



NEWSLETTER 157

October 2024

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News

Report from the 16th International Seabird Group Conference, 2nd – 6th September 2024

Jacqui Glencross, ECR representative, The Seabird Group Executive Committee

What a week! The first week of September saw 260 members of the seabird community descend on the beautiful city of Coimbra, Portugal for a packed week. The conference was hosted by the University of Coimbra and the wonderful ECOTOP group and I am sure I speak for everyone when I say they did an excellent job.

Many of us found our feet by attending a walking tour ahead of the conference on Monday 2nd September where we discovered the wonders of Coimbra and met up with old and new friends. The conference then kicked off with six workshops covering topics on networking, necropsy, policy, offshore windfarms, technology, and bioacoustics. The welcome address by [Paulo Catry](#) on the wanderings of [Cory's Shearwater](#) (*Calonectris borealis*) nesting on the Selvagens Islands, highlighted the fact we can study a species for years and some of their behaviour can remain elusive.



Group photo of the attendees and organisers of the 16th International Seabird Group Conference. Photo: Vitor Paiva.

On Tuesday, we began with a fascinating plenary on optimising movement decisions in changing environments by [Samantha Patrick](#). This talk discussed the importance of combining habitat switching and plasticity to understand adaptive changes in movement. We were then treated to talks on a range of topics including movement ecology, climate change and extreme events, census, monitoring, and demography, as well as renewable energy. After a busy day, we headed to the first of two poster sessions of the conference. This year we definitely had both quality and quantity with 150 fantastic posters on show.

On Wednesday, after a last-minute change of plans, we were given an amazing plenary talk by [Paco Bustamante](#). Paco, who impressively managed to pull together a plenary talk in less than 24 hours, told us about the effects of mercury on sub polar and polar seabirds. This led into more talks on pollution, toxicology and diseases, as well as foraging and feeding ecology. In the afternoon we also had two EDI talks by [Claudia Cavadas](#) and [Eleanor](#)

Honan on contributing to the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in science and toileting and menstruation during seabird fieldwork. Both talks were thought provoking, and I highly recommend watching these talks on our YouTube if you missed them – especially if you are managing people in the field! The second of the poster sessions followed the days talks before we headed to the conference dinner. We arrived at Casa das Caldeiras where conversations and wine continued to flow, and we were treated to a beautiful fado!

The final day of talks began with our final plenary talk by **Katarzyna Wojczulanis-Jakubas** on parental care in seabirds. We learnt about division of labour between the sexes and the importance of coordination between the parents on parental performance. The remainder of the talks discussed work on behaviour and evolution, fisheries, and many more topics.



Conference dinner Fado Band. Photo Sabiya Sheikh

As the conference came to a close, we were left filled with new knowledge, new ideas, and a long list of new friends and future collaborators. In his conference closing speech, our chair, Alex Bond, left us with a challenge; reach out and collaborate with someone new between now and the next conference in 2027. I feel very privileged to be a part of the seabird community and cannot wait to see the next wave of research which will have happened as a result of this conference.

We would like to thank Jaime Ramos and the team for organising and hosting such an incredible conference. Also, a huge congratulations goes to the winners of all the student prizes. For those of you who couldn't make it, or those who want to relive it, you will be able to watch the conference talks on our YouTube channel. For now, we say até mais, but also watch this space – because soon we will announce where our next conference will be held!

Fulmar observations from the Faroe Islands – Two chicks in the same nest

Jens-Kjeld Jensen

The **Northern Fulmar** (*Fulmaris glacialis*), like most Procellariiformes, lays just a single egg, but it is not unusual to find two eggs in the nests of this species. A study of two-egg clutches in Fulmars from the Faroe Islands concluded that the two eggs are most likely laid by two different females¹, but the process by which this occurs is far from clear. I myself have observed a Fulmar nest with two eggs which were brooded alternately by the adult: one egg was brooded one day and then the second egg the next day (on the island of Stora Dímon, Faroe Islands). Despite many observations of two-egg clutches in Fulmars, a nest with two chicks has not to our knowledge been seen until a remarkable finding this summer, 2024.

On 16th July 2024, Levi Joensen was at Hestmúlin on the island of Kunoy, Faroe Islands (Latitude: 62.366 Longitude: -6.70) to check the climbing fixtures on an almost vertical, 72 m high cliff stack. At a height of about 40 m, Levi saw a Fulmar nest with two ~10-day-old chicks lying right next to each other, seen in Image 1. On 6th August Levi was again at the site, this time with friends Marið Heimustovu and Esmundur Løwe Sørensen and saw the two chicks still in the nest as seen in Image 2. Unfortunately, a final check of this



Fulmar nest with two chicks found on the island of Kunoy, Faroe Islands, on the 16th July 2024 (left) and 16th August (right).
Photos: Jens-Kjeld Jensen.

¹ Birkhead T, Jensen JK, Thompson J, Hammer S, Thompson P, Montgomerie R. (2020). Two-egg clutches in the Fulmar. *British Birds*, 133: 165-170.

nest has not been possible to see if both chicks reached fledging age, but the observations are nonetheless very interesting.

It is the first time that two chicks have been seen in a Fulmar nest on the Faroe Islands. How the two eggs hatched is a mystery, as there was no indication as to whether two different pairs were incubating the nest, or whether just a single pair managed to rear this double clutch to hatching. Similarly, it is unclear whether these chicks, which appeared to be quite healthy, were being fed by a single pair or two different pairs. I would be very interested to hear whether any similar observations have been recorded elsewhere, and what the outcome of such two-chick nests have been.

Kaj Eli Sørensen is thanked for making me aware of this observation.

Please contact the author if you have any similar observations using these details:

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Lowestoft Kittiwakes 1946-2024

Dick Houghton, Lowestoft Seagull Action Group

A colony of breeding **Black-legged Kittiwakes** (*Rissa tridactyla*) has existed at Lowestoft, Suffolk, UK since at least 1946. The colony is remarkable in being so far down the English east coast, around 200 km south of the nearest natural cliff nesting locations at Flamborough and 150 km north of Dover.

The colony is of interest due to the recent increase in the nesting population from under 200 nests in the period 1946-2013 to my estimates of 430 nests in 2018, 650 in 2021 and the 2023 level of 960 nests. The 2024 count is yet incomplete but is similar to the 2023 figure; a reduction due in part to exclusion of birds from some nest locations.

The effect on the town of the five-fold increase in nesting Kittiwakes since 2014 can be imagined. The town buildings in the shopping centre currently host 450 Kittiwake nests in 15 separate sub-colonies. The RC Church has 200 nests, the Outer Harbour 200 and the Claremont Pier has around 100.

In addition to nearly 1,000 Kittiwake nests on ledges over vertical elevations, the bigger Larid gulls (**Herring** (*Larus argentatus*) and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** (*Larus fuscus*)) have around 3,500 nests in the town, mainly on old industrial buildings but also on house roof tops and chimneys.

I reported concerns about increasing guano in the town centre to our district council in 2021, following the 50% surge in nests since 2018. Following this, it was also reported to our MP, Peter Aldous, which then led to the formation of Lowestoft Kittiwake Partnership (LKP), an informal body tasked with addressing the problems caused by the birds. Funded by LKP, a Project Officer began work in July this year, to advise on and monitor urban gulls in the town.

