

Seabirds in the city: Urban futures and fraught coexistence

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i. Introduction: 'Save our Seagulls'

On 1st August 2018, *The Newcastle Chronicle* ran the headline: *SOS: Save Our Seagulls*. The headline followed a public outcry over the death of a number of kittiwakes – a pelagic species of gull – that had become trapped in netting on NewcastleGateshead Quayside in North East England. A change.org petition to remove the netting attracted over 10,000 signatures in less than a week; by the end of the year there were more than 100,000.

The summer of 2018 was just one of many summers marked by an ongoing dispute concerning the urban presence of a colony of kittiwakes. Every year, between March and August, an estimated 1900 pairs of kittiwakes return to breed along the River Tyne, of which 900 return to the urban areas of Gateshead and Newcastle. Whilst normally a coastal breeding bird, at their furthest point the Tyne kittiwakes are eleven miles from the coast, making them the furthest inland colony in the world. Various nesting on window ledges, drainpipes, streetlights, rooftops, and road infrastructure, this noteworthy colony of kittiwakes has swapped the cliffs of the coast for the artificial structures of the city, prompting fraught debates on coexistence, socio-environmental futures, and urban politics and planning.

The movement of diverse species into cities has become a globally important issue, often couched in debates on extinction, habitat destruction, shifting ecologies, and conflict (Barua and Sinha, 2017; Narayanan and Bindumadhav, 2019). The case of the Tyne Kittiwakes is especially pertinent in the context of global declines in seabird numbers, a severe decline in kittiwakes over the last four decades (at a rate of more than 40%), and a growth in urban kittiwake colonies in Northern Europe, raising important questions about urban futures in a climate-changed world (Houston et al. 2018; Plumwood, 2010; Van Dooren, 2014). At the same time, as a member of the gull family, kittiwakes are subject to competing systems of devaluation that render them out of place and draw attention to the challenges that they pose for coexistence. As the paper demonstrates, while the Tyne Kittiwakes have arguably unsettled understandings of public space, urban belonging, and oceanic boundaries, normative notions of the city, species value and ingrained forms of urban regulation continue to inhibit the possibility for a more expansive urban politics.

The paper draws on three years of ethnographic research, which was chiefly concerned with understanding the fraught politics of urban coexistence, and how the Tyne kittiwakes shape and are shaped by a series of political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions. Observation of breeding sites, planning meetings, talks and tours, were supported by interviews with members of the public, wildlife organisations (both welfare and conservation), local councils, business owners, ornithologists, and marine scientists. Discourse and content analysis of local and national reporting on the Tyne Kittiwakes from 1998 onwards (when they first appeared in the local press) examined how the colony has featured in public debate, while an analysis of media reports on urban gulls and ‘seagulls’ for the same period provided a wider understanding of public discourse around gulls more generally. Much of the research focused on the Tyne, but it also extended to the Farne Islands, the Northumberland coastline, and to Tromsø in northern Norway as part of a collaboration with seabird ecologists on urban kittiwake behaviour and climate change (Katz, 2020).

In centring the fraught politics of coexistence that surrounds the urban presence of kittiwakes, the paper offers an ambivalent reading of the multispecies city. As I argue, the ethical imperatives associated with climate change and species loss sit uneasily with the systems that regularly devalue non-human life, including the discourses that accompany so-called ‘trash species’ such as gulls. Urban kittiwakes highlight the challenges involved in affirming ethical forms of coexistence in contexts where species have risen to prominence as sources of conflict and discomfort. In so doing, they not only highlight the limits of the multispecies city but raise pressing questions about how to live with species in ambivalent contexts without resorting to different forms of aesthetic or economic valorisation.

With these arguments in mind, Section ii draws out the core debates that frame the paper, which intervenes in scholarship on multispecies cities and shifting ecological proximities, while also addressing the ambivalence that surrounds species that have gained notoriety as causes of contestation. Crucially, the paper connects this scholarship with a concern for ocean geographies and the ‘metaphorical potency’ of the sea (Opperman 2019: 450) to underline the more-than-urban geographies that kittiwakes make present and that shape Newcastle and Gateshead and the ecological imperatives for alternative urban futures. Section iii follows with a brief history of the Tyne Kittiwakes, while Section iv turns to the kittiwakes’ use of infrastructure and their contested claims to the city. While attending to the mechanisms of control and deterrence that have become prevalent as a result, Section IV nevertheless reveals a shift in attitudes that are indicative of

ethicopolitical changes in urban decision-making (Houston, 2021), and a responsiveness to kittiwake ‘interjections’ (to borrow van Dooren, 2019). Section v then examines how the kittiwake has emerged as a regional icon as part of a complex geography of acceptance. In noting the enthrallment that comes from encounters with the pelagic Section V reflects on the narration of oceanic relations and its implications for urban heterogeneity. To conclude, the paper outlines the conditions that continue to limit coexistence and the ability to imagine alternative urban futures; the failure to recognise local geographies of the sea; and the complicated role of encounter in the production of ecological knowledge.

ii. Wild cities, avian life, and the oceanic

The black-legged kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), hereafter kittiwake (a phonetic rendering of their call), is a small species of gull found in coastal regions in the Northern Hemisphere. The kittiwake is a pelagic gull that winters out at sea and was recently listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List (IUCN, 2019)¹ following a sharp decline in numbers over the last four decades. There are a number of factors that are thought to have contributed to their decline, including overfishing, climate change, and habitat destruction (Sandvik et. al, 2014). Because kittiwakes feed on the ocean surface they are especially sensitive to changes in marine systems (Coulson, 2011), making them important indicators of environmental change (Einoder, 2009).

It is unclear why kittiwakes first appeared along the Tyne in the 1940s, but what is clear is that they are thriving at a time when their numbers are plummeting elsewhere. 2021 saw the highest number of apparently occupied nests on record and as numbers along the Tyne continue to grow (as they do in other UK towns and cities, including Scarborough and Lowestoft), cities such as Tromsø in Norway are seeing urban colonies develop for the first time. Early indications suggest that urban areas provide ample opportunity for nesting and shelter at a time when the rise of severe weather events would appear to be impacting colonies at the cliffs. Here, silent cliffs that were once filled with a cacophony of seabird cries have become emblematic of ‘cataclysmic declines’ (Reinert, 2018) and ‘place-stories’ (to borrow Lorimer, 2019), especially in the far north of Scotland and along the coast of Norway, where some colonies have almost vanished.

