

# A flock of seagulls, or should that be gulls? Discuss...

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■ Both Milton and Dickens used the word seagull, our columnist points out.

Picture: PA

I've got quite a few friends who are birdwatchers. Some of them have taken to calling themselves birders.

This is an Americanism, though not a particularly ancient one: in 1962 the Boston Globe reported that an assembly of enthusiasts "had rejected the term bird watchers' by which they had been commonly known, and adopted the designation 'birders'". This was rather unfortunate as the original meaning of birder was "one who catches or hunts birds" – but of course it's up to them what they call themselves.

My bird-watching friends are all extremely nice people, but they do have this annoying habit, as soon as anyone utters the word seagull, of chanting the mantra "There's no such thing as a seagull".

What can we say? Of course there are seagulls! Millions of them! As it happens, I can see one from where I'm sitting right now.

But actually, of course, it's the word seagull which birdwatchers object to, for some reason. Their objections, though, are in vain. Seagull is so well established as an English word that a Google search produces 25 million hits. Our famous

writer and poet John Milton used the word. Our famous novelist Charles Dickens used it. The name of Chekhov's famous play is always "The Seagull" in English-language productions. And if saying seagull is some kind of mistake, as certain ornithologists would have us believe, it's a pretty venerable mistake: the first recorded usage of seagull was in 1542.

Bird-watchers reckon we should say gull. Well, people do say that too, including me – gull and seagull basically mean the same thing – but it's probable that seagull came to be the most common term in everyday usage in order to avoid confusion with one of the several other meanings of gull,

especially the word gull meaning fool, as in gullible. Gull was not originally an English word. The first recorded usage was not until the 1400s, and it's thought to have come into English from Welsh – the modern Welsh form is *gwyllan*.

The original English word was *mew*, which is related to German *Möwe* and Dutch *meeuw*. Birdwatchers will hardly be pleased to know that the forms *sea-mew*, *Seemöwe* and *zeemeeuw* also occur. In Norse-influenced regions of Britain you can also find *maw* or *sea-maw*, with the old Norfolk form of this being *mow*, as reported by Sydney Cozens-Hardy in his 1893 book *Broad Norfolk*. And, yes, I'm sorry, there's also *sea-mow*.