Two offshore wind developers, Vattenfall and Ørsted, were tasked with off-setting future damage to the national Kittiwake population resulting from the operation of the Norfolk and Hornsea 3 offshore wind farms further north. These companies chose to install artificial nesting structures close to Lowestoft in 2022/23 - Ørsted's were offshore and Vattenfall's onshore. They have provided 1,828 potential nest sites in total. Decoy birds and nests were placed in February 2023. The first (and only) nest - on offshore artificial nesting structure 3 - reared a single chick which hatched around 28th June this year and is expected to fledge on 6th September.

So, the future of our non-cliff nesting Kittiwake colony looks promising both for numbers and for managing their interaction with the people of Lowestoft.



Kittiwakes nesting, Stella Maris – RC Church.
Photo: Dick Houghton.



Onshore artificial nesting structures – North Pier.

Photo: Dick Houghton.



Offshore artificial nesting structure – Stamford Channel,

~1 km off Claremont Pier. Photo: Dick Houghton.

Please contact the author if you have any questions about this article using these details:

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HPAI Grant Report

North Mainland Shetland revisited – Emergency HPAI Seabird Monitoring Programme

Keith Cowieston, Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) Field Activities Liaison Officer

Following the devastating outbreaks of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in the 2021-22 breeding seasons, understanding how seabird populations were affected was deemed essential. Accordingly, a one-off coordinated programme of targeted seabird counts across the UK was planned by an ad-hoc Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) HPAI Task and Finish Group, to help understand how HPAI was affecting the numbers of birds returning to breed in 2023. This would also supplement the routine counts normally undertaken as part of the SMP. The targeted re-surveys were directed towards key species and sites most affected by high mortality in 2022, but also included some coverage of those less affected for comparison. Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) had previously mounted expeditions in support of the 4th SMP Periodic Census, 'Seabirds Count' (SC), on the north-western and western peninsulas of Mainland Shetland in 2019 and 2021. The Society was thus suitably qualified and uniquely experienced to carry out targeted re-surveys of some of those grid squares visited in 2019 and 2021.

Expedition SIMMER DIM (SD) 2023 took place in northern Mainland Shetland with re-surveying taking place from 13th-23rd June 2023 inclusive and comprised personnel from RAFOS, Royal Naval Bird Watching Society (RNBWS), and the Army Ornithological Society. The mission was to re-survey all breeding seabirds - with particular emphasis on skua and gull species - in targeted SMP grid squares surveyed during the SC 2019 and SD 2021 expeditions in the parishes of Delting, Lunnasting, Nesting and Northmavine of Mainland Shetland - insofar as timing and available resources permitted.

The re-survey's aim was to collect full colony counts, conducted at the appropriate time periods and using appropriate methods for the target skua and gull species. Dr Connie Tremlett, the overall Emergency HPAI SMP Coordinator, identified potential sites and species deemed as the highest priority, and RAFOS coordinated with Connie and other surveyors to minimise the chances of double counting in north Mainland Shetland. Additionally, given the emerging and alarming news of HPAI outbreaks amongst tern colonies on the UK mainland east coast², it was decided, internally, to re-survey as many of the local tern colonies as possible.



A Great Skua, or 'Bonxie'. Photo: Keith Cowieston.

² <https://isleofmaynnr.wordpress.com/2023/05/31/a-tern-for-the-worse/>

In 2023 we deployed an 8-strong joint RAFOS, RNBWS and Army Ornithological Society team to carry out the re-survey, arriving in Lerwick from Aberdeen in mid-June. All team members were already familiar with survey methodology, predominant topography and habitat from 2019 and 2021, so we were able to hit the ground running and conduct any necessary refresher training/mentoring, on-the-job, whilst remaining mindful of the precautions required to ensure the expedition complied in all respects with prevailing national HPAI guidance.

Emergency HPAI SMP Priorities. The priority for our re-survey work on north Mainland Shetland remained squarely focussed on skua and inland gull colonies, as not only are some of these species those giving rise to great conservation concern, but also in the case of the **Great Skua** (*Stercorarius skua*), one of species worst hit by HPAI during the 2021 and 2022 breeding seasons, and whose Scottish population was previously estimated to represent ~60% of the global total³. We approached our task with mixed feelings, keen yet worried to discover the level of the adverse impact wrought by HPAI between our recent SC observations and those of the Emergency HPAI SMP re-survey.

Observations. So, what did we discover during our survey and what lessons were we able to identify for future breeding seabird surveyors? The task was simple, re-survey a targeted selection of grid squares containing both denser concentrations of breeding Great Skua and those with more widely spaced individual pairs typically found on the drier, higher ridges between voes (a local name for an inlet or sea loch in Shetland) through a snapshot, single visit. Our aggregated 2019 and 2021 SC observations are shown in Table 1, alongside Emergency HPAI SMP re-survey results.

Skua colony observations. Our skua observations from the 131 targeted grid squares re-surveyed revealed what all informed commentators and observers had predicted, that Great Skua numbers would suffer a significant decline following the scourge of HPAI in the 2021 and 2022 breeding seasons – in our case by -55% from 132 to 60 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT), demonstrated in Table 1. This was the lowest of, but in keeping with, declines recorded during other Emergency HPAI targeted re-surveys elsewhere, e.g., of -60% at Canna; -69% at the Shiant Isles; -71% at Fair Isle; -78% at Hermaness and -85% at Noss⁴. Interestingly, the overall Great Skua decline in 2023 (from an estimated 81% of the total UK breeding population that was covered by both business-as-usual monitoring and additional Emergency HPAI resurveys) was estimated at -75%⁵.

Table 1. Changes in breeding seabird populations on north Mainland Shetland (from 131 targeted Grid Squares re-surveyed), 2019 and 2021 compared to 2023.

Species	Seabirds Count (2019 & 2021)	Emergency HPAI SMP (2023)	% Change
Arctic Skua	15 AOT	25 AOT	+67
Great Skua	132 AOT	60 AOT	-55
Great Black-backed Gull	17 AOT	32 AON/AOT	+88
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	3 AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	1 AOT	4 AOT	N/A
Common Gull	58 AOT	69 AON/AOT	+17
Black-headed Gull	16 AOT	22 AON/AOT	+38
Arctic Tern*	28	220 AON/AOT	+686

Source: Seabird Monitoring Programme Online Database <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>

* Monitoring of Arctic Tern colonies during SC was mainly by local teams, not RAFOS.

Changes in skua populations on north Mainland Shetland, comparing 2019 and 2021 to 2023

Encouragingly, although there were several indications of the previous seasons' high mortality among Great Skua populations - skeletal remains and unoccupied territorial 'look-out mounds' with associated old nest cups in territories that were occupied in the 2019 and 2021 seasons - we encountered no indications of HPAI infection among the remnant Great Skua population.

On Great Skuas, the Chair of The Seabird Group at the time, Liz Humphreys, had requested that we re-survey samples of both the larger denser colonies and smaller groupings where breeding territories were more widely spaced, on isolated and narrow peatland ridges. As expected, the denser the colony was previously, the greater the apparent mortality, in the worst case an 81% decline was recorded (Table 2). By contrast, on a less densely populated peatland site, the decline was 13%. On one particularly

³ Burnell D, Perkins AJ, Newton SF, Bolton M, Tierney TD & Dunn TE (2023) Seabirds Count: a census of breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland (2017-2021). Lynx Nature Books, Barcelona.

