

## Shiant Isles

The reformed Shiant Auk Ringing Group visited the islands from 12-19 July 2008 for the first time since the 1980s. I had made my first visit there in 2006 on an expedition organised by Adrian Blackburn, and wanted to get back to this special place. Also, the seabirds and auks in particular seemed to be struggling, and some of the more accessible colonies looked promising sites for long-term monitoring through ringing e.g. the BTO's Retrapping Adults for Survival (RAS) scheme.

Therefore, the aim of the visit was to start RAS projects on Razorbill and Puffin, and possibly Guillemot. As well as general ringing, and surveys using the methodology used by David Steventon and others in the 70s and 80s. Our visit was timed later than that of historic dates for ringing Guillemot & Razorbill chicks, as they had been noted breeding later on the 2006 visit than had been recorded in the 70s and 80s. Recent food shortages may have contributed to this.

However, our grand plans were hindered by the wet and windy, overcast weather and by fog. This limited access to the normally accessible colonies on Garbh Eilean and only one visit was possible to Eilean Mhuire, and stopped us visiting any of the outliers.

As has been reported elsewhere (see separate article by Murray & Love who visited the islands the week before), all three auk species appeared to be having a very poor breeding season. In 2006, small Sandeels and other small fish, and Pipefish were being brought back to the colonies and burrows. Though this is poor, 2008 seemed to be worse. Only a couple of large Sandeels and gadoids were seen in beaks all week, and the rest were all very small '0' class Sandeels. Perhaps surprisingly, no Pipefish were seen at all in 2008. No Puffins were noted with a beakful of Sandeels like the bird on the cover of the last Seabird Group Newsletter 108 (insert 2008 pic?)

Large areas of the main boulder field on Garbh Eilean appeared either devoid of or significantly down on Guillemot and Razorbill numbers compared to 2006. Some birds were still on eggs and other chicks were not big enough to ring. Only a few chicks were ringed. The situation was similar with the Shags in this colony. Around 5,000 adult Razorbills were in rafts between Garbh Eilean and Eilean Mhuire, which were presumably failed breeders. During the day odd Razorbill chicks were fledging and paddling across to their calling parent, to then be surrounded by a wagon train of other Razorbills. Is this parental instinct perhaps their a reaction to their own loss or group resistance against aerial predators? Going on the number of adult Razorbills it was possible to ring in 2006, the aim was to use standard netting to establish a baseline for RAS on Carnach Mhor on Garbh Eilean. However, this time they were few Razorbills to catch.

Puffins perhaps appeared to be doing a little better. Certainly the baseline RAS for them at Airighean a Bhaigh on Garbh Eilean fared better. More than 500 adults were caught on marked net lines on our only fine day, with 10 birds retrapped from the 1980s and 90s. It will be interesting to see how many retraps we get this year. Though there were lots of Puffins loafing, not many were bringing in fish. More than half of the burrows on Carnach Mhor were not occupied.

When there are losers, there are usually also winners, and Great Blacked Gulls and the Bonxies had fat chicks. The paucity of food kept the auks off the nest longer to the benefit of the predators.

With the weather, we only managed to observe one Kittiwake colony near Campar on Eilean an Taighe, of the c30 nest sites only one or two had sitting adults. The rest of the nests either had loafing adults or were empty.

More visits are planned this year and in 2010. This year's visit will be earlier so we can do more surveys and be more sure what is happening to the auks in particular.

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