



NEWSLETTER 98

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SEABIRD SEASON SUMMARY 2004

Having spent the summer as warden at Hermaness and witnessed the dire state of Shetland's seabird colonies first hand, it is difficult for me to summarise 2004's seabird season without feeling disheartened. Unfortunately, the situation in Shetland is far from isolated in its severity. From reports coming in from elsewhere in the country, it seems that few colonies could be described as 'seabird cities' this year, with population declines and low breeding success widely reported.

The finger of blame has largely been pointed towards food shortages caused by changing fish and plankton distributions, in line with changes in ocean temperatures, but local weather conditions and predation have also taken their toll at some colonies, with effects varying both between species and geographically. We have probably all gleaned some information about how individual colonies or species have fared this year, but it is more difficult to get a country-wide feel for the situation. So here's a summary of this year's seabird breeding season from a selection of colonies around the coast.

• NORTHERN ISLES

From very early on in the season in the **Shetland Isles**, it was clear that all was not well, with the cliffs being desperately quiet at a time when, in a normal year, breeding would be well underway. It was a late breeding season all round. Martin Heubeck of SOTEAG (Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group) recorded the median lay date for Sumburgh's Guillemots as 23 May, a time when some birds would have been brooding chicks only a few years ago. Guillemot breeding has become later by 3 weeks in just 3 years at this colony. Only 50% of Sumburgh's Kittiwakes had laid by 7 June and when Fulmar sites were visited on 12 August, less than 10% of chicks had begun to loose their down, suggesting either late laying and/or slow chick growth.



First summer Arctic Tern (© Micky Maher).

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Significant population declines were widespread and reported for all monitored species, except Gannets. Counts at Fair Isle by Bird Observatory staff showed that the Fulmar population was only half that of 2003, while the number of territories held by Arctic Skuas decreased by a massive 40%, to the lowest figure (33 AOTs) since the colony was established in the 1950's. The Guillemot populations at Hermaness and Noss both declined by around 40% since the last counts just a few years ago.

Most species experienced their worst-ever recorded breeding season, although once again, Gannets bucked this trend, with breeding success around average. Fair Isle's Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Arctic Skuas, Arctic Terns and Common Terns all failed to fledge any young, evidence of just how dire the situation was. However, at the beginning of the season, those Kittiwakes that managed to complete nest building appeared to be doing relatively well at some colonies. At Fair Isle, a higher proportion than in recent years managed to produce a clutch, while at Hermaness, 61% went on to hatch out chicks. But extremely high chick losses throughout Shetland, resulted in yet another year of extremely low productivity for this species. The Shags also seemed to be faring well during the first half of the season, although populations were generally down. But Deryk Shaw reported that Fair Isle's Shags suffered losses fairly late on when chicks were close to fledging, with colonies being 'littered' with dead or dying chicks and birds found washed up on the island's beaches.

Given the general state of seabirds in Shetland, it was no surprise that the long suffering Arctic Skuas and Terns continued to fare badly. There were even reports of Arctic Terns hawking for moths during the evening, and I witnessed a group of Arctic Skuas desperately chasing after a Skylark one dismal afternoon. The apparent food shortage was even affecting Guillemots, a species often considered as one of the more robust to environmental change. At many colonies, large variation in attendance suggested extensive non-breeding and population numbers were at their lowest ever. From the filthy state of incubating birds, it seemed that incubation shifts were excessively long. Unattended chicks were widely reported, sometimes for several

days in succession. Those chicks that did survive fledged at considerably younger ages and lighter weights than usual, which will surely affect their over-winter survival. The unprecedented breeding failure of Guillemots throughout Shetland meant a dismal scene during ringing trips into colonies. On Fair Isle, no chicks were ringed, compared to a normal year when 1,500-2,000 would be ringed. When the Shetland Ringing Group visited Compass Head boulder colony on 4 July, they found the colony completely deserted, when, in a normal year, perhaps 700 chicks could be ringed from 2,000-3,000 pairs. The comparatively successful breeding season for Puffins (on Fair Isle, productivity was only marginally below the 10-year mean) is perhaps surprising given that they were seen bringing in an unusual number of Snake Pipefish at several colonies. This prey is almost unpalatable to young puffins and these fish were regularly found discarded near the entrance to burrows. Deryk Shaw suggests that perhaps the slower growth rate and later fledging, compared to other auks, is beneficial to this species.



Puffin (© Linda Wilson).

It seems that it was not only the fish-eating seabirds that were suffering on Shetland. Dave Okill of the Shetland Ringing Group, reported on a visit to Mousa's Storm Petrel colony. Not only did they find fewer young than usual but these chicks were at an earlier development stage, suggesting a late season for this planktivorous species. The disastrous breeding season had a knock-on effect on Shetland's Great Skuas, which have become heavily dependent on other seabirds as a food source. In addition to a decline in numbers at most colonies, there was exceptionally high intra-

specific predation of eggs and chicks, and many chicks did not survive past their first couple weeks. The traditional stronghold colonies of Fair Isle and Foula suffered almost complete failure – just a single pitiful chick managed to fledge from 96 territories on Fair Isle, threatening the future viability of the colony.