⁴ The Seabird Group (2023) 'Newsletter 154, October 2023'.

⁵ Tremlett CJ, Morley N & Wilson LJ (2024) 'UK seabird colony counts in 2023 following the 2021-22 outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. RSPB Research Report 76' [Online] Available at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/seabird-surveys-project-report> (Accessed 26 March 2024).

narrow ridge, where eight pairs had been spaced every 500-900 m, only three of the original eight pairs were missing and on another particular western morainic flat in more glaciated terrain, the small colony of five pairs of Bonxies found within a 300 m² area in 2021 had declined by only one pair.

Meanwhile, our sample of **Arctic Skua** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) numbers had increased by a surprising 67%, from 15 to 25 AOT, albeit in our admittedly small sample of 131 targeted grid squares re-surveyed. This significant increase perhaps reflecting an element of release from the ‘top down’ pressure of the burgeoning, pre-HPAI population of competing/predatory Great Skua, postulated to have helped contribute to the catastrophic historical Arctic Skua decline in Scotland⁶.

Table 2. Percentage change in colony numbers in dense and less dense Great Skua colonies before and after the HPAI outbreak

Great Skua colonies	Seabirds Count (2019 & 21)	Emergency HPAI SMP	% Change	Remarks
Colony A	67 AOT	13 AOT	- 81	Dense peatland colony
Colony B	30	26	-13	Less dense peatland colony
Colony C	10	8	-25	Isolated peat ridge
Colony D	7	2	-71	Isolated peat headland
Colony E	8	5	-38	Isolated peat ridge
Colony F	8	5	-38	Narrow peat ridge above voe

Inland gull observations. Inland breeding gulls on the targeted grid squares of north Mainland Shetland were still doing well, numbers seemingly unaffected by HPAI. Notwithstanding their previous relative paucity on the peatlands, on the higher, drier ridges between, **Great Black-backed Gull** (*Larus marinus*) numbers had increased by 88%, albeit from a low base, perhaps through release from Great Skua competition and predation on shared habitat? Similarly, **Common Gull** (*Larus canus*) numbers had also increased, bolstering, further the local increase we had recorded since Seabird 2000⁷. Finally, it was gratifying to note that the isolated small **Black-headed Gull** (*Larus ridibundus*) colony in our survey area had escaped the HPAI ravages suffered by many colonies further south.

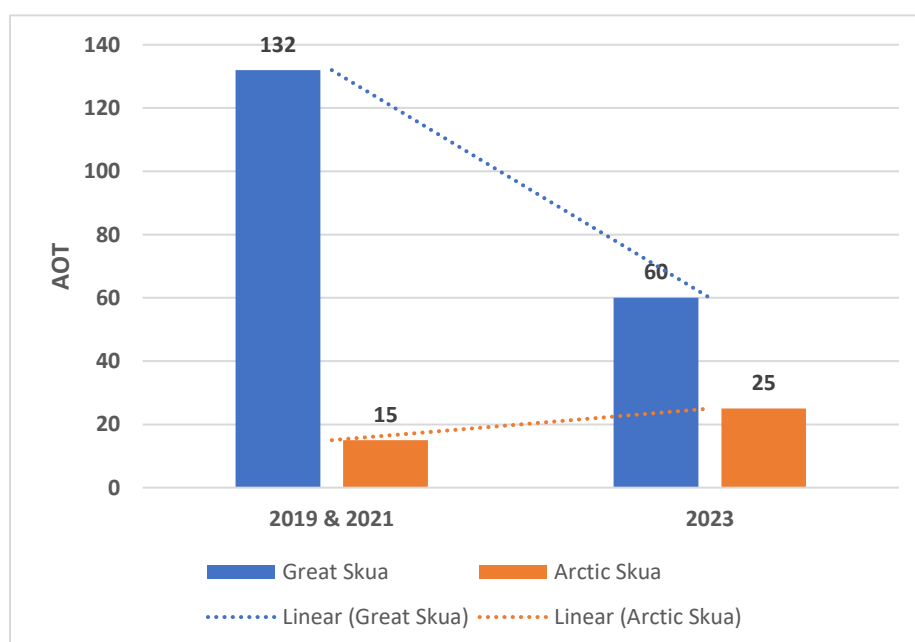


Figure 1. Skua numbers from SMP surveys, across 131 grid squares north Mainland Shetland before and after the HPAI outbreak.

⁶ Perkins A, Ratcliffe N, Suddaby B, Ribbands D, Smith C, Ellis C, Meek E & Bolton M (2018) Combined bottom-up and top-down pressures drive catastrophic population declines of Arctic skuas in Scotland. *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 87: 1573-1586.

⁷ Cowieson KR (2021) The Final Countdown – Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) expedition to north Mainland Shetland, June 2021. *Seabird Group Newsletter*, 149: 8-10.

Conclusion. In sum, 131 previously surveyed SC grid square and other sites were re-surveyed in the parishes of Delting, Lunnasting, Nesting, & Northmavine of Mainland Shetland by RAFOS, RNBWS & Army Ornithological Society personnel in 2023. The sites ranged in character from Arctic-alpine fjell-field, tundra-like heather moorland and peat hags and bog, to stretches of sandy and shingle beaches. Personnel covered many miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 47 x BTO BirdTrack species lists from 12 separate 10 km squares with a total of 664 BirdTrack entries from 67 species recorded in the survey area. Additionally, several nest record cards covering a variety of species were also generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme; two Nest Incorporation of Debris records were posted on the Birds & Debris website (both [Arctic Tern](#) (*Sterna paradisaea*)); nine Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database, and 34 moth species records forwarded to the Shetland Moth Recorder.

Finally, the RAFOS Chairman and Committee would like to express their sincere gratitude to both The Seabird Group and NorthLink Ferries for their generous grant and sponsorships towards the costs of our 2023 and previous expeditions. All participants have found the experience of tremendous value and benefit, learnt significant new skills in the process and are grateful for being given the opportunity to assist in this vital strand of work. We all now look forward, rather wistfully and longingly, to the 5th National Periodic Census of Breeding Seabirds in the UK and Ireland - in 2030 or so? - and to digesting the results of Seabirds Count findings in the recently published, magisterial, eponymous tome³.



Pale morph 'Sooty Allan', the local name for Arctic Skua (top). Great Black-backed Gull nest, egg, and chicks (bottom). Photos: Keith Cowieson.

Breeding Season Report

Skokholm Island

Richard Brown and Giselle Eagle, Skokholm Wardens

Last winter was spent wondering just how many Skokholm seabirds had been involved in the avian influenza driven auk wreck of last July. Mass early season auk returns suggested that [Guillemots](#) had been most heavily impacted, particularly in the vicinity of North Gully where a single dead adult had been seen in 2023, on a ledge during the period that chicks were jumping. This same ledge was virtually deserted during the 2024 colony count period, a very localised loss of approximately 238 birds. Pleasingly, similar losses were not seen elsewhere on the Island, indeed small increases in most other areas meant that a whole Skokholm mean count of 4989 Guillemot on ledges was only three down on last year (counts peaked at between 5065 and 5515 between 2020 and 2022). The vast majority of [Razorbills](#) also seemingly avoided the disease, this year's whole island mean count of 4333 adults being a new record, up on the 3965 of 2022; it is amazing to think that the first count of more than 1500 did not occur until 2013. Although numbers continue to increase, Razorbill productivity as monitored in the plots remains surprisingly low, with a 2024 figure of 0.49 jumpings per pair almost matching a 2013-2023 mean of 0.51. Although rough early season weather impacted [Atlantic Puffin](#) (*Fratercula arctica*) counts, the area occupied by birds continues to increase, the whole Island count remaining in the vicinity of 12,000 birds; 75% of monitored pairs seemingly fledged Pufflings (the 2013-2023 mean is 76%). The new Crab Bay Puffin Hide was particularly exciting this year, with nine pairs nesting in the fabric of the building, including one pair nesting behind the one-way glass and viewable to guests; it was wonderful to have your face only a few inches from birds oblivious to our presence, allowing us to watch incubation changeovers and Puffling feeding along with life at the nest.

