

# **LIVING WITH WILDLIFE - SILVERGULLS- FRANKSTON (VICTORIA) SEAGULL MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

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## **Introduction**

My name is Melanie Attard. I live in Frankston, Victoria. I have been passionate about animal welfare and environmental protection ever since I can remember. I became a volunteer wildlife rescuer around 8 years ago. I also help at a local shelter on a regular basis.

In February 2011 I began documenting the increasing number of call outs I was receiving to rescue Seagulls (Silver Gulls - *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*) in the coastal city of Frankston CAD (Central Activity District), Victoria. Frankston is a large city located on the shores of Port Phillip Bay.

Property owners and property managers have been installing rooftop bird deterrent systems in the CAD for many years. Nests can block pipes and gutters causing costly damage such as internal flooding. Droppings are corrosive and can reportedly half the life of a steel roof. Droppings can damage car duco. The smell of the bird's droppings and regurgitated food causes offence to many people. Seagulls are also quite noisy, especially at breeding time. Seagulls can also carry pest and virus which becomes an OHS issue for many people. Overall damage is seen as costly, OHS, and nuisance.

Silver Gulls become entangled or trapped in the rooftop deterrent systems. The deterrent systems are usually constructed of net suspended over the entire rooftop on upright poles, or wire or line attached at intervals over the rooftop to prevent birds from roosting and nesting. The systems are unregulated and are most often left unmaintained. Loose net, holes, gaps, crossing lines, and loose line are all major entanglement hazards. Non UV stable materials

(including monofilament – fishing line) deteriorate quickly and create major entanglement hazards.

These birds die terribly slow and painful deaths. Their conditions are usually highly stressed and dehydrated at rescue. Some are also starving. Most have accumulated defecation stains on their bodies. Most have had to be euthanized due to the severity of their injuries, which are most commonly multiple wing fractures. Many entanglements and trappings go unnoticed. Many of the rescued birds are seagulls but I have also found a smaller number of non native pigeons entangled in these deterrents.

### Images



Live gull entangled by wing tip in rooftop line deterrent system – Frankston CAD 2011



Live gull being cut down from rooftop netting entanglement – Frankston CAD 2012



Dead gull trapped in netting at roof edge – Frankston CAD 2012



Live gull after rescue from rooftop netting entanglement – Frankston  
CAD 2012



Dead gull entangled in loose crossing line deterrent system –  
Frankston CAD 2011



Live gull hanging from entangled wing – Frankston CAD 2011



Dead gull hanging from line entanglement – Frankston CAD 2012



Example of poorly maintained rooftop netting system – holes allow gulls in but they can't always find their way out – Frankston CAD 2011



Gull sitting underneath an ineffective system – Frankston CAD 2012

## **History**

Seagulls are Australian native water birds that are part of our coastal environment, and as such they are protected under the Victorian Wildlife Act 1975. Under this legislation it is an offence to harm, kill, destroy, take or injure protected wildlife by any means without a permit.

In recent years there has been increasing numbers of seagulls nesting on buildings in urban areas, such as the Frankston's Central Activities Area. Seagulls can breed all year, but according to the (former) Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), the peak breeding season occurs in Frankston from July to October each year. Seagulls usually nest in large colonies on offshore islands. Often two broods will be raised in a year, and both adults share nest-building, incubation and feeding duties. Eggs are laid in a shallow nest scrape, lined with vegetation.

Seagulls are opportunistic feeders, meaning they will take whatever food is available. Seagull populations increase when an abundant food supply is available. Local tips are the ideal place for many animals to gain an abundant food supply. People's wasteful food habits provide opportunity for "pest animals" to breed in high numbers. This has been seen in many animals including the Sacred Ibis in NSW and QLD. Also, many people enjoy feeding wildlife and seagulls are often fed at local parks and beaches. Seagulls are immortalised at the Frankston foreshore in the form of bronze sculptures, and regularly appear in promotional images of the area.

It should be noted that feeding wildlife is not recommended as it usually leads to nutrient deficient, high fat diets, and nuisance behaviour, which wildlife ultimately suffers for.

Cull permits have been issued by the State Department responsible – formerly DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) and the newly amalgamated DEPI (Department of Environment and Primary Industries). Permits are issued to destroy seagull eggs and chicks. Permits can also be issued to cull adult birds. Culling is carried out via a toxin placed in a food source. No cull permits have been issued for many years in the Frankston CAD as members of the public were outraged years ago when seagulls were seen dropping from the sky on a permitted cull. Due to increasing complaints about seagulls, though, the DEPI may authorise adult bird culls again as a

last resort. The conservation status of seagulls is secure across the country.