¹¹ The IUCN Red List is described as ‘a critical indicator of the health of the world’s biodiversity’. Established in 1964 the IUCN Red List is considered one of the most comprehensive sources of information on the status of animal, fungi and plant species, and is designed to inform conservation and policy action (IUCN, 2019).

Urban kittiwakes differently situate ecological crisis and offer a very different starting point from which to engage loss and the ‘moral weight’ that it carries (Parreñas, 2018: 11; Symons and Garlick, 2020). They figure in ‘urban moral reckoning’ and place formation (Wolch, 2002) and prompt questions about urban futures in the context of climate variability and change (Bulkeley, 2021; Houston et al. 2018; Steele, 2020) and shifting ecological proximities (Houston, 2021; Thomson, 2007). They also pose questions about the kinds of community that might be possible – or desirable – if urban planning, politics, and policies better embraced socio-ecological complexity and better understood how ‘sentient creatures negotiate and learn to inhabit complex, dynamic environments... according to their own knowledges, speeds and rhythms’ (Barua and Sinha, 2017:2; Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006; Narayanan and Bindumadhav, 2019). Such complexity not only includes nonhumans, but socio-cultural differences and inequities, emergent ecologies (Kirksey, 2015), and the seasonal shifts that are often out of sync with urban planning (Houston, 2021).

The potentials of anthropogenic environments for biodiversity and conservation have been recognised (see for instance Lorimer, 2008; Xie and Bulkeley, 2020), but while kittiwakes are a focus for conservation they are also discursively constituted as pests. Gulls and other species that are considered to have a relatively short history of urban inhabitation have risen to prominence as sources of contestation, especially in contexts where they are perceived to be ‘flourishing’ (van Dooren, 2019). While some species have inspired awe (Hunold, 2017), ‘adaptive generalists’ such as gulls, magpies, crows, and ibis, have elicited calls for official forms of intervention, including eradications, culls, and relocations. Such species demonstrate the high-stakes nature of the question of community (van Dooren, 2019) but also the potential for resetting the coordinates of ethical decision-making if their comings, goings, and fidelities are taken as forms of ‘meaningful inhabitation’ (Houston, 2021:47). Resistant to collapsing the human into an undifferentiated “us”, the concern with ethical decision-making in this context foregrounds the complex and contradictory relationships that constitute the multispecies city (Jerolmack, 2008; Steele, 2020) and ‘the life and death stakes’ of the specific ways in which different people are ‘bound up with others’ in a time of environmental change (van Dooren 2014: 146; Kirksey, 2015).

The notion of ‘trash animals’ is especially relevant. Rendered worthless and thus disposable (Nagy and Johnson II 2013), ‘trash’ species are often common, considered difficult to control and are seen to take on the characteristics of trash by association, while offering an uncomfortable window onto consumption practices and their constitutive relations (Pacini-Katchabaw and Nxumalo,

2015; Zahara and Hird, 2015). Birds feature prominently (Song, 2010; van Dooren, 2019). The Australian White Ibis is a good example, having become a 'highly visible' presence in Australian cities in the last few decades following draught and the destruction of inland waterlands (McKiernan and Instone, 2016). A large, loud and ungainly bird, with 'multiple, diverse and often unpredictable pathways through the city' (Allatson and Connor, 2020: 5), ibis are largely unfazed by people and are noted for scavenging, earning them the (sometimes affectionate) title of 'bin chicken'. However, while ibis have generated contempt, a more complicated affective landscape has emerged. Shaped by a politics of class and the rise of ibis iconicity in popular culture, they have also been credited with 'resignifying' the 'multispecies ecologies in which contemporary Australians operate' (p.1).

Like ibis, urban gulls are highly visible and have become a much despised bird as a result of their association with garbage, practices of scavenging, and damage to property (Dee, 2019; Deering, 2017). In this respect, they have become just one of a number of so-called "nuisance-birds" that reveal cultural anxieties about the sanitised city that go far beyond a concern for zoonoses (on pigeons cf. Jerolmack, 2008; Song, 2010). While there are over 50 species of gull, with varied ecological niches, migratory patterns, and behaviours, they commonly appear as 'seagulls'. In a review of the socio-legal construction of the 'seagull' and the regulation of gulls by local authorities in the UK, Trotter (2019) traces how the gull has been cast as a messy, noisy, and violent intruder of public space. The gull's framing as an urban problem is exacerbated by media stories that have documented the rise of a so-called 'urban killer'. Described as 'evil' and 'vicious' (Ridley, 2019), and as having made 'war zones' of 'our' cities (O'Brien, 2013), 'seagulls' have been accused of terrorising residents, victimising people, and killing pets (Jolly, 2019).

The urban presence of gulls is not only questioned on the basis of their 'moral transgressions', or the apparent threat that they pose to the 'orderliness' of public space, but on account of their connection to the ocean, which is frequently cited as a means of underscoring their dislocation – especially when they appear inland. Avian flight transcends places in ways that undermine anthropocentric boundaries, lending birds a liminal status and further confounding efforts to instil and regulate 'urban order' (van Dooren 2014; Fredriksen, 2021; Isaacs, 2019). As pelagic birds, kittiwakes in particular are inextricably linked to the ocean, traversing land, sea, and air.

While the idea of dislocation can negatively shape the grounds for coexistence, kittiwake and gull encounters can also foreground a range of oceanic geographies that can become the basis for

ecological thinking that can reset ethical coordinates. Over the last decade, human geography's preoccupation with the terrestrial has been challenged by a growing body of work on the ocean and a turn to watery spaces, which has sought to defamiliarize the strictures of terrestrial knowledge (Alaimo, 2019; Anderson and Peters, 2014; Braverman and Johnson, 2019). As environmental change reworks geographies of encounter (Narayanan and Bindumadhav, 2019; Wilson, 2017; 2019a) underscoring connections can do political work where connections are explicitly denied or where accounts of the ocean and environmental degradation are simplified, especially at a time of high public interest in marine life and health (Probyn, 2016).

