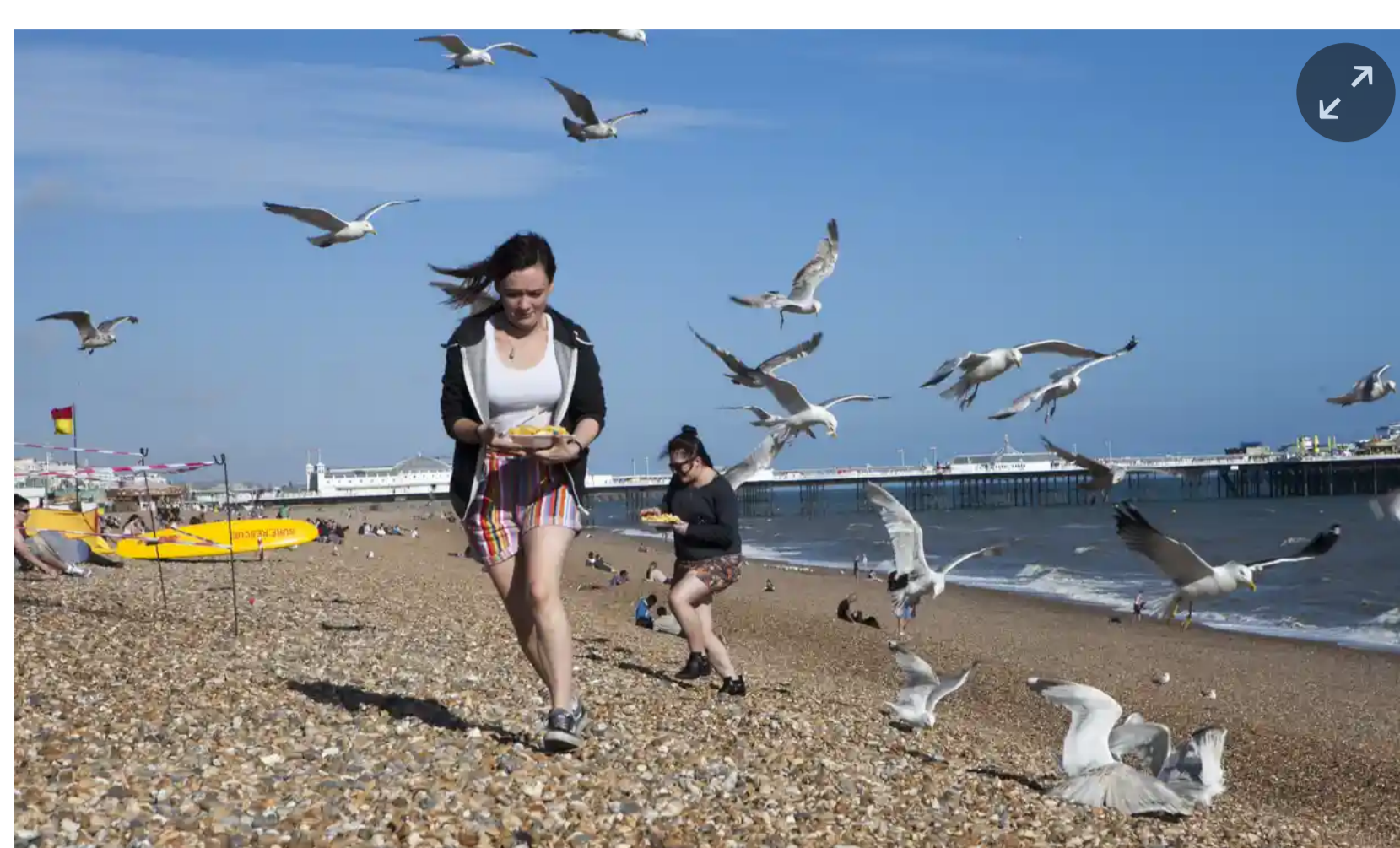
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Pass notes
Birds

Justice for gulls! They steal our chips - but also deserve our love, empathy and respect

Scientists say the birds' tendency to swoop on our sandwiches is a sign of intelligence. But will that make you less frustrated as your lunch flies away?



Giving takeaway chips a whole new meaning. Photograph: Elena Rostunova/Shutterstock

Name: Glorious gulls.