One of the natural predators of chicks, Peregrine Falcons, appear to be gone from the Frankston CAD area. Advice from local wildlife carers is that years ago the falcons too became entangled in these rooftop deterrents and as such their numbers plummeted. The hunting behaviour of the falcons to flush juvenile gulls up into the air and catch them on the wing meant that the rooftop deterrent systems were in their way of natural behaviour and entanglements were the outcome.

### **Data**

#### Rooftop deterrent Seagull entanglements in Frankston CAD

Year	Number of known entangled gulls in Frankston CAD
2011	25
2012	2
2013	16
2014 (to date)	1

#### Other related seagull/rooftop deterrent incidences in Frankston CAD

Year	incidence	number
2011	Mass juvenile gull deaths – cause unknown	25 approx.



2011	Gull eggs and chicks thrown from rooftop by contractors	Numerous reported. At least one was alive when thrown.
2011	Dead gulls sucked onto air-conditioning intake	2
2012	Juvenile gulls found in drain pits	6
2012	Mass juvenile gull deaths – cause unknown	60 approx.
2013	Juvenile gulls found in drain pit	3
2013	Gull chicks thrown from rooftop	2

There are a number of Seagull management issues in the Frankston CAD. Illegal culling, cruelty, and trapping in drains are ongoing concerns for seagull protection and welfare.

Frankston CFA (Country Fire Authority) assisting with a rooftop deterrent rescue. These rescues are often dangerous and difficult.



Since action by wildlife volunteers, our local RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) Inspectorate and the then DSE Wildlife Officer in 2011 and 2012 the number of rooftop entanglements has decreased. Please note that most of the rooftops are not visible from the street. We get a number of calls each year from workers who see the gulls on second story rooftops from their office or store room windows. When I have investigated rooftops I have found many dead birds that have gone unnoticed.

It is important to also note that since the DSE and the DPI (Department of Primary Industries) merged into the DEPI in late 2013 and there is now no available wildlife officer to assist with these cases. The former DSE provided support in the form of follow up investigations and contact with property manager/owners to rectify rooftop deterrent problems. The current situation is that due to time/staffing restrictions and OHS we no longer have this avenue of support available. I have since been continuing to report cases to the DEPI, the RSPCA and the Frankston City Council, but have followed up with property manager/owners myself. I have had little success with property managers/owners carrying out the necessary repair works or in providing me with further information. This is a time consuming task for volunteers. There is no regulation in place

and no available officer and therefore there is no way of enforcing the issue.

Local wildlife groups have played a role in education around this issue. AWARE (Australian Wildlife Assistance, Rescue and Education) have included printed information on stalls at various public events in the local area. I have also spoken at a few public events about the matter

### **Good and Bad Systems**

Poorly designed systems include the use of loose netting and fishing line, crossing fishing line, non UV stabilised materials that become loose and break after a short period of time, upright poles that bend and/or tear through netting, and clear line that the birds cannot see. Effective systems include the use of specifically designed black bird deterrent polyethylene line, no fishing line at all, UV stabilised materials, no loose crossing wires, and well secured tightly strung net. Maintenance is another major aspect of an effective system. Regular checks should be carried out and repairs or alternations done immediately. I have seen systems that have been in poor condition for years and nothing has been done. As a wildlife rescuer I have spoken with building owners but nothing has been done to fix the problem. There are no direct guidelines for the bird deterrent industry, and the guidelines for the Pest Control Industry state nothing about animal welfare and do not cover bird deterrents. Many pest controllers seem to have no expertise in bird deterrent systems and as a result are carrying out inferior work.

Building owners are getting ripped off with inferior systems. Because there is no regulation for building owners either, very poor systems such as nailed fishing line, elastic and washing line chord has been seen in use. These materials should never be used and create many hazards. It must be noted that rooftop bird deterrent systems do not actually solve the seagull problem, and just move it onto someone else's roof. But if owners insist on installing deterrents they should be humane and effective. Poorly designed rooftop deterrents don't

actually work; gulls can still get in underneath and happily roost and nest there. Building owners would be better advised to invest in a system that works and is also humane. The bad systems are actually protecting the chicks from predators and causing an increase in the gull population in Frankston.

To my knowledge, as it currently stands anyone can put whatever they want onto their roof. Also, pest control companies with no training or knowledge in bird deterrents can put whatever they like onto a customer's roof and offer no guarantees that the system works, or is humane. In 2013 Frankston City Council released a fact sheet on seagulls and rooftop deterrent systems.