Attention to connections can be especially useful in contexts where the concerns of the ocean are presented as somehow removed or 'other-worldly' (Wilson, 2019b). Such contexts underline the 'metaphorical potency' of the sea (Opperman, 2019:450) as a domain that is 'starkly differentiated' from 'landed spaces' (Peters and Steinberg, 2019; Gibbs 2019), particularly in western culture and epistemologies (Ingersoll, 2016). For Peters and Steinberg (2019), such potency is evidence of how the ocean exceeds its 'material liquidity' thus demanding a 'more than wet ontology' that is capable of grasping how such excess can unsettle boundaries. By bringing the oceanic into view, I demonstrate how urban kittiwakes necessarily reveal and disrupt thinking around what constitutes the 'city', while also drawing attention to overlooked urban geographies.

The turn to 'watery edges' as a means of recentring what is opaque or 'indifferent to urban regimes of control' (Hopewell, 2020) has taken on especial relevance at a time when warming seas and rising sea levels have made coastal cities the site of present and future catastrophes (Goh, 2019). For example, Mentz has argued that 'ecological crises, extreme storms, and growing recall of oceanic presence are returning New York's salt-water identity' (2015: xiii) after a 'long historical pause' in which it 'turned its back on the sea' (xii). In cities like New York, efforts to salvage past and present connections with the ocean not only endeavour to confront the realities of climate changed futures but also the imperatives for ecological thinking.

In the North East of England, Newcastle and Gateshead have their own 'salt-water identities'. For several centuries, the River Tyne functioned as a nationally strategic port, which was historically important to the export of coal, and one of the largest centres of ship repair and building in the world (Skelton, 2018). The region's economic prosperity was thus underpinned by the river and its riparian industries. The tidal estuary flows 20 miles from the North Sea, between the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead. Described as 'extraordinarily liminal', estuary spaces have their own

rhythms, are in constant flux and are of critical importance to both human and nonhuman life, even while their mud banks are often ‘disregarded and abused’ (Jones 2011: 2293). Despite their marginal status as a site of mixing and exchange, what is of critical importance to this account of seabirds in the city is that estuaries like the Tyne offer up local geographies of the sea. With these local geographies in mind, I turn to the River Tyne and the arrival of a pelagic gull.

iii. Kittiwakes on the Tyne

The history of the Tyne Kittiwakes is interwoven with the region’s riparian industries. In 1949, a colony was established in the town of North Shields on the window ledges of a former riverside brewery that was converted into a store for materials that were removed from ships undergoing repair nearby (Coulson, 2011:262). 2.5 miles from the coast, this was to be the first artificial site used by kittiwakes for nesting along the River Tyne. It was also the site of a long-term ornithological study until planning permission was granted to convert the former brewery into an apartment block as part of a regeneration scheme in 1990 (ibid).

Displacement is a common part of the kittiwakes’ story. In the early 1960s, birds nested on the Sheet Metal Works building in Gateshead (Bowey and Newsome, 2012), as well as the Baltic Flour Mill, which was opened in 1950 as a dual-purpose factory for the production of flour and animal feed (Martin, 2002). While the metal works was later demolished, the number of breeding pairs along the Tyne continued to grow from the 1960s onwards, with nests on the Customs House in Newcastle, as well as the silo buildings of the Co-operative Wholesale Society’s flour mill in Dunston, which was closed in the early 1970’s and marked for demolition. At 12.5 miles from the coast, the site at Dunston is thought to have been their furthest inland nesting site (Coulson, 2011). By the 1980s breeding kittiwakes were on Quayside buildings in Newcastle, the Tyne Bridge, and at a paintworks further up the river, where wooden ledges were later added by workers to support breeding birds.

During this period, the colony at the Baltic Flour Mill continued to grow but the mill was closed in 1982, with all but the silo demolished. By the late 1990s, lottery funds had been secured to convert the Baltic silo into a modern arts centre and a ‘kittiwake tower’ was constructed to support displaced birds [Figure 1]. The artificial kittiwake tower was eventually moved half a mile down the river after it was deemed too messy to be kept in close quarters to the new art gallery. The new

location was designated a site of nature conservation importance and is now the only place along the river where kittiwake chicks are ringed.

The history of the Tyne kittiwakes is thus one of dislocation, deterrence, and varied forms of accommodation, encompassing warehouses, lifeboat stations, bridges, window ledges, drainpipes, and rooftops. In some cases, the documented displacement occurred because of a desire to move the kittiwakes elsewhere, mainly in relation to planned regeneration initiatives, whilst in others displacement occurred because of the unavoidable demolition of unsafe, often derelict buildings. Today, the birds can be found in seven locations along the Tyne, with the largest breeding sites being NewcastleGateshead Quayside, particularly the Tyne Bridge, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (BALTIC) (Turner, 2010). Despite efforts to remove the kittiwakes from BALTIC after it opened as a gallery some birds persisted and the nets were finally removed. Today, the BALTIC kittiwakes can be viewed 24 hours a day by a specially installed camera funded by the Durham Wildlife Trust, to give people a “greater appreciation of their lifecycle” (*Interview, conservation officer, 2018*).

While kittiwakes have seemingly been ‘accepted’ at BALTIC, their presence along the Tyne has not always been welcome. In 2011, a report on the future of NewcastleGateshead Quayside identified the kittiwake colony as presenting ‘a potential conflict of interest with human uses of the Quayside area’ on account of their excrement and noise (p.36). As one local newspaper reported it: the kittiwakes “were simply not compatible with the aspiration to create an outstanding urban waterfront”. Globally, the privatisation or ‘reclamation’ of urban waterfronts for leisure and high-end development has seen non-human life effaced from the water’s edge (cf. Hubbard and Brooks 2020 on gentrification). Land prices along the quayside have risen sharply since the clean-up of the River Tyne (Skelton, 2018) and as the engineer responsible for the maintenance of the Tyne Bridge suggested, the problem “is that everybody wants to develop quayside sites rather than leave spaces for birds” (Tighe, 2002).

