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NEWSLETTER 130

OCTOBER 2015

50TH SEABIRD GROUP AGM, 21ST NOVEMBER 2015

This year marks the **50th anniversary** of the Seabird Group and our 50th Annual General Meeting (AGM) is to be convened at the BTO Scottish Ringers' Conference in Carrbridge, which takes place during the weekend of 21-22 November 2015. The AGM is scheduled for 1430 on Saturday 21st November. All members are welcome to attend the meeting and the conference, hosted by the Grampian Ringing Group. The programme features a range of interesting talks including movements of colour-ringed gulls to catching Common Scoters. Full details of the conference can be found [here](#). Our Chairman, Russell Wynn, and *Seabird* Editor, Martin Heubeck, are due to stand down this autumn having fulfilled their terms of office and we are currently considering potential candidates for their replacements to be elected at the upcoming AGM. If you would like to nominate yourself or anyone else, please get in touch with Russ imminently (rbw1@noc.ac.uk).

We look forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming AGM and Scottish Ringers' Conference!

2ND WORLD SEABIRD CONFERENCE, CAPE TOWN

The 2nd World Seabird Conference (WSC) is fast approaching (26-30 October 2015) and we are excited to see wide representation from the Seabird Group in Cape Town. At least 25 of the Seabird Group's Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are attending, many of whom are scheduled to present talks and posters. We look forward to learning more about the diverse research being undertaken by our members. The Seabird Group is pleased to have been able to support our ECRs through the award of two grants to facilitate attendance at the conference. We have also offered further support to WSC via our chairman Russell Wynn, who sat on the World Seabird Union committee that was responsible for evaluating travel grant applications. **Katherine Booth-Jones**, our Early Career Representative, hopes to organise a get-together for our **ECR members** in Cape Town, so if you haven't already done so, get in touch with Kat (Katherine.BoothJones@ioz.ac.uk) to let here know that you are attending.

For those that aren't able to attend WSC2, you can follow the conference on Twitter by following the hashtag **#WSC2**. Our two grant awardees will also be reporting back from the conference in our next newsletter (SGN131, February 2016).

Also, if you want to catch up with the most recent 'Meet the Masters', a series of online video conferences being held in the run-up to WSC2, you can find links to the YouTube videos [here](#). In the last couple of months, Leandro Bugoni and Ross Wanless have

discussed perspectives on seabird research and conservation from the South Atlantic, while more recently Peter Hodum and David Towns engaged with ECRs on the topic of island conservation.

BRYAN NELSON, 1932-2015

Bryan Nelson, the world's authority on the Northern Gannet and expert on Pelecaniformes, passed away on 29 June 2015, aged 83 years. Bryan spent a total of four years living on Bass Rock, along with his wife June, studying the ecology of the Northern Gannet while undertaking his PhD at Oxford University, before joining the academic staff at Aberdeen University. He wrote a number of books on seabirds, including the monograph of the Northern Gannet and the monumental *The Sulidae* (both 1978); more recently, he documented his lifetime of studying seabirds across the world in a memoir, 'On the Rocks', published in 2013. A full obituary will appear in the next issue of *Seabird*.

NEWS

FIRST GANNET NEST IN ITALY

While this may be old news (September 2013), this lovely video documents the successful first-ever nesting attempt of a pair of **Northern Gannets** in Italy. The successful parents built their nest on a small boat, which appears to have bobbed up and down on the water throughout the course of the breeding attempt. The video charts the breeding attempt, from the building of the nest, through to the young's departure from the nest and first flight. While many other North Atlantic seabirds are declining, this provides further evidence of the contrasting and continued increase of Gannet numbers <http://t.co/61ngNGAXu2>.

2014 SEABIRD WRECK, NW PORTUGAL

Seabirds and marine mammals are good indicators of the health of marine ecosystems and high mortality events of these species can signal changes in oceanic conditions, such as those caused by oil spills, fisheries, habitat loss, lack of food supply and extreme weather conditions. Surveys of beached birds and mammals thus help develop our understanding of spatial and temporal patterns in mortality; they can facilitate quantification of the number of animals affected, as well as indicate the time of the year when mortality is most severe and which species are most vulnerable.

In SGN 128 (February 2015), we reported on the UK Beached Bird Survey 2014, which coincided with what may have been the largest-ever mass seabird mortality event (or "wreck") in the northeast Atlantic, spanning January-March 2014. It was noted in that report that the wreck extended from southern England, along the coastlines of SW France, the Channel Islands, northern Spain and northern Portugal. Task forces were promptly put into action to rescue live birds and record the magnitude of the event in many European countries. However, as far as **Tim Van Nus** and **Pedro L. Moreira** were aware, Portuguese authorities and NGOs did not organise any surveying of its beaches. In March 2014, Van Nus and Moreira took it upon themselves to voluntarily survey beaches near **Aveiro**, in NW Portugal, so as to provide information for a stretch of the Portuguese coast. The pair subsequently continued to survey the same 10 km transect on a regular basis, to provide a year-round picture of the mortality of marine birds and mammals.

