



NEWSLETTER 96

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RECENT SEABIRD GROUP GRANT-AIDED PROJECTS

1. BREEDING ECOLOGY OF SKUAS ON HANDA 2003

Productivity among the Great and Arctic Skuas of Handa Island off the north-west coast of Sutherland had not been researched since 1991, during which time the colony has doubled in size. In 2003, with the help of a grant from the Seabird Group, I monitored populations of both species from May through to the end of August to assess productivity and factors affecting breeding success.



Bonxies (© D Mower)

Both species began breeding on Handa in the 1960s, and the colony has been expanding ever since, to the 2003 levels of 209 Bonxie AOTs (3% of the world population) and 36 Arctic Skua AOTs (fig. 1). Nearly 90% of the island, and almost all of the suitable habitat available, is now occupied by breeding skuas.

The key breeding statistics for 2003 are shown in Table 1. Although food availability was not a problem – only 3% of Bonxie chicks and no Arctic Skua chicks died as a result of malnutrition or illness – both populations had a relatively poor season. In the case of the Bonxies, the primary contributory factor was a high rate of chick loss to predation (50.9% of chicks hatched). As well as probable predation by conspecifics, it appears very likely that breeding Great Black-backed Gulls were responsible for a high proportion of these losses (a phenomenon that has not been reported from elsewhere). Nevertheless, productivity was still good in comparison to Shetland, and the Handa colony thus represents an important breeding contribution to the currently struggling British population (Furness 2003).



Arctic Skua (© D Mower)

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Figure 1. Numbers of Great and Arctic Skua Apparently Occupied Territories (AOTs) on Handa Island, 1964-2003.

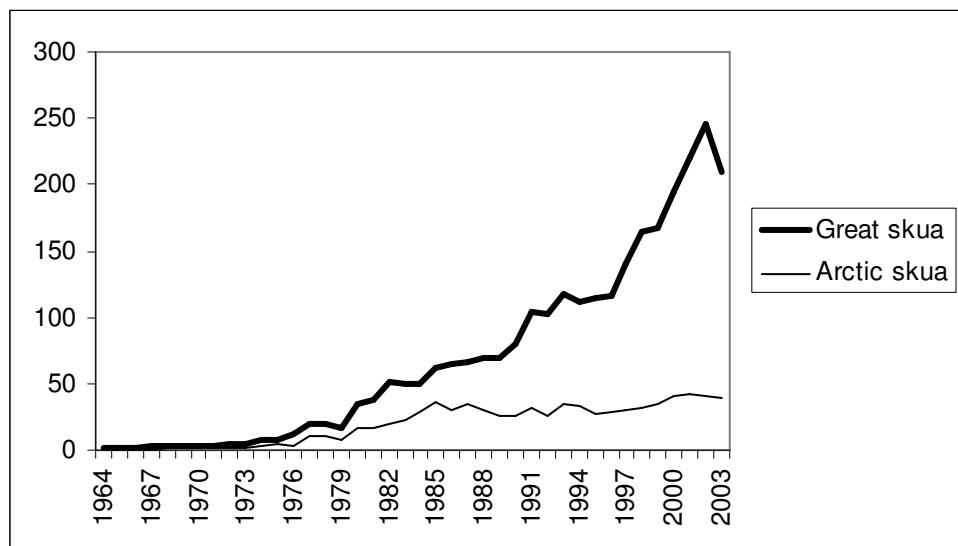


Table 1. Summary of Great and Arctic Skua breeding statistics on Handa Island, 2003.
Means \pm standard error (sample sizes in parentheses).

	Breed-ing pairs	Density (pairs per km ²)	Mean laying date	Mean clutch size	Hatching success (%)	Fledging success (%)	Chicks fledged per pair	Post-fledging mortality (%)
Great Skua	202	132 (202)	May (150) June	24 \pm 0.69 (127)	1.80 \pm 0.04 (127)	79.9 (184) (42)	45.5 (165) (35)	0.59 \pm 0.05 (202) (32)
Arctic Skua	33	138 ^a (26)	3 \pm 1.04 (29)	1.89 \pm 0.08 (27)		81.0	85.7	50-60 (39)

^aExcluding isolated territories away from stronghold

Arctic Skuas, on the other hand, had an excellent breeding season up to fledging – but the young birds were then hammered by Bonxies during their first week of learning to fly in and around their natal territory (50-60% of fledglings predated). However, those that managed to evade being eaten were soon flying strongly, and were later observed playfully harassing Oystercatchers and young Mew Gulls off the shores of the island.

106 Great Skua and 27 Arctic Skua pulli were ringed in 2003, with help from the Highland Ringing Group. A sample of chicks was

regularly weighed and measured, and monitoring was also initiated of adult territorial attendance, as an indicator of food availability. The Scottish Wildlife Trust Warden of the island, Lizzie Williams, began an important study of diet in the Great Skuas, through collection and examination of pellets. It is hoped that we will be able to continue this work on Handa in subsequent years, to build and expand on the information obtained in 2003.

Many thanks to the Seabird Group, SOC and SWT for supporting this study.

Reference: Furness, R.W. (2003) *Seabird studies on Foula 2003*. Applied Ornithology Unit, University of Glasgow.

Trevor Jones

A copy of the full 25-page report on the breeding ecology of Handa's Skuas in 2003 can be obtained as a 430KB e-mail attachment by request from Trevor Jones at: trevjones70@hotmail.com. It will also be available on the Seabird Group website soon.



