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The first LDS pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley in July 1847 (see Pioneer Day). Nearly 2,000 made the journey that year, with another 2,400 emigrants arriving in 1848. From the beginning, having so many dependent on first harvests from an untried land with an unknown growing season produced concern. That first summer, pioneers observed Indians harvesting "millions" of crickets for winter food. The crickets were driven into fires and roasted, and then stored in baskets and bags. Survival-individual and group survival-was clearly on the minds of these first Mormon settlers as they watched the Indians prepare to endure the winter.

During the first year in the Great Basin, most Latter-day Saint settlers resided in the Salt Lake Valley, although small settlements were also begun to the north at Kaysville, along the Weber River, and at Bountiful. Through the summer and fall of 1847, they planted 2,000 acres of winter wheat near the main settlement. A mild winter and thaw permitted plowing in early 1848, making it possible to plant more wheat and another 3,000 to 4,000 acres in corn and garden vegetables by spring.

As spring arrived, pioneer farmers reported with pride that their crops appeared to be doing very well. But April and May frosts leveled some of the crops, and late May brought another devastation-hordes of insects began to destroy the crops. These insects, later dubbed "Mormon crickets," were as large as a man's thumb. Not a true cricket but a member of the katydid family, the Mormon cricket has only small wings and cannot fly. Pioneer diarists reported the invaders in the fields as early as May 22. Some described them as numbering in the millions; John Steele wrote that they appeared by the "thousands of tons." For more than a month, the crickets devastated the fields, devouring the new corn, beans, wheat, pumpkins, squash, cucumbers, melons, and other crops. Farmers battled the crickets with a variety of defensive measures but had little success.

By early June, relief arrived in the form of the seagull. The appearance of gulls was described in a letter of June 9 to Brigham Young in the following manner: "The sea gulls have come in large flocks from the lake and sweep the crickets as they go; it seems the hand of the Lord is in our favor" (Hartley, p. 230). For the next three weeks, gulls appeared daily. They fed on the crickets, drank water, and then regurgitated before eating more crickets. There would be a harvest that year, after all.

Some 1848 pioneer journals mention the problems of frost, crickets, and drought without mentioning the gulls. However, several autumn accounts credited the counterinvasion by the gulls for the scanty crops that survived and acknowledged the hand of God in the event.

Ornithologists have noted that gulls, whose spring and summer habitat centers on the shores of the Great Salt Lake, regularly return to the valleys of the Great Basin to devour crickets, grasshoppers, and other insects, and that the 1848 appearance of the gulls was therefore not unusual. Some skeptics thus saw the 1848 activities of both crickets and gulls as simply natural phenomena. On the other hand, many Latter-day Saints, with faith in a God whose hand is in history and who often acts through "natural" events, believed that their crops had been saved in part by God's intervention. Over time, the 1848 "cricket war," now called "the miracle of the gulls," became a prominent part of the Saints' collective memory. In honor of this occasion, the indigenous California gull became the Utah state bird, and in 1913 the Seagull Monument on Temple Square was dedicated to commemorate the birds' role in the 1848 crisis.

In the Salt Lake Valley, crickets, frost, and lack of water played havoc on the harvest of 1848, and crop losses were severe. But the losses would have been much worse without the appearance of the gulls, which was thus a significant factor in the survival of Utah's pioneer settlers.