There were 64 **Great Black-backed Gull** nests, this two down on last year and well down on the 93 recorded in each year between 2016 and 2018. The two smaller gulls fared better, with a corrected whole island count of 724 **Lesser Black-backed Gull** pairs being very close to the 715 of last year and 313 **Herring Gull** nests being up on the 309 of last year and the highest since the 320 of 2018; whilst numbers of the former are hopefully levelling after a large decline (the last four-figure total was as recently as 2019), Herring Gull counts have now been stable for 25 years. Productivity was above average for both Lesser Black-backed Gull and Herring Gull, with 0.80 and 0.93 fledglings per pair, respectively.

Study plots suggested that the Skokholm populations of approximately 89,000 pairs of **Manx Shearwater** and 2,400 pairs of **European Storm Petrel** remain stable, with 72% of the former and 71% of the latter fledging chicks (the 2013-2023 Manx Shearwater mean is 71%, the 2014-2023 Storm Petrel mean 65%). There was fantastic news from the original Petrel Station where a record 12 pairs produced eggs, this resulting in a record seven chicks. There was also exciting news from Petrel Station ii which was finished this April; 10 of the 148 nest boxes appear to have been visited by Storm Petrels and one contained an egg stage failure (the original Petrel Station only contained four egg stage failures in the first year, Stormies seemingly doing poorly in their first year of breeding). The **Fulmar** population remains stable, with a whole island mean of 198 occupied sites being three up on last year and very close to a 2013-2022 mean of 201; productivity of 0.41 fledglings per pair was the poorest since 2013, down on a mean of 0.52 (this seemingly due in part to small chick losses to Ravens (*Corvus corax*) and Great Black-backed Gulls).



A Puffling behind one-way glass in the new Crab Bay Puffin Hide. Photo: Stephen Hyam.



One of seven chicks in the original Petrel Station. Photo: Giselle Eagle.

Ramsey Island

Nia Stephens, Warden

Northern Fulmar: 262 AOS (Apparently Occupied Sites) were counted in 2024 using a mixture of land and boat-based counts. This is a slight increase from 256 AOS last year. The average Fulmar count between 1993 - 2024 was 260 AOS, suggesting that Fulmar numbers are stable on Ramsey. Productivity remains low at just 0.24, average productivity over the last 10 years has been 0.36.

Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*): This species is counted every five years on Ramsey and has been increasing steadily since the eradication of rats in 2000 when numbers were 898 AOBs (Apparently Occupied Burrows). The last count in 2022 produced 6225 AOBs.

European Storm Petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*): Storm petrels' nest in small numbers on the inaccessible western cliffs of the island. 2024 confirmed 8 AOB in the areas that are accessible for survey using the playback method, one of which is in an artificial nest box.

European Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*): 11 AON were counted from boat in 2024. This is up from six in 2023 and in-keeping with the average count of 10 AON between 1993 – 2024.

Common Guillemot (*Uria aalge*): Auks on Ramsey are counted using a mixture of land and boat-based counts. The two main colonies are counted five times and an average taken. Guillemot numbers on Ramsey have been on a steady increase since the 90's. However, we were expecting numbers to be down this year following large numbers of dead adults washing up during the

post-breeding season in 2023. Numbers have decreased but perhaps not as dramatically as feared. The total count was 4357 individuals, this is down from 4853 in 2022 and down on the 10-year average of 4661.

Razorbill (*Alca torda*): Razorbills have been on a steady increase on Ramsey and numbers remain fairly stable with 1919 individuals counted, and last year's count was 1934. The 10-year average for this species is 1574.

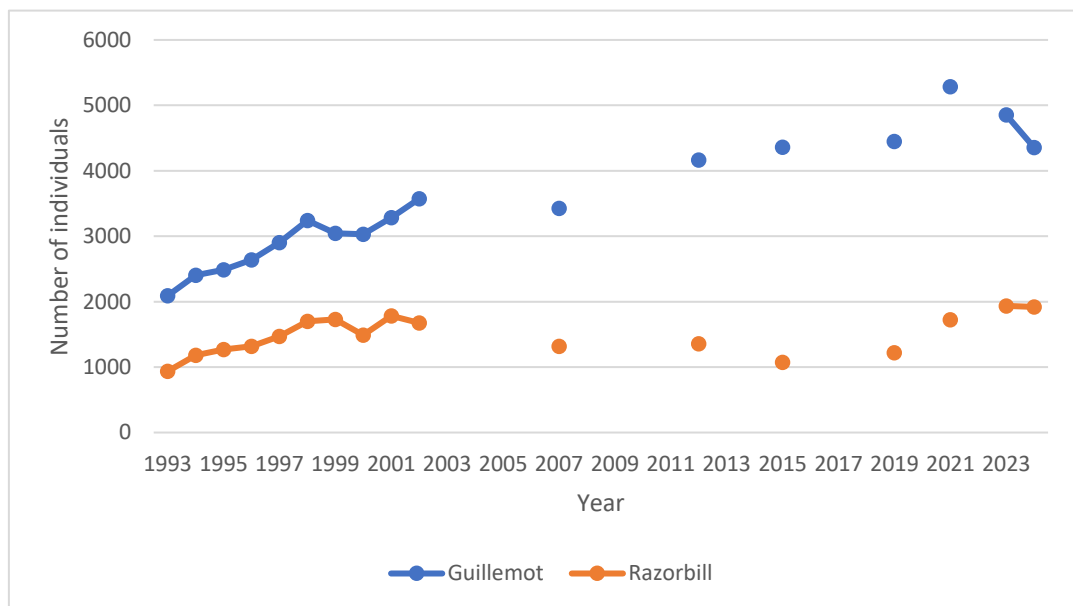


Figure 1. Number of individual Guillemots and Razorbills on Ramsey between 1993 and 2024.

Black-legged Kittiwake: Kittiwake numbers have been decreasing on Ramsey for decades and have gone from over 400 pairs in the 90's to an all-time low of just 28 AONs in 2023. This year saw a slight increase with 48 AONs counted from boats. With birds spread between two small colonies that are difficult to view, numbers are now too low for productivity studies.

Herring Gull: All gull species were counted using a mixture of land and boat-based counts. Until recently many species on Ramsey were censused once in a five-year period, however since HPAI we are now trying to count everything every year - time and weather permitting. Herring Gull numbers were up slightly on last year with 144 AONs compared to 128 last year. The 10-year average count is 152 AONs.

Great Black-backed Gull: Great Black-backed Gulls are down to 5 AONs this year. The 10-year average for this species is 8.5 AONs.