Bonxie chick in the nest (© B Ramsay)

2. ABUNDANCE AND DISTRIBUTION OF BREEDING PROCELLARIIFORMS IN THE AZORES ARCHIPELAGO IN RELATION TO INTRODUCED AND NATURAL PREDATORS

One of the aims of the University of Glasgow 2003 expedition to the Azores was to determine the influence of introduced predators on the distribution and abundance of procellariiforms breeding on islands and islets in this archipelago. A considerable number of non-native animal species have been introduced to the Azores (Mathias *et al.* 1998). Petrels and small shearwaters are particularly vulnerable to attack by land mammals introduced from mainland ecosystems. Their burrows, that may provide protection from gulls, give little protection from rats or mustelids, small enough to enter the tunnels.

As a broad generalisation, the birds have evolved no effective direct protection from such attack (apart from often rather limited oil

spitting). The presence of introduced predators on some islands may have caused local extinctions, and probably limits opportunities for the establishment and growth of breeding populations of these burrow-nesting seabirds. In fact, most seabird colonies in the Azores are now confined to precipitous cliffs or small and isolated islets, and this has been interpreted as a result of predation by introduced mammals (Monteiro *et al.* 1999).

Although some fieldwork was carried out from April onwards, the Glasgow University expedition took place primarily during August 2003, and fieldwork aimed to supplement the limited published data about procellariiform and predator distributions and abundance. The study included all of the nine main islands in the Azores archipelago, and most of the accessible islets considered large enough to have seabirds breeding on them. Habitat and topographical factors seem to affect predation both through their influence on the distribution of predators (*eg* inaccessibility of the islands and distance to the coast) and also through the availability of suitable breeding sites for seabirds. So, we also had to consider other variables such as the area and altitude of the island, the geology (rock substrate, presence of cliffs, boulders...), the presence of humans living on the islands (or when they were last inhabited), frequency of human visits to the islets, presence of illumination, distance to next inhabited island...

The species of interest in the study are Madeiran Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma castro*, Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, the abundant 'Cagarro' (Cory's Shearwater) *Calonectris diomedea*, Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, Little Shearwater *Puffinus assimilis baroli*; and their avian predators: Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans atlantis* and Buzzard *Buteo buteo*; and the introduced mammals and likely major predators: Cat *Felis catus*, Norway Rat *Rattus norvegicus*, Black Rat *Rattus rattus*, House Mouse *Mus domesticus*, Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*, Weasel *Mustela nivalis* and Ferret *Mustela furo*.

Presence or absence of each species on the islands was initially assessed by bibliographic search and interviews with local naturalists, researchers or natural wardens. This information was then complemented with direct observations of animals, collection of samples of excrement,

and the employment of ‘rat chew sticks’. This technique has been shown to be effective in estimating relative rat abundance (Zonfrillo & Monaghan 1995). The sticks consist of pieces of wood (15 x 2 cm, eg tongue depressors used by doctors and hospital staff), which are then soaked in liquid margarine or butter, and placed along transects on the islets. The presence of rats is easily detected because they conspicuously chew the sticks.

In total, we obtained information on the distribution of procellariiforms and predators on 28 islands and islets. Cats, Ferrets, Weasels and Hedgehogs are only found on the 9 main islands. Nevertheless, rats are able to swim well over the short distances between main islands and most of the small islets, and to survive on islets, so they are the main threat on islets. Of the 19 islets identified as likely to hold seabird colonies, we visited 14, and we put rat sticks in all of them, prospecting simultaneously for the presence of breeding procellariiforms. We found clear evidence of the presence of rats in 3 of these islets (Ilhéus de S. Lourenço, da Mina and Vila Franca). Additionally, another 2 islets appear to suffer from sporadic visits by rats and other predators during low tide (Ilhéus de S. Anténio and Rosto do Cão), or even cats, which were seen on the last one.

Our preliminary results suggest that in the Azores, the only procellariiform that seems to be able to coexist with rats is the Cory's Shearwater, as this species is widely distributed even on islands where rats are present in very large numbers. This is consistent with the interpretation of Furness *et al.* (2000), who concluded that Cory's Shearwater nesting distribution seems to be related more to selection of sites that avoid human exploitation than to distributions of cats or rats. In contrast, the Madeiran Storm-petrel breeds in significant numbers only in 3 predator-free islets (Vila, Praia and Baixo) but is even absent from most of the other islets that are at present free of predators. This suggests either that, apart of the presence of predators, other important ecological constraints must exist and limit the abundance and distribution of storm-petrels in the Azores, or that predators may have eliminated small petrel populations from some of the islets and then themselves become extinct on those sites.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who helped during the expedition, especially Maria Carvalho and Jöel Bried (University of the Azores), Helder Fraga (Natural warden in Faial), and Paulo Faria (birdwatcher in Flores) for their help during the fieldwork and all the information they provided.

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3. PREDATION ON TERN EGGS BY EUROPEAN STARLINGS IN THE AZORES

In 2003, a Glasgow University Exploration Society expedition visited the Azores archipelago, with the primary objective of carrying out a variety of studies of Azores seabirds. One aspect of this work was to collect data on the Roseate Tern population of the Azores, as this is now one of the largest populations of the species remaining in Europe.

During the last few years, the mixed Common and Roseate Tern colony at Vila islet (Santa Maria Island, Azores archipelago) has been suffering from increasing rates of egg predation.

Depredated eggs have been noted in the islet since annual monitoring was initiated in 1989, when Adrian del Nevo counted 154 Roseate Tern nests and found "several eggs predated" (IMAR-Açores unpublished data). In 1999, 167 nests of Roseate Tern and 181 nests of Common Tern were counted at Vila islet and 112 eggs (of both species) were found depredated (Neves, pers. obs.). Hays *et al.* (2002) reported pecked and partially eaten eggs on Vila islet in 1999 and 2000. These two studies mention the fact that a pair of Eurasian Buzzards (*Buteo buteo rothschildi*) was also nesting on the islet and the birds regularly took large chicks and adult terns, but it was not suggested that the buzzard ate eggs. In another colony in the Azores, Ramos & del Nevo (1995) observed a Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* preying on eggs and chicks of Roseate Terns.

