



# NEWSLETTER 110

February 2009

## CONSERVATION NEWS

### BREAKING NEWS: FULMAR WRECK IN SE NORTH SEA



Dark phase Fulmar (Jan Andries van Franeker)  
from [www.zeevogelgroep.nl](http://www.zeevogelgroep.nl)

Abnormally high numbers of dead Fulmars were found on the coasts of the Netherlands and Germany in January 2009. Seawatchers, noticing the first passage of Fulmars for a ‘long time’ past Egmond (Noord Holland) on 4<sup>th</sup> January, warned of possible strandings, and indeed the first weakened birds were taken to animal hospitals the same day. Between 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> January, Fulmars were being found on beaches in the north of the Netherlands at a rate of circa.1 per km, of which half were dark phase birds. At sea, out of 316 counted past Spurn Point, Yorkshire on 5<sup>th</sup>, 4% were dark, whereas 50% of Fulmars recorded on surveys off Schleswig Holstein, Germany around 9<sup>th</sup> January were dark. The first birds were also found on German beaches on 9<sup>th</sup>. By 26<sup>th</sup> January, the Dutch beached bird survey had recorded 57 (0.41 per km) and 122 birds had been collected from German beaches which included a high proportion of dark phase birds.

The only report from Denmark was of old remains of five light phase birds on 4 km of beach on at Skagen on 18<sup>th</sup> January, but unusual numbers Fulmars were noted on beaches in Rogaland, SW Norway from 13<sup>th</sup>. By 18<sup>th</sup> Jan at least 54 had been collected in the south of the country, ‘many if not most’ being dark phase. So far, there have been no reports of abnormal numbers of Fulmars from beached bird survey schemes in NE England, Orkney or Shetland, although three of 19 collected in Shetland were dark, and small numbers of dark birds continued to be seen on seawatches during the month there.

CONTENTS	Page
CONSERVATION NEWS.....	1
RESEARCH NEWS .....	5
BEACHED BIRD SURVEY NEWS.....	6
2008 BREEDING SEASON NEWS.....	10
GRANT REPORT.....	15
CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS.....	17
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.....	17
SEABIRD GROUP NEWS.....	20

A similar wreck of Fulmars occurred in the SE North Sea in March 2004, when examination of corpses found many in arrested moult, with about 13% being dark phase birds. The proportion of dark birds of Arctic origin is higher in this wreck, but so far there are no clear indications of problems with moult. Participants in the project monitoring plastic particulate contamination among Fulmars will gather on the Dutch island of Texel for a Workshop in mid February, when post-mortem examination of the corpses should reveal the age and sex composition of the mortality.

Reports from many contributors were collated Jan Andries van Franeker, who would welcome further information on unusual numbers and colour phase proportions of dead or live birds: [jan.vanfraneker@wur.nl](mailto:jan.vanfraneker@wur.nl)

**See [www.zeevogelgroep.nl](http://www.zeevogelgroep.nl) for information on the wreck and colour-phase identification.**

**Martin Heubeck**

**[martinheubeck@btinternet.com](mailto:martinheubeck@btinternet.com)**

## **DEATH AT FILEY BAY**

For the past three summers, the RSPB has become increasingly concerned about Razorbill and Guillemot deaths reportedly caused by the birds drowning in fishing nets set for salmon and Sea Trout in Filey Bay, North Yorkshire. If left unchecked, this has the potential to be a huge conservation issue, particularly considering the dying birds are most likely coming from the nearby, internationally important RSPB Bempton Cliffs seabird colony. Therefore in early 2008, the RSPB engaged in discussions with Natural England and the Environment Agency (EA), who license the fishery. Encouragingly, a threshold system was adopted whereby when a certain number of birds were being caught per week, a voluntary ban would come into force and fishing would stop for 14 days. The fishermen at Filey, who in total operate six licensed nets, all agreed to report seabird bycatch to a co-ordinator employed by the EA.

Faced with concerns of cruelty and that the true level of bycatch was not being fully reported, RSPB Investigations undertook covert evidence gathering at Filey on 13 and 17 June 2008.

Observations from a hidden location on the seafront revealed large numbers of live birds struggling to avoid drowning in a net just off the beach. Up to 40 birds were left floundering for several hours, whilst fishermen collected their haul of fish and returned to the shore.

During the two days, over 100 auks were recorded caught in the net, mostly Razorbills. Significantly, at this time of year it is highly likely that the drowned birds were part of breeding pairs in the local area and that their nests and chicks are likely to have also died as a consequence, making this a conservation as well as a welfare problem.

The video evidence was immediately shown to the Environment Agency and Natural England, who jointly agreed that fishing activity should be suspended at Filey for 14 days. When fishing resumed, it was operated under a stricter regime in which nets were not set overnight - this, together with the fact that most of the birds had by now completed their breeding and had headed out to open sea, resulted in much lower numbers of birds being caught accidentally.

Footage was also sent to North Yorkshire Police. As a result of this, a fisherman was charged with causing unnecessary suffering to seabirds, mainly Razorbills, on the dates on which evidence was gathered.

Unfortunately, the case had to be discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (after much consultation with both the RSPB and RSPCA) when it became apparent that the Animal Welfare Act 2006 does not apply to incidents taking place offshore.

It is important to make it clear that RSPB are not trying to stop the fishery, but believe it is unacceptable that hundreds of seabirds are dying avoidable deaths in these nets every year.

RSPB are calling on the Environment Agency to introduce better practices and a new bylaw to underpin this with enforcement action. Simply preventing nets being left out at night and

instigating a short period of closure during the peak 'bycatch' period could prevent the unnecessary deaths of hundreds of birds.

**Mark Thomas, RSPB Investigations**  
**mark.thomas@rspb.org.uk**

**Adapted from [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)**

## **CONSERVING PATAGONIA'S MARINE RICHES**

A team of international collaborators have launched a book to help conserve one of the richest marine areas on earth. It identifies the main problems facing the conservation and sustainable use of the Patagonian Sea.

The Patagonian Sea covers over 3 million km<sup>2</sup> and is home to a great diversity of marine species, with a special wealth of top predators including globally important populations of Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys* (Endangered) and Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* (Vulnerable). It extends from the south of Brazil to Tierra del Fuego, in the Atlantic, passing Cape Horn and along the Fuegian channels and fjords of the south of Chile.

The Patagonian Sea is exposed to many human threats such as pollution and over-fishing. The new book is the first comprehensive summary of the main issues relating to its conservation and management. Entitled '*Synthesis of the Status of Conservation of the Patagonian Sea and Areas of Influence*' it includes 50 chapters and was compiled by 80 leading experts.

The review is the first major output of the 'Forum for the Conservation of the Patagonian Sea and Areas of Influence' - an international team of collaborators of which BirdLife was a founding member, representing its Partners and programmes throughout the region. Over the last decade the Forum has been an indispensable meeting place for organisations with shared concerns about the conservation and management of the Patagonian Sea.

The vision of the forum is an ecologically healthy and diverse Patagonian Sea, meeting the needs, wishes and aspirations of people whilst maintaining one of the world's greatest wildlife

spectacles and most productive marine ecosystems.

The new 'Patagonian Sea' review will be available at the Forum's website - [www.patagoniansea.org](http://www.patagoniansea.org). Among the active organisations belonging to the Forum are: BirdLife International, Conservation International, WWF, Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, Fundación Aquamarina, Fundación Ecocentro, Fundación Patagonia Natural, Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina, Wildlife Conservation Society and Wildlife Trust. The publication of the was made possible thanks to the collaboration of the Lighthouse Foundation, Pew Institute for Ocean Science, WCS, Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation and FPN funded by the United Nations Development Programme and Global Environment Facility.

**Adapted from [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)**

## **MICE BRING TRISTAN ALBATROSS CLOSER TO EXTINCTION**

The Critically Endangered Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena*, has suffered its worst breeding season ever, according to research by the RSPB. The number of chicks making it through to fledging has decreased rapidly and it is now five times lower than it should be because introduced predatory mice are eating the chicks alive on Gough island - the bird's only home and a South Atlantic territory of the United Kingdom.

The mice are also affecting Gough Island's other Critically Endangered endemic species, Gough Bunting *Rowettia goughensis*. A recent survey of the bunting's population revealed that the population has halved within the last two decades. Now there are only an estimated 400-500 pairs left.