Lesser Black Backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*): Lesser Black-backed Gulls are up slightly at 66 AONs, this is up by 12 from last year but still down on the 10-year average of 87 AONs.

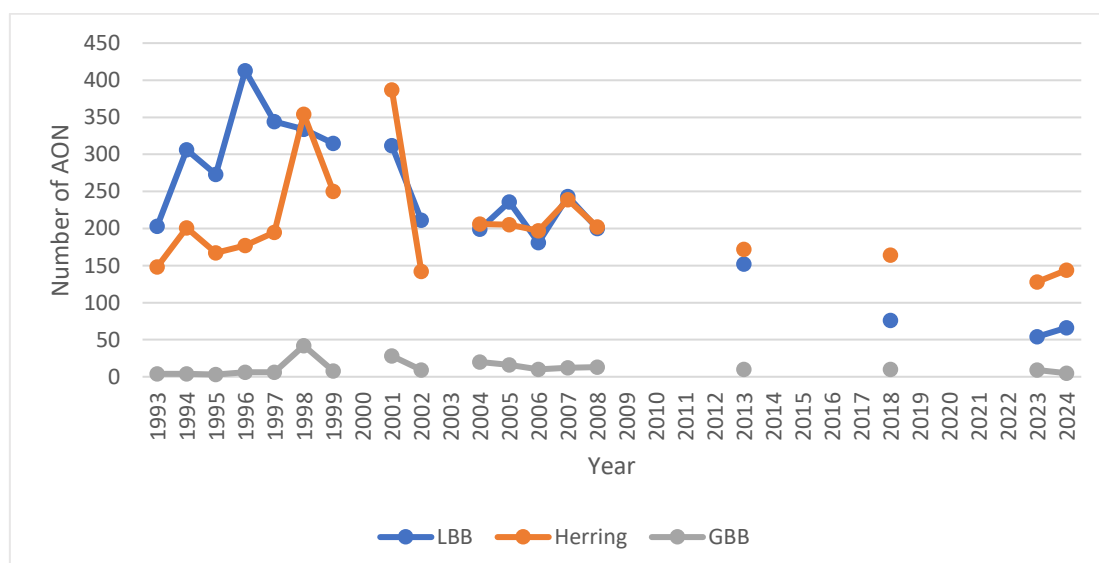


Figure 2. Number of AONs for Herring, Lesser (LBB) and Greater Black-backed Gull (GBB) nest sites on Ramsey, 1993-2024.

Canna

Bob Swann, Highland Ringing Group

In terms of overall numbers of birds attempting to breed and of actual chick production, 2024 was perhaps the worst season for breeding seabirds on Canna since our monitoring began in 1969. **Herring Gull**, **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, **Common Guillemot**, **Northern Fulmar** and **European Shag** all recorded record low counts. **Great Skua** also declined to the lowest level since they colonised the island. **Black-legged Kittiwake** declined from recent peak counts, though overall numbers still remain high.

In many instances these declines were due to a lack of birds, possibly exacerbated by the ravages of bird flu or the severe storms that affected Scotland throughout winter 2023/24. For the gulls and Fulmar, however, it is just the continuation of a long-term decline in numbers.

Following previous large declines, Shag numbers had been showing some signs of recovery in recent years (Figure 1). So, the low number recorded in 2024 was disappointing.

However, the decline did not appear to be linked to high levels of mortality. Although Shags along the east coast of Scotland were badly affected by major storms in early winter 2023/24 it was expected that west coast Shags would escape the effects of the severe easterly gales. This was probably the case. Visits to one of our main Shag colonies on Canna in May 2024 to check study nests, showed that although it was going to be a late breeding season, lots of birds had laid or were nest building. On our return visit in late June, virtually all these birds had failed, and most had abandoned the island. The low count in 2024 therefore probably reflects the abandonment of the island by adults by the time we did our full island count in late June.

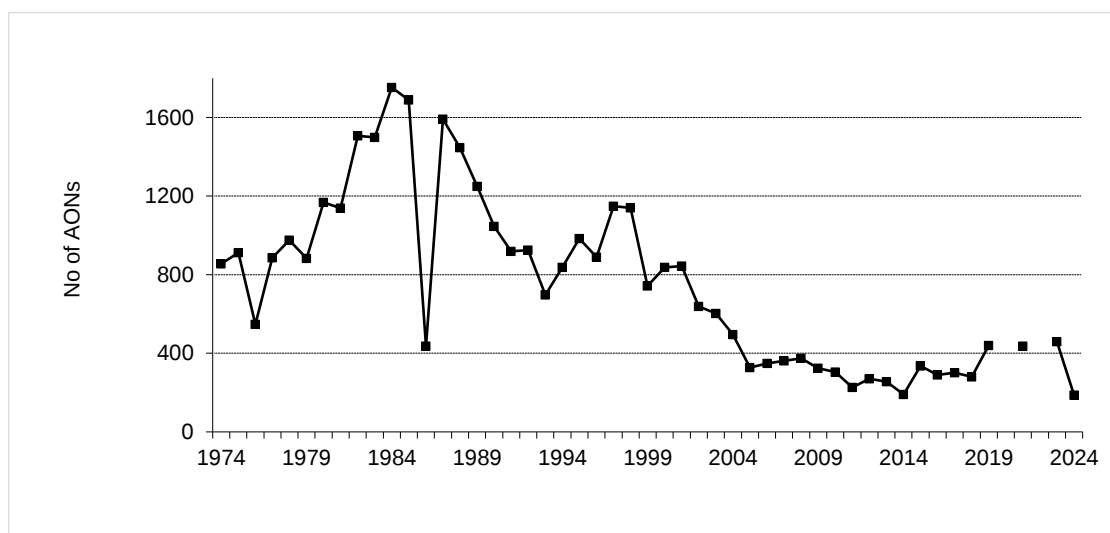


Figure 1. Number of Shag nests on Canna 1974-2024.

It is possible something similar was happening with Guillemots. It was evident that a high percentage of birds had either failed or were making no attempt to breed (Figure 2). As an example, on 30th May the sec5 Inlet colony held 86 adults, of which only nine were incubating eggs, all of which had failed by 29th June, though 93 adults were still present in the colony. Other evidence of adults not breeding comes from one of three birds fitted with a geolocator and recaptured in 2024. The light traces from this bird showed that it visited the colony for a few days late May/early June and again in early July, spending most of the rest of the summer out at sea.

Razorbills showed a somewhat mixed picture. At section 5 at Geugasgor 90 AOS were counted, the highest total recorded in this section since 1986. However, in the boulder areas in Sections 1-4, numbers dropped by 21% from 250 AOS in 2023 to only 197 in 2024. In these areas, predation appeared to have been an issue as witnessed by predated eggs and the discovery of a cache of three freshly predated adult birds. Camera traps highlighted the presence of a Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) in the affected area.

