

Forth Seabird Group Seabird Counts 2023

Compiled by Terita Deare

Introduction:

The legacy of the Forth Seabird Group (FSG) contribution to the BTO/JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme traces back to 1959 when Bob Smith conducted the first seabird counts on the Forth Islands in Scotland. His pioneering work laid the foundation for understanding the dynamic seabird populations inhabiting the Inner-Forth Islands. Bob Smith's dedication to this cause led him to become a founder member of FSG in the mid-1990s, cementing the group's commitment to long-term seabird monitoring.

FSG's commitment to conservation has resulted in annual seabird counts being conducted without interruption, with the exception of 2020 due to government-imposed Covid-19 restrictions. Over the years, these counts have provided crucial insights into the health and trends of seabird populations in the region.

Methods:

Efficiency remains paramount in FSG's efforts, particularly concerning the comprehensive counting of the islands. Overcoming the logistical challenge of optimising boat hire costs, FSG successfully conducted surveys of Inchkeith, Inchcolm, Carr Craig, and Haystack within a single day during the month of June. This required a minimum of 12 individuals; however, this year, FSG marshalled a team of 18 dedicated participants. The team was divided, with half focused on Inchkeith and the remaining half attending to the other islands. Furthermore, Inchgarvie was meticulously surveyed over half a day, ensuring accurate data collection. The partnership between FSG and Edinburgh Marine Academy at Port Edgar Marina facilitated seamless boat hire, enhancing the practicality of FSG's operations and contributing significantly to the survey's overall success.

Surveys were conducted through a combination of boat-based assessments and on-foot visits to the islands in order to count the nests for various species. The teams successfully counted the nests of fulmars, razorbills, shags, cormorants, kittiwakes, herring gulls, lesser black-backed gulls and great black-backed gulls. Please note guillemots were counted as individuals on the cliffs. On Inchkeith and Inchcolm islands, lesser black-backed gulls and herring gulls have not been regularly counted and have been omitted from the results. Additionally, advice from the RSPB and UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) stated puffin burrows should not be counted due to the risks associated with avian influenza.

Results and Conclusion:

Between 2022 and 2023, fluctuations were observed in seabird populations across the surveyed sites (Figure 1; Figure 2, Table 1). Overall, there was a decrease in counts for most species, with exceptions being Shags and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which showed an increase. These trends may signify changes in populations of seabirds in the Firth of Forth due to causal factors such as avian influenza. In conclusion, understanding these trends is crucial for effective surveillance and management strategies going forward on the Forth Islands.

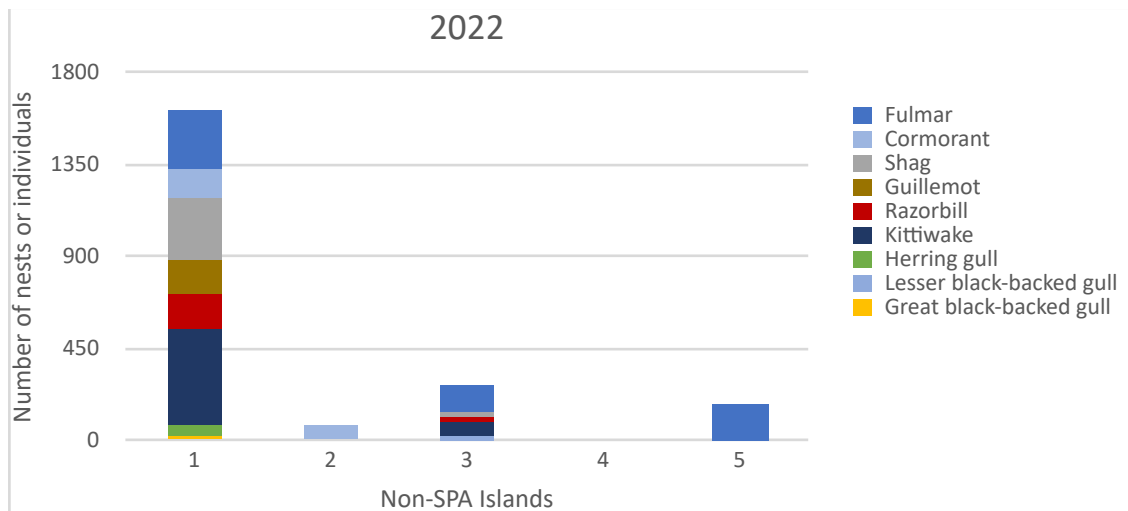


Figure 1. Results from the June 2022 survey season of nesting seabird species on non-SPA Forth Islands.