Despite seemingly ‘condemning’ the birds as an obstacle to the riverside’s regeneration and assuming that urban development is incompatible with nature, the 2011 report noted that the kittiwakes along the Tyne were nevertheless ‘regionally important’ and ‘unique in being the furthest inland colony in the UK’ (1-16). In response, one RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) officer suggested that “it would be rather positive if they [the council] would use the kittiwake as a mascot” for the regeneration that was so central to Newcastle and Gateshead’s *European Capital*

of *Culture* bid (Tighe, 2002). In this vein, the potential for eco-tourism has frequently been cited as a means of countering dire assessments of the kittiwakes' impacts on urban development. As one writer and former resident suggested: "I just think there is a unique opportunity... it's a genuinely unique colony and I just think the city council and... whoever else might be involved – the quayside properties and so on – are missing a trick, really. It's one of a kind" (*Interview, 2018*). In restricting discussion to the potentials for urban development, these seemingly irreconcilable positions on kittiwakes and urban futures reveal a common starting point and the constraints that foreclose alternative ways of thinking coexistence.

iv. Agitations, interjections and urban planning

The kittiwakes' use of infrastructure has been the source of much contention. The steel, granite and wooden ledges of the city are ideal for a bird that usually nests on narrow cliff-face ledges. Mud helps to fix nests in place and is readily available along the estuary banks, while seaweeds, grass and other loose materials are mixed and added to the base (Coulson, 2011). In the summer, the smell of guano – a pungent mix of fish and ammonia that is more readily associated with bird cliffs or coastal fish packing – is unmistakable. Unpleasant smells are said to heighten one's awareness of the vulnerability of *corporeal* boundaries (Henshaw, 2013), but the smell of guano and white-washed walls also register oceanic excess (Peters and Steinberg, 2019), which has become an ordinary part of the olfactory experience of the quayside. Beyond the breeding season, when kittiwakes are at sea, nest traces, white-washed walls, and sedimented seaweed are reminders of absent presence, the kittiwakes' claim to the city, and their agency in the 'revisualisation' of urban space (Allatson and Connor, 2020).

Kittiwakes have also become a distinctive part of the urban soundscape. 'Kittiwaaake' calling between pairs is crucial to mating, egg-laying and the social stimulation of the colony (Coulson, 2011: 73-74). The birds display strong site fidelity, and return to the same breeding site every year, developing long connections to place across a lifetime (thought to be as long as 27 years). While the significance of the breeding season is acknowledged in legislation, which prohibits the installation of deterrents once the season has commenced, site fidelity is not recognised, and birds are easily displaced between seasons. As Braverman (2012) suggests, it is through legislation and its routine enforcement (or absence!) that "the very essence of the city" continues to be defined. Its essence is also defined by Avishock², nets, fire-gels, spikes, plastic birds of prey, and other

² Avishock is an electric bird deterrent that uses a small electrostatic pulse to keep birds away.

decoys that have been utilised in practices of deterrence and control along the quaysides to varying degrees of effect (and in some cases to no effect at all). As Gibbs' argues, 'asserting, maintaining, and contesting territory are more than human projects' (2018: 204). Across two decades, the installation of deterrents – whether because of a general dislike of the birds, food hygiene, health concerns or worry about the integrity of structures – has been met with concerns about a failure to understand kittiwake behaviour and repertoires, and the consequences of displacement. Indeed, a frequent frustration expressed by local wildlife groups is the assumption that kittiwakes can be easily moved on:

“we’ve seen this pattern: they nest on buildings, people get annoyed and so come next breeding season there’s deterrents, and the kittiwakes will just shift to the next one. Research has shown that once they’ve been brought up in an urban environment, they are an urban bird. You’re not going to put a deterrent up and they’ll shift to cliffs, which quite often people think they’re going to do”. (*Interview, Wildlife Conservation Officer, 2018*)

For example, in 2019, after netting was placed on Newcastle’s Guild Hall in recognition of its protected status as a Grade II listed building, 70 pairs of birds were displaced. While this saw other Tyne colony-sites grow as displaced birds relocated, new, more peripheral breeding sites were established close by. This included nests built atop three domed streetlights located just in front of the netted building. Not only did a bird successfully fledge from one of the nests (despite expectations), but the nest controlled the street lighting for that summer, having blocked out the light sensor that would normally detect daylight. Birds have returned to these streetlights every year since.

The kittiwakes’ ‘experimental use’ of infrastructure might be considered an ‘interjection’, which, as van Dooren argues, is an action that simultaneously disrupts ‘the status quo’ and ‘proposes something new’ (2019:40). Their use of infrastructure not only disrupts anthropogenic rhythms but interrupts visions of how the city ‘ought to be’. As van Dooren (2019) suggests, interjections and the responses they provoke – whether adaptation, culling, deterrence or acceptance – are fundamentally ethicopolitical in that they raise questions about community, its limits, and the potentials of urban life (p.40). Such questioning was the focus of Heather Phillipson’s exhibition at BAL TIC, ‘The Age of Love’ (2018), which featured the Tyne kittiwakes as an urban ‘omnipresence’. Film from the kittiwake camera was played on a loop across 12 screens that ran

along two walls of the gallery space, whilst ‘augmented reality excrement’ was made visible through an app on visitors’ mobile phones. Phillipson described her interest in the birds as relating “not only to [their] specific qualities and location... but also to the flock’s ability, through its resolutely immovable, defecating presence, to puncture and disrupt the social veneer”. In this interpretation, the kittiwakes’ interjections were acknowledged, and the birds appeared as political actors whose ‘forms of difference and differencing’ were taken seriously (van Dooren, 2019: 40).