Despite the grave situation for both species on Gough Island, UK government funding to plan for and take forward the eradication of mice is still lacking. This is despite recognition from two prominent UK House of Commons Committees that the "biodiversity found in the UK Overseas Territories is equally valuable and at a greater risk of loss" (than the UK) and that current levels of funding are "grossly inadequate". Eradicating mice is the single

action that would solve the primary conservation threat facing both species.

A complete survey of the Tristan Albatross on Gough Island in January showed there were 1764 adult albatrosses incubating eggs. A later survey revealed that only 246 chicks had survived to fledging however.

The RSPB has been involved in a feasibility study to test whether it's possible to remove the mice. So far, the trials look promising, giving both species a more optimistic future. Funding of this year's work on Gough has come from the Overseas Territory Environment Programme (OTEP).

Tackling alien invasives species in UK Overseas Territories is one of 10 Key Actions to prevent extinctions that BirdLife has highlighted in a new publication, *Critically Endangered Birds: a global audit*.

To find out more and to download a copy of *Critically Endangered Birds: a global audit* go to:

<http://www.birdlife.org/crbirds/index.html>

Adapted from [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)

### **FUJIAN BIRDPWATCHERS TAKE CHINESE CRESTED TERN MESSAGE TO SCHOOLS**

With an estimated population of not more than 50 birds, the Critically Endangered Chinese Crested Tern *Sterna bernsteini* is one of Asia's most threatened birds. Only three regular sites are known, two used for breeding (Mazu and Jiushan Islands, off the coasts of Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces respectively), and one for staging (Min Jiang Estuary, Fujian Province).

The greatest threat to the tern's survival is egg collection by fishermen for food, which continues even though the Mazu and Jiushan Islands breeding sites are both within protected areas. According to the International Single Species Action prepared for the Convention on Migratory Species under the supervision of BirdLife's Asia Division, the immediate priority is to strictly enforce the relevant conservation laws, accompanied by an education programme targeted at local communities, especially fishing communities.

The Fujian Bird Watching Society had already begun its own surveys of Chinese Crested Tern when it approached BirdLife/Hong Kong Bird Watching Society China Programme for support. The result, thanks to a grant from the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, was the action for the Critically Endangered Chinese Crested Tern project, which aims to locate undiscovered breeding colonies and feeding areas along the coastline between Fuding City and Pintan Island in Fujian Province.

The project, which will last 18 months from July 2008 to December 2009, is also conducting education and awareness work at schools and local communities around key sites in northern Fujian Province, and raising awareness of the need for strengthened law enforcement and other actions among stakeholders in Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces.

Twelve volunteers from the Fujian Bird Watching Society are involved in the education and awareness work at schools and local communities. In the first three months of the project, they prepared a variety of materials including posters, banners and exhibition boards, flags for the Volunteer Chinese Crested Tern Conservation Groups, materials for talks, and a video of Chinese Crested Tern, with an information leaflet about the tern and other seabirds to follow.

The opening ceremony for the project was held at Fuzhou Wushan Primary School, which is attended by children of government officials. Two hundred students and teachers attended the ceremony and the accompanying bird photo exhibition and talks, and information about Chinese Crested Tern was distributed. The event was reported by The Ta Kung Pao Hong Kong, Southeast Morning Post, Fuzhou Evening Post, Southeast Post, Fujian TV, Fuzhou TV and Fujian People's Radio, among others.

A workshop in early November trained members of the volunteer groups in communications techniques such as organising talks and environmental games, and answering questions from the public about Chinese Crested Tern. After the workshop, five volunteers visited the Changle Jinfeng Secondary School, the school nearest the Min Jiang estuary. Forty students and teachers, including the school principal, joined

in activities which included birdwatching, talks and a bird photo exhibition.

Education and awareness work has continued, including visits to a school in Mawei region, to the communities in Lianjiang and Ningde, and to two fishing villages in Fuding City. Further work in Fuqing, Pingtan, Louyuan and Xiapu is planned for early 2009.

The Species Action Plan for the Chinese Crested Tern can be downloaded at:

[http://www.cms.int/bodies/ScC/15th\\_scientific\\_council/Documents/En/ScC15\\_Doc\\_10\\_SSAP\\_ChineseCrestedTern\\_Only.pdf](http://www.cms.int/bodies/ScC/15th_scientific_council/Documents/En/ScC15_Doc_10_SSAP_ChineseCrestedTern_Only.pdf)

Adapted from [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)

## RESEARCH NEWS

### DETAILS OF MANX SHEARWATER MIGRATION REVEALED

The migratory movements of seabirds (especially smaller species) remain poorly understood, but details of the 20,000 km migration of Manx Shearwaters (*Puffinus puffinus*) have been revealed using geolocators for the first time.



Manx shearwater (Photo Chris Rodger)

Geolocators were fitted to in two studies to map the birds' long foraging trips. They report their results in papers in Proceedings of the Royal Society B and the journal Ibis. The data was

recovered from tags fitted to six breeding pairs from Skomer Island, off the coast of Wales.

The results suggest that, during their long migration, all 12 of the birds studied had to make at least one stopover of up to two weeks to 'refuel' – behaviour not normally associated with birds that migrate over open seas, because, unlike terrestrial species, they were not able to return to the same feeding spot each year. However, they appeared to have adopted the same behaviour as it offered the "optimal migration strategy. If the birds flew directly they would have to have a larger fat reserve in order to make the journey, this would mean the bird would be flying the first part of the migration weighing more than it needed to. It is a complex trade-off between the aerodynamics of long distance flight and the risks and time constraints of having to stop and refuel.

The migratory route revealed by the geolocators was very broadly consistent with what people using more traditional methods, such as ringing, thought they had taken. However, they showed that their migration route takes them further south than had previously been thought.

The team used 2 different types of tags that had been designed and made by the British Antarctic Survey and allowed researchers to know whether the bird was sat on the water or diving, or whether it was flying.

By combining the two data sets (location and flight/stationary), it was possible were able to work out the birds' migration pattern and behaviour en route. All of the tagged birds returned to the UK breeding site, which suggested that the tags did not inhibit them during their seven-month migration. The researchers also found that in the two weeks prior to laying their single large egg, female Shearwaters journeyed to distant waters south west of Britain, probably to exploit rich fishing near the continental shelf break. Males stayed nearer their Pembrokeshire colony during breeding: both males and females depend heavily on fisheries within the Irish Sea.

**Migration and stopover in a small pelagic seabird, the Manx shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*: insights from machine learning. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, Jan 13, 2009.**

DOI: [10.1098/rspb.2008.1577](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2008.1577)

T. Guilford, J. Meade, J. Willis, R. A. Phillips, D. Boyle, S. Roberts, M. Collett, R. Freeman and C. M. Perrins

**GPS tracking of the foraging movements of Manx Shearwaters *Puffinus puffinus* breeding on Skomer Island, Wales**  
**Ibis Volume 150, Issue 3, July 2008, Pages: 462-473**

TC Guilford, J Meade, R Freeman, D Biro, T Evans, F Bonadonna, D Boyle, S Roberts, CM Perrins

## **SEX SPECIFIC FOOD PROVISIONING IN THE COMMON GUILLEMOT**

**Thaxter CB, Daunt F, Hamer KC, Watanuki Y, Harris MP, Grémillet D, Peters G & Wanless S. (2008) Sex-specific food provisioning in a monomorphic seabird, the common guillemot *Uria aalge*: nest defence, foraging efficiency or parental effort? Avian Biology Vol 40. 75-84.**

Sexual differences in food provisioning rates of monomorphic seabirds are well known but poorly understood. This study addressed three hypotheses that attempt to explain female-biased food provisioning in common guillemots *Uria aalge*: (1) males spend more time in nest defence, (2) females have greater foraging efficiency, and (3) males allocate a greater proportion of foraging effort to self-maintenance.

Males spent no more time with chicks than females but made longer trips and travelled further from the colony. There was extensive overlap between sexes in core foraging areas, indicating that females were not excluding males from feeding opportunities close to the colony. However, as a result of their longer trips, the total foraging areas of males were much greater than those of females. There was no difference between sexes in overall dive rate per hour at sea, in behaviour during individual dives or in a number of other measures of foraging efficiency including the frequency, depth and duration of dives and the dive: pause ratio during the final dive bout of each trip, which was presumably used by both sexes to obtain prey for the chick. These data strongly suggest that sexes did not differ in their ability to locate and capture prey. Yet males made almost twice as many dives per

trip as females, suggesting that males made more dives than females for their own benefit.

These results support the hypothesis that female-biased food provisioning arose from a difference between sexes in the allocation of foraging effort between parents and offspring, in anticipation of a prolonged period of male-only post-fledging care of the chick, and not from differences in foraging efficiency or time spent in nest defence.