Among the initial two surveys conducted on March 14 and March 27, 134 dead animals were recorded, including 112 **Atlantic Puffins**, five **Razorbills** and 21 other seabirds comprising seven species, some of which are rare or uncommon in Portugal (e.g. **Northern Fulmar**, **Great Northern Diver** and **Common Gull**). During the following monthly surveys conducted between April 2014 and March 2015, they recorded 84 dead animals: 63 birds (all but one, a Whimbrel, were seabirds), 13 marine mammals, five domestic animals and three Leatherback Sea Turtles. Seabirds continued to represent the majority of the specimens but, in contrast to March 2014, only six species were recorded. Three taxa alone, namely the **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (32), **Northern Gannet** (20) and gulls belonging to the genus *Larus* (6), comprised 94% of the seabirds.

The full reports can be downloaded from the Natural Society of Northumbria's website via the following link: www.nhsn.ncl.ac.uk/news/cms/beached-bird-surveys. Alternatively, email me at seabirdgroup.newsletter@gmail.com.

PROMISING NEWS FOR SOUTH GEORGIA'S BIRDS

In the last issue (SGN 129, June 2015), we reported on the completion of the third and final phase of South Georgia's rodent eradication project, carried out by the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT). While a momentous occasion, it was realised that the full rewards of eradicating rodents would not be seen for decades. It was therefore highly promising to observe marked increases, so soon after baiting had finished, in numbers of South Georgia's two endemic species – the **South Georgia Pipit** *Anthus antarcticus* and **South Georgia Pintail** *Anas georgica georgica*, both of which have been hugely impacted by the presence of rats. Furthermore, in January 2015, a Pipit nest was discovered – the first on mainland South Georgia since baiting was carried out. For the first time in years, pipits have a chance of successfully rearing young on the mainland. The South Georgia Pintail has not been known to breed on the mainland in living memory, yet only one year after baiting began, a female Pintail was seen with a flock of ducklings waddling behind her. Of course, as a consequence of their life history – i.e. late age at maturation and low fecundity – and tendency for natal philopatry (returning to breed close to their natal site), South Georgia's seabirds will take longer to recover. It is hoped that, with time, the petrels and prions that are currently restricted to rodent-free offshore islands will return to breed on the mainland. A sighting of an unprecedented number (15) of **Wilson's Storm Petrels** *Oceanites oceanicus* earlier this year, in front of the base at Kind Edward Point, is giving SGHT staff hope that birds may already be returning to prospect for sites on the mainland.

Adapted from SGHT's newsletter, August 2015. Further information can be found on their website www.sght.org.

2015 SEABIRD BREEDING SEASON SUMMARIES

NORTH RONA – SCOTLAND'S REMOTEST SEABIRD ISLAND

Stuart Murray (murraysurvey@yahoo.co.uk), **Steph Elliott**, **Dave Jones** & **Jill Harden**

North Rona, although a small island (122 ha in area and 108 m at the highest point), has a range of breeding seabirds, including both Leach's and European Storm Petrels, a distinction shared by only three other Scottish island groups, St Kilda, the Flannan Isles and Shetland. It lays 73 km north-east of the Butt of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides and a similar distance north-west of Cape Wrath on the Scottish mainland. Its remoteness makes working there difficult, not because it's a particularly challenging place, except perhaps for making a landing on its exposed coast, rather the high cost of the boat charter. The latter becomes more expensive, with every passing year, whereas funds for seabird work have been steadily declining. The Scottish Ornithologists' Club, the Seabird Group and Scottish Natural Heritage generously funded us in 2015, as they also did in 2009 and 2012 (see *Seabird* 23, 2010; *Scottish Birds* 33, 2013), so we have been able to do some useful work over the years.

The main aim in 2015 was to carry out an island-wide survey of Leach's Petrel, which is time consuming and labour intensive, requiring the four of us all day, every day, for ten days. In addition, we had to count as many of the breeding species as we could manage - a condition of the Seabird Group grant. The timing - 20 June to 4 July - was right for Kittiwake, Razorbill, Guillemot and Shag, for all of which we managed to achieve complete counts (see below). Fulmar could have been squeezed in, if bad weather hadn't delayed our arrival by two days, but as it turned out we were very lucky to even get ashore. Had we been 24 hours later, we wouldn't have been able to land at all, as a massive swell rolled in from the south-west and pounded every landing site for the next week, leaving us effectively stranded.

