

SMPnews

Monitoring internationally important seabird populations across the UK

Welcome...

to the third issue of SMPnews. The **Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP)** tracks the population changes of the UK's internationally important breeding seabird species at coastal and inland colonies.

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Puffin, by Edmund Fellowes/BTO

SMP reporting completes moult

By Sarah Harris, BTO

Over the years, the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) has played a crucial role in documenting the status and trends of seabird breeding populations in the UK, and when possible, by combining data, across Britain and Ireland. Such reporting has taken place via the SMP since 1989, following the programme forming in 1986.

From 1991 to 2006, summaries were published as annual reports collated by JNCC, RSPB and the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group. These reports, titled *Seabird Numbers and Breeding Success in Britain and Ireland*, are available to download from the JNCC Resource Hub (<https://hub.jncc.gov.uk>). They were monochrome, extensive, and detailed, and included tables and graphs. The reports presented the monitoring results, along with encouragement to the many individuals and organisations collecting the data.

Following on from these reports, there was a move to online publications, again hosted on the JNCC website (<https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/smp-reports>), and titled *Seabird Population Trends and Causes of Change*. These were published annually from 2009 to 2019 and, in line with the previous reports, included an introduction, species accounts, acknowledgements, and references.

After a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the transfer of the programme's lead to BTO, the most recent report – covering 1986 to 2023, with a focus on the latter three years – was published in November 2024. The new title carries forward the previous theme, but with a nod to SMP itself: *Seabird Population Trends and Causes of Change: 1986–2023, the annual report of the Seabird Monitoring Programme*. As before, the report includes an introduction, species accounts,

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Editorial & news

By Sarah Harris, SMP Organiser and SMPnews editor, BTO

My first experience of seabird monitoring was inland, at Rye Meads, Hertfordshire, where Black-headed Gulls and Common Terns nested each year on the tern rafts and scrapes. It feels like a full circle that Issue 3 of *SMPnews* not only focuses on these species – with tern illustrations and a small gull identification guide – but also on Rye Meads itself! To the right is a photograph of the author behind the Rye Meads site focus article, holding the SMP Organiser! My dad helped to fuel my passion for birds and monitoring from the start. Given the focus on small gulls and terns, this issue serves as a reminder that we need to increase monitoring of seabirds at inland sites as well as along our coastlines.



Birding buddies, by Sally Harris

Back to the here and now, Nina O'Hanlon has recently completed the trend analysis using the 2024 Colony Count and Breeding Success data submitted to SMP Online to create the abundance trends and productivity values for 2024. The annual SMP Report containing the all-important Government Official Statistics is planned for publication this autumn. Prompt publication of the SMP Report is only possible if data are entered in a timely fashion. We ask that all data be submitted to SMP Online by the end of October in the year of data collection. Thank you. Emma Caulfield has been leading the charge with SMP Online developments over the last year, and we cannot wait to start using the new, simplified data entry pages, to ensure site boundaries are well mapped, and to use the updated verification system to check through the data at the end of each year.

I have been busy too! Significant development work continues, including: new-look Key Site reports in the making; the SMP Annual Report is underway; ongoing plans for further SMP Online developments; continued maintenance work that a huge dataset like SMP brings; finalising the SMP engagement plan whilst also actively engaging with existing and new surveyors; working with colleagues to take forward plans for modernisation of the trend analysis; implementing the Sampling Strategy; and developing a strategy for a revised *Seabird Monitoring Methods Handbook* – bringing in modern technologies where feasible, such as surveying using a drone. So as ever, lots of exciting projects to think about, great people to work with both in the office and out in the field, and lots of data to collate.

Thank you to everyone who has shared their views on this newsletter's content over the past two issues. As a new publication, we're keen to encourage you to shape future issues and will, therefore, continue to check the feedback form, which can be found at bit.ly/SMPnews_feedback. Additionally, as alluded to on page 3, and in the new 'Notes' section of *SMPnews* (page 4), we are always keen to receive news, observations, and potential article ideas from those of you lucky enough to be surveying seabirds out in the field. So please do get in touch if you would like to submit articles for this publication.

I look forward to hearing from you, and happy 'seabirding'!