### **Pest Control Companies**

A number of pest control companies offer the installation of these bird deterrent systems. Various designs and materials are utilized by the various companies. It is generally accepted that fishing line should not be used, but this is not regulated or enforced. In fact, anyone can install a rooftop deterrent system without a Council permit. Frankston City Council has stated that this is a State Government issue and they will not regulate the deterrent systems themselves. Some of the Pest Control companies installing in the Frankston CAD include Elite Bird Control, ANC, and Rentokill. Elite Bird control offer a 100% guarantee that their system is humane and effective.



Seagull nest with eggs amongst bird deterrent spikes installed around rooftop edge – Frankston CAD 2011

## **OHS**

As well as being an animal welfare and wildlife protection issue, these poorly designed and badly maintained systems are dangerous. They are a major OHS hazard to maintenance workers and rescuers who access the rooftops. I have been told in the past that some maintenance workers have refused to go onto rooftops for work such as air conditioning servicing. A result of this could mean that buildings are shut down or are being occupied in unsafe conditions for workers due to contamination in ducts and vents. Maintenance workers could also trip on the loose and low wires and line. A good system should allow for human access, but many do not. I have had to climb over and through many wires and lines to rescue birds and it is very dangerous. Maintenance access zippers also stick if not maintained resulting in a lack of access to the roof top. There are also issues with metal poles being used to hold wire and net that become loose or bend, if one of these poles connected with electrical wires there could be major issue with the steel roof becoming electrified.

DSE and RSPCA officers have commented that this is a major OHS hazard even for them to carry out investigations or rescues.

### **City Image**

The poorly designed and badly maintained systems simply look very bad and are negatively impacting on the image of Frankston. Add to that a dead or dying bird dangling from the edge of a building and this is not a good look for Frankston. I met with our local MP Geoff Shaw in 2011 about this issue who thought that Seagulls were introduced animals and therefore pests. He also believed the rooftop deterrents were an eye sore and Council need to act to clean up Frankston's image.

### **Action**

In 2011 I approached Frankston City Council and presented the information I had with a petition calling for action. I requested action in the form of regulation, enforcement and education. Frankston City Council agreed to take some action and stated this was majorly a State Government not a council issue and agreed to write to the Minister for assistance. Frankston Council also agreed to launch education around seagulls which would include media and signage. To date Frankston Council have not written to the State Minister or installed any signage.

In 2012 I was asked to speak to the Australian Wildlife Advisory Committee (a subgroup of the then DPI) and I presented all of the information I had on this issue.

In 2013 a Working Group was set up by the DPI to advise the Australian Wildlife Advisory Committee on the issue. I was asked to be a part of this group and provide information. After a couple of meetings and email contact the Working Group is devising recommendations to be sent to the State Minister responsible. No outcome is advisable as yet.

### **Suggested Solutions**

- Regulations around the design, installation and maintenance of rooftop bird deterrent systems.
- Education programs around protected wildlife and animal welfare issues.
- Alternative solutions to seagulls nesting and roosting on rooftops.

## Links

- Wildlife Matters Victoria – Seagulls page  
<http://www.wildlifemattersvictoria.org/seagulls-silvergulls.html>
- Frankston City Council Seagull fact sheet  
[www.frankston.vic.gov.au/.../Fact\\_Sheet\\_-\\_Seagulls\\_in\\_the\\_CAD.pdf](http://www.frankston.vic.gov.au/.../Fact_Sheet_-_Seagulls_in_the_CAD.pdf)
- Seagull fact sheet  
<http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Chroicocephalus-novaehollandiae>
- RSPCA  
<http://www.rspca.org.au/>
- DEPI  
<http://www.depi.vic.gov.au/>
- AWARE Wildlife  
<http://www.awarewildlife.org.au/>
- Animalia Wildlife Shelter  
<http://www.animaliawildlife.org.au/>
- Wildlife Victoria  
<http://www.wildlifelifevictoria.org.au/>



Photograph – Peter Berbee 2011

**Melanie Attard** has been rescuing wildlife for over 7 years. My first rescue involved stopping for a road kill possum in my mum's street that I then discovered had live young in her pouch. I was dismayed to discover that people are not employed to rescue and rehabilitate wildlife and that this vital service lies with countless volunteers who give their time and money to help our wildlife. As a passionate Vegan, animal rights and environmental activist I decided to get involved. I work with any group that can use my assistance, including Wildlife Victoria, AWARE, and *Animalia*.