Breeding output was also well below average for many species. Northern Fulmar had a total breeding failure, whilst European Shag had a near total breeding failure, with only three young being produced from 35 study nests (0.1 young/AON compared to

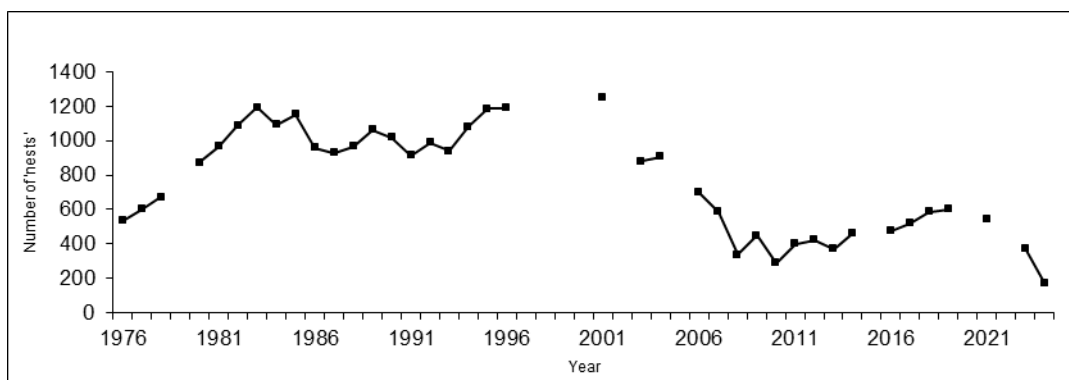


Figure 2. Number of nesting Guillemots in study plots on Canna.

long term average of 1.3 young/AON). Black-legged Kittiwake productivity was well below the long-term average with only 0.3 young/AON, compared to the long-term average of 0.7. Only Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull and Great Skua had productivity figures close to their long-term averages.

Shortage of food was strongly implicated in these declines. For instance, Common Guillemots were only recorded bring in gadids, a low-quality fish, and as a result surviving chicks were very underweight. A sample of 19 chicks with wing length >60 mm weighed on average 240.7 g, significantly lower than the long term 1981-2023 median weight of 270 g (U=8252.5, $p < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U test). Fortunately, no HPAI outbreaks were recorded on Canna in 2024.

Fair Isle

Alex Penn, Acting Warden, Fair Isle Bird Observatory

2024 was a poor season for Fair Isle's seabirds almost across the board, with a number of factors thought to be driving the reduced population totals and productivity declines. Many species were slow to return to breeding areas this year, with a difficult late winter period for **Guillemot** and **Razorbill** seemingly affecting the proportion of adults returning in breeding condition. **Arctic Tern** and **Kittiwake** were both late to settle, with knock-on effects on **Arctic Skua**, which rely heavily on these two species for food. **Great Skua** and **Gannet** (*Morus bassanus*) bucked this trend, returning in better numbers than 2023, an encouraging sign after previous heavy losses to HPAI in these species.

Productivity however was poor across the board, with several species returning figures of zero productivity in their monitored plots. A prolonged period of cool and damp weather in early June was lethal for many hatching and newly-hatched young, and this coupled with an apparent lack of food available for some species contributed to this year's poor results.

Northern Fulmar: Numbers in the population plots remained stable, increasing by 3.9% to 399 AOS, while productivity fell by a further 16.1% on 2023 to 0.32 chicks fledged per AOS, the lowest figure since 2001.

Northern Gannet: An increase in breeding pairs was encouraging, with a 15.8% increase to 5592 AONs, the highest total recorded on the isle, as the species continues its expansion along the isle's north and west cliffs. Productivity monitoring is ongoing, but it looks set to be a reasonable year in the colony areas.

Shag: Poor weather meant access to the population plots along the isle's west coast was again not possible this year, but numbers remained stable in the productivity monitoring plots. Signs were initially good for a successful year, but poor weather in June saw many nests abandoned in this period, and the few surviving young gradually disappeared from nests, resulting in a zero-productivity figure in the plots. Visits to other areas of the isle found no nests with chicks to ring, suggesting an extremely poor year for this species isle-wide.



Counting Gannets along the isle's north coast.

Photo: Alex Penn.

Arctic Skua: An extremely poor year for this iconic but struggling species. Territories fell to just nine, a drop of 59.1% on 2023 and the lowest ever isle count. Birds were reluctant to lay, possibly as a result of the extremely late and limited breeding attempts by terns, Kittiwakes and auks that the birds rely on for food. Eggs were recorded in only three territories, and no birds fledged young, with only one pair reaching chick stage.

Great Skua: Though a long way from their all-time peak of 535 AONs in 2021, an isle-wide count of 163 AONs was a 6.5% increase on 2023. Productivity was rather poor however, with food shortages and low-level HPAI presence in chicks thought to be the drivers, with a large proportion of pairs resorting to killing and eating chicks of nearby birds.

Black-legged Kittiwake: A second poor year in a row for Kittiwake after a complete washout in 2023 saw adults again slow and reluctant to settle back into breeding colonies, with just 18 AONs in the monitoring plot, a 14.3% drop since 2023. Many of these nests did not last long, with birds slowly abandoning through the season, and just one chick reached fledging – a productivity figure of 0.06.

Arctic Tern: In a similar pattern to 2023, after being very late to return and settle this spring, adults eventually laid in good numbers, with 224 nests counted in walkthroughs of the main colony site on Bunness, and a small separate colony at South Light. June's poor weather coincided with peak hatching however resulting in almost the complete abandonment of the Bunness colony. Counts of fledged young resulted in a productivity figure of just 0.02 – the lowest since 2013.



A fledged Great Skua. Photo: Alex Penn.

Common Guillemot: Numbers in the population plots reduced by 16.6% to 932 individuals, the first time since 2017 that the plot counts have dipped below 1000 birds. Productivity was extremely poor, with a low proportion of adults present actually breeding, meaning that eggs and chicks were short of protection and were gradually picked off by predators. This resulted in zero productivity in the monitored plots, the first year without 'fledged' young produced since 2013.

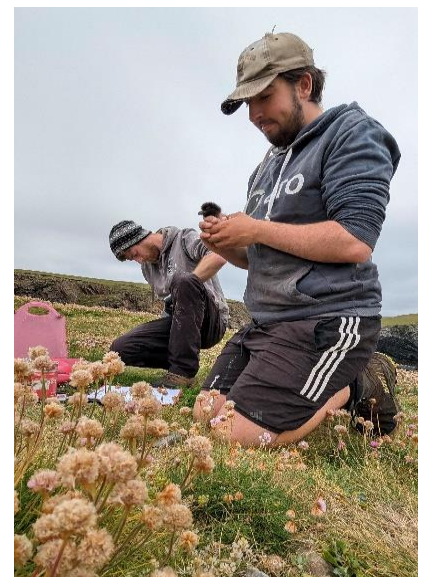
Razorbill: Issues with having the cliff access systems safety-tested in 2024 meant that no monitoring of Razorbills was possible this year.

Black Guillemot (*Cepphus gryll*): A count of the east coast study plot saw 176 adults logged – a 9.3% decrease on 2023, but within the fluctuations of recent years. No productivity monitoring of this species is possible, with the vast majority of nesting sites inaccessible.

Puffin: No population count was attempted in 2024. Productivity monitoring in the offshore Greenholm plot was foreshortened, with continuous SW winds in late July and August making it impossible to reach the plot for monitoring visits in the latter part of the breeding season.



An Orca distraction (above; photo by Jonnie Fisk) whilst taking Puffin chick repeated biometrics (right; photo by Alex Penn).