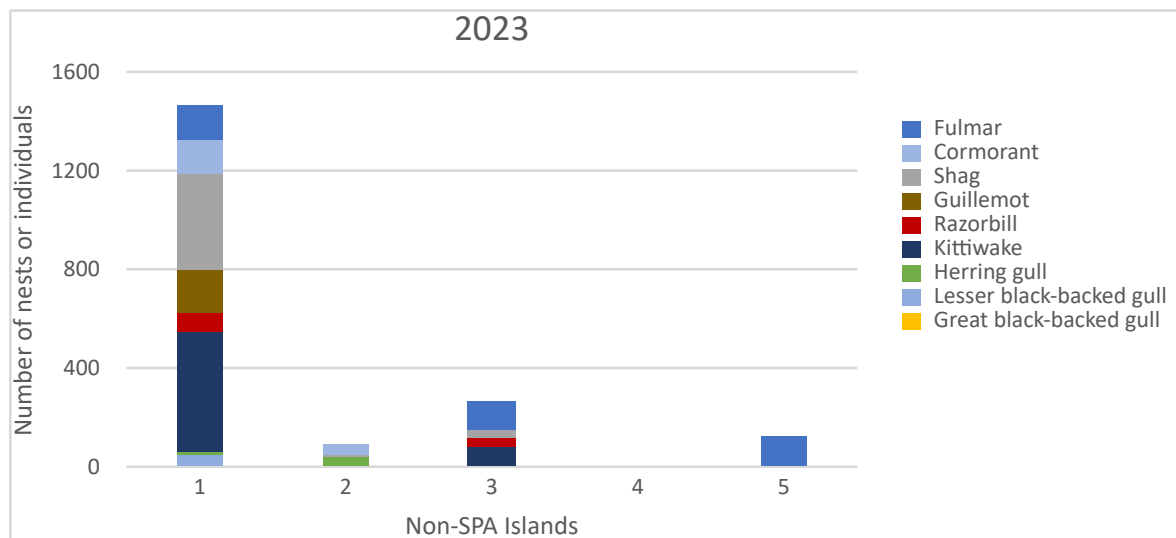


Figure 2. Results from the June 2023 survey season of nesting seabird species on non-SPA Forth Islands.

2023	Inchkeith	Carr Craig	Inchcolm	Haystack	Inchgarvie	Total
Fulmar (AOS)	137	0	121	0	124	382
Cormorant (AON)	143	43	0	2	0	188
Shag (AON)	390	12	35	0	0	437
Great B-b Gull (AOT)	10	1	6	1	4	22
Lesser B-b Gull (AOT)	breeding, not counted	3	597	3	39	642
Herring Gull (AON)	breeding, not counted	37	498	19	36	590
Kittiwake (AON)	480	0	76	0	0	556
Razorbill (AOS)	83	0	30	0	0	113
Guillemot (IND)	170	0	0	0	0	170

Puffin (AOB)	breeding, not counted	0	0	0	0	
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Table 1. Results of seabird counts 2023 for the non-SPA Forth islands.

Acknowledgement

FSG were delighted to be awarded an emergency one-off grant from the Seabird Group to cover the costs of boat hire incurred when carrying out the annual seabird counts on the non-SPA islands in the Firth of Forth ie Inchkeith, Inchcolm, Inchgarvie, Carr Craig and Haystack. FSG receive a grant from NatureScot to cover the costs of carrying out the annual seabird counts on the islands in the SPA ie Bass Rock, Craigleith, the Lamb, Fidra and Inchmickery.

FSG have posted all of their results for the 2023 seabird counts (ie for SPA and also non-SPA islands) into the BTO/JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme database. The results will also be published in the FSG's own annual report at the end of the year.