Ramos & del Nevo (1995) concluded that in the early 1990s, the role of predation on tern colonies was insignificant as a factor influencing nest-site selection in the Azores. The high rates of egg predation observed at Vila Islet in recent years are presumed to have very serious adverse effects on the Azores population, since Vila islet is one of the most important tern colonies in the archipelago. Vila Islet has been declared an Important Bird Area (IBA 014) and holds a mixed colony of Common and Roseate Terns that also include the only known breeding pair of Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) in Europe (Monteiro 2000). Vila Islet has no mammalian predators and holds about 20% of the Azores Roseate Tern population (201 pairs in 2002 when the total breeding population was 991). Egg laying in the Azores occurs between late April and late July (Hays *et al.* 2002; Ramos & del Nevo 1995), prior to which terns concentrate in clubs and gradually start displaying, courting, and nesting behaviour.

During this study, only Starlings were observed eating tern eggs. However gulls and Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) were also observed in the islet and could have been undetected as predators. During 2003 more than 48% of the nests from a defined observation area were depredated during 12 days. Eleven complete sequences of egg predation by Starlings were observed and several more incidents indicated predation. Observations from predation sequences showed that predation usually

occurred by the actions of more than one Starling. A small group of Starlings (up to 6 individuals) would approach the area of a nest even when a bird was incubating. The incubating bird would fly up to mob one of the Starlings, at which point the other individuals moved quickly towards the nest and broke the eggs. On many occasions, Starlings were also seen returning to the exact places where predation had occurred, and sometimes even removing egg remains from the nest and taking them away from the nest to eat them, while in other cases unsuccessful predation attempts were observed. However, Starlings seemed quite persistent even when they were mobbed, usually returning to exactly the same place they were feeding after a number of seconds. Starlings tend to roost up to 200 m above sea level (Feeare 1985); in the Azores they roost abundantly on remote sea cliffs and on islets (pers. obs.) and the roosting areas largely overlap with tern breeding areas. However Starling predation of tern eggs has not been detected at other colonies in the Azores. Caloura Islet off São Miguel is a good example. The number of Common and Roseate Terns breeding in this islet has increased over the last few years. A few hundred Starlings roost in the islet and adjacent coast (according to local people the numbers are increasing). However no depredated eggs were found during several visits to the islet. As opposed to Vila islet, breeding of European Starlings at Caloura islet has never been confirmed. This fact, together with the fact that Caloura is much more rocky and has little vegetation, may contribute to the absence of resident Starlings.

Starlings are not the only threat to terns in the Azores. Observations conducted during this study suggest that tern colonies in the Azores may not be sufficiently protected from human disturbance. Fishermen were seen landing on Mós Islet, Terceira Island to harvest Rock Pigeons and they caused considerable disturbance in the tern colony. The main Roseate Tern colonies in the Azores, which are protected by European Union and Portuguese conservation legislation, should be clearly identified with notice boards to warn people to avoid entering tern colonies during the breeding season.

Predator control has long been considered necessary for the survival of the north eastern

American population of Roseate Terns (Nisbet 1981) and many studies have reported on management strategies in tern colonies and the results of their implementation. In the Azores, some way of controlling the impact of Starlings on Roseate Terns seems necessary, if the Azores population of Roseate Terns is to be maintained.

Acknowledgements

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FAIR ISLE - 2003 BREEDING SEASON

The 2003 breeding season on Fair Isle was sadly the worst on record and generally unproductive. Once again it appears that there was an almost complete absence of (suitably sized) sandeels in Fair Isle waters. As usual in years of poor food supply, it was Kittiwakes and Arctic Terns that appeared to suffer most but this year every species (apart from Gannet) had (almost) their lowest productivity on record.

The first signs that things were not well came very early on when Guillemots failed to return to ledges on time. Although in recent years attendance has not been until February or even early March, only small numbers were ashore by mid-March and the first eggs were not seen until 3rd May – almost two weeks late! Attendance at the plots was the lowest since 1990 - a previous disaster year! Both Guillemot and Razorbill breeding success was down by approximately 40% compared to last year and productivity for both was the lowest on record (Table 1). Large chicks were grossly underweight and feeding rates of Guillemot pulli were abysmal – just 1.87 feeds/chick/day.

Perhaps strangely, however, Puffins seemed comparatively successful. An estimated productivity of 0.65 chicks fledged per egg at the two monitoring sites is close to the previous ten-year mean of 0.67. Provisioning rates during the 24-hour watch however were just 1.93 feeds/burrow/day and easily the lowest on record. Analysis of Puffin food samples showed that just 14.8% of fish were Lesser Sandeel, whilst 66.5% were Sprats and 18.7% were Gadoids. This is the second consecutive year that Sprats (rather than Sandeels) have dominated Puffin food samples, whilst Sandeel numbers were not only the lowest on record but also relatively small fish (50.14 ± 0.86 mm), perhaps indicating a lack of suitably sized prey and hence an apparent preference for Sprats.