Eric Meek of the RSPB reported a situation in the **Orkney Isles** that was, unfortunately, not much different to that in Shetland, with many species experiencing their worst breeding seasons. At several colonies, Kittiwakes failed to fledge any chicks, Fulmar productivity was the lowest ever recorded and that of Guillemots was well below the long-term mean. Massive population declines of Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Guillemots were evident at Marwick Head and the Noup Cliffs, Westray. Arctic Skuas suffered a miserable season throughout the Orkney Isles, with most colonies holding very few birds and few, if any, chicks were fledged, while the general impression of Great Skuas was of reduced numbers and a late season. 2004 was probably the worst season for Arctic terns on Orkney since monitoring began. The once-flourishing colony of thousands of pairs at North Hill on Papa Westray only managed to attract 22 birds and no chicks were fledged. Similarly, over a thousand adults on nearby Westray failed to rear any young. Reasonably good tern numbers appeared at the start of the season on North Ronaldsay and Audkerry but most left without laying and no young were fledged, while Rousay, which once held vast colonies, was totally empty. However, the situation seemed better in the south, where at least two islands were expected to have fledged some young and there were observations at Stroma (outwith Orkney but lying on the south side of the Pentland Firth) of ‘thousands of adult terns and several hundred fledged young’. In contrast to other species, observations of Black Guillemots suggested a more or less normal year for this species, which is perhaps not surprising given their high dependence on Butterfish in Orkney.

• EAST COAST

Moving down to Easter Ross, Bob Swann described another very poor breeding season for the second or, in some cases third, year running at **North Sutor and Nigg Oil Terminal**. Low

food supplies, poor weather and gull predation all contributed towards the poor breeding performance. Fulmars had another very poor year and Guillemot breeding success was the lowest ever recorded. Only Razorbills and Cormorants bucked the trend. Kittiwakes, Terns and Great Black-backed Gulls suffered complete breeding failure, apparently due to a shortage of sandeels. The lack of sandeels probably also impacted on Shag breeding success as there were many failures, though spells of intense heavy rain also washed out many nests. Lack of food for Great Black-backed Gulls resulted in increased predation by this species on Shags, Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Common Gulls. The breeding failure of Common Gulls at Nigg was also partly due to high chick mortality during periods of intense rainfall. Although populations of Common Gulls and roof nesting Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls increased at Nigg, continuing population declines were noted in Great Black Backed Gulls, Cormorants, Kittiwakes and Guillemots. Declines in Terns were particularly severe at Nigg Oil Terminal. Kittiwakes have suffered a worrying 74% decline in seven years, while Shags have more than doubled in numbers over the same period and reached a record high.

On the **Isle of May**, Mike Harris and colleagues from the Centre of Ecology & Hydrology, reported a very poor breeding season for Shags, with a substantial number of birds not attempting to breed. On average only one chick was reared per four nests, similar to the last ‘non-breeding’ year in 1999. This is in stark contrast to last year’s highest ever recorded productivity. Although timing of breeding was normal for Shags, their diet was varied, unlike in typical years, and included sandeels, butterfish, bull-rout and gadoids. All three auk species on the Isle of May experienced poor seasons. Puffin productivity was lower than average, that of Razorbills was the second lowest recorded while Guillemot productivity was the lowest on record and continues the worrying trend of declining breeding success witnessed over the last 10 years. Unusually for the Isle of May, most Guillemot losses were recorded during chick-rearing, when an unprecedented number of chicks were neglected, and fledging weights were the lowest recorded. Kittiwakes also suffered, with mean breeding success being

lower than the long-term average, while Fulmar productivity was the lowest ever recorded.

John Walton of the National Trust reported that the season on the **Farne Islands** was best described as 'dismal' with productivity for many species being the lowest in recent history. Problems started at the end of June when gale force winds and heavy rains (totalling half the annual rainfall of 2003) lashed the islands for 48 hours, and temperatures dropped to 8 degrees. Many cliff-nesters were washed-off in the stormiest seas seen for decades - the 20 metre high Pinnacles had waves crashing over their tops. Later in the season a sandeel shortage was evident, with birds bringing in oversized sprats and pipefish. Many Guillemot eggs and young were lost in the two day storm and the cliffs were littered with dead chicks after the early departure of adults. Guillemot chicks were seen leaving their ledges at all hours of the day, something not witnessed before. Puffins, despite suffering from severe burrow flooding, had a breeding success of 0.62 and they appeared less affected by the sandeel shortage, simply switching prey. Kittiwakes had the worst productivity on record and many chicks starved in the nest, while an estimated 60% of Arctic Tern chicks perished on the Inner Group. Over 1000 dead Sandwich Tern chicks were found in the colony of 1853 pairs, after the two day storm, and they suffered further losses from food shortages. The population of Shags was 16% down from 2003, and they had the worst productivity on record, with only 11% of eggs producing chicks that fledged.

• WEST COAST

In comparison to the devastation in Shetland and Orkney, it seems that most colonies on the northwest coast of Scotland were relatively unaffected by food shortage. When Adrian Blackburn visited several island colonies in the northwest during early July, he fully expected similar scenes to those reported for the Northern Isles, but was pleasantly surprised to find that this was not the case. Although he was unable to make comparisons with previous years, his impressions of Guillemot and Razorbills chicks on the **Shiants** and Terns on **The Monarchs** indicated that these colonies in the Outer Hebrides were doing well. The seabirds on **Sule Skerry**, only 40 miles west of Orkney, appeared

to be doing reasonably well, although Guillemots and Kittiwakes were breeding much later than normal and sandeels seemed to be in short supply. Puffins also seemed to be bringing in very few sandeels and it seemed that chicks were generally low weight for their size, despite the adults bringing in other prey species in large numbers. Much further west to **St Kilda**, and data from the National Trust for Scotland gave an average productivity of 0.74 for Fulmars and 0.4 for Kittiwakes. **Handa** possibly had one of the highest productivities recorded in the country for Kittiwakes this year, at 1.16 chicks per pair. Mark Foxwell also reported that Handa's Guillemots seemed to be doing well, with an estimated productivity of 0.69. At **Colonsay**, David Jardine recorded similar numbers of Fulmar, Shag, Kittiwake, Guillemot and Razorbills to those in 2003. Paul Collin of the RSPB reported that productivity at the **Mull of Galloway** seemed to be good with reasonable numbers of young Guillemots. There were many young Kittiwakes too, despite many birds delaying nest building and a good number not nesting at all.

