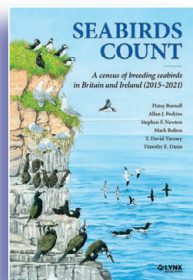


# REVIEWS



***Seabirds Count A Census of Breeding Seabirds in Britain and Ireland (2015–2021)*** by Daisy Burnell, Allan J. Perkins, Stephen F. Newton, Mark Bolton, T. David Tierney, Timothy E. Dunn and Robert Vaughan. Lynx Nature Books, Barcelona, 2023. ISBN: 9788416728602. 528 pages. Hardback, £45.

Seabirds Count reports on the fourth in a series of national surveys of Britain and Ireland's seabirds carried out from 2015 to 2021. The previous national surveys and associated reporting books were Operation Seafarer (1969–1970), Seabird Colony Register (1985–1988), and Seabird 2000 (1998–2002). These surveys, which aim to document the status and distribution of 25 species of seabird across the whole British Isles, are always a mammoth undertaking. However, this survey (*Seabirds Count*) also endured the additional difficulty of coinciding in part with an international pandemic. *Seabirds Count* was developed by the Seabird Monitoring Programme partnership, with a Steering Group that encompassed representation from a number of partner organisations, and was coordinated and managed by the JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee).

The first major section of the book details the methods and analysis used for the *Seabirds Count* census. This section includes the survey methods and site definitions used to ensure comparability with previous surveys, as well as some discussion and statistics regarding coverage. There are detailed discussions of the methods and rationale behind the data validation, data analyses and mapping

techniques used throughout. Finally, there is a discussion of the rationale for the specialised surveys and analysis used for European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, Leach's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous*, Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, and urban nesting Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* and Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*.

The second major section is also the largest and is composed of the accounts of the 25 seabird species, each written by a different authorship team. These accounts each include an introduction to the species, details of the census methods and coverage, information on their status and trends, and a discussion. Each species account contains detailed tables of breeding data, a chart of population sizes by geographical area, distribution maps and a final general discussion of the survey result and its context. The standardisation between the different national surveys allows comparisons between colonies and geographical areas and the presentation of local and national trends. The tables included in each account cover breeding numbers by geographical/administrative region, county level and by Special Protection Area. Global and biogeographical region breeding number estimates are also provided. Each species account also includes two maps: one showing the distributions of the species' breeding numbers, and another showing the distribution of the mean annual percentage change in breeding numbers. The discussions are wide-ranging, covering the factors affecting breeding success for each species and their effects on the populations. These accounts are all sumptuously illustrated throughout with colour

photographs and artwork. Rare breeding seabirds or those known to breed in hybrid pairs (Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*, Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*, Black Tern *Chlidonias Niger*, Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*, Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*, Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*, Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*) are included within a single section, with a brief overview of the associated data.

The third major section is a very interesting discussion of the causes of seabird population change including exploitation and persecution, incidental mortality, predation, disease and natural toxins, food availability, nesting habitat availability, pollution, and climate change. These discussions include evaluations of seabird population changes, and the trends observed between the national surveys. Although there are some positive changes, such as those observed following mammalian predator eradications, most discussions are less positive.

The final section is comprised of the nine appendices: Surveyors, Coastal survey sections, Single-point survey sites, Call-playback surveys, Urban-nesting gull survey methods, Lesser Black-backed Gull correction model regions, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull population estimates at key sites, Urban-nesting gull survey coverage information, and Total change between Seabirds Count and Seabird 2000.

The last appendix is probably the starkest, displaying a table showing the total change in the breeding numbers of each species both in each country, as well as across all countries, between this survey and the previous survey. The table is colour-coded with blue indicating seabird increases, yellow indicating stability and red indicating declines. Although there are some positive gains in some regions and in particular species, the general trend is that Britain and Ireland's seabirds are in decline, with a disappointing amount of red highlighting. This information alone will hopefully be useful in influencing legislators, organisations and individuals to make the necessary changes to mitigate some of the causes of these seabird population declines.