Kittiwake ‘interjections’, to borrow van Dooren’s description, have seen the birds rise to prominence as a source of both ambivalent complaint and celebration. One of their first appearances in the local press was in 1998 when birds became caught in netting on a quayside hotel and died. Local residents described the scenes of ensnarement as “horrific to witness”. Similar incidents have been reported since, with one local business owner describing netting entanglement as “appalling” (x). Even reports primarily concerned with the discomfoting presence of the birds – and the unequal impacts of their presence – have included worry over the suffering of birds trapped in netting and sometimes “stuck there for days” (*Evening Chronicle*, 2011). These accounts reveal moral tipping points and producing a far more uncertain picture of how local business owners and residents relate to the colony. As Gillespie (2016) suggests, witnessing animal suffering can be subversive in that it acknowledges the subjectivity of other creatures, their embodied experiences and lifeworlds, and the inequities of multispecies relations.

In the case of 2018, which prompted the change.org petition, entangled birds and circulating images became the basis for transformation when they brought into view the violence that birds are subjected to when deterrents are not properly maintained (a legal requirement that is poorly upheld). Nets used to prevent kittiwakes from nesting on one of the quayside hotels were proven unsafe when several kittiwakes became trapped and subsequently died. Some were rescued following coordinated responses that involved welfare and conservation charities, members of the public, and the fire service, but rescues were complex and made difficult by a variety of factors, including the height of the buildings (five stories high); uncertainty about who was responsible for the netting and cost of rescue; and the presence of other kittiwakes, some of which had nested on top of the netted ledges.

In one notable example, a young kittiwake became trapped on the wrong side of a net having grown sufficiently large enough to be unable to get back through. As it was too young to fledge and was still being fed through the net, the decision was taken by local wildlife organisations to

closely monitor the bird and leave it in place for as long as possible, based on an assessment of the bird's needs but also the risks posed to neighbouring nests. When images were circulated on social media by members of the public and gained national attention, the delayed rescue was seen as evidence that local organisations were failing to act, which further escalated tensions in the city. Weeks later, the young bird was successfully released.

The summer of 2018 not only reignited long-standing disputes around public space but also brought the distinctions between various groups into sharp relief, including the distinctions between welfare and conservation, various moral positions that outlined different aspirations for coexistence, and different forms of expertise and decision-making. While frequently presented as a conflict between 'man and bird' (Coulson, 1998), the reported 'conflicts' were about disagreements between different groups and positions, competing forms of legislation and protection, and different understandings of what constitutes appropriate action, not only between those that disagreed on whether kittiwakes have a claim to urban space, but also between groups that might otherwise be considered allies in their concern for recognising avian claims. The dispute raised further questions about differing degrees of responsibility and financial capacity (for mitigation or maintenance of buildings), including the distinctions between diverse types of businesses and leaseholders, multinational hotel chains and small independents, homeowners and landowners, and the limited budgets of councils severely affected by austerity cuts. Yet while the use of social media undoubtedly heightened tensions and overlooked some of the complexities of the issue, one council employee noted that "the public attention had really done the trick" (*Interview, 2019*). In 2019 the nets were replaced with no reported trappings.

Planning and partnerships

Central to many of these negotiations has been the Tyne Kittiwake Partnership, which was established in 2012 as a means of 'safeguarding' the colony. The partnership is demonstrative of the kinds of compromises and collaborations that are worked through in order to achieve cohabitation. At the time of writing it includes representatives from the RSPB, the Natural History Society of Northumbria, Northumberland and Durham Wildlife Trusts, and ecologists from Newcastle, Gateshead, North Tyneside and South Tyneside Councils as well as a variety of independent researchers and ornithologists, who work in an advisory capacity to improve understanding of the colony and facilitate urban planning and conservation. As one member put it:

“Without the partnership a lot of stuff wouldn’t happen because there wouldn’t be that organisation there... to say “you need to do something” because they [the kittiwakes] are not everyone else’s priority” (*Interview, 2019*)

One of the core concerns of the partnership has been to work with local businesses, and to advise on kittiwake-related issues, including the appropriateness and legality of deterrents, planning applications, and the organisation of public events. As scholars have argued, multispecies cities require a deeper consideration of urban planning matters that not only cut across and navigate different interests and politics but are attentive to different rhythms, mobilities and collective labours (Houston 2021). Because of the colony, seasonal mobilities and daily flightpaths are of especial importance to urban planning in Newcastle and Gateshead, whether in relation to building maintenance work, key infrastructural projects, or new planning permissions.

Planning for The Great Exhibition of the North in 2018 was illustrative of this point. While the River Tyne is important for business, leisure and entertainment, it is also central to kittiwake flightways as a key route into and out of the cities for foraging out at sea. When a year-long programme of events was planned, the partnership advised on the use of fireworks, light shows, and hourly water displays to ensure that the celebrations did not compromise kittiwake mobility. This included reducing the overall height of the planned water displays, leaving wide passageways either side of them, and designing displays that gradually increased in height rather than ‘erupting from the water’ to allow kittiwakes enough time to alter their routes, all of which were taken up in the final plans and closely monitored during the event (*Interview, council employee, 2019*).

If planning is a key issue, then so too is education (Narayanan and Bindumadhav, 2019), especially in the context of fraught cohabitation where species of gull are often conflated, and deterrents have exacerbated problems they were installed to address. The partnership has hosted talks and developed publications to improve understanding of the birds, which has included leaflets for distribution in hotels in the hope of reducing tourist complaints, which have been cited as a driver for deterrents. Historically, some members of the partnership have also run a stall at the weekly quayside market, positioning themselves at the “less desirable spot directly under the bridge and directly under the kittiwakes” (*Interview, 2018*). As one of the organisers said: “We take a scope. We talk to people about the birds and have quite a positive response” (*ibid*). This activity is not only about supporting better understanding of the colony – including their breeding and foraging

behaviour, seasonal mobilities, and life out at sea – but about encouraging people “to take a proper look”. As another partnership member put it, “much of the conflict is based on a lack of knowledge” and even people that have lived in the area their whole lives have never really stopped to look at them properly (*Interview*, 2019). Just as kittiwakes have learned to inhabit the city, their presence has required other forms of urban learning and negotiation.

v. The sea, the production of iconicity, and the ‘good gull’

After decades of displacement as a consequence of regeneration, the kittiwakes are now actively enrolled in what is arguably one of the region’s most iconic ‘success stories’. Situated in a prominent location on the River Tyne, BAL TIC Centre for Contemporary Art is instantly recognisable as the former silo, with BAL TIC FLOUR MILLS written in giant lettering on its side. It is underneath this lettering that kittiwakes have nested, making them highly visible, with as many as 200 birds packed onto the main ledge [Figure 2], where they can be easily viewed from the kittiwake camera or a viewing platform on Level 4. No longer ‘simply tolerated’, the kittiwakes have now become as much a part of the cultural institution as the art itself, with kittiwake pin-badges and children’s books available in the gallery’s store as evidence of their entry into local popular culture. As one curator suggested, “they have become an instillation in their own right... sometimes there are as many people coming to see the kittiwakes as there are coming to see the gallery spaces” (*Interview*, 2018).