## **BRITAIN'S OLDEST RAZORILL**

In the latest British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Ringing Report, Razorbill M23170, ringed as a chick on the cliffs of Bardsey Island, Gwynedd was reported back on the island for its 41st summer. The typical lifespan of these birds is normally much lower at 13 years.

Adapted from [www.bto.org.uk](http://www.bto.org.uk)

## **BEACHED BIRD SURVEY NEWS**

### **NATIONAL BEACHED BIRD SURVEY 2008**

The 2008 National Beached Bird Survey was conducted during the weekend of 23/24 February. More than 650 volunteers surveyed 2,388 km of the UK coast and recorded 573 dead seabirds, divers, seaducks and grebes (excluding 'wings only'). The resulting density of 0.24 dead seabirds per km walked is the lowest since 1991 (1991-2007 mean = 0.95 birds per km, s.d.  $\pm 0.83$ ). A total of 69 waders and miscellaneous birds were also found, one of which was oiled. Other finds included 16 dead seals and one cetacean.



**Figure 1: Stretches of beaches walked in the National Beached Bird Survey 2008. The dots mark the starting point of each stretch.**



**Figure 2: Numbers of oiled 'seabirds' found during the National Beached Bird Survey 2008**

In the middle of January, the cargo vessel Ice Prince sank 26 miles off Portland Bill in Dorset. Around 2,000 tons of timber were washed up on beaches on the south coast. The following clear-up operations will have reduced the number of seabirds found on these beaches during the February survey. However, although almost no oil leaked from the ship, within a week of the incident, oiled seabirds were found off the coast of the Isle of White and at some beaches in Sussex. It appears, that the oil was illegal discharge of ships in the wake of the Ice Prince incident. A few weeks later, oiled seabirds were washed ashore at the coast of Kent, again presumably due to oil from illegal discharge (source: BBC online). Both incidents will have increased the number of oiled seabirds found in the south and south-east regions (Figure 2).

Slight oiling was recorded at 24 of the 689 beaches walked; eight of these beaches were located in the south, six in the southeast. Beaches in Orkney, Shetland, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands were free of oil. No birds were found entangled in netting. All of the four sick seabirds recorded were oiled; three of these were found in Kent following the oiling incident in this area, amongst them a heavily oiled Red-throated Diver.



**Figure 3: Number of auks (guillemot, razorbill, black guillemot, little auk, puffin) found during the National Beached Bird Survey 2008**

Auks (Figure 3), although the most frequently recorded seabirds (Table 1), were found at their third lowest density since 1991: 0.10 dead Auks per km (1991-2007 mean = 0.61, s.d.  $\pm$  0.70). All other seabird groups were also found at below average densities.

Overall, 12.4% of seabirds recovered were recorded as being oiled to some extent. This is the highest oiling rate since 2003 (1992-2007 mean = 13.4%, s.d.  $\pm$  7.62) and mainly due to the oiling incidents in the south and south-east compounded by the low overall densities of birds found. Although the oiling rate for petrels were the highest of all species groups (Table 1), the actual numbers involved were small: one slightly oiled Manx Shearwater of three found. The oiling rate for auks (24.6%) was well above the long-term average (1991-2007 mean = 18.4% s.d.  $\pm$  11.78).

Table 1: Numbers, density and % oiled for different group sof seabird species found during the 2008 National Beached Bird Survey, with 2007 results for comparison

Species Group	Number found		Density (no./km)		% Oiled	
	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007
Auks	240	878	0.10	0.38	24.58	8.31
Gulls	126	142	0.05	0.06	3.97	1.41
Cormorant & Shag	93	172	0.04	0.08	3.23	0.58
Fulmar	55	43	0.02	0.02	1.82	0.00
Gannet	20	20	0.01	0.01	5.00	0.00
Kittiwake	13	29	0.01	0.01	0.00	6.90
Seaducks	16	28	0.01	0.01	6.25	0.00
Divers	3	8	<0.01	<0.01	0	0.00
Grebes	2	1	<0.01	<0.01	0	0.00
Terns	1	2	<0.01	<0.01	0	0.00
Skuas	1	0	<0.01	0.0	0	N/A
Petrels	3	1	<0.01	<0.01	33.33	0.00

Table 2: Numbers, density and % oiled for all seabirds in each region found during the 2008 National Beached Bird Survey, with 2007 results for comparison. N.B.: South region includes Channel Islands

Region	Distance walked (km)		Number of dead seabirds		Density (no. dead birds/km)		% Oiled	
	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007
Shetland	48.4	48.4	42	21	0.87	0.43	4.8	0.0
Orkney	43.2	47.3	29	34	0.67	0.72	0.0	0.0
North-east	607.2	603.8	141	244	0.23	0.40	0.7	0.4
South-east	349.5	346.4	63	40	0.18	0.12	39.7	2.5
South	271.3	181.1	64	119	0.24	0.66	56.3	54.6
South-west	54.25	30.2	2	8	0.04	0.26	50.0	0.0
Wales	232.1	244.9	32	75	0.14	0.31	3.1	2.7
North-west	650.74	631.2	195	776	0.30	1.23	2.1	1.2
N. Ireland	131.8	155.1	5	7	0.04	0.05	0.0	0.0

As it has been the case in most years, oiling rates were highest in the south (Table 2), but only slightly above the long-term average for this region (1992-2007 mean = 53.6%, s.d.  $\pm$  17.67). The oiling incident near the coast of Kent resulted in the second highest oiling rate for the south-east region since 1992 and twice the long-term average (1992-2007 mean=19.6%, s.d.  $\pm$  16.29). Only two dead seabirds were found in the south-west but one of them oiled, resulting in the high oiling rate of 50%. Oiling rates for the other regions were low and for the ninth consecutive year, no oiled birds were found in Northern Ireland.

We are grateful to Martin Heubeck of the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG) and regional RSPB staff for co-ordinating the 2008 Beached Bird Survey, to the Paul Britten for producing the maps, and particularly to all the volunteers who gave up their time for this survey.

NB. Results presented here are those from surveys carried out 14 February – 01 March 2008 (a week either side of 21/22 Feb). This is to standardise the results with those of other countries involved in the International Beached Bird Survey, of which this National Beached Bird Survey forms a part. No data were available for Lancashire or Cheshire (southwest region).

**Sabine Schmitt**  
RSPB

[sabine.schmitt@rspb.org.uk](mailto:sabine.schmitt@rspb.org.uk)

## SHETLAND BEACHED BIRD SURVEY: PUFFIN AWAY FOR 30 YEARS!

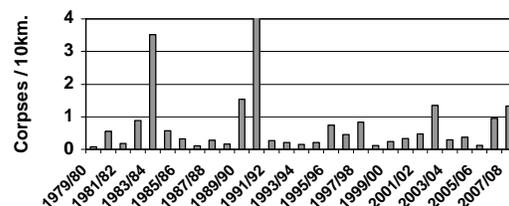
Monthly beached bird surveys (BBS) in Shetland began in the late summer of 1978 by the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG), and have continued since, except in January and February 1979 when they were disrupted by

the *Esso Bernicia* and other oil spills, resumed in March 1979, and have run continuously since.

At the end of each month SOTEAG staff and 14 volunteers cover 48 km of beach, the main purpose of which is to monitor levels of chronic oil pollution in the seas around Shetland. However, the data on the seasonal occurrence of 63,700 dead seabirds over a 30-year period can also be explored to look for changes or unusual ‘spikes’ in natural mortality. Atlantic Puffins on the Isle of May, and possibly over a much wider area, reportedly had a ‘difficult winter’ in 2007/08 (Seabird Group Newsletter 108). Was this reflected in the BBS data?

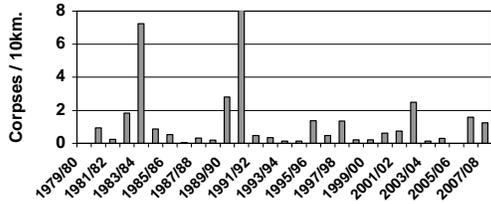
Relatively few Puffins are normally dead in Shetland outside the breeding season, major exceptions being in winter 1983/84 and 1990/91 (Figure 1). Overall, numbers in 2006/07 and 2007/08 were higher than average, but not markedly so.

Figure 1. Non-oiled Puffins recorded per 10 km on the September to March Shetland BBS, 1979/80–2007/08. 1990/91 = 8.7 corpses / 10 km.