As already mentioned, *Seabirds Count* was a huge undertaking from inception to completion. Everyone involved in the collection of the data, the undertaking of the analysis and the production of the book should be commended for their part in this work. This book will no doubt provide the foundation for future national surveys and the means to assess future population trends and changes. In the wake of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in 2021, and climate change in general, this kind of work will continue to be ever more important. *Seabirds Count* is an easy-to-read, beautifully produced book, as we have learnt to expect from Lynx Nature Books.

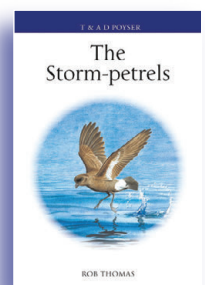
**Jeff Stratford, Website Officer (Outgoing),  
The Seabird Group**

***The Storm-petrels* by Rob Thomas. T & AD Poyser, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, UK. ISBN 9781472985811. 336 pages. Hardback £60.00, Ebook £31.50, Flexiback £35.00.**

It is very likely that, if you are already a UK-based storm-petrel fan, you will have encountered the work of Rob Thomas already. The Cardiff University lecturer's boundless enthusiasm for storm-petrels is radiant and terribly infectious. So, I must start this review with full-disclosure; like

many people I know, I caught the storm-petrel bug under Thomas's tutelage at Cardiff University as an undergraduate, and I view storm-petrels as a collective gateway drug that has fuelled my fascination with all things seabird ever since.

I found the broad scope of the book to be refreshing; as a scientist I am more used to reading (sometimes quite dry) accounts focused purely on detailed, narrow topics. However, Thomas's book is anything but narrow or dry. It begins with a scene-setting



dip into the evolutionary history of storm-petrels, ranges through a comprehensive grounding in all things ecological to do with life as a storm-petrel, explores storm-petrel conservation issues, and even includes brief species accounts for southern and northern species of storm-petrel. The book ends with chapters on how we humans have embraced storm-petrels in our cultures, and how the reader may encounter storm-petrels for themselves. Of course, this is all quite the adventure and far too much to cover in this review, and therefore I can only present an overview of some of my highlights.

*The Storm-petrels* is illustrated throughout with charming and delicate hand-drawn figures depicting storm-petrel behaviours and anatomy, produced by Thomas himself in a distinctive Pointillist style. The book is also brightened by a great number of excellent quality colour photographs and artworks from other contributors, alongside informative scientific figures and tables to accompany points made in the text. Images – photographic, artistic and scientific – are well-positioned and distributed throughout each chapter, breaking up the text without disturbing the flow of the narrative.

Chapter 3, *The challenges of survival at sea*, provides an insight into what might be the storm-petrels' greatest alluring factor – how such tiny, fragile-appearing birds can not only survive, but indeed thrive out in the harsh expanse of the open ocean. The chapter begins with a primer on what we know about storm-petrel longevity gained through ringing studies, and our understanding of how a slow breeding strategy and protective telomeres on storm-petrel DNA may contribute to their unexpectedly long lifespans. The chapter also delves into the physiological, anatomical and behavioural mechanisms that storm-petrels employ that allow them to drink seawater, fly with minimum energy expenditure, moult and retain body-heat. This chapter references and eloquently distils a large body of research, revealing some astonishing facts about storm-petrel life at sea that were new to

me, including the role of storm-petrel feet in flight and storm-petrel maximum recorded dive-depth.

Seabirds are rarely famous for their songs, and yet storm-petrels are perhaps an exception to this. Chapter 7 *Communication and mate choice* describes the rich world of storm-petrel acoustic communication, expanding on the classic "fairy being sick" purring song of the male European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* to describe other calls and their potential uses. Acoustic signalling is not only useful to storm-petrels however, and the chapter goes on to describe how researchers can exploit storm-petrel acoustic communication for surveying. Another distinctive characteristic known to the storm-petrel enthusiast is their smell, with school children quoted in the chapter describing it unconventionally as "*Smells like Christmas and unwashed hair.*" The potential use of olfactory and visual cues by storm-petrels are discussed briefly, although this appears to be a little-explored area of storm-petrel research.

Storm-petrel ecology and human history collide in Chapter 13, *Storm-petrels in human culture*, which is a fascinating and well-researched account delving into human interactions with storm-petrels, through traditional uses, art and literary references. My favourite part of this chapter was Thomas's discussion of the origins of historical and local names given to storm-petrels. Observations of storm-petrel ecology are reflected in these names, for example, their pattering flight over the water, crevice-nesting behaviours and habit of regurgitating oil.