Bob Swann described the seabirds on **Canna**, one of the Small Isles, as having a 'mixed' year. However, evidence points to rat predation rather than poor food supply being the cause of the problems on this island. As reported in Newsletter 95, there is now an ongoing problem in the boulder colonies where high predation rates by rats greatly affected Shag and auk numbers / breeding success. This resulted in record low numbers of breeding Shags and Razorbills, with several large colonies now totally abandoned. Shags in rat infested boulder colonies produced a dismal 0.1 chicks per nest, but new cliff colonies did much better (1.3-1.6 chicks per nest). Around 50% of Razorbills nests were predated by rats and Guillemots also suffered rat predation. However, Guillemots in rat free colonies looked good, and a large number of fish (mainly gadoids and sprats) were being brought in. Fledging weights were close to the average, suggesting that chicks were in good condition. Fulmar numbers remained stable and success was high. Unlike many of the north and east colonies, Kittiwakes on Canna continued to increase in numbers and reached a record high, with an average breeding success. Both these species nest on sheer cliffs where rat predation is not a problem. Finally, the latest

Canna colonists, 2 pairs of Great Skuas, both nested and reared 3 young between them - just compare that to the one chick fledged from the whole of Fair Isle!

• PEMBROKESHIRE

Warden Juan Brown described a mixed story for auks on **Skomer Island**. While the populations of Razorbills and Puffins were the third and second highest counts respectively, Guillemot numbers were slightly down from 2003, and this was the first year there had been a reduction in the population since 1996. Razorbill productivity was equivalent to the 5 year mean, while Guillemot productivity was the lowest on record, although at 0.63 chicks per pair, they are obviously not suffering as much as some other colonies. Unlike other species further north, it was an early breeding season for Puffins and it is possible that when productivity estimates were made, some chicks had already fledged. However, if the value of 0.63 is accurate, this is the lowest breeding success since 1974.

The Fulmar population increased to its second highest ever count, with breeding success above the 5 year mean. In contrast, Manx Shearwater productivity was below the mean, and these birds suffered a double blow when strong westerlies in September produced a large wreck nearby at Newgale. It was good news for Storm Petrel monitoring however, with the estimated number of occupied burrows being a third up from 2003. Although the population could be increasing, Juan Brown suggests that it is more likely that they are just managing to find more breeding sites around the island. The three breeding gull species had mixed fortunes. Great Black Backed Gulls seem to be doing well, with

the 13% increase in Apparently Occupied Nests being consistent with the recent increase over the last few years and productivity (1.60) was the highest on record. Herring Gull numbers were slightly up and productivity (0.78) was better than the previous two years. However, Lesser Black Backed Gull numbers have reached an all time low over the last two years, and the low productivity recorded over the last 10 years continued (0.31). It was a poor season too for Skomer's Kittiwakes, with the population a third down from 2003 and at an all time low since 1967. Only two thirds of birds attempted to build nests and breeding success was below the long term mean. At nearby **Ramsay Island**, the Kittiwake population was half of that of 2003, and warden Simon Avery witnessed total breeding failure. But finally, to end on a high note, there was good news from the Shag colony on nearby **Middleholm Island**, which appeared to have had a good breeding season, according to Steve Sutcliffe who recorded 49 nests (the highest number ever) and an average of 2.64 large chicks per nest.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those mentioned above, who passed on their observations and monitoring results either directly to me, or to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee's Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP). Matt Parsons kindly passed on data from the SMP. None of the monitoring would be possible without the dedication of all those who worked in the field, of whom unfortunately, there are too many to mention here.

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Table 1. Productivity estimates for some species at five colonies in 2004. Please note that these figures are only a guide, and should not be quoted without first contacting the relevant individuals, as mentioned in the text, or matt.parsons@jncc.gov.uk

	Fair Isle	Isle of May	Nigg / N. Sutor	Farne Islands	Skomer
Guillemot	0.00*	0.51*	0.40*	-	0.63*
Razorbill	0.00*	0.53	0.90↑	-	0.50
Puffin	0.63↓	0.60↓	-	0.62	0.63
Kittiwake	0.00*	0.28↓	0.00*	0.10*	0.47↓
Fulmar	0.43↑	0.21*	0.04↓	0.47	0.49↑
Shag	0.69*	0.25↓	0.90↓	0.27*	2.64 (Middleholm)

*worst since monitoring began, ↓ below average, ↑ above average

RECORD BREEDING SUCCESS OF TERNS IN WEST SCOTLAND



The tern raft viewed from the sea. The raft is bordered by rows of tall fence posts with terns perched on them (just below the central mountain) (© Clive Craik).

Here's a ray of sunshine to counter the bad news of seabird breeding failures in the Northern Isles and elsewhere in 2004. In the Oban area, some seabirds enjoyed spectacular breeding success. In the Sound of Mull, at possibly the largest colony of Common Terns in the British Isles, about a thousand pairs fledged 1,500 – 2,000 young, a useful addition to the British Isles total of 14,500 pairs of this declining species. It was the best breeding season at this colony since records began there in 1984. A trip in a small boat through the nearby tidal rocks and skerries on 1 August 2004 was dramatic. Many hundreds of inquisitive young terns skimmed low back and forth around our heads.