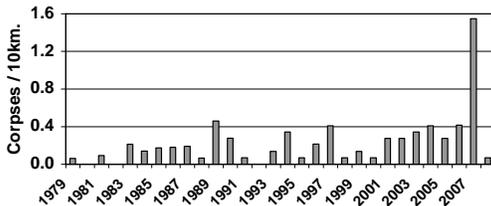
The 1983/84, mortality occurred mainly in January and February, while in 1990/91 it extended from December through to February. In the latter wreck, examination of a sample of corpses suggested all age classes had been equally affected (Harris *et al.* 1991. *Seabird* 13: 63-66). In comparison, the number recorded in those months in 2007/08 was relatively modest (Figure 2), and the number of auks (all species) on the February 2008 National BBS was well below the 1991-2007 average for that month (Schmitt 2008. Unpubl. RSPB Report).

Figure 2. Non-oiled Puffins recorded per 10 km on the December to February Shetland BBS, 1979/80–2007/08. 1991/92 = 19.6 corpses / 10 km.



Where 2007/08 differed from previous years was in the number of dead Puffins recorded earlier in autumn (Figure 3). Unusual numbers of adult Puffins were reported washing ashore during southerly winds in mid October, but both authors were out of Shetland at the time so the reports were not followed up. In BBS two weeks later, only 13 mostly adults were found. By then winds had shifted to the north, spring tides had occurred, and it appeared as though many corpses had been washed away. However, even the count of 13 was eight times the previous 28-year seasonal average. Larger numbers were recorded in Orkney at the same time (Meek 2008. Unpubl. RSPB Report). Autumn 2008 saw a return to normal in Shetland, with only one dead Puffin in the four months September to December.

Figure 3. Non-oiled Puffins recorded per 10 km on the September to November Shetland BBS, 1979–2008.

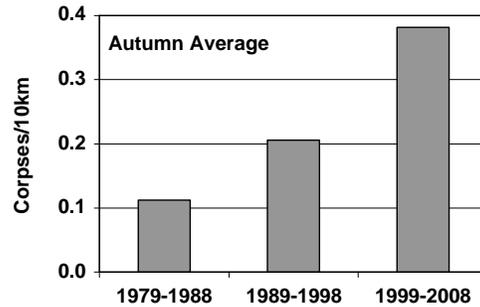


It is perhaps open to question whether apparent changes involving such small numbers of birds are meaningful. However, seemingly minor events take on some significance if they are at odds with the

normal in long-term data sets collected in a standard manner.

Our data suggests that the occurrence of dead Puffins on Shetland beaches in autumn may have changed over the past 30 years (Figure 4), but cannot answer whether this may reflect any changes in population size, distribution, or mortality rates.

Figure 4. Average autumn occurrence of non-oiled Puffins on the Shetland BBS, by decade.



Martin Heubeck & Mick Mellor  
martinheubeck@btinternet.com

**2008  
BREEDING SEASON  
NEWS**

**SHIANTS ISLES**

We visited the Shiant Isles between 3 – 8 July 2008, enjoying mostly calm, sunny weather. We circled the islands by boat and counted all the Kittiwake nests on all three islands and the outlying Galtachean rocks. Two landings were made on Eilean Mhuire, the most inaccessible of the main islands. The time available for seabird work was limited, and Kittiwakes apart, the following notes are not as thorough or comprehensive as we would have liked.

## Kittiwake

We counted well-built nests only, with or without an attendant adult. Trace nests were ignored.

**Eilean Mhuire:** 525 nests were counted, with 441 of these (84%) confined to the east cliffs. Of 142 nests checked from the land on 5 July, 86 were empty and 56 had an apparently incubating adult. A further 85 had attending adults standing on the nest, but most, if not all of these were probably empty. On the west coast the colony at Bid na Faing had 43 empty nests and 16 with incubating adults. A small nearby colony had 8 attended nests, contents unknown. The south coast had a group of 6 nests, 4 of which held tight sitting adults. On the north coast there were 11 nests, most attended, but their contents unknown.

**Eilean an Taighe:** 4 empty nests were found, all on the south east coast of the Mianais peninsula.

**Garbh Eilean :** 6 nests were found, all at Tobhaichean Caola. Five were empty and unattended, one held an incubating adult.

**Galta Mor:** 2 unattended nests

**Galta Beag :** 12 nests, 6 with incubating adults and 6 unattended.

The maximum group total (of 2 counts) was 549 nests, compared with 1849 nests found in 1999 (Seabird 2000) and the minimum count in 1986 of 1807 nests (Seabird Colony Register).

Year	1986	1999	2008
<b>Eilean Mhuire</b>	1291	1798	525
<b>Eilean an Taighe</b>	57	0	4
<b>Garbh Eilean</b>	337	15	6
<b>Galta Mor</b>	77	36 <sup>1</sup>	2
<b>Galta Beag</b>	45	0	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>1807<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>1849</b>	<b>549</b>

<sup>1</sup>Combined Galta total

<sup>2</sup>1807 min, 1920 max

The total population of 549 well built nests found over the whole island group is the lowest number since records began in 1970 (SCR). Of these, 138 (25%) were confirmed as empty, with no sign of eggs, small young or attending adults. There were only 79 nests (14%) with birds sitting tight, presumably incubating, so equivalent to the 'apparently occupied nest' counted in most surveys. If these samples are representative of the whole colony, then there were only 200 (36%) active nests in the islands, while the majority, 349 nests (63%), belonged to pairs that had either failed to lay or failed very early. No young were seen, and it is likely that hatching had not begun. If even recently hatched young were present, it is reasonable too suppose that some feeding by adults would have been seen, particularly on 5 July when 3 hours were spent checking nests on Eilean Mhuire. Whatever happened after our visit, breeding success in 2008 must have been very low.

## Great Black backed Gull

No counts were made on **Garbh Eilean** and our visit was too late to count nests, so we estimated breeding pairs based on adults apparently on territories. On **Eilean Mhuire** two counts suggested between 46 and 60 pairs. On 16 May 2004 S Murray (unpub) found 56 nests with eggs and 14 well built but empty nests. This, and earlier counts of AOT suggest breeding numbers are fairly stable (1986 47-60 AOT. 1995 85 AOT. SCR).

Between 8 and 12 AOT were estimated on **Eilean an Taighe**, many fewer than the 22-40 AOT on 16 May 2004 (S Murray). These totals should be treated cautiously. It was not the optimum time to be counting breeding gulls and the birds were very dispersed over the territories. More significant was the apparent lack of young gulls. Scottish Natural Heritage reported large numbers of recently hatched chicks on Eilean Mhuire on 17 June, whereas we found more dead than alive. Only 5 broods were seen, all about a month old, however

no intensive search for broods was made and chicks could easily have been overlooked in the long grass and rushes in the centre of the island. On Eilean an Taighe no dead young were found, but only 3 broods were confirmed, all about 4-5 weeks old.

### **Shag**

Nests were searched for along the west side of Mianais on **Eilean an Taighe**, nine were found compared to 46 in 1986 (SCR). There were 2 broods of two chicks, and one of one chick, all were about 10 days old. There was also a new hatched brood of 2 and two clutches of 3 eggs. Three unreachable nests had either eggs or very small young.

On **Garbh Eilean** a small part of the main boulderfield was checked, but only a single adult was flushed and no nest was found. Over the entire boulderfield few birds were seen standing around at any time, which would suggest a population crash rather than a major non breeding event.

In 1986 and 1999 over 1000 and 246 nests respectively, were found among these boulders (SCR, Seabird 2000).

### **Guillemot**

Two counts were made at Tobhaichean Caola on **Garbh Eilean** on 6 July. The average was 1289 birds, compared with 2853 in 1986 (SCR) and 2837 in 1999 (Seabird 2000), however these counts were made at the optimum time for this species. In 2008 no chicks were seen, neither were adults seen carrying fish. A small number appeared to be incubating, but most birds were very unsettled and the ledges sparsely populated. On St Kilda at the same time, the species had not begun to fledge and chicks were very obvious on the breeding ledges (S Money pers com), while on Canna numbers were low and breeding success poor. (R Swann pers com). It seems likely that breeding success on the Shiantis in 2008 was also poor.

### **Puffin**

Food loads were assessed at a dense grass slope colony on **Garbh Eilean**, and several hundred burrow entrances checked for dropped fish. The only fish seen being carried were small 0 group sandeels (one found was 30 mm long) but one dropped rockling (30 mm) was also collected. Loads appeared to be small. Breeding success was unknown, but no hungry chicks were heard calling from underground, and a high proportion of burrows were clearly in use.