The most obvious result this year was the complete breeding failure of Kittiwakes at all ten of the monitored plots. Birds did not commence nest building until late May - almost two weeks late - and a high proportion (13%) failed to complete. A similar percentage then failed to lay any eggs. Virtually all of the remainder failed at the egg stage or with small young. Young either starved to death or were left unattended at the nests (as adults struggled to find sufficient food), leaving them open to attack from gulls and skuas. Four chicks at one plot came close to fledging, before these too were taken by predators. As in the rest of Shetland, Arctic Terns returned in much-reduced numbers, and of those that did, many failed to nest. Just 80 pairs attempted to breed this year - the lowest number since 1985 (when the colony was in its infancy) and a far cry from the record 2,836 in 2001. Only a handful of chicks hatched and none fledged. No chicks fledged in 2002 and only four fledged in 2001, so this year's result was not unexpected.

Fulmars continue to decline slowly, although productivity at four of the five sites averaged a respectable 0.45 chicks fledged per AOS. The remaining site however only fledged one chick from 30 AOS, possibly due to persecution from Great Skuas, bringing the overall productivity down to 0.37.

A whole island census of Shags revealed a total of 732 AON – an increase of 10.4% from 2001 and an encouraging sign that Shags have perhaps turned the corner after reaching an all time low in 1998 (567 AON). Productivity was poor though: 1.33 chicks fledged per AON is less than the recent ten-year average (1.54) and a long way short of last years record figure (1.98) (Table 1).

Puffins also experienced a drop in productivity at the two monitoring sites, with less occupied nests being found than in previous years and the lowest productivity since 1993.

Table 1. Breeding performance of Fair Isle seabirds in 2003.

Species	Productivity	Long-term mean productivity	Comments
Fulmar	0.37 (0.45)	0.42	Four of five plots averaged 0.45. Only one fledged from 30 AOS at other.
Gannet	0.70	0.70	Continues to increase - 1,866 AON is +17.7% from 2002
Shag	1.33	1.54	Whole island count 732 AON, 10.4% increase from 2001
Arctic Skua	0.09	0.56	Continues to decline. 55 AOT is lowest since 1950s.
Great Skua	0.05	0.85	Second highest AOT (145) but poorest productivity - for 2 nd consecutive year.
Kittiwake	0.00	0.86	2 weeks late to breed. 25% of pairs failed to get as far as even laying eggs and 50% AON failed at egg stage.
Arctic Tern	0.00	0.34	Just 80 AIA – lowest since 1985. Third consecutive complete breeding failure.
Guillemot	0.48	0.74	Late to arrive. Lowest attendance at plots since 1990. Two weeks late to lay and lowest productivity on record.
Razorbill	0.43	0.62	Lowest productivity on record. Chick weights very low (as were Guillemot)
Puffin	0.65	0.69	Strange result! Feeding rates lowest on record. Just 14.8% food items were (small) Sandeel. 66.5% were Sprats.

Numbers of Great Skua territories increased by 9% this year (to 145 – the highest since 1997), but productivity was the lowest since records began, with only seven chicks successfully fledging. Similarly, the smaller, declining breeding population of Arctic Skuas had a very poor season, with only five chicks fledging from 55 territories (8.3% less than last year).

On a more positive note, the Northern Gannet as a breeding species continues to steadily increase, with a 17% rise in the number of AONs this year, in keeping with the average annual increases of this species on Fair Isle. Gannets are less reliant on Sandeels as a food source than the other species and a productivity of 0.70 chick fledged per AON is average. It is incredible to think that the first few Gannets bred here as recently as 1974, when the first five nests fledged three chicks and now, thirty years on, we have 1,859 occupied nests – including 13 on Sheep Rock! With around 1,000 immature non-breeding birds also present on the isle and plenty of available nest sites, the colony looks set to continue to expand. Maybe one day Fair Isle's Sheep(less) Rock could be renamed Gannet Craig?

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CONCERNS AT TYNEMOUTH (TYNE AND WEAR, ENGLAND) FULMAR COLONY

Alarm bells started ringing for me when I was shown an article in the Newcastle newspaper '*The Evening Chronicle*' dated Thursday 31 July 2003. The article was about planned 'artwork' on Tynemouth Cliffs beneath historic Tynemouth Priory and Castle, namely giant illuminated letters spelling 'LAND' – and only visible offshore. This was to be part of a public art project costing £224,000 and had the support of Anthony Gormley, creator of the major (and very popular) 'Angel of the North' giant sculpture situated near Gateshead, Tyne and Wear.

On the cliffs below the Castle is an important Tyneside seabird colony – consisting of nesting

Kittiwakes and Fulmars. I have recorded activities at this colony for over thirty years and watched the breeding numbers rise steadily over that period. Being fearful about the impact on the seabirds, and wishing to voice my concerns and objections to the plan, I contacted English Heritage (guardians of the historic monument as well as the cliffs). I also expressed my concerns in early August to various bird organizations including the RSPB, BTO, The Seabird Group, Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club and English Nature. I also communicated with local interested individuals, Dr John Coulson, Peter Brown, Planning Manager of North Tyneside Council (NTC) and Jackie Hunter, Biodiversity Officer with NTC. NTC had received the planning application and were awaiting any objections prior to the final consideration of the application in September.

Here is a brief summary of the Planning Application:

Application Type: express consent to display an advert;

Location: Cliff face on Promontory at Tynemouth Castle;

Proposal: Erection of four internally illuminated aluminium signs in the shape of the letters 'L', 'A', 'N', 'D' with white 'Flexi-Face' material 4m high, overall width 16.5m, max height above ground 25m.