Breeding success was equally impressive at most of the 15 smaller colonies of terns in this study area, which lies along the mainland coast between Mallaig in the north and West Loch Tarbert in the south. The second largest colony of Common Terns here in 2004 was at a mussel farm at South Shian in Loch Creran. In 1996, a

mussel raft there was adapted to allow terns to breed, a unique combination of shellfish farming and seabird conservation. Early in 2004, farm operations required us to move the entire superstructure to another raft – the fencing, the turf and vegetation, and all 20 plywood boards on which the terns breed. In March, Roger Thwaites (the former owner of the mussel farm, who first set up the tern facility), Rob Lightfoot and I spent two miserable weekends of rain and wind doing this. We were rewarded this summer when a record 80 pairs of Common Terns raised 109 young to flying (1.4 young/pr), a huge increase from the previous site record of 27 pairs and 50-odd young in 2003.

Smaller numbers of terns also bred well in Lochs Ailort, Moidart, Teacuis, outer Sunart, Leven, Etive and Feochan. Why should this have been so, especially in a year when, in the Northern Isles, terns and other seabirds had a disastrous season?

Years of severe food shortage, like those that often cause breeding failures of seabirds in Shetland, are almost unknown in west Scotland. During the years 1980-2004 there was only one such year (1985). While Shetland seabirds depend largely on sandeels, there are three fish groups on which terns and other seabirds can rely in the west – sandeels, herring/sprats and gadoids – and simultaneous shortages of all three are unlikely. In this study area, predation is the main determinant of tern breeding success. Native predators such as otters and peregrines can have severe effects, but the birds have co-existed with these and adapted to them. This is not so with the introduced American mink, now a surprisingly common but rarely seen species along the richly productive shorelines of the West Highlands.

The high productivity of the terns in 2004 was the rewarding result of ten years of mink control. Almost all the tern colonies that survive in the study area are now protected every year by trapping and removal of mink. Otherwise, like unprotected colonies in this area, they would have disappeared.

The downfall of such colonies has been their nearness to the mainland. Some are as close as 25 metres, nearly all are less than a kilometre offshore, and more distant ones are joined to the mainland by island chains. These short stretches of water protect the ground-nesting birds from

fox, stoat, hedgehog and other land mammals. However, mink are aquatic and easily swim up to 2 km. When they reach islands and encounter high densities of nests, they prey heavily on eggs, chicks and incubating adults, often causing widespread whole-island breeding failures. When these are repeated yearly, the surviving adult birds eventually abandon affected sites, making whole sealochs and other areas empty, not just of terns, but of all shore-breeding waterbirds (seabirds, wildfowl and waders). Visits in June to many empty islands that once held breeding waterbirds of many species will verify this – for example, all the islands in Lochs Caolisport, nan Ceall, Lomond (yes!), Creran or almost the whole length of Loch Sunart. But where mink are removed, the birds can breed normally and the colonies thrive. Then, when conditions are good, as they certainly were for terns in 2004 (despite bad weather), impressive numbers of young can be raised, and it makes all the hard work of mink control worthwhile.

Many thanks to all who have helped with this work, especially to the late Ian Hynd, who financed much of the project, and to Isle of Shuna Shellfish, the new owners of the mussel farm, who have generously allowed the tern breeding facility to remain.

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Aboard the tern raft at mussel farm on Loch Creran (near Oban) in 2004. All the birds on the ‘ground’ are unfledged chicks (note the high density). Adults are flying in to feed them (© Clive Craik).

SURVEY OF GANNETRIES IN 2004

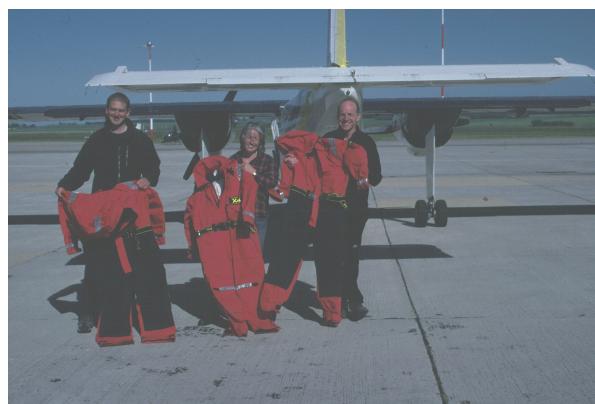
There is a long tradition, going back for almost a century, of counting Northern Gannets and changes in numbers of this spectacular species are better known than for any other seabird. Full surveys were undertaken in 1984-85 and 1994-95, and since another was planned for 2004-5, full coverage was not attempted during Seabird 2000. Results from the colonies that were censused during Seabird 2000 (mainly the smaller, less remote ones) suggested that the population was continuing its long increase. However, numbers at the larger and more isolated colonies of St Kilda, Ailsa Craig, the Bass Rock, Sula Sgeir and Sule Stac in Scotland and Little Skellig in Ireland, that together contain over half the British and Irish population, were not counted.



Stuart Benn (RSPB, right), George Cormack (pilot) and Tony Mainwood having flown St Kilda and the Bass Rock (© Stuart Murray).

The proposed census took place as planned in 2004. The Shetland colonies at Hermaness and Noss were not surveyed since they had been counted in 2003. Counts of the smaller, more accessible colonies were made by wardens, contract workers and volunteers but the major colonies listed above plus the Flannans, Scar Rocks, Grassholm and Bull Rock, were successfully photographed from the air. This is a challenging (and expensive) undertaking. However, since most gannets nest in Special Protected Areas (SPAs), there is a legal obligation for them to be counted regularly, and the financial costs were borne by Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Council for Wales and the Irish National Parks & Wildlife,

Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.