### **Summary**

This was too short a visit to get more than an indication of what is happening to the Shiantis seabirds, but clearly the **Kittiwake** population was reduced, and with a 70% loss of breeding birds in a decade the outlook for them here is bleak. **Greater Black-backed Gull** numbers appeared to be fairly stable, but they seem to have produced very few fledged young this season. Question marks also hang over **Shags**, and a thorough count of nests at their largest colony on Garbh Eilean is long overdue. **Guillemots** have likely had a very poor breeding season, with possibly some decline in overall numbers. **Puffins** seem to be unaffected but their breeding success is unknown. **Razorbills** were still present in hugely impressive numbers, especially on Garbh Eilean, but again nothing is known about breeding success.

The Shiant Isles hold one of the main concentrations of seabirds in the Minch and the status of all the species breeding here is in urgent need of re-assessment.

**S Murray & J A Love**  
[murraysurvey@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:murraysurvey@yahoo.co.uk)

## **NORTH EAST SCOTLAND**

Seabirds have not done well in 2008 in NE Scotland. After a miserable April the inland Common Gulls (SBG Newsletter 107) nested a fortnight later than last year. A few

became sick and died again early in the season. Individuals were examined by the SSPCA and sent for testing for most things except botulism by SNH, but nothing was found. Many clutches were lost. On 18 June only three late clutches and six chicks were found, three (and a Mountain Leveret) dead. In July many adults remained feeding in the local fields, especially around silage and ploughs, but few were young; there was a mass departure of flocks north down the Fiddich valley on the evening of 31 July.

Casual observations suggest an equal situation among cliff-nesting seabirds. There were no young auks at sea and few young Kittiwakes ashore off Troup Head on 23 July, where it was estimated from the sea that there were roughly 1730 occupied Gannet sites. The brightest observation is that it is years since many dead seabirds have been seen along the shore.

**W.R.P. Bourne**  
wrpbourne@yahoo.co.uk

## FORTH ISLANDS



**Fulmar on Inchmickery (Chris Rodger)**

### **Fulmar**

All islands were counted and unfortunately the downward trend seen in the last ten years has continued – down from the high of 2045 AOS in 1997 to 1169 AOS this year. The only island showing an increase this year is May Isle.

### **Cormorant**

In 2004 the Forth islands were home to 400 breeding pairs. Since then numbers have been falling steadily and this year only 259 AON were counted. Compared to last year, numbers on Haystack increased, Inchkeith remained the same while the other islands all showed decreases.

### **Shag**

In recent years, this species reached a peak of 1794 AOS in 2003. Since then breeding numbers have dropped and this year saw only 1061 AON. May Isle and Lamb showed an increase on last year while all other islands showed a decrease.

### **Gannet:**

Not counted this year.

### **Great black-backed Gull**

Back in 1995 there were only 20 pairs breeding. Since then there has been a steady increase. This year the count for all islands was 60 AON. The central part of Craighleith was not fully covered because the count had to be brought to a quick end as the weather rapidly deteriorated. The actual total might therefore be higher.

### **Lesser Black-backed Gull**

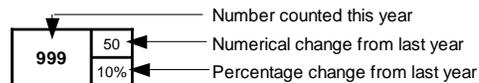
On the islands where this species was counted, the numbers were similar to last years figures. However, on May Isle there was an increase from 1665 last year, to 1944 AON i.e. an increase of 17%.

### **Herring gull**

This species is only counted on some of the islands and numbers on each of these islands showed increases. On Inchgarvie numbers more than doubled from about 94 AON last

2008	Bass Rock		Craigeith		Lamb		Fidra		Eybroughy	Inchkeith		Carr Craig		Inchcolm		Haystack		Inchmickery + Cow & Calves		Inchgarvie / Forth Bridge		Long Craig		May Isle		Total				
Fulmar (AOS)	43	-5 -10%	86	-20 -19%	7-8	-2 -22%	160	-43 -21%			248	-67 -21%	0		124	-48 -28%	0		23	-9 -28%	175	-43 -20%	0		293	12 4%	1,159	-225 -16%		
Cormorant (nests)	0		41	-38 -48%	73	-33 -31%	0				93	0%	20	-9 -31%	0		32	4 14%	0		0		0		0		259	-76 -23%		
Shag (nests)	22	-6 -21%	133	-66 -33%	97	24 33%	146	-23 -14%			161	-26 -14%	13	-1 -7%	7	0%	0		55	-2 -4%	0		0		427	28 7%	1,061	-72 -6%		
Gannet (nests)	✓		0		0		0				0		0		0		0		0		0		0		0		0			
Eider (nests)	5+	5	✓		✓		8	8			✓		4	2 100%	50+	50	0		33	33	71	10 16%	11	6 120%	1,088	1,088	1,270	1,202 1768%		
Great B-b Gull (nests)	0		10+	-7 -41%	2-3	-2 -50%	2	0%			5	0%	1	0%	1	1	1	0%	?	-1 -100%	1	0%	0		37	7 23%	60	-2 -3%		
Lesser B-b Gull (nests)	3+	3	✓		✓		✓				✓		c3	0%	✓		3	-4 -57%	✓		c17	-1 -6%	0		c1944	279 17%	1,970	277 16%		
Herring Gull (nests)	✓		✓		✓		✓				✓		c51	5 11%	✓		c8	3 60%	✓		c202	108 115%	0		c2962	108 4%	3,223	224 7%		
Kittiwake (nests)	323	-54 -14%	513	5 1%	110	14 15%	222	-22 -9%			352	-47 -12%	0		88	-28 -24%	0		0		0		0		3,354	-70 -2%	4,962	-202 -4%		
Common Tern (nests)	0		0		0		0				0		0		0		0		0		0		c90-100	-43 -31%	c101	18 22%	197	-25 -11%		
Arctic Tern (nests)	0		0		0		0				0		0		0		0		0		0		0		c511	-14 -3%	511	-14 -3%		
Roseate Tern (nests)																									2	1 100%				
Sandwich Tern (nests)	0		0		0		0				0		0		0		0		0		0		0		1	1	1	1		
Razorbill (pairs/sites)	85	-34 -29%	147	-34 -19%	80	3 4%	95	-33 -26%			62	6 11%	0		5	-1 -17%	0		0		0		0		0		3464 b (c2700 s)	-140 -5%	3,174	2,607 460%
Guillemot (birds on cliffs)	c1600	480 43%	c1550	400 35%	c2900	1,505 108%	403	-185 -31%			28	12 75%	0		1 on land		0		0		0		0		0		17,157	387 2%	23,638	2,599 12%
Puffin (birds unless otherwise stated)	a few		✓		51 on land	51	50 on land, 270 sea	58 22%			646 on land & sea	-324 -33%	0		36 on sea	-3 -8%	0		1 on land	-11 -92%	0		0		c42,000 AOB		c42,000 AOB + 1054 b			

KEY:



AOS = Apparently occupied sites  
 OB = occupied burrows  
 ✓ = birds present but not counted

0 = none breeding  
 c = circa  
 b = birds  
 s = sites

year to 202 this year. Interestingly, the numerical increase on May Isle was the same (ie 108 AON) but the percentage increase here was only 4%.

### **Kittiwake**

Numbers in the Firth of Forth reached their peak of well over 11,000 AON in the mid-1990's. Then there was a sharp drop to around 7,000 AON in the late 90's. Since then there has been a steady drop to this year's count of 4,962 AON. Apart from Craighleith and Lamb, where there were slight increases, the other islands all showed decreases in numbers.

### **Common Tern**

Last year, the count was 255 AON. This year only 196 nests were counted, taking numbers back to what they were in 2005 and 2006.

### **Arctic Tern**

This year's count is a few nests down on last year's which brings then back to what they were in 2006.

### **Roseate Tern**

In recent years, there have been very few of this species breeding on the Forth islands. This year 2 nests were counted – up from one last year.

### **Sandwich Tern**

This year a single nest was counted. This is better than the previous two years when none were counted, but nothing like the 500 AON in 2001.

### **Razorbill**

Although there was a peak of over 5,200 AOS in 2005, the general trend in recent years has been downwards. Lamb and Inchkeith showed slightly increased numbers while the other islands all showed decreases.

### **Guillemot**

Unlike most of the other seabird species, the guillemot has shown an increase in breeding numbers. This increase was seen on all islands except Fidra where numbers dropped.