After checking the plans, I could see that the art/advert was requested to be located near the top of the cliff on the concrete buttress protecting one cliff section. In my letter of objection to Peter Brown, I included information on the recent breeding success of the seabird colony and wintering numbers of Fulmars (see Tables 1 and 2). I also expressed the following points:

1. According to recent Fulmar data (Tables 1 and 2) – the optimum period for locating such an advert/artwork would be from mid-September to the end of November – to cause the least disturbance to the seabirds. Kittiwakes tend to leave the colony after their breeding season, by the end of August, and do not return until early the following March;
2. The advert/artwork will only be illuminated and visible offshore at night – to very few

- people on passing and visiting shipping and was consequently considered a very costly exercise with little return. The Tynemouth pier gates are locked at dusk and therefore no pedestrians will be able to view the illuminated work. The money would be better spent on more amenable artwork with a better location for the public;
3. Vandalism was possible because the cliff section is accessible to the public from the shore below;

Table 1. Seabird breeding success on Tynemouth cliffs – Summer 2001, 2002 and 2003.

Year	Fulmar		Kittiwake	
	AOS	SN	AON	SN
2001	99	40	83	53
2002	109	37	93	75
2003	95	16	76	34

Key: AOS = Apparently occupied Sites, AON = Apparently occupied Nests,
SN = Successful nests raising chicks (late in the breeding season)

Table 2. Maximum monthly Fulmar numbers, winter 2000/01 – 2002/03.
These figures cover two-thirds of the complete colony and therefore will account for about two-thirds of all birds present at the time of the counts.

Year	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2000/01	0	0	69	58	59	73
2001/02	0	0	40	25	43	42
2002/03	1	7	89	9	79	70

The Planning Application was granted by NTC in late September. This was disappointing, but at least various points had been made to support the birds. A letter (dated 3 October) received from Peter Brown stated "I can assure you that your views were taken into consideration before a decision was made". The Council imposed a condition that the sign should be removed from the site on or before 31 January 2004, before the nesting birds return. It appears that as long as birds with actual nests (in the breeding season) are not disturbed - then the law is upheld. Reports indicated that eight letters of objection had been received by the Council.

The artwork was attached to the cliffs by November and is due to be dismantled by the end of January. I do wonder whether the complete lack of Fulmars on the cliffs during my weekly visits from 5 October 2003 to the present (03 January 2004) is purely a coincidence. Yes,

4. If the four giant letters were located by fitters coming down from the top of the cliffs, disruption would be kept to a minimum.

I was completely against the project, but from the information that I had received by this time, there was obviously quite a lot of support for it in certain quarters – hence the points I made above in order to make the project as undisruptive as possible to the seabirds.

there is a genuine place for art in our culture and community, but there is a right time and place.

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Kittiwakes (© Chris Wernham)

A NEW GANNETRY FOR THE UK

The Sule Skerry Ringing Group first visited the island of Sule Skerry in 1975. At this time, the lighthouse was still manned, and talking to the keepers they told us that Gannets regularly flew very close to the island but never over the top. They also said that any Gannet that landed on the island was destined to die, and our observations supported this viewpoint. In the early eighties, the light was fully automated and probable continual disturbance ceased. By the early nineties, a group of Gannets were seen regularly on the western side of the island but, as far as we were aware, they never attempted to nest, although there was evidence of pre-breeding activity. We suspect that the occasional summer storm put them off.

As we arrived in the summer of 2002, about fifty Gannets were sitting or loafing on the upper slopes of a south-facing and sheltered geo, and we purposely avoided that area. After a few days, the birds vacated the area, indicating that our presence on the island was sufficient to disturb them.

As we approached the island in 2003, we noticed that a similar number of Gannets were present in the same area. On closer inspection after landing, we could clearly see some adults sat on nests and, after a week, the nests were checked. Fifteen nests were found – two were empty, eight had an egg and five had a small chick. It was noticeable that these breeding birds were well behind those breeding on Sule Stack, and it must be assumed that the Sule Skerry birds were overspill from this nearby large colony.

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MARINE ORNITHOLOGY – NOW WITH A EUROPEAN EDITOR

While *Atlantic Seabirds* is the official journal of the Seabird Group and the Dutch Seabird Group, both groups also support *Marine Ornithology: an International Journal of Seabird Science and Conservation*. *Marine Ornithology* is managed

and published biannually through a partnership between global seabird societies, including the African Seabird Group, the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), the Australasian Seabird Group, the Seabird Group (UK) and the Dutch Seabird Group.

The journal publishes full-length papers, short communications (usually less than three printed pages long), and book, website and software reviews on all aspects of seabirds and marine ornithology. Contributions dealing with coastal or inland birds such as gulls, terns, cormorants and pelicans are also considered. Review papers or Commentaries on important or emerging topics in marine ornithology are also encouraged.

Since 2001, *Marine Ornithology* has been published both in hard copy and in electronic form at the journal's website: <http://www.marineornithology.org> where further details of the journal and instructions to authors are also posted. Authors do not have to be members of the sponsoring seabird societies and all contributions (except for book reviews) are fully peer reviewed.

I have recently been persuaded to act as co-editor, together with John Cooper of Cape Town, South Africa (the journal's founder), and Dr Tony Gaston of Ottawa, Canada, . . . and my main task is to encourage and edit contributions from Europe – hence this note.

So please submit (preferably electronically) any suitable European material for *Marine Ornithology* to me.

Rob Barrett
[\(robb@tmu.uit.no\)](mailto:robb@tmu.uit.no)

Hard copy submissions should be sent to:

Rob Barrett, Editor
Zoology Department
Trømsø University Museum
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NO-9037 Trømsø
NORWAY

GUILLEMOT TICK PROJECT 2003-2006: A SUMMARY SO FAR

Great Island Virus is a globally distributed simple pathogen that infects *Ixodes uriae* ticks and the seabird hosts that the ticks feed on. Previous work undertaken on the Isle of May (1992-1996) established that Great Island Virus is chiefly supported by ticks feeding on Guillemots and that Guillemots are frequently infected by the virus. The virus was shown to be genetically and antigenically diverse and subject to intense immune selection from its Guillemot hosts. There is no evidence that infection affects adult mortality, although it may have subtle effects on breeding success.