Matt Parsons (JNCC, left), Jill Harden (NTS) and Stuart Benn (RSPB) at Inverness Airport during the flight to Sule Stac, Sula Sgeir and the Flannans (© Stuart Murray).

The only colonies that were not counted were those on Ortac and Les Etacs in the Channel Islands and it is hoped that these be covered in 2005. In 2003 new ganntries were reported from The Noup (Westray) and Sule Skerry. We are very keen to know of any records of gannets ashore elsewhere in Britain and Ireland in 2004 that might indicate where the next gannetry will be established.



Sarah Wanless (left), Stuart Murray and Rene van der Wal assessing the edge of the gannetry on Bass Rock, August 2004 (© Mike Harris).

Piecing together the jigsaw of photographs for each colony and then counting all the 'little white dots' is a formidable challenge. Work is well underway and it is hoped that the size of the

British and Irish population will be known early in the New Year.

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NOTE ON WING MEASUREMENTS AND WEIGHTS OF MAGELLANIC DIVING PETREL (*PELECANOIDES MAGELLANI*)

Very little is known about the breeding biology, weights and measurements of the Magellanic Diving Petrel, *Pelecanoides magellani*, a species with a summer and winter distribution based around the channels and fiords of southern Chile and Tierra del Fuego (Brooke 2004; Harrison 1987; Murphy 1936). So I was delighted to find 29 birds of this species, on the deck of the Marco Polo MV (Orient Line),

whilst I was an expedition member cruising the Chilean Fiords in January of 2004.

The ship was travelling south overnight on 2nd/3rd and 3rd/4th January 2004, between Latitude 49 – 53° S and Longitude 73 – 74° W. On both nights, weather conditions were good but sporadic rain and steady drizzle were encountered. As is my normal practice, I checked the ship decks at dawn – 05:30hrs, in case the ship's lights had attracted flying birds.

On the morning of 3rd I, along with other passengers, found 26 Magellanic Diving Petrels alive, and one dead, hidden behind chairs, in gutters etc. on three of the decks. One further Magellanic Diving Petrel was found, at dusk, at 22:30hrs that evening and a further two were found at 05:30hrs on 4th.

All the birds were examined by myself. Birds were positively identified using guidelines published in *Seabirds an Identification Guide*, Harrison, P. (1983), and examined for general condition, moult and brood patch.



Magellanic Diving Petrel (© Christopher Wilson).

Maximum wing cord, measured using B.T.O. wing rule method, and weights, using a 300g Pesola Balance, were taken from all alive birds. Birds were not sexed due to lack of any obvious sexual differences. Birds were kept in keeping bags until dry and all released successfully.

All birds were in apparent good condition: there were no signs of moult nor signs of any brood patches. The dead bird was more thoroughly examined and appeared in good condition, with no trace of moult or brood patch (wing and weight not taken).

Measurements taken were as follows. Mean maximum wing cord: 120.7mm (117-124). Mean weight: 104.6gms (90 -128gms). Bird found 23:00hrs not included in weight analysis (88g), as it could possibly have been on ship all day.

Very little is known about this species and its breeding biology is barely known (Brooke 2004). Egg laying occurs November-December and fledging in March. Adults are in post-nuptial moult April-June (Murphy 1936). There is no information on when Magellanic Diving Petrel start breeding but Common Diving Petrels, *Pelecanoides urinatrix*, commence breeding at 2-3 years old (Richdale 1965). Due to the time of year, these birds were probably first year non-breeding birds. Previous means and ranges of wing measurements from skins (Murphy 1936) show males at 125.7mm (120-133.5mm) and females at 128mm (121-132.5mm). The only previous weights in the literature relate to two males being 158g and 163g and two females being 145g and 174g (Jehl 1973).

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SEA-WATCHING IN MADEIRA

The volcanic archipelago consisting of Madeira, the Desertas Islands and Porto Santo, lies around 500 km off the northwest coast of Africa and around 155 miles north of the Salvage Islands. As well as its breeding seabirds, it is renowned in the birding world for its endemic birds, including Madeiran chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs madeirensis*, Madeiran Firecrest *Regulus madeirensis* and Long-toed Pigeon *Columba trocaz*. Because of the incredible opportunity to observe several Atlantic species of shearwaters and petrels, we decided to visit Madeira for a week in August 2004, and thought we'd share some useful information for those of you considering a trip.

The best time to see both breeding and migrating seabirds in Madeira is late August to early September. But, despite its many apparently suitable headlands, Madeira offers only a handful of sea-watch viewing 'hotspots', simply because much of the accessible coastline is too high to offer suitable vantage points (it claims to have the second highest sea cliff in the world). The two most well known sea-watching sites are Ponta do Cruz, the southern most point of Madeira just a few miles west of the capital Funchal, and Porto do Moniz in the north west. Believe it or not, it is also quite common for people to be able to sea-watch from their hotel balcony, for those lucky enough to get a room with a sea-view in an appropriately located hotel! In addition to sea-watching from the coast, booking onto a pelagic trip will increase your chances of seeing some of the 'more difficult' species, and allow cracking views of others. Most recommended is the all-day boat trip to the Desertas Islands, offered by "Ventura

do Mar" (cost 75E, duration 10 hours). In addition to the seabirds, also fairly regular on this trip are Sei, Fin and Sperm Whales, Common and Bottlenosed Dolphins, Flying Fish and, if you are extremely lucky, the endemic Monk Seal, which breeds on the Desertas island of Bugio.

