

Seabird Monitoring Programme findings in Inverclyde and Bute. Rafe Dewar

Over the last three years I have been conducting seabird counts as part of the national Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP), covering my local areas of Inverclyde and Renfrewshire, as well as making ferry trips to sites in the Clyde Islands of Bute, Arran and Great Cumbrae. I'd like to thank the Seabird Group for providing me with a grant to contribute towards my travel expenses in order to achieve this.

The locations that I visited during the census counts were rather varied - from the windswept sandy bays and moors of the Clyde Islands, to a wet Sunday afternoon spent counting gulls in an industrial estate in Paisley. This does of course show the variety of habitats that seabirds can occupy, and provide an insight of how humans can be a help, or hindrance in different circumstances.

The results, in comparison with the previous counts carried out for the Seabird 2000 monitoring programme were noteworthy, and here I provide a brief summary for contrasting areas - the industrial and urban locations around Inverclyde, and the more remote 'natural' sites on the isle of Bute.



A view of the Greenock rooftops and Clyde Estuary with typical large warehouse on left,

Across Inverclyde a total of 23 sites were resurveyed in 2019 and 2021, mainly urban, although a few more natural loch and reservoir sites were also covered. Herring gull and lesser black-backed gulls were the two predominant species, taking advantage of warehouse rooftops and other industrial environments to nest and acquire food, although common gulls were also present in smaller numbers. Separate tystie (black guillemot) surveys also took place in 2018 along the quaysides of the post-industrial Clyde foreshore.

Results from the 2019 and 2021 gull surveys showed an overall decline in Apparently Occupied Nests (AON) and Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT) for herring gull: from 102 to 45 AON/AOT (-56%); and for lesser black-backed gull from 190 to 61 AON/AOT (-68%). Further investigation into herring gull numbers does however show that excluding the large Loch Thom reservoir in the Muirshiel Hills where 62 AON were recorded for Seabird 2000, but only 3 AON in 2021, urban herring gull numbers were similar between

censuses (40 AON in 1999-2001 and 42 AON/AOT in 2019-21). For lesser black-backed gulls, which were found in smaller numbers on Loch Thom in 2000, a clearer reduction in urban numbers was however evident.

The reduction in numbers for both species can be at least partly explained by a similar decline in the total number of sites occupied by either species, from 18 under Seabird 2000 to 11 in 2019 and 2021. In some cases, the reason for this decline was clear - for example the former Carthage Engineering Works site, where both species were present for Seabird 2000 counts, has been redeveloped into housing, and no longer provides suitable nesting habitat. This is a trend common across Inverclyde where the redevelopment of former shipyards and warehouses has taken place during the last few decades. In some cases, warehouses have been replaced by similarly sized buildings forming retail parks or industrial estates, but crucially the design of these buildings do not provide conditions as favoured by gull species. In particular, it seems like the removal of corrugated asbestos roofs, whilst beneficial to humans for obvious reasons, has removed preferred gull habitat, as this roof material accumulates lichen, moss and other vegetation over time, which can provide nest material (see e.g. Rock, 2005¹). Not coincidentally, the largest colony of breeding gulls in Inverclyde in 2019-21 was recorded at Baker Street in Greenock where disused warehouses there have retained their asbestos roofs. Although the now widespread pressed steel roofs are less favoured by gulls, they evidently do still provide some nesting opportunities, for example between roof vents, albeit in lower densities. At other sites it was evident that some of these buildings have netting to prevent gulls nesting, and birds were absent.

The redevelopment of the Clyde waterfront also appears to have affected black guillemot numbers, for example at the Ladyburn site in Greenock where 15 individuals were present at the time of Seabird 2000, but none were present in 2018 due to the subsequent change in land use to housing and greenspace. Overall there was a reduction in black guillemot numbers from 86 to 77 individuals (-11%) with the most noticeable difference at Inverkip power station (from 38 to 5 individuals) although this may be due to increased difficulties in accessing the now defunct power station site, and so results there should be treated with caution.

Although the reduction in urban gull numbers can sometimes be easily explained, this is not necessarily the case for seabirds at natural sites. At Loch Thom in 2021 herring gull numbers were much lower than during Seabird 2000, and great black-backed gulls were absent, although encouragingly common gulls showed an increase from 5 to 21 AON.



Heading towards Bute for seabird counts on a typical summer's day

¹ Rock, P. 2005. Urban Gulls: problems and solutions. *British Birds* 98: 338-355.

On Bute, which is a relatively remote and undisturbed island, the Seabird 2000 counts recorded common gull, herring gull, lesser black-backed gull and fulmar across 8 sites. Notable records were a large gull colony on Scoutag Moor where there were 350 and 300 AON for herring gull and lesser black-backed gull respectively; and 200 and 150 AON herring gull and lesser black-backed gull at St Ninian's Bay. Repeat visits in 2019 however found that not only was the Scoutag Moor colony deserted at the time of survey, but most other gull and fulmar nest sites were unoccupied, with only one common gull nest recorded across all sites. Whether this situation is due to local influences or representative of wider pressures on nesting and foraging birds will become clearer after the national SMP data have been analysed. What is apparent however is that gulls, and other seabirds, can face a range of challenges, depending on their chosen environment.