Their acceptance at the cultural institution is relatively recent. In a public statement, the first director of BAL TIC claimed that, while birds have inspired artists through the ages he could think of “no artistic potential for kittiwakes” (Tighe, 2002). As Tighe lamented in a piece for *The Financial Times* “If only kittiwakes were more fashionable, like peregrine falcons or ospreys, they might enjoy a warm welcome by all [...] but these are not high-kudos birds” (*ibid*). While it is clear that the cultural status of the Tyne Kittiwakes has changed, they are still valued within a particular hierarchy of taste that restricts them from achieving the kind of status that Tighe was referring to. Their ‘defecating presence’ has been reinscribed and treated with good humour and affection in ways that are reminiscent of the humour that has developed around the Australian Ibis and the emergence of ‘Ibis kitsch’ (Allatson and Connor, 2020), which celebrates an ungainly, much derided bird of remarkable resilience. This is notable in BAL TICs kittiwake information leaflets and public campaigns, which are splattered with cartoon guano, deliberately centring what is often

the target of affective contempt in a light-hearted recognition of the kittiwakes' very physical and sensory presence.

The kittiwakes might still be seen as a barrier to development along some parts of the river, but their status at BAL TIC reflects a 'complex social geography of acceptance' (ibid), which has seen them emerge as assets at a site of significant cultural capital and place-making. This cultural capital and the kinds of audiences it attracts was evident in the recommended readings that were provided for Heather Phillipson's *Age of Love* exhibition, which suggested Haraway's 'Staying with the Trouble' (2016), Carson's 'Silent Spring' (1962) and hooks' 'all about love' (2000) to be suitable reading companions. In 2015, kittiwakes also featured in Claire Morgan's 'Gone With The Wind' which was installed at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle as part of the culture programme to mark the 10th anniversary of the Great North Run. Featuring a taxidermy kittiwake flying through a rectangle composed of 10,000 seeds suspended on threads, (Whetstone, 2014), the kittiwake was a metaphor for the runners and a further nod to the bird's regional iconicity.

That the birds are valued for their cultural, aesthetic and economic potential is without doubt, but a growing commitment to coexistence that extends beyond such potential is also palpable. For the last 2 years the return of the first kittiwakes has been reported as a newsworthy event, and media stories increasingly report on them in the context of climate change, vulnerability and the iconicity of a colony considered globally unique and of "national conservation concern" (Henderson, 2004). BAL TIC has become a key site for kittiwake talks and tours. In 2019, a 'kittiwake explorer' guide for children asked: "*How will you make the world a better place for kittiwakes and other birds?*" while inviting children to follow their ears to locate the birds around NewcastleGateshead Quayside. In 2019, a local 'eco-tourism enterprise' started a kittiwake walk to raise awareness of the gulls. Comprising a two-hour walk equipped with cameras and binoculars, the walk is marketed as family fun and a chance to see the birds close-up, with a talk about kittiwake biology and behaviour back at the gallery. As one of the founders put it "it's crazy that something like this hasn't already been done. It could be such a huge thing for the city and so very special... we've been blown away by the interest" (*Interview*, 2019).

The cultural status of the kittiwakes might have been transformed by their presence on BAL TIC, but their emergence as an icon has required work. Whilst many people visit the gallery to watch the birds, others find it difficult to ignore the smell of guano, and there are many more who decry the close proximity of just another 'rat with wings'. Indeed, whilst the charismatic nature of the

kittiwake was frequently noted, it was recognised that one of the chief challenges for those advocating for them was a general lack of enthusiasm – sometimes an outright hatred – for the ‘dreaded seagull’ (*Interview, council worker, 2018*). One local student, who had spent his summer monitoring the birds in his spare time, pointed out how difficult it was to convince people that kittiwakes were a vulnerable species and were worthy of attention, noting the scepticism in the common refrain “but it’s a *seagull!*” (*Interview, 2018*).

There are a number of things at issue here, including a limited understanding of urban gulls, a general disbelief that they are worthy of interest, and an unwillingness to accept that gulls are vulnerable at a time when *urban* gull numbers are apparently on the rise. In his study of ring-billed gulls in Toronto, Watson (2013) argued that urban inhabitants frequently ‘misidentify’ gulls because of their distance from the birds. Rather than a physical distance, he describes a psychological distance that ‘manifests itself in the observers’ lack of interest’. It is this psychological distance, he argues, that allows ‘the generic seagull’ to emerge and ‘the individual distinctiveness’ of species to disappear (p.x).

When reflecting on her efforts to get people to see the kittiwakes as a very different kind of gull – “that they’re not here all year round and they don’t feed on your chips” – one RSPB officer noted the challenge of doing so without further ‘demonising the herring gull’ (*Interview, 2018*), which, as she pointed out, is also on the UK conservation red list³. Despite being cognisant of the dangers of demonizing other gulls and further hardening attitudes towards them, conservation workers regularly distinguished the kittiwakes as ‘gentle, noble gulls’⁴, ‘good parents’, and ‘hard-working’ on account of their making daily roundtrips out to sea to forage for their ‘own’ food. In these instances, they performed what might be considered a form of ‘rescue work’, offering a moral account of the kittiwakes that distanced them from popular, demonising, representations of the generic ‘seagull’ and its moral transgressions – most notably their kleptoparasitism⁵ (Deering, 2017).