A great deal of theoretical work on the causes and consequences of genetic diversity has been undertaken but it has rarely been tested by either empirical or experimental work. A new 3-year collaborative project at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH) is trying to understand the mechanisms that maintain diversity using Great Island Virus as a study organism. Great Island Virus is particularly well suited to addressing issues of geographical and temporal scale and interactions between the virus and host immunity.



**Male (left) and female (right)
Ixodes uriae ticks**

As part of this project, CEH Banchory are taking the lead role in coordinating the collection of ticks from seabird colonies around the UK and worldwide in order to obtain virus isolates, which can then be genetically analysed. We are targeting our UK collections on ticks that have fed on Guillemots. During the summer, when

there are plenty of host seabirds around, the ticks emerge to feed. Once the ticks have had a blood meal, they then over-winter in rock crevices in the colony, which are damp and protected.



**Tick attached to the head of a
Common Guillemot**

We were interested in collecting the ticks after they had fed, so in 2003, we visited Guillemot colonies at the end of the breeding season, after the birds had left, and collected ticks from these rock crevices. Over 7000 ticks were sampled from the Isle of May, the Farne Islands, Fair Isle, Sumburgh Head, Sanda and Great Saltee, and these are currently being analysed by our colleagues at CEH Oxford. We were also able to obtain tick samples from colonies of albatrosses (Bird Island, South Georgia), Cape Gannets (Mercury Island, South Africa), Common Guillemots (Triangle Island, British Columbia), Tufted Puffins (East Amatouli, Alaska), Leach's Petrels and Rhinoceros Auklets (St Lazaria, Alaska).

This project will give us a detailed understanding of the molecular evolution of a virus that infects seabirds in the natural environment and is of relevance to our understanding of other viruses with segmented genomes, such as influenza and the insect-borne orbiviruses that are of veterinary significance.

We would like to thank all those who helped us to achieve our tick collections in the UK in 2003: Dave Okill & Pete Ellis (Sumburgh); Deryk Shaw & FIBO (Fair Isle); John Walton, David Steel, David Parnaby & Alex Ash (Farnes); Ian Parkinson & SNH (Isle of May); Rab Morten (Sanda); Oscar Merne (Great Saltee); and Mark Newell and Genevieve Jones who assisted with the collecting. We would also

especially like to thank those involved in the overseas collections: Richard Phillips (Bird Island); Francis Daunt, Sue Lewis, Joan James & Rian Jones (Mercury Island); Mark Hipfner (Triangle Island); Leslie Slater (St Lazaria); Arthur Kettle (East Amatouli); David Grémillet (Crozets) and also Ann Harding & Tom Van Pelt for advice.

Linda Wilson (ljwi@ceh.ac.uk), Sarah Wanless & Mike Harris

SEABIRD RINGING ON THE FORTH ISLANDS

Following on from our recent 'Ringing Special' Newsletters, Seabird Group Treasurer John Davies gives you a flavour of the experiences that can be expected if you partake in seabird ringing with Lothian Ringing Group in the Firth of Forth.

Ed

When you think of the islands in the Firth of Forth, off the south-east coast of Scotland, you think of the Bass Rock, home of the Gannet, and the Isle of May, with its famous Bird Observatory (IoMBO). On the Bass, Bryan Nelson did his original work on the Gannet and ringed thousand of birds in the course of his research. The IoMBO is perhaps better known for its migration studies ringing passerines, rather than its seabird ringing. However, over the last 30 years Mike Harris, Sarah Wanless and colleagues from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Banchory (CEH formerly ITE) have ringed tens of thousands of seabirds on the May as part of their continuing seabird studies.

Including the Bass and the May, there are a dozen or so islands in the Forth. Two of the other islands, Craigleith, a couple of miles from the Bass, and Inchkeith, further up the Forth between the Port of Leith (Edinburgh) and Kinghorn in Fife, also have significant seabird colonies. The Lothian Ringing Group (LRG) and its predecessor, the Edinburgh RG, have been ringing on these two islands for 30 years. Prior to LRG, the late Bob Smith started ringing at these colonies in the late 1950s/early 1960s. Bob also chronicled the rise in the seabird populations of the Forth islands over the years, originally in the *Edinburgh Naturalists' Journal* and latterly in the *Forth Islands Bird Report*,

published by the Forth Seabird Group.

Craigleith is a small island just off North Berwick on the East Lothian coast. LRG ring mainly Fulmars, Cormorants, Shags and Puffins, but there are also large colonies of gulls - Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Kittiwake - and other auks - Razorbill and Guillemot. Inchkeith is a larger island. It has been inhabited until fairly recently and has a lighthouse, now automatic. There are the remains of military buildings and gun emplacements from Victorian times (late C19) and from the First and Second World Wars guarding the approaches to the old naval base at Rosyth. On Inchkeith we ring mostly Fulmars, Cormorants and Kittiwakes, but there is an expanding Shag colony as well as Razorbills, a few Guillemots, Puffins and the largest Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull colonies in the Forth! We make eight or nine ringing trips to these two islands at weekends from late May to early August.



Pam Moncur and Kyle Campbell ringing Puffins on Craigleith (© John Davies)

Our season begins with trips to Craigleith and Inchkeith to ring Cormorant chicks in late May/early June. The colony on Inchkeith is an open site on rocks at the south-east end of the island and on an offshore skerry - Long Craig. Ringing at this site requires care, a team of experienced ringers and a low tide. Craigleith is a cliff top colony in Tree Mallow *Lavatera arborea*. It's easier to work than Inchkeith - by crawling through the Tree Mallow from nest to nest. We have also collected food and feather samples from Cormorant chicks for David Cars' research into their diets and genetics at CEH.