Calf of Man

Aron Sapsford & Eleanor Grover (Ornithological Wardens), Mike Haigh, Chloe Hurst, Sophie Elliot, Izzy Burns (Assistant fieldworkers), Manx National Heritage & Manx Wildlife Trust

Colony counts or population estimates are undertaken using a combination of land-based observations and boat counts. Little or no data on productivity is collected – owing to the inability to view many of the seabird colonies from land, as well as a lack of fieldworkers to undertake such intensive and time-consuming studies.

Overall, the start of the breeding season was delayed, and productivity was low.

Northern Fulmar: Surveys produced a minimum of 95 AOS – comparable to recent years. A study group of 71 AOS revealed 29 definite pairs, with a poor maximum productivity of 0.10.

Manx Shearwater: Burrow occupancy surveying during 2024 was 39%. Population estimates for 2021–2023 gave a range between 1000–1200 AOBs. Numbers of birds seen ashore in spring were larger than previous years in small/outlying colonies, suggesting that the population continues to increase.

European Storm Petrel: Not yet proven to breed. Small numbers of birds are recorded regularly at night (attracted to tape-lure) between May–August each year.

European Shag: A minimum of 119 AON were recorded. Detrimental weather once again resulted in exceedingly poor productivity (0.06 across the five colonies monitored). The colour-ringing project was continued (initiated in 2021 and aimed at investigating fledging success and juvenile survival) – although only three pulli were marked.

Herring Gull: AONs significantly decreased to 596 (689 in 2023). Strong storms resulted in high mortality of small chicks early in the season, but afterwards chick survival appeared to be high.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: The number of AONs increased to 66 (45 in 2023). Eggs were recorded being incubated as late as 4th July.

Great Black-backed Gull: 57 AON were counted – a slight increase on recent years, although productivity was very low. Chicks less than a week old were recorded on Kitterland on 8th July.

Common Guillemot: Restricted to just two breeding sites on the north-east tip of the Calf, the population was estimated at 264 Individual Adults (IAs) – a 15% increase from 2023 and higher than the 10-year average of 180 IAs (2014–2023).

Razorbill: Razorbills increased (+87% from 2023), with 318 IAs estimated in 2024 – the highest breeding count since 2010.

Atlantic Puffin: A project to encourage Puffins to return to the Calf has been running since 2016, with porcelain decoy birds sited at three locations, as well as a sound system playing calls. No birds were sighted ashore in 2024. Offshore sightings increased, with up to 30 birds seen.

Black Guillemot: Up to five pairs were thought to be breeding, although sites are inaccessible and hard to view.

Great Skua: One bird summered for the ninth consecutive year, being present from mid-April through to mid-August.

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*): A total of 50 nests were located, of which 66% successfully hatched. A significant decrease in number from the previous two years, although we lacked a volunteer dedicated to breeding bird monitoring.



Volunteer Sophie checking a Shag nest.

Photo: Aron Sapsford.

Isle of May

Mark Newell, Josie Hewitt, Erin Taylor, Carrie Gunn, Ella Benninghaus and Francis Daunt (UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology)

Following an appalling end to 2023 with Isle of May seabirds hit by a triple whammy of Avian Influenza, apparent food shortages and autumn storms it was clear that numbers were going to be severely reduced for many study species and those that survived were likely to be in poorer condition. As a result, UKCEH started the 2024 monitoring season with a high degree of trepidation and concern. This was soon born out with the commencement of breeding considerably later than normal and laying very asynchronous.

With the exception of **Atlantic Puffin** and **Northern Fulmar** all study species commenced laying later than average with **Common Guillemot** the latest on record. Common Guillemots, in particular, were behaving abnormally with eggs often abandoned soon after laying and very low attendance with few site holders in place to defend sites ahead of laying.

Return rates of individually colour marked birds revealed what we feared with **Razorbill** and Common Guillemot at the lowest ever level while **European Shags** were only lower in 1994. More positively Atlantic Puffins and **Black-legged Kittiwakes** returned at average levels.

Following a challenging winter those birds that survive are often in a poorer than average condition and this results in reduced breeding success. Coupled with reports of very low Sandeel populations in the winter the expectations for a good breeding success were low. However, it was better than feared with Atlantic Puffin and Razorbill having an average season while European Shag and Black-legged Kittiwake were above average (although see note below). Only Northern Fulmar and Common Guillemot were below average, but the latter was still above the poor years in the mid-2000s.

Several Common Guillemots and Razorbills were noted with exceptionally worn plumage indicating that they hadn't completed their post 2023 breeding season moult or had grown weakened feathers due to poor feeding conditions at the time.

- **Northern Fulmar** breeding success (0.37 chicks per incubating pair) was below average.
- **European Shags** had a successful season (1.64 chicks per pair), well above the average of 1.24. Adult return rate at 16.7% was the second lowest on record.
- **Black-legged Kittiwakes** had an above average breeding season (0.95 chicks per completed nest). However, high mortality was noted in chicks at fledging age with large numbers dead in the sea and under cliffs. Unless birds were seen dead in nests it was not possible to quantify which had actually failed. Consequently, breeding success recorded is likely an overestimate. Adult return rate (84.1%) was above average.
- **Common Guillemots** had a below average breeding season (0.65 chicks leaving per pair laying). Return rate of adults (59%) was the lowest ever, following the previous low point in 2023.
- **Razorbills** had an average breeding season (0.64 chicks leaving per pair laying), but the adult return rate (50%) was the lowest on record.
- **Atlantic Puffins** had an average breeding season (0.77 chicks per pair laying). The return rate for adults (80.4%) was only slightly below the long-term average.



Razorbill on the Isle of May with exceptionally worn back feathers.
Photo: Mark Newell.

As the winter approaches we will be delighted to receive sightings of any colour ringed Shags along the east coast. Please send sightings to shags@ceh.ac.uk.

For more information check out our website (www.ceh.ac.uk/our-science/projects/isle-may-long-term-study) and follow us on X/Twitter (@UKCEHseabirds).

Seabirder Spotlight

Seabirder Spotlight aims to illuminate the variety of career paths and roles available to aspiring seabirders. Contributors are asked a range of standard questions about their careers, for example on what their current job involves, what aspects they love about their work and what skills have been important to cultivate on their journey. In particular, we hope that the contributions from members of the seabird community will inspire and motivate people in their early careers to work with seabirds.

Sydney Collins

Three lessons have guided my career so far as a seabird researcher, with the first being to take every opportunity you can. I began my seabird career back in 2016 when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Guelph. In my first year, I was presented with a sudden and unexpected opportunity to study seabirds on Middleton Island in the Gulf of Alaska. It was not the plan I had made for myself (I wanted to study meerkats!), but through the support of my professors, family, and friends, I flew out to Middleton Island to work as a research assistant and carry out my undergraduate thesis research on seabird personality. I lived in a tent surrounded by nothing but our small field crew, the birds, and the ocean. I immediately fell in love with seabirds, and have since followed them across North America, landing in Newfoundland for my graduate studies. I have been privileged to work with many seabird species, but my graduate studies focused on my beloved **Leach's Storm-Petrel** (*Hydrobates leucorhous*). Carrying on with my undergraduate work, I studied the individual consistency of their behaviour and space use to enhance conservation planning. I have loved peeking into the unique lives of each bird I work with.



