



BIRD

Sleuth

Gulls Reaching a Goal



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A Herring Gull, alert and investigating its surroundings.

Have you ever climbed a fence to get a baseball you hit over it, or walked in through the door of a store to look at something you saw in the window? You didn't try to walk straight through the fence or window—you knew that there was something between you and the object you wanted, and you quickly found a way around it.

Researchers investigating intelligence in animals sometimes test “detour behavior,” or the ability to get around barriers. Recently, a group of researchers at a university in Italy wanted to measure detour behavior in a several bird species. They believe that the better an animal is at finding a way to reach the goal object, the better they are at problem solving.

First, the subjects were placed in a corridor and shown a desirable object. For the Herring Gulls in the study, the scientists decided to use a mirror because the image of another gull should be appealing and interesting to

this social species. Then, a barrier such as a low bar or a wall with a hole was placed between the gull and the mirror. This blocked the direct path, but the gulls could still see the mirror. They would then release the gull and record details of its behavior as it tried to reach the mirror.

The scientists found that of the three species they tested, Herring Gulls were very good at navigating barriers to reach a goal. Four out of five of the Herring Gulls in the their studies could reach the mirror on the first try, no matter the barrier.

References

Zucca, P., Fabrizio, A., Vallortigara, G. 2005. “Detour behavior in three species of birds: quails (*Coturnix sp.*), herring gulls (*Larus cachinnans*) and canaries (*Serinus canaria*).” *Animal Cognition*. 8:122–128.

