

# Did Great Black-backed Gull Breed in Durham in 2016?

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On 31st July 2016 I arrived at Whitburn Steel to look for waders and terns. It was high tide and I was hoping there would be some waders roosting below the small headland that overlooks the muddy bay. On the water just below the cliffs, I noticed 4 juvenile Great Black-backed Gulls alongside an adult. It became clear that the juveniles were begging for food from the adult, which indicated that the juveniles had fledged within the preceding month or so. I took a quick video of the birds and made a mental note to check the breeding status of Great Black-backed Gull in Durham.

Although I knew Great Black-backed Gull was a rare breeder in north-east England, I was surprised to read in Bowey and Newsome (2012) that Great Black-backed Gull has never bred in Durham. The big question is, were these juveniles born in Durham? Or were they born outside the county and had flown down to Whitburn Steel?

Around 17,000 pairs of Great Black-backed Gull breed in the UK (Mitchell 2004) but the only regular breeding site in north-east England is the Farne Islands in Northumberland where 12 pairs bred in 2011 (Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club 2015). Could the Great Black-backed Gull family I observed at Whitburn Steel have flown down from the Farne Islands? Indeed family parties of terns that have bred on the Farne Islands and Coquet Island are regularly observed along the Durham coast in late summer. The family of Great Black-backed Gulls were still present in exactly the same place a fortnight later on 12th August, perhaps supporting the notion that the juveniles were born in Durham. Next summer, I will be checking Marsden Rock and the other stacks off the South Tyneside coastline in the hope of confirming Durham's first breeding record of Great Black-backed Gull.

A video of the four juveniles begging for food from the adult is available here:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/31121749@N06/28648036436/in/album-72157671437728682/>

## References

- Bowey, K and Newsome, M (2012). The Birds of Durham. Durham Bird Club.
- Mitchell et al (2004). Seabird populations of Britain and Ireland. Poyser, London.
- Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club (2015). Northumbria Bird Atlas. NTBC.