Although the seabird populations have never been particularly large on Rona, when compared with similar colonies elsewhere in the Hebrides, they have been more regularly counted than most, starting with the landmark efforts of Operation Seafarer in 1969. For those species we didn't count in 2015, surveys in previous years indicated that Puffin, Great Skua, Eider and Black Guillemot were more-or-less maintaining their numbers. Arctic Tern is an erratic breeder, with typically less than 100 pairs present. Leach's Petrel declined between 2001 and 2009, but European Storm Petrel numbers remained unchanged between these years. Indirect evidence from 2015 suggested that Puffins were doing well, with healthy food-loads being brought in throughout our stay.

This year, Fulmar, Guillemot, Razorbill, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Kittiwake all returned the lowest ever totals recorded for these species. Especially striking is the decline of the Great Black-backed Gull; with over

2,000 pairs in 1972, this was the largest colony in the UK and Ireland, but by 2012 numbers had slumped to less than 200 pairs. Breeding success in recent years has been abysmal and 2015 seemed to be going the same way, with few large chicks present.

So, for those species we succeeded in counting, how did they fare in 2015?

Kittiwake: Half the losses since 2012 are in the two previous largest sub-colonies; down from 329 AON to 171 AON and from 71 to 34 AON, respectively. Overall, the total of 630 AON is a 32% decline since 2012, continuing the relentless downward trend from the peak year of 1993 with 4,197 AONs.

Razorbill: An increase at the largest sub-colony, from 71 to 101 birds, accounts for the overall 5% increase to 540 birds; otherwise, numbers and distribution are similar to 2012. The population has perhaps stabilised at the present level, as 543 birds were counted in 2005 and 513 in 2012; though this is half of what it was in the 1980s when over 1,000 birds were present.

Guillemot: An apparent increase of 15.7% since 2012, but that year was so bad (hardly any eggs on the ledges and few chicks) that many birds had given up or not bred at all. It is possible that the colony has been stable with 5,000-6,000 birds since 2012. However, the long-term trend is downwards, at a steady 5% per annum since the peak year of 1986, when the site held a now-unimaginable 17,104 birds.

Shag: There has been no change in numbers or distribution since 2012. Had we been able to do a count of inaccessible sea caves (holding 18 nests in 2012, island total of 83), we would likely have had the same number in 2015.



North Rona, from the east, and the lighthouse at the highest point at 108m. Photo credit: S Murray.

Leach's Petrel survey

There have now been three whole-island surveys of Leach's Petrel on North Rona: in 2001, 2009 and 2015. Between the first two the population fell by 34%, from 1,084 AOS (apparently-occupied sites) to 713 AOS and the 2015 survey shows a further, although smaller, decline. Remarkably, 90% of the losses are within the ruined village, while the 15 sections sub-dividing the rest of the island have shown little or no change, some even showing slight increases. The village has always been known as the best site for the birds and in 2001 it held 30% of the island total - 314 AOS, falling to 234 AOS by 2009, and now having dropped below 200 AOS in 2015.

Despite this, the population is in better shape than we thought it might be, but the situation in the village is concerning and it would be tragic if the petrels were to be lost from there. As to why this is happening, predation by Great Skua would have to be in the frame. Their nests almost surround the village and look down on it from higher ground. However, we have little evidence to date to prove that they pose a problem and the hoped-for haul of Skua pellets and Petrel corpses wasn't forthcoming this year. Searches of the breeding areas and around nests revealed Skua chicks were being fed fish, predominantly large Mackerel. These were most likely taken by harassing gannets from the nearby colony of Sula Sgeir, although we cannot prove that either.

Between the predation issue and the response rate to playback, compared with earlier years, we have more than enough to think and speculate about before committing ourselves in print, but the intention is to have a third paper on the fortunes of the Rona Petrels in *Seabird* before too long.

SHETLAND (EXCLUDING FAIR ISLE)

Martin Heubeck & Mick Mellor (SOTEAG), Rachel Cartwright, Andy Denton & Craig Nisbet (Scottish Natural Heritage), Sheila Gear (Foula Ranger Service), & Newton Harper (RSPB)

Prolonged rainfall isn't usually a problem for Shetland's seabirds, but May was the wettest on record, and by the end of the month some of the older hands described many sections of cliff as the most waterlogged they could remember. In terms of food supply and chick diet, there is very limited recording of this but the season seemed mixed, according to species and foraging ability. Auks (at least Guillemots and Razorbills) coped reasonably well on a mix of sandeels and gadids, and Shags clearly found sufficient prey to hold things together. However, after an early start things went downhill at most Kittiwake colonies in late June and early July, while Arctic Terns produced few fledged young. With some numbers still being crunched, the following is a partial summary only.