Shags breed on most islands in the Forth and can have a protracted breeding season or non-breeding years. We ring most of our Shags, adults and chicks, on Craigeleath around mid summer. In 2003, they were around a week to 10 days earlier than usual. We have ringed and retrapped a lot of Shags over the years and are waiting for a member of the Group to do an analysis.

On Craigeleath, we ring Puffin chicks and ring and retrap adults in burrows in late June. The recovery rate is very poor - we have more recoveries from the smaller numbers of Razorbills and Guillemots we ring than we do from Puffins. We have a few controls from the May and lots of retraps awaiting analysis. The few recoveries are on British coasts of the North Sea and English Channel.



Puffins in the hand (© John Davies)

Most islands with cliffs in the Forth have Kittiwake colonies but most are inaccessible for ringing. We ring Kittiwakes on Inchkeith, which has a comparatively small, but accessible colony. At the beginning of July we make two trips, going around the island at low tide using an extension ladder to reach the nests on the cliffs above. We ring mostly chicks and catch a few adults with a net. We have co-operated with Mike Harris and Sarah Wanless on the May with local movement studies - by colour dyeing - and food sampling.

Fulmars are my favourite seabirds! In recent years we have ringed Fulmars both at the largest colony, on Inchkeith, where there are plenty of suitable slopes and ledges for breeding, and also on Craigeleath. We ring chicks at the end of

July/beginning of August and catch a few adults as well. Recoveries of our Fulmars ringed as chicks have so far been concentrated on the shores of the Forth, on the East Coast of Britain and the Low Countries of the North Sea. Other birds are recovered in the English Channel, the Celtic and Irish Seas and the North Atlantic. One third of the birds are recovered in their first year.



Alan Leitch and Martin Moss grovelling for Puffins on Craigeleath (© John Davies)

John Davies

(johncdavies@blueyonder.co.uk)

UPDATE ON SEABIRD 2000

Spring 2004 will see the publication of the results of Seabird 2000, a census all 25 species of seabird breeding in Britain and Ireland. *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland* by Mitchell, P. Ian, Stephen F. Newton, Norman Ratcliffe and Tim E. Dunn (eds) published by T. & A. D. Poyser, London, will be launched at the Seabird Group Conference in Aberdeen on Friday 2nd April. Conference delegates will have the opportunity to purchase a copy before it goes on general sale in May. The first session of the conference on Saturday 3rd April is devoted to presentation by the book's editors on the main findings of Seabird 2000. Information on Seabird 2000 will also be available online at www.jncc.gov.uk/seabird2000.

Ian Mitchell

(Ian.Mitchell@jncc.gov.uk)

GROUP NEWS

AGM, NOVEMBER 2003

The 38th Annual General Meeting of the Seabird Group was held at the Duke of Gordon's Hotel in Kingussie at the Scottish Ringers' Conference on Saturday 22 November 2003. The Annual Report that was made at the meeting is reproduced below; copies of the annual accounts and Treasurer's Report are enclosed with this Newsletter.

The 38th annual report of the Seabird Group, 2003

There was one change to the Executive Committee during the year with Linda Wilson being elected as an Ordinary Member.

At the end of October 2003 the Seabird Group had 296 paid up members, down 13, and a further 32 who had not paid for the year, up 17. The forthcoming conference must be used to recruit some new members and ensure that lapsed members pay their dues. In addition, Atlantic Seabirds and/or the Newsletter were sent to 15 statutory institutions, 13 other subscribers (institution and foreign non-member subscribers via subscription services) and 5 other groups in exchange for their own publications.

The 37th Annual General meeting was held at the Scottish Ringers Conference at Kingussie on 23rd November with 20 members in attendance. Only one formal meetings of the Executive Committee was held during the year, all other business being conducted by e-mail. Much of this was involved with arrangements for the next Conference, which is to be held in Aberdeen in April 2004.

With regard to Atlantic Seabirds all 3 parts of volume 4 and the first part of volume 5 had been published by the end of October 2003. Newsletters Nos. 93-95 were also produced and sent out with Atlantic Seabirds to save on postage.

Fieldwork and the writing up the results of Seabird 2000 were completed and the book is now with the publishers.

Organisation of the next Seabird Group Conference is well underway. As of 1 November

40 talks and 10 posters have been offered and just over 100 confirmed bookings made.

Grants were provided for four projects. These involved colour ringing Cormorants in Grampian, Skua studies on Handa, Shag studies on the Isle of May and seabird studies in the Azores.

R L Swann

Secretary

Mike Harris was thanked for his many contributions to the Group and Mark Tasker was elected to replace him as Chairman. Bob Swann was re-elected as Secretary for a further year, to maintain continuity during the change over of Chairmen, and we are very grateful to Bob for agreeing to hold the position for this further 12 months. Steve Hunter was thanked for serving and Jez Blackburn was elected to replace him as an Ordinary Member on the Committee.

Matt Parsons of JNCC gave a brief report on progress with the SEABIRD 2000 book (see separate note on page 13 of this Newsletter).

Martin Heubeck reported that arrangements for the 2004 conference were well in hand. Around 100 delegates had either booked or asked for further details, over 40 talks had been offered and a programme was almost arranged. The Chairman thanked Martin for all his work on the conference, particularly in keeping the overall price for delegates at such a reasonable level.

Under 'Any Other Business', we discussed the location of future AGMs. There had been some concerns that if the AGM remains in a single location, it could result in an inward looking Group. It was pointed out that when the AGM is held at the Scottish Ringers' Conference, attendance is usually very good, whilst at the last AGM at Swanwick (BTO Annual Conference in Derbyshire), a quorum had barely been achieved. The Committee agreed to look into possible ways to alternate the location of the AGM.