### **Puffin**

On May Isle it was expected that breeding numbers might have reached 100,000 pairs this year. However only circa 42,000 AOB were counted and this is 39% down on last count in 2003 which found c70,000 AOB. (SBG Newsletter 108) The Farne Islands have shown a similar decline. On the other islands, where numbers of Puffins are shown in the table below, these are birds which were seen near the breeding colonies.

### **Bill Bruce**

Adapted from 'Forth Islands Bird Report November 2008'.

Reports and monitoring figures for previous years can be found on the group's website: [www.forthseabirdgroup.org.uk](http://www.forthseabirdgroup.org.uk)

## **SEABIRD GROUP GRANT REPORT**

The reformed Shiant's Auk Ringing Group visited the islands from 12-19 July 2008 for the first time since the 1980s. I had made my first visit there in 2006 on an expedition organised by Adrian Blackburn, and wanted to get back to this special place. Also, the seabirds and auks in particular seemed to be struggling, and some of the more accessible colonies looked promising sites for long-term monitoring through ringing e.g. the BTO's Retrapping Adults for Survival (RAS) scheme.

Therefore, the aim of the visit was to start RAS projects on Razorbill and Puffin, and possibly Guillemot. As well as general ringing, and surveys using the methodology

used by David Steventon and others in the 70s and 80s. Our visit was timed later than that of historic dates for ringing Guillemot & Razorbill chicks, as they had been noted breeding later on the 2006 visit than had been recorded in the 70s and 80s. Recent food shortages may have contributed to this.

However, our grand plans were hindered by the wet and windy, overcast weather and by fog. This limited access to the normally accessible colonies on Garbh Eilean and only one visit was possible to Eilean Mhuire, and stopped us visiting any of the outliers.

As has been reported elsewhere (see pages 10-12), all three auk species appeared to be having a very poor breeding season. In 2006, small Sandeels and other small fish, and Pipefish were being brought back to the colonies and burrows. Though this is poor, 2008 seemed to be worse. Only a couple of large Sandeels and gadoids were seen in beaks all week, and the rest were all very small '0' class Sandeels. Perhaps surprisingly, no Pipefish were seen at all in 2008. No Puffins were noted with a beakful of Sandeels like the bird on the cover of Seabird Group Newsletter 108.

Large areas of the main boulder field on Garbh Eilean appeared either devoid of or significantly down on Guillemot and Razorbill numbers compared to 2006. Some birds were still on eggs and other chicks were not big enough to ring. Only a few chicks were ringed. The situation was similar with the Shags in this colony. Around 5,000 adult Razorbills were in rafts between Garbh Eilean and Eilean Mhuire, which were presumably failed breeders. During the day odd Razorbill chicks were fledging and paddling across to their calling parent, to then be surrounded by a wagon train of other Razorbills. Is this parental instinct perhaps their a reaction to their own loss or group resistance against aerial predators? Going on the number of adult Razorbills it was possible to ring in 2006, the aim was to use standard netting to

establish a baseline for RAS on Carnach Mhor on Garbh Eilean. However, this time they were few Razorbills to catch.

Puffins perhaps appeared to be doing a little better. Certainly the baseline RAS for them at Airighean a Bhaigh on Garbh Eilean fared better. More than 500 adults were caught on marked net lines on our only fine day, with 10 birds retrapped from the 1980s and 90s. It will be interesting to see how many retraps we get this year. Though there were lots of Puffins loafing, not many were bringing in fish. More than half of the burrows on Carnach Mhor were not occupied.

When there are losers, there are usually also winners, and Great Blacked Gulls and the Bonxies had fat chicks. The paucity of food kept the auks off the nest longer to the benefit of the predators.

With the weather, we only managed to observe one Kittiwake colony near Campar on Eilean an Taighe, of the c30 nest sites only one or two had sitting adults. The rest of the nests either had loafing adults or were empty. More visits are planned this year and in 2010. This year's visit will be earlier so we can do more surveys and be more sure what is happening to the auks in particular.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I thank the expedition members: Gareth Bradbury, Alister Clunas, Gary Goddard, Kevin Hemsley, Chris Jones, Bob Medland and Derek Robertson for their wholehearted participation and support on the trip. Also, David Steventon for sharing his vast knowledge and experience of previous visits in the 1970s and 80s. The members supported the trip themselves. Therefore, the Seabird Group financial support for the purchase of a water filter and auk nets was critical to its success. Finally, many thanks to the Nicolson family for permission to ring on the Shiant Isles and for the use of their house.

Jim Lennon, Shiant Auk Ringing Group

[lennons@shearwater50.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:lennons@shearwater50.fsnet.co.uk)

## CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS



### 10<sup>TH</sup> SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE BRUGES, BELGIUM 27-30 MARCH 2009

The 10th International Seabird Group anniversary meeting will be held in the beautiful city of Bruges (Belgium) from 27 till 30 March 2009. The place of venue for this special anniversary meeting will be the historical 'Provinciaal Hof' on the market square.

**The preliminary programme and all other details can be found online at:**

[www.vliz.be/events/seabirdconference2009/index.html](http://www.vliz.be/events/seabirdconference2009/index.html)

Email: [seabirdconf2009@vliz.be](mailto:seabirdconf2009@vliz.be)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor

In the latest newsletter, (Seabird Group Newsletter 109, October 2008) I read Bernie Zonfrillo's response to Bill Bourne with some concern for some of their facts are seriously wrong. Bernie states categorically that Soay sheep were never present on Hirta, implying that there were never sheep present

at all. I have just completed a book on the natural history of St Kilda (to be published by Birlinn next spring) so have researched the topic quite exhaustively. In fact, the earliest accounts dating to Martin Martin in 1697 clearly state there were two thousand sheep on St Kilda, 400 of them on Boreray, 500 on Soay and the remainder on Hirta. In 1815 the geologist John MacCulloch said the sheep on Hirta were 'of the ancient Norwegian variety . many of the brown-fleeced variety.' If these were not Soays then they were certainly Scottish Short-wooled sheep similar to those surviving on Boreray today (where there may have been a little outbreeding with Soays and Blackface in the past) and on North Ronaldsay. It seems that the St Kildans began to adopt Blackface on Hirta in the mid-1800s, where some thousand or so came to replace the older breeds - but by Seton's visit in 1877 there were still 20-30 Soays being grazed on Dun, besides the parent flock on Soay itself, and the distinctive sheep on Boreray. The islanders maintained Blackfaces on Hirta right up to the evacuation in August 1930 when approximately 1200 were taken off to be sold in Oban a few days later.

Although the islanders managed to capture a score of sheep on Boreray a few days earlier, they had not visited Boreray or Soay for several years, so these flocks were left behind, each numbering several hundred. In 1932, a hundred Soays were gathered by a group of St Kildans and, at the request of the new owner Lord Bute, released on Hirta to found the flock that exists there today. What counts exist for Soay and Boreray indicate that the sheep numbers there fluctuate in tandem (if not as dramatically) with the Soay sheep on Hirta. Several old accounts and the recent Seabird 2000 surveys all suggest that puffins have always been most numerous on Soay and Boreray so, with Dun, are clearly not impacted by the presence of grazing animals. Indeed the fowlers on the Faroes deliberately put sheep on the puffin slopes to compact the soil knowing that the birds will excavate fresh

and firm burrows the next season to the benefit of future sustainability.

And so to Bernie's next erroneous statement, about red deer on Rum. It is an island I lived on for ten years and have written a book on its human history. True the last owner might have taken the odd red deer from parks in England (none from Woburn to my knowledge), and a few stags from Perthshire but it was not he who introduced them to the island. The earliest mention of deer on Rum is by Dean Monro in 1549 and, in my opinion, they had probably been introduced to the island some time before that, to create a hunting preserve for the Lordship of the Isles and their clan chiefs. Indeed, in 1632 one Benbecula rogue was prosecuted in Inveraray for poaching deer in Rum.

There are graphic accounts of the Rum deer being rounded up into stone corrals (which can still be seen) for slaughter. This, together with the loss of forest cover, resulted in the extinction of red deer on Rum by 1796. Up to this time Manx shearwaters were also being actively harvested as food by the islanders, having been there - if the hill name Trollaval is anything to go by - at least since Viking times. The shearwaters would have finally been free of this toll when the entire human population (bar one family) were removed from Rum to Canada in 1826-28. Young shearwaters or fachachs were eaten on Mingulay, St Kilda and continued to be eaten on Eigg until into the twentieth century.