Cory's shearwaters *Calonectris diomedea* are the most numerous breeding seabird to be seen at sea and from the coast from June to October, with reports of several thousand passing in an hour. They often pass very close to shore, while views of the more pelagic Bulwer's Petrels *Bulweria bulwerii* are usually more distant, unless you take a boat trip. Little Shearwaters *Puffinus assimilis* and Manx Shearwaters *P. puffinus* are less commonly seen, but Porto Moniz seems to be the most reliable site. Migrating Great Shearwaters *Puffinus gravis* pass Madeira's north coast from late August to mid September, but their passage is quite unpredictable. Balearic Shearwater *Puffinus mauretanicus* are rare but regularly seen, often during days of heavy passage of Manx and Great Shearwaters. One of the most difficult breeding seabirds to see is the Madeiran Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma castro*, but we heard reports of birds being seen from the ferry crossing to Porto Santo, as well as being heard calling at night at a breeding colony at Ponta do Garajau, just east of Funchal. Fea's Petrels are resident breeders on Bugio, and the best chances of seeing these are on a pelagic trip to the Desertas, although with patience, it may be possible to see them off Porto Moniz or Ponta da Cruz. However, because it is virtually impossible to separate Fea's petrel from Zino's Petrel in the field (see Tove 2004), most birds have to be recorded as Fea's / Zino's Petrel.

The critically endangered endemic Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma Madeira* was only recently recognized as a full species, distinct from the Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis* and Fea's Petrel *P. feae* (Bourne 1983). Its estimated population of only around 50 pairs makes it the rarest seabird in Europe. The few breeding colonies (one of which was only discovered in 2003) are confined to the central mountain massif of Madeira, at an altitude of around 1800m. And it is here, at Pico do Arieiro, that there is the best chance of hearing (and often seeing) them as they return to their breeding burrows at night.

We took a guided night trip to the colony with a former employee of the Freira Conservation Project. After two hours and several shooting stars later, we were rewarded with hearing three individuals calling and a brief view of one bird directly overhead. Hearing their bizarre calls in the faint moonlight was a truly amazing experience. Our guide described how recent funding has allowed the extension of the Parque Natural da Madeira around the Zino's Petrel colony, which should prove to be a significant boost to the Freira Conservation Project.

Useful information

A great website for general information and trip reports is <http://madeira.seawatching.net>, which also has contact details for 'Ventura do Mar' and guided trips to the Zino's Petrel colony.

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BIRD MORTALITY ON SOUTH MORAY BEACHES

In 2002 and 2003 unexpected numbers of birds were found dead along the south shore of the Moray Firth in the late summer, with more auks in the first year and gulls in the second (British Birds 97: 468), so a comparable but more extensive survey was repeated in 2004. It produced what are probably more normal results (Table), with a lower proportion of young birds following a poor seabird breeding success in this area- possibly there were simply too few young birds present, though on the other hand there were also the first young Common Seals, which may also have suffered in the bad weather.

In view of the widespread speculation in the public prints that the breeding failure was due to global warming affecting the sea, it should be noted that it also extended to the huge gull colonies (and Red Grouse) in the Mortlach Hills

inland, where the birds were badly affected by storms in May, so that only a handful of young Common Gulls could be found in early July where in good years there are thousands.

Adult/immature birds and seals found dead between the River Findhorn and Deveron mouths during July-October.

	2002	2003	2004
Kilometres examined	3.5	5.5	12.5
Fulmar	4/3	0/1	2/0
Great Black-backed Gull	0/1	3/2	1/2
Herring Gull	1/2	4/13	10/3
Common Gull	2/4	7/13	4/8
Black-headed Gull	0/1	0/1	0/1
Black-legged Kittiwake	1/3	4/9	5/8
Razorbill	4	0	1/2
Common Guillemot	70 (3/62)	12 (0/7)	5/4
Black Guillemot	0	1	0
Puffin	1	0	0
Birds/km	28	12	4.5
% immature	87	72	50
Common Seals	0	0	1/3

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SEABIRD WRECK, NORTH WEST SCOTLAND LATE SUMMER 2004

During late August 2004 and into the first few days of September Scotland was affected by some very deep depressions, which as well as resulting in above average rainfall, also produced some very unsettled weather with periods of strong to gale force south westerly winds. Following this reports began to come in of large numbers of auks in distress in sea lochs in north-west Scotland. Before long large numbers of live birds and corpses were coming ashore. Local bird watchers in the area were contacted and asked to check their local beaches, to see how widespread the problem was. The RSPB then mobilised its volunteer beach bird surveyors to check beaches in from West Inverness-shire to the Moray Firth.

In all between the end of August and mid September 2115 beached seabirds were

recorded. The majority of these were auks with 1793 Guillemots, 61 Razorbill and 7 Puffin. Also reported were 64 Fulmar, 20 Shag, 1 Cormorant, 17 Gannet, 58 Kittiwakes and 65 gulls. Beached birds were reported from Loch Linnhe in the south, north to Mallaig, Skye, Lewis, west Ross-shire, west and north Sutherland and east to Caithness (figure 1). Only small numbers were reported from the Moray Firth and south Orkney. Large concentrations were present along the west coast of Skye, particularly Lochs Slapin, Scavaig and Bracadale. On the west mainland the largest concentrations were in Loch Broom, Enard Bay and Loch Inchard. Further east big numbers were found in Sinclair Bay and Dunnet Bay in Caithness (the latter site had 45% of all beached fulmar). All observers commented that these figures were absolute minima. The coast of west and north Scotland is very indented with numerous skerries and islets and a very low population density, so that only a small percentage of the entire coastline was covered.