³ The UK conservation red list includes a variety of criteria, including historical population decline and at least a 50% decline in the UK breeding population over the last 25 years. Globally, the IUCN records a decrease in numbers but does not consider the herring gull to be threatened.

⁴ This is largely attributed to their dark “deep” eyes, which are contrasted with the red and yellow eyes of larger gulls (see Lorimer, 2007 on charisma).

⁵ Kleptoparasitism describes a foraging strategy by which gulls ‘thieve’ food from others. Diving birds capable of foraging for food below the sea surface are often victims of kleptoparasitism. Gulls engage in interspecific kleptoparasitism, which means that their victims are often a different species.

That such ‘rescue work’ was deemed necessary is evidence of the normalisation of moralising discourses and that the “problem” of gulls has reached a certain cultural salience. The cultural baggage and moral connotations that gulls carry was perhaps most apparent when one reluctant visitor to BALTIC’s viewing platform described the kittiwakes as “disgusting: nothing more than pigeons with wings...” (June, 2019). This refers to the ‘popular disdain for pigeons’ and its attendant phrase: ‘rats with wings’ (Jerolmack, 2008: 72), which, as one wildlife officer pointed out, was a description that was frequently used to ‘describe the kittiwakes by members of the general public’. As Jerolmack notes, the history of this loaded phrase is significant – and not only for understanding the constitution of ‘problem *animals*’. First reported to have been used in 1966 by a park’s commissioner in relation to Bryant Park, New York, this metaphor ‘efficiently summarised the apparent health and nuisance threat of pigeons’, linked them to the ‘menace of rats’, and also connected them to a wider concern for the immorality of urban public space, which included “vandals”, “bums”, and homosexuals (p.81). Recognising the freighted history of such a commonplace phrase goes some way to appreciate just how entrenched the imaginative geographies of problem animals are, and, by extension, just how difficult it is to shift them, without giving them further credence. Whether moralising discourses or legal mechanisms of regulation, each pose questions for conceptions of public space as a site of multispecies encounter (Trotter, 2019).

Enthralment and encounters with the pelagic

The conviction that the Tyne kittiwakes are ‘out of place’ and should be moved on is not confined to those who dislike the birds. Indeed, there are many people who feel that the kittiwakes need to be deterred from urban nesting for their own good on account of the city being “a terrible place to be” (*Interview, local resident, 2018*) or as one member of the public put it: “no life for something so wild” (*Interview, 2019*). In these accounts, the notion of “wild” and “wildness” were connected to the kittiwakes’ relationship with the sea, and an understanding of the ocean as a space that lies outside of human control. The kittiwakes are not just wild but “*so wild*”. The discursive framing of the ocean becomes key to understanding how the city is often treated as antagonistic to the colony or as somehow tainting the birds. As Halberstam and Nyong’o (2018:459) argue, the idea of wildness remains as a ‘colonial fantasy of untouched and unoccupied space’, which, in this instance, fails to recognise the opportunities that the urban presents for the birds, and the altered marine systems that have been linked to kittiwake declines.

This insistence on the place of the ‘wild’ is seen elsewhere (Thomson, 2007). In Hunold’s (2017) account of the complicated politics of care that has come to shape the lives of red-tailed hawks in Philadelphia, he noted that many hawk watchers failed to relinquish ambivalent feelings of being both enthralled by the birds’ close proximity and deeply concerned for their wellbeing in the city. This ambivalence was especially evident when a hawk fledgling was rescued and released in a ‘more suitable’ habitat outside of the city; a decision that was celebrated by some and decried by others, both on the basis of what was perceived to be in the bird’s best interests. In both instances – the hawks and the kittiwakes – enthrallment comes from the encounterability of something that is normally beyond reach – the wild – and so their figuring as ‘wild’ birds becomes the origin of both joy and consternation (Kirksey et al. 2018; Wilson, 2019b).

As research has shown, like kittiwakes, many species are thriving in cities precisely because of the opportunities that cities present. For this reason, Thomson (2007) argues for the importance of centring animal agency. Indeed, even in situations where species have moved into urban areas as a result of habitat destruction or other forms of environmental change she suggests that framing their movement in terms of environmental crisis can be unhelpful precisely because it continues to present the urban as a space of last resort, which denies animal agency, paves the way for their relocation on account of their ‘own good’, and thus reinforces city/wilderness binaries that deny urban heterogeneity (Narayanan and Bindumadhav, 2019). As Thomson (2007) argues, “it is one thing to recognise that a city is a place designed mostly for humans and another to propose that the city – because of its humanness – is an unnatural and inferior place for wildlife” (2007:90).

Oceanic connections and the status of the wild, have not only been central to delineating the limits of the city and urban life, but have been key to the development of the colony’s iconicity. That the kittiwakes put the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead “on the map” is evident in frequent references to their distance from the sea and assurances that “the Tyne kittiwakes comfortably beat nearest rival, Greenland” for the title of world’s furthest inland colony (Henderson, 2012). As a more recent report suggested: “Newcastle is unusual amongst world cities in having a seabird colony in its centre” (Kelly, 2018). In celebrations of the colony, emphasis is placed on the birds’ relationship to the open ocean and the ability to encounter a pelagic species in the heart of the city. As Matt Merritt put it in *A Sky Full of Birds*, the Tyne Kittiwakes ‘have an air of genuine wildness’ (2016:70), “hearing those kittiwake calls, I’d felt myself simultaneously in the midst of one of the country’s largest cities, and completely alone amidst the salt spray and howling winds

of some northern clifftop” (75). The kittiwakes, he noted, allow you to travel across time and space.

As is the case with many migratory birds, wonder is created through the recounting of distances travelled (Isaacs, 2019). A frequently asked question during public talks at BAL TIC was “where do they go?” In one case, the audience was informed: “far... far North, as far away as Greenland, but mostly we just don’t know” (*Observation, 2018*). Newspaper reports frequently repeat this claim as a way of documenting the significance of the colony and the connections that they build between the Tyne and the Arctic Circle, Norway, Greenland and even the South of France (Henderson, 2005; 2012). The desire for knowledge, however, is not straightforward. Upon hearing of the challenges of monitoring the birds out at sea one visitor to the city remarked that she “rather like[s] not knowing where they go” on account of there being “something magical about the not knowing” (*Interview, 2019*). While scientists have celebrated the tracking devices that ‘now make it possible to observe the mysterious lives’ of ‘elusive seafaring birds’ (Brooke, 2018), for some people in the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead, the “mystery is what makes them so special” (*Interview, quayside resident, 2018*).

