

# Breeding Seabird Survey 2023



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Cover image – Shag ©Steve Levrier

## Introduction

The 2023 Breeding Bird Survey of Guernsey and Herm was completed in mid-June to provide comparable data with previous surveys undertaken in recent years. The project was made possible after a generous grant was paid to La Société Guernesiaise (the local equivalent of a UK Wildlife Trust) by The Seabird Group in response to the Avian Flu outbreak.

## Surveyed Areas

The survey covered the main islands of Guernsey and Herm, including Jethou, The Humps, Lihou and other associated islets.



Figure 1 Guernsey & Herm

## Method

Surveying was predominantly undertaken from boats, one based in the south-west was used for Guernsey's south coast cliffs and another, based on the east coast, visited Herm, Jethou and nearby islets.

Lihou Island, situated off the west coast was visited on a suitable low spring tide whereas two small islands to the north were assessed from Guernsey using a telescope.

The boat-based surveys were undertaken on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June, slightly later than the previous survey in 2021. This was due to tidal and weather delays. Lihou Island was counted on 16<sup>th</sup> June and the northern islets on 23<sup>rd</sup> June; all areas were therefore surveyed within a week.

Boat surveying can be difficult, particularly where inshore reefs impede inshore access. We used two surveyors to ensure all areas were counted and cross-checked, often fairly quickly as submerged rocks, tidal currents and fishing gear put pressure both on the boat operator and the counters.

## Results

The general impression during the surveying was that seabird numbers were significantly down on 2021, with entire sections of cliffs being found almost (or completely) devoid of active nests. On Lihou Island, for

example, the south side was as busy as normal but on the north side, which normally hosts good numbers of gulls (mostly Herring), the traditional sites were vacant apart from two active nests. The east side was similarly quiet apart from a lone Lesser Black-backed Gull tending a nest with recently hatched chicks, right alongside the footpath. This nest was fiercely defended against every person walking past, including me, to the point of physical blows. It was therefore a surprise when I was informed that this nest had failed later in the season – the committed parents deserved a better outcome.



Figure 2 Adult Lesser Black-backed Gull in Lihou Island’s east coast, Guernsey in background ©Wayne Turner

In comparing the 2023 figures with 2021, there were significant declines in many species.

TOTALS	Fulmar	Cormorant	Shag	Little Egret (individuals)	Common Tern (individuals)	Lesser B-b Gull	Herring Gull	Great B-b Gull	Guillemot (individuals)	Razorbill (individuals)	Puffin (individuals)	Oystercatcher
All areas 2023	35	15-21*	111-11	16	1	52	480-529	61-62	255+	3*	5*	43-45
All areas 2021	35	23	246	9	4	32+	705-752	77	36	18	25	32+
All areas 2015	62	26-31	440-45	N/A	0	221-26	1273-132	122-13	130-15	20	21	N/A

Figure 3 2021 and 2023 totals for all areas. \* suspected underestimate

Most notably, Herring Gulls were down by more than one-third and Shags were down by more than 50%. Great Black-backed Gulls were down by 20% whereas Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which are the more mobile of the large gulls, were up by 60%.

Although Fulmars appear to have declined over the last 20 years, numbers seem to be stable for the time being, as do Cormorants. Common Tern is a fickle local breeder and a lone bird was actually a surprise after a small colony in Guernsey had declined as quickly as it appeared since 2020.

Local auk colonies are extremely difficult to count from a boat but landing on the breeding sites can cause unacceptable disruption, including lost or broken eggs. With this in mind, the figures are at best, an estimate. Tidal cycles and weather certainly can also influence the number of birds present at a colony or in the local vicinity at any one point. Despite these variables, Razorbill counts were very low but Guillemots were significantly up on recent counts, with some areas seemingly bursting with birds.

In comparing the figures from the last Bailiwick-wide count, the last two surveys are placed in further stark context. Broadly speaking, the downturn in Shag and Lesser Black-backed Gull is 75%, Herring Gull is down 60% and Great Black-backed Gull and Fulmar have both halved.

Whilst Puffin and Razorbill are both showing signs of similar significant declines, the difficulties of obtaining accurate counts must be considered. The notable exception is Guillemot which has nearly doubled in the last decade – is this a genuine increase or just displaced birds from elsewhere?

## Discussion

Seabirds around Guernsey and Herm have faced unprecedented issues over the last 20 years including:

- Exceptional storm events including the Great Seabird Wreck 2014
- Periods of high seawater turbidity
- Increasing human disturbance of breeding colonies and inshore waters
- Non-native predators such as Brown Rat and feral ferret
- Increasingly unstable weather during breeding season
- Loss of food waste from local landfill
- Changes in natural food sources due to Climate Change
- Avian Flu

At this stage, it is difficult to ascertain which of these factors is driving local declines in breeding seabirds; it is likely that a combination of most or all of them is causing the losses. More recently, whilst widespread die-off from Avian Flu has not been recorded in local populations, there has been a huge impact on the nearby Alderney Gannetries. It seems inevitable that other species will have been affected but with smaller numbers involved, the deaths may have passed unnoticed.

Whatever the reasons, Guernsey's seabirds are currently in a quite grave position. It remains to be seen whether the recent losses will continue or level out - or reverse. It is unfortunate that in waiting for further data, we may miss the opportunities to address those pressures which could be resolved if we choose to do so, such as human disturbance and non-native species.

Despite the currently depressing outlook for most species, the upturn in numbers of breeding Guillemots is a most welcome exception (Figure 3). Elsewhere, there are still sites seemingly bucking the overarching trend; for instance, the small islet of Houmet Paradis, in the north-east corner of Guernsey was packed with half-grown gull chicks and as it was the last site to be counted in 2023, it provided some welcome relief.



Figure 4 Guillemots on one of the islets of The Humps, north of Herm ©Mark Guppy