In addition corpses were removed quickly by scavengers and others were buried under tangles thrown up by the large waves. Observers in Skye estimated that the number of dead birds must have run into the thousands.

Five corpses were sent for analysis to the SAC lab at Achincruive in Ayrshire. All five were underweight (range 619-780g) and all showed typical signs of having died of starvation. Many observers commented that large numbers of auks had floated up to the head of the sea lochs,

where there was much calling, but little signs of birds diving for food.

Ring recoveries showed that most of the Guillemots were of local origin, with 24 originating from the Isle of Canna, two from Lunga, Treshnish Isles, 2 from Port Ban, Colonsay and one from Sule Skerry. Of these birds 6 were youngsters less than 3 months old, 3 were immature, but the majority, 19 of them, were adults of breeding age. Many of the latter were in heavy wing moult and presumably flightless.

NORTH SCOTLAND SEABIRD WRECK AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2004

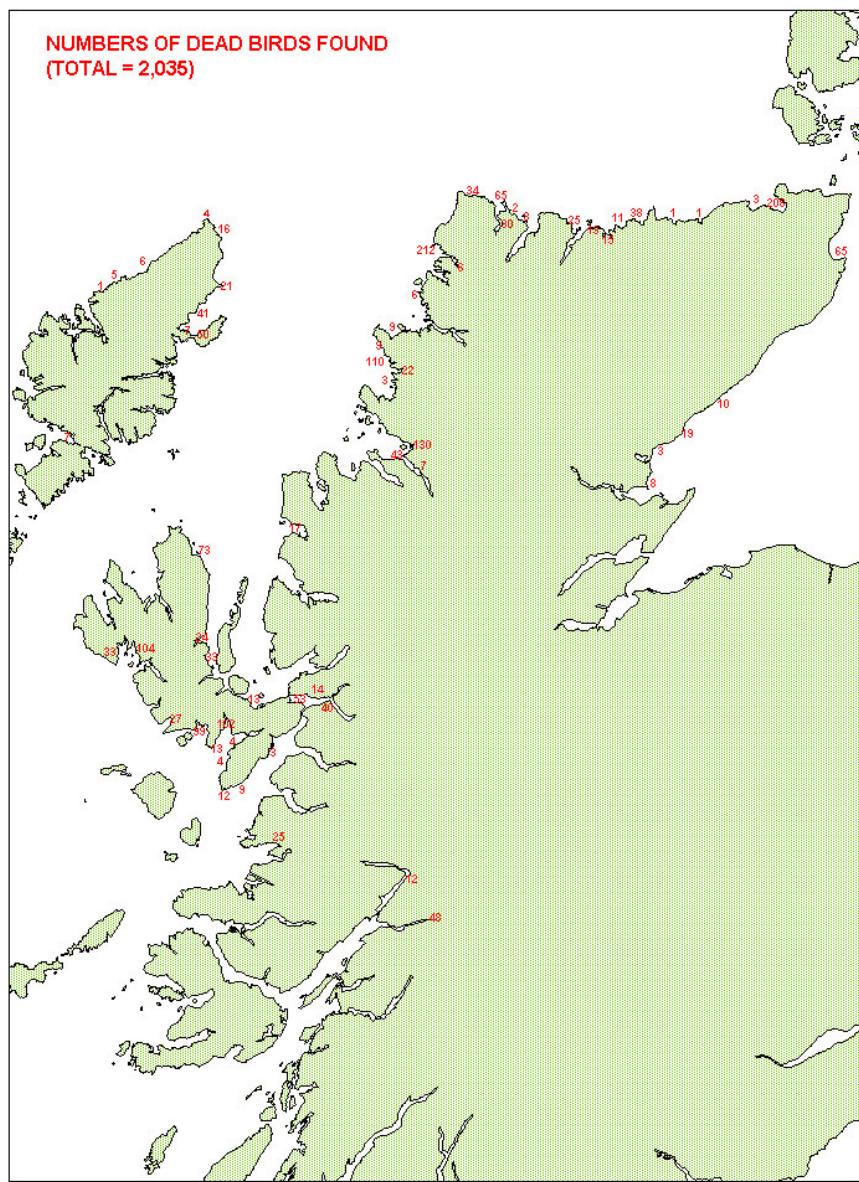


Figure 1. Numbers of dead seabirds found around the coasts of Scotland in August-September 2004 (Source: RSPB with thanks).

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Following a period of calm weather in mid September the number of beached birds dropped dramatically, though even at the end of October reports continued to come in of sickly birds still present in sea lochs and smaller numbers of corpses coming ashore. From Skye and Barra there were also reports from fishermen of guillemots following boats and feeding on discards, a behaviour which had not been observed by these fisherman before.

The wreck was apparently due to a lack of suitable fish and exacerbated by bad weather. Although there was a major problem with fish availability in the North Sea and around the Northern Isles in summer 2004, observations from Canna earlier in the summer had shown no signs of food shortage and the observed productivity for auks, shags and kittiwakes was either average or just above average. Guillemots were mostly feeding on sprats and young whiting, which appeared to be available in good quantities. Even in mid August large numbers of auks, porpoises and whales were observed feeding around Skye and the Small Isles. Things must have changed quite dramatically prior to the wreck. As a footnote it is worth recording that in mid October numbers of sick birds started appearing along the Moray Firth coast and in Aberdeenshire.