Would any Members that have views on the locations of future AGMs please contact the Secretary (preferably as soon as possible via e-mail) to express these views (contact details on back page). Please let him know whether any particular location would make you more or less likely to attend an AGM.

Bill Bourne asked whether the group could be more pro-active in organising surveys for members and other interested birders. This led to a wide-ranging discussion. It was suggested that sea-watching data or beached-bird data could be collected. It was pointed out that web based surveys were relatively cheap and easy to run and could acquire useful data. They do, however, need cash and expertise to set them up. It was suggested that some Seabird Group funding could be used for this but other members questioned the conservation value of some such data and the need to find people with time to help run such projects, particularly in an organisation with no permanent paid staff.

The next AGM is planned for November or December 2004, at a venue to be announced after consultation with Members (as requested above).

Ed

**SEABIRD GROUP
8TH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN,
2nd-4th APRIL 2004**

Plans are well underway for the forthcoming Conference in Aberdeen in April. At present, the speaker's programme is complete, with 31 talks planned, starting off on Friday evening with Tony Gaston's presentation on "Ice, seabirds and climate change in the Canadian Arctic". The launch of the book "*Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland*", reporting the results of the Seabird 2000 census, is also planned for the Friday evening, along with a buffet reception in King's Conference Centre (a late bar will operate in Crombie Halls of Residence). There is also a full poster programme, with presentations ranging from the high Arctic to the albatrosses of the southern oceans.

On the Saturday evening, a sumptuous Conference Dinner will be followed by a ceilidh, with music from Flying Piemen Ceilidh Band, in the historic and memorable setting of Elphinstone Hall. The Conference will close around 4.30pm on Sunday afternoon, but on Monday 5th April a field trip is planned along the coast of Aberdeenshire, taking in seabird colonies, the Ythan Estuary and the

Loch of Strathbeg RSPB Reserve. If there is sufficient interest, a separate inland excursion may also be arranged. Accommodation can be reserved for the Sunday evening and beyond.

The Conference is already well subscribed, and certain grades of accommodation may become unavailable in the near future. If you had thought of attending but forgotten to do anything about it, it is strongly advised to book as soon as possible. A programme will be posted on the Seabird Group website in early February, from which you can download a booking form. If you have any queries, please contact Martin Heubeck (martinheubeck@btinternet.com), or, for bookings, Alan Leitch (alan.leitch@snh.gov.uk). See you there!!

PS – JOURNAL BACK-ISSUES

Back copies of both the *Seabird Group Newsletter* and *Seabird/Atlantic Seabirds* will be available for purchase at the conference for 50p and £1 per copy respectively.

Ed

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS

Please would all Members note that subscriptions are now due for 2004. Would all of you that do not pay by standing order please send your renewal form (enclosed with this *Newsletter*) and remittance to Sheila Russell as soon as possible. Many thanks!

An updated renewal/membership form will also shortly be available for downloading from the website, which we hope will make renewal easier for some of you and also allow potential new members to join more easily.

Ed

ATLANTIC SEABIRDS

We apologise that there has been some confusion over the number of issues of *Atlantic Seabirds* that were expected in 2003. To clarify the situation, there will be three issues of the journal each year, unless there is a Special Issue planned, and we will endeavour to keep Members informed if any changes to this number are anticipated.

Ed



Registered Charity No. 260907

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EDITOR
Chris Wernham (BTO Scotland)

JOURNAL REVIEWER
Mark Tasker

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 1st May (for June edition), 1st September (for October edition) or 1st 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*, containing papers on current research. The Group organises regular conferences and also provides small grants towards seabird research. Current 2004 membership rates are:-

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

Sheila Russell
Membership Secretary
Clober Farm
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Scotland, UK.

GROUP NEWS

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 Group members for replacements on the committee are always very welcome.

Chairman
Mark Tasker (**2007**)

JNCC, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen. AB10 1UZ
(mark.tasker@jncc.gov.uk)

Secretary
Bob Swann (**2004**)
14, St Vincent Road, Tain,
Ross-shire. IV19 1JR
(bob.swann@freeuk.com)

Treasurer
John Davies (**2005**)
31, Easter Warriston,
Edinburgh. EH7 4QX
(johncdavies@blueyonder.co.uk)

Editor, *Atlantic Seabirds*
Jim Reid (**2005**)
JNCC, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen. Ab10 1UZ
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Editor, *Newsletter*
Chris Wernham (**2006**)
01786 466563 (see box)

2004 Conference Organiser
Martin Heubeck (**2005**)
(martinheubeck@btinternet.com)

Other Members:
Jez Blackburn (**2007**)
Alan Leitch (**2004**)
Linda Wilson (**2006**)

NEXT (39th) AGM

If you have any view on a suitable location for the next AGM, then please e-mail the Secretary (address above). See page 14.

DON'T FORGET! SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE 2004

See inside article! If you haven't booked already, places are getting limited, so please contact Alan Leitch as soon as possible for a booking form:

Alan.Leitch@snh.gov.uk
2, Burgess Terrace
Edinburgh. EH9 2BD
Scotland (UK)

SEABIRD GROUP GRANTS

The next deadline is 31 March 2004 so please submit proposals for next breeding season's fieldwork very soon, so that the Committee can make the earliest possible decision for you!

Applications forms are available from the Secretary, or can be downloaded from the website:

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

CONTENTS OF THE NEWSLETTER

As Editor of the *Newsletter*, I make every effort to check the content of the material that we publish but it is not 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.

Ed