

SEABIRD 2000 UPDATE

Britain has just been declared free of Foot and Mouth Disease, one year on from the first outbreak. This time last year, I was supposed to be planning the third and final field season of Seabird 2000. However, all those plans were left hanging in the air until mid-May when the first counts were due to begin. We did not know whether any seabirds would be counted because of the restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the disease. Surveys in the Western Isles by volunteers from the Earth-Watch Institute had to be cancelled, while a major survey of Shetland's breeding skuas was postponed until later this year, as were surveys of inland-nesting gulls in England and Wales. Some surveys will therefore have to be carried out in 2002 if we are to achieve full coverage of colonies as planned. Thankfully, Ireland and most of Scotland remained free of the disease, so that despite the restrictions, the majority of the remaining fieldwork did go ahead.

Back in March, it even looked doubtful as to whether we would be able to finish off the Tystie survey of North West Scotland. With movement in the countryside being restricted, it seemed that even driving a boat trailer from port to port could carry a remote risk of spreading the disease. However, with common sense and disinfectant prevailing, we were able to cover the entire north coast of mainland Scotland, Argyll, the majority of the Western Isles and even parts of the Dumfriesshire coast, one of the few areas of Scotland infected with FMD. I would like to thank all of our contributors in 2001 for adhering to the restrictions, completing foot and mouth risk assessment forms, and thus ensuring that Seabird 2000 surveys did not carry any risk of spreading the disease. I would also like to thank all the land-owners who, in very worrying times, still allowed seabird surveyors on their land.

Despite Foot and mouth, we have now surveyed over 95% of coastal colonies. Most such surveys in 2001 had to be conducted from the sea, and small grants

were issued by the Seabird Group to fund boat charters.

Ironically, the one area of work that remained largely unhindered by FMD was the survey of petrels, probably the biggest challenge that lay ahead when I took on the job of organising Seabird 2000, back in May 1998. Most of the islands are stock-free and thus work has not been affected by the foot and mouth restrictions. During previous censuses, we could only really guess at how many of these birds were actually breeding on an island or whether they were breeding there at all. Their nocturnal and subterranean habits and penchant for nesting on some of our most remote islands, had made petrels nigh on impossible to survey accurately up until the development of the tape play back method. The technique has made what may look like an uninhabited boulder field or grassy slope come alive with the sound of Storm and Leach's Petrels calling from invisible burrows. By playing tapes of their calls during the day, at the height of the incubation period, we have been able to identify exactly where the colonies are and determine breeding numbers.

Thanks to substantial funding from the EU Atlantic Area INTERREG programme, JNCC and Birdwatch Ireland have been able to carry out expensive expeditions to the remote islands of the west coast of Ireland and North West Scotland. We now know that around 50,000 pairs of Leach's Petrel breed in Britain and Ireland. St Kilda holds 90% of the population and the next largest colonies are on North Rona and the Flannan Isles, which hold 1,000-2,000 pairs respectively. A handful of pairs were also found on Old Hill in Loch Roag (West Lewis), Sule Sgeir and Gruney (Shetland).

Ireland's only colony of Leach's petrel is on the Stags of Broadhaven – four pyramidal stacks off Co. Mayo. Though breeding was suspected on the Stags in the 1940's, it wasn't until 1982 that it was confirmed when a single egg was dug out of an occupied burrow. So my last day of Seabird 2000 fieldwork on 27 July 2001 was spent rather spectacularly, crawling

up and down the steep tussocky slopes of the largest of the Stags.



Leach's petrel, St Kilda.

We obtained 16 responses from Leach's Petrels. Two easily accessed burrows had adults tending four day-old chicks. Our survey timing was well after the ideal censusing period for Leach's, so there may well have been many more burrows on the island with unattended chicks, which would not have responded to the tapes. Unfortunately the glorious weather that enabled a fairly straightforward landing on this foreboding rock, did not last and we were unable to visit the other stags. Because of this, and due to the likelihood of low attendance, it is difficult to extrapolate a population estimate from these 16 responses. However, assuming that there were similar numbers on the other three islands and that the response rate was half what it is during peak incubation (20%), we might expect over 300 pairs on the Stags. We did however find 130 responding Storm Petrels on the island, which were uncharacteristically nesting in tussocky vegetation and Puffin burrows (classic Leach's habitat), rather than the usual rocky sites such as boulder beach. Steve Newton's team over the last two years have been scouring the multitude of islands off Ireland's west coast – unearthing unknown colonies of Manx Shearwaters, Storm Petrels and Puffins. By the time the necessary number crunching has been done, we should have a much more comprehensive idea of how important the isolated islands off Ireland's west coast are.

So, with most of the fieldwork completed, when are we going to see some figures? – I hear you cry. Very shortly, I hope. The new Seabird 2000 database has been up and running since September 2000 and we hope to have all the data collected so far entered onto that database by the end of January 2002. We will then start the data analysis and will call on experts on each of the 25 species to contribute to the finished text. We are hoping to have the text completed by the start of 2003. Publishing should take just under a year, so we are aiming to launch the Seabird 2000 book officially at the Seabird Group's next conference in Aberdeen in April 2004. However, you will not have to wait until then to be able to access data. Once all the data that have been collated so far are validated, we will be able to respond to specific data requests, probably from June 2002 onwards. I will let you know when exactly the data will be available and how to make a data request in the next issue of the *Seabird Group Newsletter*. By 2004, we should also have a fully interactive website on which Seabird 2000 data can be searched and accessed directly.

Some of you have no doubt contributed to Seabird 2000 already. However, as mentioned earlier, there are a few gaps remaining. We are particularly interested in obtaining help in Yorkshire (all work had to be cancelled due to FMD in 2001) and for surveys of roof nesting gulls in Kent, South East Wales (the Glamorgans) and south Devon.

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