Red-throated Divers had reasonably good seasons at Foula (12 pairs fledged 11 chicks) and Hermaness (5 pairs fledged 4), but less so in a study area in Northmavine (22 pairs fledged 10). **Fulmar** success averaged 0.34 at 7 colonies (range 0.19-0.44), but was almost certainly compromised by the May rainfall, particularly at Troswick Ness where many former sites were scored as too wet for use, and on Foula where no chicks were seen on the wetter areas of cliff in August. **Gannets** at Noss maintained their high productivity: 0.74/AON. **Shags** had an early and successful season at Sumburgh Head, where chick survival was high (1.38 fledged/AON), but fewer chicks were seen at Burravoe (0.80/AON). On Mousa, at least 21 chicks disappeared from the 22 nests monitored (0.82/AON). Bits and pieces of Shags found along the cliff tops during the season suggested predation, possibly by Otters. At Foula, 30 monitored pairs fledged 0.93/AON, with some nests washed away by rain and the sea, and three broods seen dead.

At Foula, there were 28 **Arctic Skua** AOT (one with just a single bird), and 26 pairs laid; 17 chicks fledged, with 4 pairs fledging broods of 2. At Hermaness, one pair fledged one young (the first on the NNR since 2009), but the 2 pairs at Noss both failed (a fledgling with a wing deformity was abandoned and presumably predated). **Great Skuas** fared poorly. At Foula, only 3 chicks fledged from the 42 AOT monitored (success 0.07), with cannibalism persisting throughout the fledgling period, and it was a similar story at Hermaness with 9 chicks fledging from 53 AOT (0.17), and on Noss (0.10).

Few **Kittiwake** colonies were surveyed, but a count of 277 nests at Foula represents a further decrease there (361 in 2014 and 1,065 in 2006), while a depressingly low 179 nests at Noss updates the 2010 figure of 507, and continues the decline since the peak count of 10,767 AON in 1980! Laying was generally earlier than in both 2013 and 2014 at the nine colonies monitored, and hatching success was also generally high, but breeding success averaged only 0.10/laying pair, ranging from zero at Noss (although a handful of fledged young were seen) and St Ninians Isle to 0.42 at Hermaness, with most failures at the early chick stage. It takes time to collate observations on **Arctic Terns**, but numbers were generally low and two periods of settlement and laying, in mid to late June and again in mid July, seemed to produce few fledged young.

Guillemot numbers at monitored colonies were generally similar to 2014, while breeding success was monitored in single plots at Sumburgh Head (twice-daily) and Burravoe (every 3-4 days). At the former, median laying date (14th May) was similar to 2014 (16th), incubation progressed smoothly and first-egg hatching success was high (70%). Chick diet was a mix of sandeels (42%, mainly 'medium' sized) and a gadid species (50%, mainly 'medium' to 'large') believed to have been Norway Pout. Many smaller chicks had difficulty swallowing the larger gadids, growth rates appeared to vary considerably, a few chicks were seen dead, and chick predation by gulls reduced productivity further; success was 0.52 per laying pair. At Burravoe, median laying was c.16th May, but heavy rain caused substantial egg loss in late May with few relays. Chicks were seen at 53% of incubating sites and their survival was higher than at Sumburgh, with success of 0.51. **Razorbill** numbers remained low at monitored colonies. At Sumburgh Head, breeding success of 67 pairs known (51) or assumed (16) to have laid was 0.57; laying was earlier than in the Guillemot plot, with birds sitting tight at 20 sites (eggs seen at 10) on the first check, on 7th May. At Sumburgh Head, at 50 **Puffin** AOB identified (visited by adults on 2 or more dates, 22nd May to 17th June), fish were brought to 19 on one or more dates from 17th June to 28th July, suggesting maximum productivity of 0.38/AOB.

FAIR ISLE

David Parnaby, Fair Isle Bird Observatory Warden

It was an interesting year for the breeding seabird populations on Fair Isle; while generally quite good, there were some notable exceptions (making it quite hard to summarise!).

The species that suffered the most were:

Kittiwake: The population fell again (to just 859 AON), after a small rise in 2014, and only a few chicks fledged (0.13/AON).

Arctic Tern: Just 30 pairs nested, fledging just one chick.

Puffin: A whole-island count produced just 6,666 adults (although this is a notoriously difficult species to survey on Fair Isle) and productivity fell almost 18% (compared with 2014) to 0.64 chicks fledged per egg laid. Food samples showed a large reduction in the size of prey being brought in, and heavy rain in the spring didn't help the monitoring plot, with some burrows flooded.



Species whose seasons were probably best described as 'ok' or 'mixed' included:

Bonxie: This species suffered a surprising decline, falling by more than 200 pairs to just 188 AOT (the lowest on Fair Isle since 2005), but productivity of 0.9 chicks per AOT was the highest since 2006.

Arctic Skua: Productivity almost halved, compared with 2014, to just 0.27 chicks per AOT (although with only one chick fledged during 2011-2013, this is not a bad year by recent standards), but the population did at least record its second consecutive year of growth to 37 AOT.