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JOURNAL REVIEWS & ‘BITS’ BY MARK TASKER

From *WORLD BIRDWATCH* Vols 26(2) & (3)

Alex Aitken and Peter Robinson, fishermen from New Zealand and Australia respectively, have shared the €18,000 prize put up by SEO, the BirdLife partner in Spain for the best new idea to reduce seabird bycatch on longlines. They independently submitted the same idea of dripping greasy fish liver oil onto the water behind the boat as they are setting their lines. Both found that birds avoided oil on the water’s surface. Coupled with streamer lines, bycatch was reduced by 95%. The grease is prepared by removing the livers of any catch, mashing these

into a paste with some salt and leaving the mixture to ferment for 3-5 days (nice!). The mixture is then allowed to drip out of a barrel at the rate of about 2-3 litres per 1000 hooks.

Experiments in Brazil with a blue dye are also showing great promise. It is known that birds do not take blue dyed fish, but unfortunately there may be also an effect on target fish catch. The current experiments use of a two stage blue dye, one part of which leaches out after being in the water for a while, leaving bait that is even more attractive to fish than untreated bait.

The ‘winner’ of the Big Bird Race – the Ladbroke’s sponsored competition for shy albatrosses migrating across the southern oceans was Aphrodite, an albatross ‘owned’ by Jerry Hall. Only three contenders were left at the end of the race, the remaining 15 either had malfunctioning transmitters or had fallen victim to longlining practices that the race was designed to highlight.

From *SEEVÖGEL* Vol. 25 (1 & 2)

Ragnar Kinzelbach reviews the wintering range of northern gannets from the published literature and from his own observations. She found an increase in sightings in the western Mediterranean (off Turkey) and off Tunisia. Some of this may be an artefact of an increase in bird-watchers in these areas, but there also seems to be evidence of an increasing occurrence paralleling the increase in the breeding population. The breeding populations on Helgo land are also reviewed by Veit Henning.

Falk Hüttmann describes conservation and research on seabirds of western Canada (in German).

From *PACIFIC SEABIRDS* Vol. 31 (1)

This issue kicks off with the intriguingly titled “Do albatrosses of Midway Atoll select cigarette lighters by color?” by a team of three researchers from three continents ably led by John Cooper. There are hints that there is a bias in colour of lighters selected by the two albatross species breeding on Midway, but results are too small

for any certainty at present. The authors suggest that if a bias is found, then manufacturers might be approached to see if the least-favoured colours by albatrosses might be preferred for production. An item later in the issue describes a “plastic megastrudel” of 3 million tonnes that has accumulated in the NW Pacific gyre, 2000 km to the northwest of Hawaii.

Craig Harrison’s conservation report ranges extensively across the work being done by PSG to advocate the better conservation of Pacific seabirds, ranging from letters to the Mexican government, comments on a US seabird conservation plan to endorsements of proposals to remove rats off Hawaiian islands. News of a grounding by a fishing vessel on the San Benito islands off Mexico was good in that the Mexican Navy responded rapidly and removed 55,000 litres of oil from the wreck, but not so good in that rats could easily have got ashore to this important island (2 million breeding seabirds). Removal of rabbits from one of the Juan Fernandez group off Chile by a team of Chilean workers appears to have been successful and it is hoped that the pink-footed shearwaters (that breed here and in just one other location) will benefit.

PSG is now publishing all abstracts of their meetings on their website, and has also started a list-server to keep their members in touch with each other and any relevant seabird activities. A list of all papers that appear on the website occupies a few pages of this issue.

From FALKLANDS CONSERVATION NEWSLETTERS

The February 2004 issue highlights the loss of 44,000 breeding pairs of albatross and 69,000 breeding pairs of penguins in just three years from Steeple Jason Island. A combination of bycatch and poisonous algal blooms seems to be the main problem. The March issue notes that the Falkland Islands Government has adopted a national plan of action for seabirds, aimed at reducing longline bycatch and killing in trawl

fisheries. The offshore squid fishery is due also to be investigated to determine if there is any seabird interactions.

The progress of John Ridgway’s round the world sailing trip to highlight the plight of albatrosses is reported in a number of issues of the newsletter. A petition was also gathered by Birdlife over the same period. This was presented to FAO in Rome, where it is hoped that it, and the sailing trip will accelerate moves to get FAO to take further measures to better regulate fisheries dangerous to albatrosses.

A long article in the August 2004 issue describes further heroic efforts to eradicate rats from Outer North West Island. This 65 ha island should have many tussac breeding species that will return if the eradication is successful.

FIRST CONFIRMED SCOPOLI’S SHEARWATER FOR BRITAIN

In the October issue of *Birdwatch*, Bob Flood described how a pelagic trip off the Isles of Scilly at the beginning of August 2004 yielded the first confirmed sighting of Scopoli’s Shearwater for Britain. Scopoli’s Shearwater is the nominate form of Cory’s Shearwater which breeds in the Mediterranean and which some consider as a potential split from the Atlantic breeding *borealis* birds which occur in British waters. There have been some reported sightings of this bird previously, but because of the difficulty of separating Scopoli’s from Cory’s, rarities committees insist that any sighting must be supported by photographic evidence of reasonable quality. Fortunately, a digital image of the Scilly’s bird confirmed that this individual had an underwing pattern of long white fingers running the length of the primaries, which is diagnostic of Scopoli’s Shearwater.

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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

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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**)
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Other Members:
Jez Blackburn (**2007**)
Linda Wilson (**2006**)
Juan Brown (**2008**)

NEXT (9th) SEABIRD GROUP INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 1-3 September, 2006

The theme has been agreed as "Seabird Populations under pressure" and the first call for papers is likely to go out in the June 2005 Newsletter.

The 2006 AGM of the Seabird Group will be held during the conference

SEABIRD GROUP GRANTS

The next deadline is 31 March 2005 but please submit proposals as soon as possible, 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'

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