Lord Salisbury bought Rum in 1845 and within a year or two had begun reintroducing deer - including some fallow although only the red deer were to thrive. It was they that came from estates in southern England (again I have found no reference to Woburn) so the bloodline cannot have been contaminated by interbreeding with Sika Deer. Hence, the Rum deer have some significant genetic value.

I have had no experience in my time on the island of red deer killing Manx Shearwaters

although I occasionally saw them eating carcasses, bones, even their own cast antlers, in order to add minerals to their diet. The situation may now have changed (but I can see no particular reason why) and I still find it hard to accept that red deer are wilfully killing shearwaters. I do know from experience that some of Rum's three or four pairs of golden eagles prey on shearwaters, which they must be catching at night. Incidentally, the eagles also take many rats since there are no lagomorphs in Rum, so removing all the island's rats will greatly impact the golden eagles. But then if they too are killing shearwaters . . . Nor, incidentally, am I convinced that sheep kill many tern chicks on Foula. In 1974 Tony Mainwood and I, and many of the islanders, put this incidence down to the introduced hedgehogs, which were chewing the wing tips of the tern chicks so they could never fly even if they reached fledging age. As we know from Uist hedgehogs relish birds' eggs too.

Therefore, St Kilda and Rum have had grazing animals for many centuries and I have yet to see any evidence that it is they, which have had a detrimental effect on nesting seabirds. NTS (National Trust Scotland) and SNH (Scottish Natural Heritage) who have only had dominion over these islands since 1957, should not be condemned for favouring important ground-breaking (pardon the pun) research on sheep and deer, over the nesting seabirds, hugely important as they are. This all seems a pointless debate anyway, when we see the massive problems seabirds are suffering through collapses in the marine food chain.

**John Love**

[john.a.love@btinternet.com](mailto:john.a.love@btinternet.com)

Dear Editor

I read with interest Bernie Zonfrillo's letter in the Seabird Group Newsletter 109 but was a little surprised by some of his comments regarding Rum and St Kilda. I believe it is unfair to say that these islands have had the conservation of their vegetation ignored in favour of the long-term studies on red deer and Soay sheep. These studies have taken advantage of populations of deer and sheep that were already present on the islands of Rum and St Kilda respectively.

The population of red deer on Rum currently numbers less than 1000 individuals, the lowest recorded for very many years. The Red Deer study area is based at Kilmory in the north of the island, where the study animals are largely hefted, and this is well away from the Manx Shearwater colony on the tops of Rum's highest mountains. Bernie Zonfrillo is also incorrect when he states that red deer were not present on Rum before their introduction by a previous owner of the island. It is generally accepted that red deer have been present on Rum since ancient times and were first mentioned by Dean Munro in 1549. Their bones have also been found in middens in caves on the island that date from Mesolithic times. This original population of red deer on Rum was hunted to extinction by 1796 as noted by the Old Statistical Account of Scotland. Red deer were re-introduced to the island by the Marquis of Salisbury from both Scottish and English estates after he purchased the island in 1845. There is no record of any introduction direct from Woburn.

For over 35 years the red deer research project on Rum has produced and still continues to produce ground-breaking research. This long term and ongoing data set will be of increasing importance in helping us to understand the ecological effects of climate change into the future.

I believe that the red deer population of Rum has only a very small effect on the shearwater population. By far a more

serious threat than deer on Rum is the population of brown rat that is likely to be increasing due to climate change. Eradication of brown rat on Rum would have far greater benefits for Rum's breeding seabirds than any changes in the management of the red deer herd.

There is also an increased risk of accidental introductions of ground predators to Rum since the island's new pier and roll-on roll-off ferry came into operation four years ago. Previously most cargo and passengers were transported from the ferry to the island by flit boat and this acted as an extra barrier to the accidental introduction of ground predators. This year will see the hand over of Kinloch village on Rum from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to the local community and the pier into the control of the Highland Council. It is hoped that this will increase the human population of Rum by providing employment opportunities independently of SNH, who currently manage the whole island on behalf of the Scottish Government. It will be important for the Isle of Rum Community Trust to work closely with SNH to help prevent the accidental introduction of ground predators to the island.

**Sean Morris**  
sean@isleofrum.com

## SEABIRD GROUP NEWS



### THE 43<sup>rd</sup> ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SEABIRD GROUP, 2008

There were a number of changes to the Executive Committee during the year. Norman Ratcliffe replaced Mark Tasker as Chairman and Martin Heubeck replaced Jim Reid as Journal Editor. In addition, the retirement of Jez Blackburn as a Committee member was used as an opportunity to elect our Membership Secretary, David Sowter, as a full Committee member. During a temporary leave of absence Claire Smith has covered for Liz Humphreys as Newsletter Editor.

At the end of 2008 the Seabird Group had 424 members including institutions and statutory bodies. This is largely unchanged from last year with an increase of 7. Not all institutions have been invoiced due to the delays in journal production. The issue of unpaid members is in the process of being resolved by the combined efforts of the membership secretary and treasurer.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> Annual General Meeting was held at the Scottish Ringers' Conference at Braemar on 17 November 2007. 24 members were present. Two formal meetings of the Executive Committee were held during the year, all other business being conducted by email. The winter 2008/9 AGM will be held at the Conference in Bruges which means no AGM in the 2008 calendar year. This situation is allowed for in the constitution and has occurred in the past.

The following grants were awarded in 2008:

#### Spring

Juan Pable Seco Pon, Argentina – Utilization of fishery discards - £400

Dr Russell B Wynn, National Oceanography Centre, UK - SeaWatch SW - £300

Jim Lennon, Shiant Islands Ringing Group - Shiant Islands Seabird Study - £300

#### Autumn

Stuart Murray & John A Love - Dunkeld, Perthshire - Survey of Leach's Storm Petrel and Atlantic Puffin on North Rona & Sula Sgeir in 2009 - £1,500

Alexander L. Bond Newfoundland - identifying the colony of origin of Razorbills shot during the Newfoundland murre hunt.- £300.

Deryk Shaw/ Fair Isle Bird Observatory - Where do our Kittiwakes go outside the breeding season? - £500

The Seabird Group awards small grants to projects twice a year, the deadlines for applications are 31<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> October. Applications should be submitted, preferably in electronic form, to the Secretary using the official application form available from the secretary or from the website, where grant guidelines are also available.

The first new issue of Seabird is now with the printers and should be with members fairly soon.

**Alan F. Leitch**  
**Secretary**

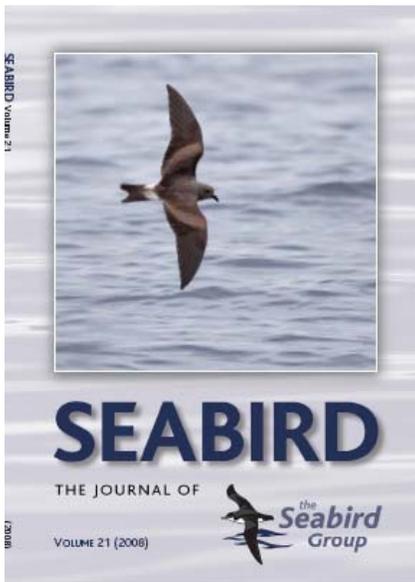
## NOTICE OF THE SEABIRD GROUP ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 43rd Annual General Meeting of The Seabird Group will be held at on Friday 27th March 2009 at 20:15 during the 10th Seabird Group Conference at the Provinciaal Hof in Bruges.

Nominations are required for the following executive committee positions:

- Secretary
- Membership Secretary
- Ordinary committee member

**Nominations and items for the agenda should be notified to the Secretary ASAP.**



### UPDATE ON JOURNAL SCANNING

We are pleased to announce that all volumes of Seabird and Atlantic Seabirds have now been scanned. Scanning of Seabird was contracted to Capture All Ltd, while Steve Geelhoed very kindly scanned Atlantic Seabirds. The electronic versions are now with our website designer, Jeff Stratford who needs to do a small amount of preparation before they are able to go live on our website. A note on the Seabird Group

Forum will be sent out when these become available.

(If you wish to subscribe to this forum, please send a blank email to [seabirdgroupforum-subscribe@yahogroups.com](mailto:seabirdgroupforum-subscribe@yahogroups.com)).

Linda Wilson

### EMAIL ADDRESSES REQUIRED FOR CORRESPONDENCE

**Thank you to everyone who has already supplied their email addresses, we now have over 250.**

**Please will all members, who have not already done so, let the Membership Secretary, David Sowter, have their email address for correspondence.** This will reduce our postage costs and hopefully enable more grant funding for members' projects that are supported by the Executive Committee.