2015 saw the lowest number of Bonxies on Fair Isle since 2005, but the highest productivity since 2006!
Photo credit: Lee Gregory.

Fulmar: A decrease of over 10% in the population monitoring plots may have been caused by heavy spring rains that washed several eggs from the cliffs before monitoring was complete and productivity stayed the same at 0.54 chicks fledged per AOS.

Tystie: There was no change in the population size, which has been showing a gradual, but wavering, increase since numbers crashed in 1998.

Gannet: The population fell again, to 3363 AON, a decrease of over 700 pairs from the peak in 2011, the reasons for this decline are not clear for a species that seems to be doing well elsewhere. At the time of writing, productivity figures are not available, although it seems to have been a reasonable year.

Pleasingly, there were some definite success stories, with the following species doing well:

Shag: Although productivity was down slightly, at 1.69 chicks fledged per AON, this is still the third best year since 2001, whilst another increase in the population monitoring plots was also positive.

Guillemot: Signs that the population crash, evident since the late 1990s, might have been coming to an end were further boosted with a count of 20,924 individuals - an increase of over 7% since the last whole-island count in 2010. It was also another productive breeding season, with 0.59 chicks fledged per AIA (apparently incubating adult).

Razorbill: A massive decline occurred in 2007, with numbers more than halving, but the 2015 whole-island count revealed an increase from 2010 of 41.2% to 1,930 individuals. This hopefully signals a change in fortunes for this species, which also enjoyed a very productive season with 0.70 chicks fledging per egg laid.



The flooding of some Puffin burrows in the monitoring plot didn't stop the FIBO team enjoying fieldwork.
Photo credit: Ciaran Hatsell.

SKOMER

Edward Stubbings, Birgitta Büche & Matt J. Wood

After twenty years of progressively earlier breeding seasons, 2013 and 2014 saw two of the latest on record. 2015, however, saw a return to a slightly earlier breeding season. With severe storms and seabird wrecks in the north-east Atlantic during the 2013-14 winter, the worst was feared for Skomer's seabirds. The effects have been somewhat complicated and can only be properly assessed by the intensive, long-term studies that are carried out on the island. Adult survival has been low and the low number of ring recoveries and re-sightings of marked birds also support this.

Long-term studies of adult breeders revealed the effects of the 2013-14 seabird wreck using preliminary mark-recapture models: auks suffered marked declines in survival over the winter. The survival of breeding adult **Razorbills** in 2013-14 was just 0.59, more than 30% below the study average of 0.90 (1970-2013). **Puffin** survival also dropped from the study's annual average of 91% (1973-2013) to 68% in 2013-14. This comes as no surprise, after tens of thousands of auks were washed up dead on the Atlantic coast of NW Europe, but now we can be more confident that the drop in the numbers of returning adults in 2014 was not just due to birds taking a year off from breeding. **Kittiwake** survival also dropped in 2013-14 to 0.73. There are a number of possible explanations for this: there is some evidence for a decadal cycle of adult survival since 1978; Kittiwakes may also have suffered higher losses associated with the seabird wreck; or, more worrying, the decline may be evidence that the difficulties faced by Kittiwake populations further north in the UK are now apparent farther south.

The 2015 breeding season saw improved breeding success for the auk colonies that suffered such low productivity in 2014. In 2015, productivity increased for **Guillemot** (0.63 to 0.73), **Razorbill** (0.27 to 0.37), and **Puffin** (0.53 to 0.66). A **diet** study undertaken by Julie Riordan, on behalf of Tim Birkhead and Sheffield University, revealed that clupeids were the main prey species for **Guillemots**, followed by sandeels and gadids.

The long-term decline of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** continues, with 7630 AONs in 2015. Productivity was, however, the highest since 2011 at 0.69, while adult breeding survival between 2013-2014 increased to 0.93 (long-term average 1978-2013: 0.88). **Herring Gulls** continue to decline in number, although productivity was up from 0.52 to 0.69. Breeding adult survival also increased to 0.97 (average 1978-2013: 0.82). **Great Black-backed Gull** numbers increased to 123 (the highest since 1975) but productivity was down slightly from 1.88 to 1.64. **Kittiwakes** showed encouraging increases in both numbers (1,546) and productivity (0.73). A population of **Shags** on Middleholm had another good breeding season with a productivity of 2.63, albeit from a rather diminished population.

Keep an eye on the website for publication in due course of the complete Skomer Seabird Report 2015 at <http://www.welshwildlife.org/news/wildlife-trust-reports/>.

NB This report includes data collected by Elisa Miquel Riera (The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales) and Ros M. Green (University of Gloucestershire), both supported by funding contributions from JNCC's Seabird Monitoring Programme, and Julie Riordan and Tim R. Birkhead (Sheffield University).