The book concludes with Chapter 14 *Encounters with storm petrels* and an epilogue, encouraging the reader to go out to observe storm-petrels for themselves and to understand and treasure them better. As a former student of author, this struck me as very in-character for Thomas, who has, with his passion for storm-petrels, successfully inspired many seabird research

careers and hopefully will continue to do so with the content of this book.

I found Thomas's book to be a tour-de-force of accessible scientific writing. It is an absorbing read and the author's enthusiasm shines through with each revelation. Information is often delivered with whimsical humour, so if you like your natural

history texts to be strictly business, this may not be to your taste. But the occasional informality of the writing does not detract from the fact that this is clearly a very thorough, well-researched account, full of surprising storm-petrel insights to delight even the most clued-up storm-petrel fan.

**Katherine Booth Jones**

***Rathlin, A Wild Life*** by Ruby Free. Colourpoint Creative Ltd, Newtownards, County Down, 2024. ISBN 9781780733869. 240 pages. Paperback, £12.99.

*Rathlin, A Wild Life* by Ruby Free is a personal account by debut author Ruby Free of her time spent working at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) West Light Seabird Centre on Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland. Joining her at the beginning of her six-month stint on the island, we step off the ferry with Ruby and watch her discover both herself as well as the island. This book provides a highly relatable story for a very niche few, of packing up and relocating to a remote island for a seasonal role in seabird conservation. Whilst the challenges and thrills of remoteness are shared experiences among people in the fields of seabird science and conservation, it is rare to see them so alive on paper. Ruby's intimate writing style allows a wider audience, that extends outside seabird researchers, to access this hidden world.

Reading much like a diary, the book invites the reader into the day-to-day of island living and chronologically follows the Atlantic seabird season, from the first egg to fledging. Ruby's experiences are interwoven with facts and information about the multiple species of seabird that she encounters on Rathlin Island. We sit with Ruby in the colony and observe nature's highs and lows, smiling as chicks hatch, and grieving the Atlantic Puffins that are predated by Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus*. Ruby revisits several individual

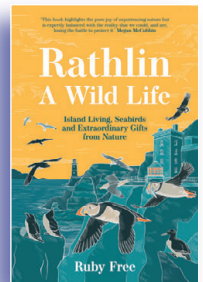
seabirds throughout the book, for example she playfully names an Atlantic Puffin pair 'Puff' and 'Finn', and in doing so creates relatable characters for the reader to engage with. Through freely connecting with individual animals and telling their stories, underlying conservation messages and real-life tales of climate change are hard-hitting.

This book highlights the magic of seabirds, but also the lives of those who work with them. The author describes funny little moments unique to island living, such as shooing pigeons out of visitor centres with a mop. Through her emotionally rich descriptions, Ruby creates colourful imagery and moments to appreciate the need to pause, such as a night when she cycled through the mist with Short-eared Owls *Asio flammeus*, or a time when she stayed in the sea that second longer. These moments are accompanied by gorgeous illustrations, that bring both the story to life and the reader closer to Rathlin Island.

The book is written in real-time pace, and sometimes daily accounts can be over-detailed or tangential. However, though the narrative can sometimes feel slow, Ruby draws us into a simpler life where we are more connected to nature and can enjoy the mundane:

*"I was hanging clothes out to dry to the sound of sand martins and washing dishes with a view of sea cliffs. The mundane was now marvellous."*

Following Ruby's departure from Rathlin Island, in the closing chapters we watch how the effect of living with seabirds on the island carries over to impact Ruby's career choices, and way of life.



*Rathlin, A Wild Life* is a tribute to women, adventurers, neurodivergent power and nature lovers. It has its quirks, but its imperfections make it feel real. It teaches us that we shouldn't stop learning from nature, and that we shouldn't be afraid to love it with our whole hearts. In a world where science is reported without emotion, it is refreshing to see an account that is lively and loud.

*Rathlin, A Wild Life* is an ode to island living and seabirds, and I certainly feel inspired to make a visit to Rathlin Island in the near future.

***Katrina Siddiqi-Davies,***  
***Manx Shearwater Researcher***