### NEWSLETTER TO GO ELECTRONIC

Please note that all future copies of the Seabird Group newsletter will be sent to members as a PDF file attached to an email. It is recognised that some members may still require a printed (hardcopy) of the newsletter for use in a library or common room and these will still be sent by post if a member specifically requests this through David.

**Please send your email address to [davidsowter@freenet.co.uk](mailto:davidsowter@freenet.co.uk)**



**Minutes of the 42nd Annual General Meeting of the Seabird Group held at the Fife Arms Hotel, Braemar on 17th November 2007, 15:00.**

Mark Tasker was in the chair with Linda Wilson taking minutes in Alan Leitch's absence. Twenty-four members were present. Apologies were received from Alan Leitch and Jim Reid.

**1. Minutes of the 41st Annual General Meeting**

The minutes of the 41st AGM, were read by Mark Tasker. They were proposed for acceptance by David Sowter and seconded by Sarah Wanless.

**2. Matters arising**

There were no matters arising.

**3. 42nd Annual Report of the Seabird Group**

The report was read by Mark Tasker. It was proposed for acceptance by Martin Heubeck and seconded by Mike Harris.

**4. Accounts and Treasurers Report**

The accounts and report were presented to the meeting by John Davies. Mike Harris commented on the amount of surplus funds and John Davies responded by saying that the Committee was looking into ways of reducing its surplus by awarding more grants and by investing in the journal.

**5. Election of Officers**

The following officers were due to retire:- Mark Tasker, Jim Reid and Jez Blackburn. The current committee members nominated and seconded Norman Ratcliffe to replace Mark Tasker as Chair, Martin Heubeck to replace Jim Reid as editor of AS, David Sowter to replace Jez Blackburn as Ordinary Member (but also acting as Membership Secretary). Mark Tasker thanked Jim Reid for his work on AS, and Jez Blackburn for his work on the Seabird Group Forum, which he has kindly agreed to continue running.

Mark Tasker reported that the Executive Committee is reviewing the Constitution and that there may be a proposal to modernise it at the next AGM, including the possibility that two of Ordinary Member posts may be replaced by the Membership Secretary and the Publishing Editor of AS.

## **6. Atlantic Seabirds**

Mark Tasker reported on the progress made with the journal since the last AGM. The Dutch group had been approached with our proposal that publication of the journal would be brought back in house by the Seabird Group, but that we would like to continue to work with Dutch group on this joint publication. The Dutch had put this to their membership, who decided that they would prefer to return to a Dutch language publication, and therefore would like to discontinue the joint publication of Atlantic Seabirds. They also wished that the name 'Atlantic Seabirds' should discontinue, but the Executive Committee will approach the Dutch again to check that this is definitely the case.

The Executive Committee have agreed to fund around £1000 for a design revamp and £2500 a year for an annual publication of the new journal. The design revamp will include having colour (including a full colour cover, with some colour inside e.g. photos) and possibly include adverts. The aim is to have a new issue published by the next AGM. There was a discussion about the pros and cons of continuing with the name 'Atlantic Seabirds' (if the Dutch were happy with this) or returning to the old name of 'Seabird'. Sheila Russell commented that AS is currently 1½ years behind and that there would be an issue of making up this gap if we continued with the name of Atlantic Seabirds. However if the journal reverted to its old name of Seabird, the next volume number would be 21, a good 're-birth' number, and this would avoid the problem of making up the gap.

## **7. Next conference**

Mark Tasker reported that Eric Steinen had offered to host the next Seabird Group conference in Brugge. There are currently two options for dates, October 2008 or Spring 2009. The Executive Committee had a preference for October 2008, but the host will make the final decision.

## **8. AOB**

There was a request from Mark Grantham for ideas for a new scoping project on Reducing Impact of Oil Spills (RIOS) and he summarised five areas that could be put forward to the EU for funding research (Short-term behavioural monitoring of rehabilitated seabirds, Use of ring-recovery analysis and colour-ringing as a means of estimating survival rates, Linking survival/mortality to rehabilitation protocols and identification of causes of post-release mortality, Towards a better understanding of seabird movements in Europe, Establishment of a North Atlantic Beached Bird Survey network). Mark Tasker requested that Mark Grantham put something in the newsletter on this topic.

There was a brief discussion about the location of future AGMs. Mike Harris commented that there was a very good turn out at Braemar, which was a good reason for continuing to have AGMs at the Scottish Ringers conference. John Davis suggested the possibility of having an AGM at the next Seabird Group conference and it was agreed that the Executive Committee would continue to review where AGMs were held.

Martin Heubeck commented on the high standard of recent newsletters and encouraged people to contribute to both the newsletter and the journal.

Mark Tasker was thanked for his work as Chairman.  
The meeting was adjourned at 15:40



Registered charity No. 260907

The Seabird Group  
c/o BTO  
The Nunnery  
Thetford  
Norfolk IP24 2PU  
England, UK.

Email:

[seabird@bto.org](mailto:seabird@bto.org)

Website:

[www.seabirdgroup.org.uk](http://www.seabirdgroup.org.uk)

Seabird Group Forum :  
<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/seabirdgroupforum/>

The Newsletter is published three times a year. The editor welcomes articles from members and others on issues relating to seabird research and conservation. These should be received by 15th May (for June edition), 15th September (for October edition) or 15<sup>th</sup> January (for February edition).

The Seabird Group promotes and helps co-ordinate the study and conservation of seabirds. Members also receive the journal *Atlantic Seabirds*. The Group organises regular conferences and provides small grants towards seabird research. Current membership rates are:

Standing Order £9.00  
Concession £5.00  
Institution £15.00  
Ordinary £10.00

David Sowter  
Membership Secretary  
5 The Grove,  
Penwortham  
Preston,  
PR10UU, UK.  
([davidsowter@freenet.co.uk](mailto:davidsowter@freenet.co.uk))

## CURRENT SEABIRD GROUP COMMITTEE

Current retiral dates (at AGM) are shown in bold after the name of each member. Nominations (which should be submitted to the Secretary) from members for replacements on the committee are always welcome.

### Chairman

Norman Ratcliffe (**2011**)  
c/o British Antarctic Survey,  
High Cross, Madingley Road  
Cambridge, CB3 0ET  
[notc@bas.ac.uk](mailto:notc@bas.ac.uk)

### Secretary

Alan Leitch (**2008**)  
2 Burgess Terrace,  
Edinburgh. EH9 2BD  
[alan.leitch1@virgin.net](mailto:alan.leitch1@virgin.net)

### Treasurer

Andrew Ramsay (**2010**)  
Lower Courthill, By Tain,  
Ross-shire, IV19 1NE  
[aDkramsay@homecall.co.uk](mailto:aDkramsay@homecall.co.uk)

### *Atlantic Seabirds*

#### Editor

Martin Heubeck (**2011**)  
Sumburgh Lighthouse, Virkie,  
Shetland ZE3 9JN.  
[martinheubeck@btinternet.com](mailto:martinheubeck@btinternet.com)

### *Atlantic Seabirds*

#### Publishing Editor

Linda Wilson  
[Linda.Wilson@jncc.gov.uk](mailto:Linda.Wilson@jncc.gov.uk)

### *Seabird Group Newsletter*

#### Editor

Liz Humphreys (**2010**)  
BTO Scotland, University of  
Stirling, Stirling. FK9 4LA  
[liz.humphreys@bto.org](mailto:liz.humphreys@bto.org)

### *Seabird Group Newsletter*

#### Assistant Editor

Claire Smith (**2010**)  
[Claire.BSmith@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Claire.BSmith@rspb.org.uk)

### Other Members:

Juan Brown (**2008**)  
Simon Foster (**2010**)  
David Sowter (**2011**)

## EDITORIAL

The first issue of the relaunched 'Seabird' journal will soon be with members. Submissions for Seabird 22, to be published at the end of 2009 should be submitted to Martin Heubeck

Submissions for the newsletter must be in electronic format, preferably in word and should be no more than 1500 words wherever possible. If you would like to see any more new themes, which are not currently covered by the newsletter, then please get in touch with your ideas (Email: [seabird@bto.org](mailto:seabird@bto.org)).

Every effort is made to check the content of the material that we publish. It is not, however, always possible to check comprehensively every piece of information back to its original source, as well as keeping news timely. Please will readers make further checks, at their own discretion, if they have concerns about any of the information or contacts provided, and contact me to allow feedback to other readers if necessary.

We also try to provide a forum for readers' views, so that those provided in the *Newsletter* are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Seabird Group.