CANNA

Bob Swann

For many birds, 2015 was a rather disastrous breeding season in northern Scotland with cool, cloudy, wet conditions prevailing. Below-average summer temperatures, however, appeared to benefit seabirds, most of which had one of their best breeding seasons for many years. This was certainly the case on Canna.

Following recent long-term declines, both Shags and Kittiwakes showed welcome increases in numbers, not seen since the mid 2000s. Both species also exhibited high productivity. For **Shags**, a productivity figure of 1.74 young/AON was the highest figure we have recorded since 1997 and well above the long-term average of 1.31 young/AON. Whilst, for **Kittiwakes**, the mean number of young fledged per AON was 0.93, again well above the long-term average of 0.67. **Fulmars** continue to decline on Canna; we only counted 174 AOS, well below the peak of 669 AOS in the late 1970s and the lowest figure we have ever recorded. Despite this, they had above-average breeding output with 0.44 chicks/AOS – the highest figure we have recorded since 2006.

Following massive declines in the numbers of breeding gulls in the early 2000s – for example, Herring Gulls declined from 1282 AONs in 2000 to just 96 AONs in 2006 - numbers have since remained fairly stable, albeit at low levels. Breeding output has, however, fluctuated quite a bit, probably related to food availability. In 2015, **Herring Gulls** had below average breeding success with only 0.7 young fledged per monitored pair, whilst **Great Black-backed Gulls** had average breeding success with 0.9 young fledged per monitored pair.

Despite the unusually cool spring and summer weather, 2015 turned out to be quite an early breeding season for many of Canna's seabirds. This meant that many Auks had left the colony prior to our arrival in early July. Although this affected our normal monitoring work, there were indications that it had been a good breeding season. An average weight of 267 g for Guillemot chicks prior to fledging was almost identical to the long-term average. There appeared to be lots of fish available, with the diet being dominated by Sprats (46%) and Sandeels (39%). Sprats virtually disappeared from the diet of Canna Guillemot chicks between 2005 and 2011. High post-fledging mortality of underweight Guillemot chicks between 2004 and 2008 resulted in very low return rates to the colony from these cohorts. Retrapping adults has shown that recruitment rates for the 2009-11 cohorts is showing a marked improvement and this may be helping to reverse the recent declines in the number of breeding birds. There is a similar story with Razorbills, where the 1995-2002 cohorts had a return rate of 6.1% by age 5. Return rate for the 2003-08 cohorts slumped to 0.3%, probably a reflection of a large increase in post-fledging mortality. The 2009 cohort, however, has shown a marked improvement with 6.3% returning by age 5 and 5.2% of the 2011 cohort have already returned by age 4.

In 2014, we were provided with 100 geolocators by Marine Scotland. This summer, we retrieved 4 from Fulmars, 20 from Kittiwakes, 5 from Guillemots and 4 from Razorbills. These are showing some very interesting insights to the patterns of movements away from Canna for these species. A further 59 geolocators were deployed in 2015: 4 on Fulmars, 25 on Kittiwakes, 20 on Guillemots and 10 on Razorbills.

ISLE OF MAY

Mark Newell (manew@ceh.ac.uk), Mike Harris, Sarah Burthe, Carrie Gunn, Sarah Wanless and Francis Daunt.
Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Edinburgh.

The 2015 breeding season on the Isle of May NNR proved to be another good year, following the general success of 2014. Breeding commenced early for most species, especially European Shags and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Although the weather was generally cool and breezy, the seabirds were largely unaffected even by a gale on 6th June at the peak of the season. With gusts approaching 60 mph, many of the exposed west-facing cliff nesters were expected to suffer, as happened in 2011 (see Newell *et al.* 2015); however, with the exception of a few Kittiwake nests, breeding attempts survived the blast.

The number of birds nesting in the study plots showed an increase in all species except Northern Fulmar, which was down by 15%. Kittiwakes, in particular, showed a heartening 41% increase in completed nests across the plots from last year. Despite the drop in breeding numbers, **Fulmars** had a productive season (0.52 chicks per breeding pair) for the third year in succession. **European Shags** had an above-average season (1.91) with only two years of higher productivity since the study began. Following high breeding success in 2014, **Black-legged Kittiwakes** had another successful season (1.07) with only three years in the 1980's and last year being higher. **Common Guillemot** (0.78) and **Atlantic Puffin** (0.75) had an above-average breeding season while **Razorbill** showed continued improvement (0.6), reaching just below the long-term mean. Return rates were above the long-term average in all five study species: European Shag 88%, Black-legged Kittiwake 84%, Common Guillemot 93%, Razorbill 86% and Atlantic Puffin 90%.

Sandeels (*Ammodytes* spp.) remained the main food of young Razorbill, Puffins, Shags and Kittiwakes, while the diet of Guillemots was dominated by Clupeids.