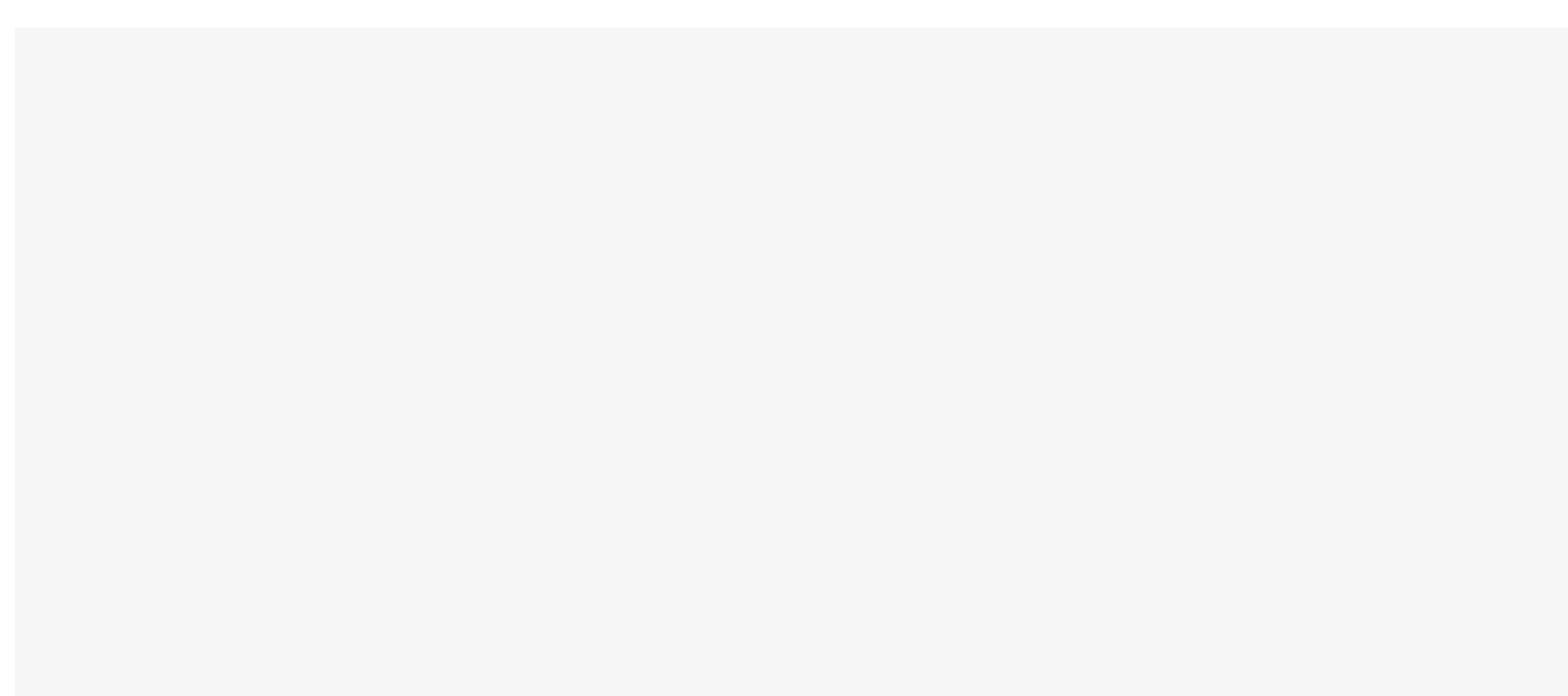
Age: Typically, gulls live between five and 15 years in the wild.

Seagulls, right? No such thing.

Eh? "Seagull" is not a species. There are more than 50 species of gull worldwide. In the UK, there are just a few relatively common gulls including the herring gull, black-headed gull, common gull (less common, confusingly), great black-backed gull, lesser black-backed gull ...

Yeah, all right, Bill Oddie. What about Jonathan Livingston Seagull? He's fictional. And allegorical.

Whatever. They still nick chips. It has been known.



And ice-creams. For dessert, presumably.

And everyone's seen the video of the seagull - sorry, gull - shoplifting a sandwich. From the Co-op, in Aberdeen. Demonstrating a certain nous.

Nous? They're a bloody menace, sky delinquents! Well, Prof Paul Graham of the University of Sussex ...

In Brighton, right? Home to some of the worst offenders! Whole gangs of them preying on unsuspecting day trippers and foreign students, as well as raiding the residents' bins ... Prof Graham says: "I think we need to learn to live with them."

What! Why? Because of multiple pressures - including loss of natural habitat, dwindling fish stocks - populations are falling in the wild and they're being forced into urban spaces.

Yeah, but do they really need to turn to crime? "When we see behaviours we think of as mischievous or criminal almost, we're seeing a really clever bird implementing very intelligent behaviour," Prof Graham told the BBC.

Going through the bins is intelligent? They've learned how to tell which discarded items are edible.

And that food tastes better if you get it fresh - either by dive-bombing unsuspecting humans or robbing it directly from shops. And negotiating automatic doors, as well as evading security guards to do so. That incident in Aberdeen involved a herring gull, by the way - they're on the red list.

Most wanted? No, the red list of threatened species. It means they're a conservation concern because of declining numbers. Gulls are amazing - they're graceful, gliding over the sea for hours and hours ...

Sky rats! They can drink sea water, flushing the salt out of the body. They're monogamous ...

Boring! And colonial ...

Boo! No, as in they breed in colonies. They co-parent, too - 50:50.

So do I! And I pay for my sandwiches. They helped mid-19th-century Mormon settlers in Utah by devouring a plague of crickets. There's a monument in Salt Lake City commemorating the event, known as the **Miracle of the Gulls**.

Hallelujah! Quite.

Do say (as a certain French philosopher once did): "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea."

Don't say: "Gull cull, gull cull!"

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