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# Short communications

## Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls preying on pipefish in the Eastern North Sea

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Birds vary much in their diet, some being specialists and others generalists. Among seabirds, gulls *Larus* spp. are regarded as opportunistic feeders, and eat a large range of marine prey and other food items (Haftorn 1971, Cramp 1983). This also applies to two of our large gull species, the Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* and the Herring Gull *L. argentatus*.

This note reports incidental observations of both these species feeding on pipefish (*Syngnathus* sp. and/or *Entelurus* sp.) along the coast of central Western Norway (in the eastern North Sea) during surveys of seabird chick production during the last week of July 2006. Observations were made in or near four colonies, of which three were on the outer, exposed coast and one, a large gull colony, in a more sheltered fjord area. Herring Gulls with pipefish were seen twice in or near two outer colonies, Bleikenøvlingen and Rogngulløy, located 25 and 30 km NW of Bergen, respectively, in the municipality of Øygarden. The first observation was of an adult flying with a partly swallowed pipefish. The second involved a chase among one adult Great Black-backed Gull and 10 adult Herring Gulls, one of

which was carrying a pipefish. Two other cases involved only Great Black-backed Gulls. One was of two adults in a mixed, large gull colony at Austevoll (Maaksteinen) and the other of two juveniles handling a pipefish as they swam 100 meters off a mixed gull colony in the Bjørnefjord area (Tysnes municipality, 30 km S of Bergen). In the latter case, one of the juveniles managed to swallow the head after both gulls were seen actively handling it. Exactly which species of pipefish were taken by these gulls is not known, but the snake pipefish *Entelurus aequoreus* is the most likely candidate (see below).

An additional observation of a Herring Gull carrying a pipefish in the same study area was made in October 2006 (A.T. Mjøs pers. comm.). Local fishermen on the island of Fedje (60 km NNW of Bergen) also reported bycatches of pipefish during the 2006 mackerel *Scomber scombrus* fishery (A.T. Mjøs pers. comm.). These incidental observations are reported in light of many reports of pipefish in the western parts of the North Sea, e.g. in UK (Harris 2006, Kirby *et al.* 2006, Anon 2006a,b).

I have not previously seen gulls feeding

on pipefish in these coastal areas despite 30 years of surveys and fieldwork (e.g. Håland 1985, 1992, 1993, Håland & Ugelvik 1989). Nor have I seen Lesser Black-backed Gulls *L. fuscus intermedius* feeding on pipefish during an ongoing study of the reproductive ecology of the species in four colonies during 2005 and 2006 in the same region (pers. obs.). This is surprising due to the more pelagic feeding habit of this species (e.g. Cramp 1983).

That large gulls have recently started to prey on pipefish, an otherwise unsuitable prey due to its bony outer skeleton and the difficulties of handling (Harris 2006, pers. obs.), may be associated with the unprecedented numbers of pipefish which have recently been recorded in the north-eastern Atlantic (Kirby *et al.* 2006). The Norwegian Institute of Marine Research ([www.imr.no](http://www.imr.no)) has also reported snake pipefish being caught in large numbers in 2006 in the Barents Sea. This sudden increase in pipefish numbers in northern waters is probably linked to increased sea-surface temperatures in the northern hemisphere (Kirby *et al.* 2006). What role pipefish and other, new emerging prey may have for breeding gulls and other seabird species, remain to be seen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Alf Tore Mjøs for allowing me to include his observation of a Herring Gull with pipefish at Fedje in October 2006.

## SAMMENDRAG

Nordsjøens marine miljø er i endring mht både fysiske og biologiske parametere. De siste par år har nålefisker, for eksempel havnål, økt voldsomt i bestand og utbredelse, i 2006 også helt inn i Barentshavet (Havforskningsinstituttet i Bergen). Denne meddelelsen rapporterer fire tilfeller av store måker med fanget nålefisk, sannsynligvis stor havnål *Entelurus aequoreus*, som er den arten som Havforskningsinstituttet har påvist store

mengder av denne sommeren. Adulte gråmåker ble observert to ganger i slutten av juli 2006 med fanget nålefisk (ved kolonier i Øygarden i Hordaland), i tillegg to observasjoner av svartbak som hadde fanget slike fisker (i Austevoll og Tysnes kommuner). Det ene tilfellet involverte to adulte svartbak, i det andre tilfellet to juvenile svartbaker. Observasjonene er kort diskutert i perspektiv av de endringer som skjer i havmiljøet og parallelle endringer i sjøfuglbestandene i Nordsjøen de siste årene. Hvilken rolle endringer i fiskebestander og «nye» fiskearter vil få i sjøfuglenes diett kan kun fremtidig forskning avsløre.

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