For more information on the Isle of May study, visit the website: www.ceh.ac.uk/sci_programmes/IsleofMayLong-TermStudy.

References: Newell M, Wanless S, Harris MP, Daunt F. 2015. Effects of an extreme weather event on seabird breeding success at a North Sea colony. *Mar. Ecol. Prog. Ser.* 532:257-268.



Atlantic Puffins had a good breeding season on Isle of May NNR achieving a productivity of 0.75.

Photo credit: Mark Newell.

Jeff Stratford

SCOTT, P. ET AL. 2015. FOOD PREFERENCE OF THE BLACK-HEADED GULL *CHROICOCEPHALUS RIDIBUNDUS* DIFFERS ALONG A RURAL-URBAN GRADIENT. *BIRD STUDY* 62: 56-63

The rapid urbanisation of the last century has provided more anthropogenic sources of food for the large populations of resident and migrating Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* in the UK. As a generalist feeder Black-headed Gulls can be found in urban, suburban, rural and coastal habitats during winter months. The distribution of Black-headed Gulls in these habitats may result from selection of habitat to satisfy nutritional demands when winter foraging opportunities are limited. Both seasonal diet and habitat switching have previously been reported together with temporal habitat switching with tidal cycles. An assessment was made of the food preferences of Black-headed Gulls along a rural-urban gradient in a coastal environment in Liverpool Bay in NW England. The level of anthropogenic activity and food availability along a 42 km stretch of the coast was used to select 11 study sites. Food choice experiments were set up at each of the sites with gulls freely choosing between provisioned natural and anthropogenic foods. The food preference and time for birds to select food was recorded for 20 tests at each site. Provisioned food choice was found to be correlated with the food type that was most likely to be found in their immediate environment. The time to respond to artificially provisioned food was quicker in urban environments. Also, both within and between sessions, the time to respond decreased with learning. Black-headed Gulls were not shown to be moving between sites to satisfy nutritional demands. The foraging behaviour of juveniles is thought to adapt to their wintering habitat largely stochastically.

COULSON, J. C. & COULSON, B.A. 2015. THE ACCURACY OF URBAN NESTING GULL CENSUSES. *BIRD STUDY* 62: 170-176

Large gulls nesting on buildings and other structures in towns and cities have been increasing over the past half-century. The efficiency of vantage point and street surveys for urban nesting Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* and Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* was evaluated in NE England and Dumfries (Scotland). The accuracy of census methods is particularly important with increasing nesting in urban areas while nationally declining numbers of Herring Gulls are nesting on natural sites. Vantage point surveys were mandated in the 1999-2002 national surveys in Britain and Ireland. Six urban conurbations were used to compare detection efficiencies of vantage point and street surveys. Nests missed by both methods were identified either by later presence of unfledged chicks or determined by 'cherry-picker'. An appreciable number of nests were not detected by each method with detection rates of 78% for vantage point; 48% for street surveys; and 88% for combined surveys. In Dumfries in 2013-14 a 'cherry-picker' was used to locate all nests allowing the actual proportion of nests missed to be determined, showing detection rates of 75% for vantage point; and 84% for combined surveys. Vantage point surveys markedly underestimated numbers of nesting large gulls. Detection rates were found to be inversely proportional to the number of industrial and commercial buildings. The 1999-2002 national surveys are believed to have underestimated numbers of nesting large gulls and exaggerated national trends in abundance. To improve accuracy, more intensive surveys using very high vantage points using cherry-pickers or aerial surveillance is proposed.

CORRECTION

SGN 129, p5, Shetland Tystie Census 2015. Should read: "Fieldwork began on 25th March 2015, and although hampered by persistent westerly swell, by 25th April 6,508 'associated' adults had been counted compared with 6,518 in 1998-2000 along the same stretches of coast." Not "...by 20th April 6,1508...".

Apologies from the Editor.

EXPANSION OF THE TROUP HEAD GANNETRY IN 2015

Stuart Murray, Mike Harris & Sarah Wanless

On 30 June 2014 we undertook an aerial survey of the Troup Head gannetry in north-east Scotland. This was the first time it had been done from the air since the colony was founded in 1987/88. The mean of independent counts by two observers was 6,480 apparently occupied sites (AOS; see Murray, S. *et al.* 2015. The status of the Gannet in Scotland 2013-14. *Scottish Birds* 35: 3-18). Prior to this, the most recent count, made from both land and sea reported 2,885 AOS on 15–25 June 2013 (Anderson, V. 2013. Gannet: Full colony count, Troup Head, 2013. Unpublished report, RSPB, Strathbeg). While it was clear that the colony was expanding rapidly, particularly at the western end, the difference in methods between 2013 and 2014 made it difficult to assess how much of the apparent doubling in numbers was due to a real increase and how much was an artefact of methodological differences.