As I reach the end of my PhD, I am excited to have begun a new chapter of my career as the Project Coordinator for an international collaboration to restore Northern Gannet populations in North America. My graduate supervisor, mentor, and scientific idol, Bill Montevecchi, gave me the opportunity of a lifetime to apply what I learned with him as a graduate student to conserve the seabirds that I love so dearly. Leading a project of such magnitude has provided a steep but exciting learning curve and taught me my second important lesson (which I am still learning!): how to self-advocate and effectively voice your ideas. In a large group of accomplished scientists, it is important to leave your insecurities and egos at the door to ensure that the best ideas are put forward for the benefit of the birds.

The third lesson impressed upon me throughout my career is to surround yourself with people who inspire you and treat you with respect. I have been incredibly fortunate to work with diverse, kind, and supportive people who respect me regardless of my gender, but I know that, unfortunately, that is not a shared experience for everyone. The women in science I encountered early in my undergraduate career were the people who inspired me to pursue a career in seabird science, and the supportive people I work with now inspire me to keep going. This reflection led my amazing colleague Cerren Richards and me to create **Women in Seabird Science** - a platform for women and non-binary seabirders to find, support, and be inspired by one another. Our website (<https://www.womeninseabirdscience.com/>) and social media pages feature the international work, stories, and advice of women and non-binary seabirders from all career stages. We also feature free educational resources and are developing a bibliography of women- and non-binary-authored seabird papers to make our work more visible. In the same way that my professors and colleagues forever inspire me, I hope that aspiring seabirders can find the spark on our website that helps them pursue and continue their career with seabirds.

Jacqui Glencross, ECR Representative

Seabird Paper Roundup is a section included to help Early Career Researchers promote any recent seabird papers they have produced. We hope this can help highlight some of the amazing work that is being undertaken across our community, whilst highlighting work to those of you who may not be aware of it yet.

ECR PAPERS

Lemesle P, Jouanneau W, Cherel Y, Legroux N, Ward A, Bustamante P & Chastel O (2024) Mercury exposure and trophic ecology of urban nesting **Black-legged Kittiwakes** from France. *Chemosphere*, 363: 142813.

This is the first study of a Kittiwake colony in the southern part of its range. Mercury concentrations were up to three times higher than in other colonies where sub-lethal effects have been observed.

Lemesle P, Carravieri A, Poiriez G, Batard R, Blanck A, Deniau A, ... Bustamante P (2024) Mercury contamination and potential health risk to French seabirds: A multi-species and multi-site study. *Science of The Total Environment*, 952: 175857.

Blood mercury (Hg) was analysed in chicks of eight seabird species from 32 sites in France. Influences of extrinsic and intrinsic factors on Hg concentrations were evaluated. Feeding ecology, especially $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values was the main driver of Hg variation. No strong geographical difference in seabird Hg contamination was reported. According to Hg toxicity threshold, 74 % of chicks were categorized as no risk.

Sojitra M, Corney S, Hemer M, Hamilton S, McInnes J, Thalmann S & Lea M-A (2024) Traversing the land-sea interface: A climate change risk assessment of terrestrially breeding marine predators. *Global Change Biology*, 30: e17452.

We developed a trait-based risk assessment framework to evaluate climate change vulnerability for 56 seabirds and seals from Australia to Antarctica, using 25 criteria related to vulnerability, exposure, and hazard components. Four species—Shy Albatross, Southern Rockhopper Penguins, Australian Fur Seals, and Australian Sea Lions—were identified with high climate urgency, with species breeding in lower latitudes, as well as certain eared seals, albatrosses, and penguins, particularly at risk due to extreme weather, habitat changes, and prey availability. The framework underscores the need for fine-scale long-term data and further collaborative research on both at risk species and less-studied species and hazards to inform targeted conservation and climate adaptation strategies.

Glencross JS, Jewell A, Grigg JL, McInnes A, Brierley AS & Sherley RS (2024) **African Penguin** *Spheniscus demersus* foraging on juvenile fish in jellyfish tentacles. *Seabird*, 36: 5.

Here we describe a newly observed foraging behaviour in African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* in which they target fish located in jellyfish tentacles. As animal-borne cameras have only been deployed on African Penguins since 2015 it is unclear whether this behaviour is novel or previously unobserved. The behaviour appears to be opportunistic and beneficial to the African Penguins as it enables them to catch stationary prey.

Saunier M, Amy M, Baumann M, Bignon F, Cartraud A, d'Orchymont Q, ... Le Corre M (2024) Long-term monitoring highlights the positive responses of the seabird community to rat eradication at Tromelin Island, Western Indian Ocean. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 6: e13083.

Executive Committee vacancies

We have five upcoming vacancies on the Executive Committee and we are now requesting that members of The Seabird Group consider proposing themselves for one of the following roles: [Treasurer](#), [Journal Editor](#), [Newsletter Assistant Editor](#), [Equality and Diversity Officer](#), and [Social Media Manager](#).

If you are interested in any of these roles, we would recommend that potential candidates reach out to the current post holders for more information.

All applicants need to email secretary@seabirdgroup.org.uk a short description of up to 200 words explaining why they want the role by the 31st October 2023. Voting will be done online, and all candidates will be notified before the AGM. The successful candidates will then be proposed and seconded at the meeting to be formally made a member of the Executive Committee. We look forward to hearing from you!



Website: www.seabirdgroup.org.uk

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/TheSeabirdGroup/

Twitter: [@TheSeabirdGroup](https://www.twitter.com/TheSeabirdGroup)

Registered charity No. 260907

The Seabird Group promotes and helps co-ordinate the study and conservation of seabirds. Members also receive the journal *Seabird*. The Group organises regular conferences and provides small grants towards research.

Current Seabird Group Committee

Chair	Alex Bond (2027)	chair@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Secretary	Andie McQuillan (2027)	secretary@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Treasurer	Ian Cleasby (2024)	ian.cleasby@rspb.org.uk
Membership Secretary	Antoine Grissot (2026)	membership@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Seabird Editor	Katherine Booth Jones (2027)	journal@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Newsletter Editor	Amy King (2026)	newsletter@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Website Officer	Amanda Mead (2027)	jeffstratford@gmail.com

Ordinary Members:

Assistant Newsletter Editor	Kirsty Franklin (2024)	kirsty.franklin@rspb.org.uk
Seabird Assistant Editor	Ruth Dunn (2024)	journal@seabirdgroup.org.uk
ECR Representative	Jacqui Glencross (2026)	ecr@seabirdgroup.org.uk
Social Media Manager	Katrina Siddiqi-Davies (2024)	socialmedia@seabirdgroup.org.uk
EDI Officer	Lila Buckingham (2024)	edi@seabirdgroup.org.uk

Current membership rates

Ordinary	£30
Concession	£15
Institution	£50
Individual Life:	£350
Institution Life	£500

The Newsletter is published three times a year. The Editor welcomes articles from both members and non-members on issues relating to seabird research and conservation. We aim to provide a forum for readers' views so that those provided in the Newsletter are not necessarily those of the Editor or Seabird Group.

Submissions for the newsletter should be emailed to the newsletter editor: newsletter@seabirdgroup.org.uk. We recommend a maximum of 1500 words and ask that photographs and figures are sent as separate files and with full credits, where appropriate. **Deadlines are: 15th January (February edition); 15th May (June edition); and, 15th September (October edition).** Every effort is made to check the

content of the material that we publish. It is not, however, always possible to check thoroughly every piece of information back to its original source as well as keeping news timely. If you have any concerns about any of the information or contacts provided, please contact the Newsletter Editor.