Distance from the sea is frequently used as a means to underline value and intrigue and generate support for conservation, but for some, these statements do precisely the opposite and serve to highlight a species out of place. As one man put it: “the clue is in the name *sea-gull*... they have no business being here” (*Interview, local resident, 2019*). Indeed, while citing their ‘distance from the sea’ is often done to recuperate the colony’s status, it also serves to disavow local geographies of the sea, the tidal reach of the River Tyne, and the long histories of marine entanglement upon which the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead are founded. While the kittiwakes might hold the potential for a reckoning with such entanglement, both in terms of the region’s particular histories and wider concerns for climate-related oceanic change, local debates on the colony demonstrate a repeated failure to recognise oceanic proximity.

vi. Conclusion: more-than-urban futures

It is not entirely clear why kittiwakes first appeared along the Tyne in the 1940s, 11 miles from the coast. What is clear, however, is that they are thriving at a time when numbers are falling steeply elsewhere. Whilst their distance from the coast might make the Tyne kittiwakes unique, urban kittiwake numbers are on the rise internationally and if recent research is correct, urban settings

may well provide ideal breeding sites in a climate-changed future, raising pertinent questions that extend far beyond the urban geographies of the River Tyne.

The discourses around the Tyne colony have undoubtedly shifted over the last two decades because of a variety of factors including growing awareness and concern for climate change and species decline; better understanding and local media reporting; partnerships to advocate for the birds; and the facilitation of new kinds of urban planning that take into account the kittiwakes' differential impacts on different people and interests. Contestations and deterrence mechanisms remain, but the kittiwakes are now routinely recognised as a vulnerable species of international significance, crucial agents of urban place formation, and as cultural assets with economic potential. These changes do not mark a coherent shift from 'pest' to 'icon', but rather a more complex geography that folds in charisma, environmentalism, taste, class, and contempt. While undoubtedly positive overall, these complex geographies nonetheless reveal an inherent ambivalence and a set of constraints that continue to shape how nonhumans figure in the city and an inability to imagine an urban politics that is fully capable of a broader accommodation of difference (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006).

The question of contribution, or what the kittiwakes can bring to the urban centres of Newcastle and Gateshead, continues to shape how the kittiwakes' claim to the urban is understood. Not only is this a limited way of framing their presence, which overlooks and restricts wider questions about responsibility and shifting ecological proximities, but it further exacerbates problems for species that can't be framed in such terms (and are actively drawn into comparison). While charismatic appeal has long been central to conservation, economic contribution and moralising discourses not only remain unchallenged but are actively used by those invested in avian claims to space. This is not to critique the work that has been done to change public discourse around the colony, given the limited resources available, but rather to recognise the salience of normative logics of urban development and cultural capital. Despite recognising the deleterious consequences for other species, the production of iconicity has become a tactic that is actively encouraged as a way of countering negative discourses and bringing the kittiwakes in line with urban development agendas – a move that is far easier to achieve than unsettling the very basis upon which urban agendas are set and environmental futures are imagined.

Calling for a more expansive form of coexistence that resists the temptation to focus on species value – be it charismatic appeal, economic potential, or any other form of labour (Barua, 2020) –

and that better centres questions of mutuality and ethical responsibility does not mean that the practical challenges that coexistence presents should be ignored. It is important to recentre questions of animal agency and push for change in how urban space and politics are viewed, but it is also important to recognise that kittiwakes and other non-humans are not always easy to live with and can require a variety of compromises that aren't always equally borne. While a better understanding of behavioural repertoires and animals' geographies is paramount, so too is a better appreciation of the forms of maintenance and planning that is needed in order to enable cohabitation. This might concern routine, more prosaic forms of maintenance, such as the jet washers that prevent the build-up of guano, or the more complex negotiations that enable engineers to undertake infrastructural repair work around the colony and their seasonal inhabitations. In cases where the presence of different species has proven divisive, an unwillingness to either understand how creatures negotiate dynamic environments or listen to multiple voices, only serves to sustain conflict, and polarise views in ways that prohibit dialogue and the realisation of alternative urban futures.

As I have argued, in thinking about urban futures along the Tyne, a focus on local geographies of the sea and the role of the Tyne estuary could play an important role in disrupting the boundaries that currently shape how urban belonging is understood. The particularities of urban colonies must be connected to wider accounts of environmental damage, species decline, and oceanic change, even while it is important to challenge the assumption that the city is an inferior place for wildlife or a place of last resort (Thomson, 2007). If encounters can bring into focus the 'lives and deaths linked to human social worlds' (McKiernan and Instone, 2016:), encounters with seabirds in the city can also prompt critical questions concerning ecological change and how the urban might be implicated in a range of oceanic geographies. This might include declining prey stocks and overfishing in the North Sea or the wider effects of climate change, warming seas, and the increasing occurrence of severe weather events. Strikingly, despite the tidal reach of the River Tyne, and the historical importance of Newcastle-Gateshead's maritime connections, the ocean is regularly seen as somehow distant, revealing missed opportunities for fully engaging and understanding their salt-water identities.

The role of encounter is, of course, not straightforward, for while kittiwake encounters can bring vulnerability and oceanic geographies into view, the ease of encounter makes any account of vulnerability difficult to narrate. Whilst kittiwake absences are confirmed in scientific counts and observations at the coast, increasing proximity in the city masks these absences from a wider urban

public. Environmental change has ‘reassembled encounters’ and if the absence of encounter can ‘distort ecological knowledge’ (Fredriksen, 2019:771), then so too can its presence. A fuller account of the more-than-urban geographies that shape coexistence in the city thus not only reveals how the ocean and the metaphorical potency of the sea can and does play a role in urban politics, but also ensures that the contours of urban coexistence are firmly situated within wider socio-environmental futures.

vii. References

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