We wrote at the time that *'given the current size and complexity of the Troup Head gannetry, switching to an aerial survey (to make the counts) augmented by land checks to establish boundaries of the club areas would seem the most effective way of monitoring changes in numbers'*. We didn't imagine that the opportunity to do another aerial evaluation of the colony would arise so soon. However, on 30 July 2015 the same photographer and pilot did a fly-past of the Troup cliffs and sent us a series of photographs covering both the colony (as it was in 2014) and the cliffs to the east and west of the colony. These photographs showed that Gannets had moved into areas to the west, which were previously unoccupied on 30 June 2014, and revealed how quickly they had eroded the ground and started to nest. A land visit on 8 August 2015 to check the status of these presumed non-breeding birds found seven nests with chicks.

The rapid growth of the Troup Head gannetry shows no sign of slowing. It will be interesting to see just how fast these new areas are completely colonised and whether Gannets subsequently move onto the lower cliffs, displacing Guillemots and Kittiwakes that currently breed there.

UPCOMING CONFERENCES

13TH INTERNATIONAL SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE, 6-9 SEPTEMBER 2016, EDINBURGH

The 13th International Seabird Group conference will take place in Edinburgh on 6-9 September 2016, organised by Francis Daunt and colleagues from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. The conference venue is the John McIntyre Conference Centre, Pollock Halls, situated close to the Scottish Parliament and the Royal Mile and set in the shadow of Arthur's Seat at Holyrood Park. The conference will commence in traditional fashion with a plenary lecture and reception on the evening of 6th September. Three days of talks on the latest topics in seabird ecology will follow, including further plenaries from top researchers in the field. Registration will open in the winter with Early Bird and abstract deadlines in April. Further details will be circulated in due course via email, our website and social media.

27TH INTERNATIONAL ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS, 19-26 AUGUST 2018, VANCOUVER

The 27th meeting of the International Ornithologists' Union is to be held in August 2018 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The conference will take place over 19-26 August, with field trips before and after. The 27th IOC will have a full range of plenary lectures, symposia, workshops and contributed paper sessions, plus a wide range of birding tours. The venue is the Vancouver Convention Centre, a repeat winner of the prestigious AIPC award for "World's Best Convention Centre". The Centre, located on the waterfront with a spectacular mountain view across the harbor, is adjacent to Vancouver's renowned downtown and a short walk from the forests of Stanley Park. It is expected that the field trips will include destinations such as the Arctic, Rocky Mountains, tundra, rainforest, and the local marine environment of British Columbia.

Visit the [IOU's](#) website to find out more about the Union. Further details will be posted here in due course, and a separate conference website will be launched. Keep an eye on the website or look out for further updates from the Seabird Group via social media and future newsletters. In the meantime, watch this [video](#) with further information on the conference and Vancouver.



Website: www.seabirdgroup.org.uk
 Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/The-Seabird-Group/505575036157550?fref=ts
 Twitter: [@TheSeabirdGroup](https://www.twitter.com/TheSeabirdGroup)
 Seabird Group Forum:

Registered charity No. 260907

The Seabird Group promotes and helps co-ordinate the study and conservation of seabirds. Members also receive the journal *Seabird*. The Group organises regular conferences and provides small grants towards research.

CURRENT SEABIRD GROUP COMMITTEE

Current retiral dates (at AGM) are shown in brackets:

Chairman	Russell Wynn (2015)	rbw1@noc.ac.uk
Secretary	Ellie Owen (2016)	ellie.owen@rspb.org.uk
Treasurer	Will Miles (2018)	willtsmiles@hotmail.com
Membership Secretary	Alice Trevail (2018)	seabirdgroup.membership@gmail.com
Seabird Editor	Martin Heubeck (2015)	martinheubeck@btinternet.com
Newsletter Editor	Hannah Watson (2018)	seabirdgroup.newsletter@gmail.com
Website Officer	Jeff Stratford (2016)	jeff.stratford@pms.ac.uk
Ordinary Members:		
Assistant Newsletter Editor	Holly Kirk (2018)	holly.kirk@merton.ox.ac.uk
Early Career	Katherine Booth-Jones (2015)	Katherine.BoothJones@ioz.ac.uk
Seabird Census	Stuart Murray (2018)	murraysurvey@yahoo.co.uk
Social Media	Viola Ross-Smith (2018)	viola.ross-smith@bto.org

Current membership rates	
Standing Order	£20
Concession	£15
Institution	£35
International:	£21
Life	£300

The Newsletter is published three times a year. The editor welcomes articles from members and others on issues relating to Seabird research and conservation. **Deadlines are: 15th January (February edition); 15th May (June edition); and, 15th September (October edition).**

Submissions for the newsletter must be in electronic format, preferably in word and should be no more than 1500 words. Please email photographs/figures as separate files and with full credits.

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 any 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 Seabird Group.**