Sarah

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

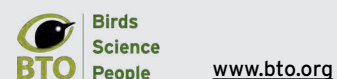
We are grateful to Elaine Freezer for sending us an update from her SMP site, to Sophie Bennett, Nina O'Hanlon, Bec Jones, and Alan Harris for their fascinating articles. To Murray Orchard for providing an insight into his annual SMP monitoring, and to Dawn Balmer and James Clarke for answering our questions for the team introductions. Finally, thanks to Emma Caulfield for the SMP Online update! Sarah Harris authored the remaining text and articles, and produced, designed and edited the newsletter.

SMP PARTNERSHIP

The Seabird Monitoring Programme is funded jointly by BTO and JNCC, in association with RSPB, with fieldwork conducted by both non-professional and professional surveyors.

Including the organisations above, the SMP also has an Advisory Group of 24 organisations who feed into the direction and decision-making process of the Steering Committee.

Read more about the scheme governance at: www.bto.org/smp-contributing-organisations



www.bto.org



www.jncc.gov.uk



www.rspb.org.uk

THE SMALL PRINT

The Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) monitors breeding seabirds throughout the United Kingdom, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Close collaboration with organisations in the Republic of Ireland enables all-Ireland interpretation of seabird trends. Information in this newsletter is compiled from a variety of sources and does not necessarily reflect the views of SMP partner organisations. © BTO 2025. Published by BTO, JNCC, and Associate Partner, RSPB.

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acknowledgements and references, but with the addition of articles of relevance to the programme, survey background information, news and coverage, surveying and analytical methods, increased contextual information relating to each species (distribution, diet, causes of change and conservation), a brief overview of Key Sites, and information on how to get involved. The report is available online as a PDF document, now adorned with stunning images, infographics and colourful graphs. This report will continue to evolve going forward, so expect further enhancements in the future.

This reporting history reflects the programme's evolution and its commitment to providing high-quality data and insights to inform conservation decision-making and to deliver Official Statistics to the government. In its current iteration, the report enters a new era, focusing on enhancing wider engagement and accessibility through its content. This new-look report broadens its appeal to the general reader while preserving the essential data and analysis crucial for conservation and policy professionals.

Equally importantly, this report really highlights the immense value of surveyor efforts and the collation of data from across Britain and Ireland. Thank you to everyone who has submitted data to the Seabird Monitoring Programme since 1986.

Read the full report at: www.bto.org/smp-publications



MORE THAN MONITORING

In the Spring 2024 issue of *SMPnews*, Elaine Freezer shared her experiences monitoring a local Common Tern colony near Southampton. Elaine is certainly maximising her time with these birds, and when providing the SMP team with updates for the 2025 season, Elaine sent some superb illustrations to accompany her update, and noted "It has been enjoyable and educational watching and sketching the Common Terns breeding at my local site. They've fledged!" We had to share them with you, and Elaine kindly said we could! ↓



NEWS FROM YOU

Have a story to tell?
News from your site?

We want to hear from you:
contact us on [Bluesky](#), [X/Twitter](#) or [email](#) and share your experiences with us.



Artwork, by Elaine Freezer/BTO

From the field

Observations from the seabird experts on the ground: you!

A call to report 'odd-servations'

By Sophie Bennett,
BTO Scotland

Every year several hundred highly skilled surveyors and ringers head to seabird colonies to collect essential data on our globally important seabird populations. During the breeding season, these dedicated groups or individuals may monitor everything from plot counts of Kittiwakes to annual survival of Guillemots.

In addition to this, and due to their often vast experience, they are likely to notice unexpected changes in colonies, such as large increases in marine litter at colonies, and/or changes in the birds themselves, through to very poor feather condition or large amounts of retained winter plumage.

These odd observations may be shared amongst surveyors or ringers within a season, particularly when there are whispers that other folk may be observing the same thing elsewhere in the UK.

However, these often less quantitative observations are rarely recorded – understandably, given the volume of data that already needs to be proofed and submit – or if they are, it's recorded in places that are hard to access. Blogs, for instance, might capture some anecdotal insights, but these can be difficult to find. The value of such observations often isn't recognised until they're needed – for example, to provide context for a particular year, assess how widespread an observation is, or understand the impact of emerging threats on birds.

With that, we wanted to encourage folk to report notable observations from their field sites at the end of the season



Green-coloured guano around a Kittiwake nest at Whinnyfold.

Kittiwake nest, by Ewan Weston/BTO

This could be to *SMPnews*, but also to publications like *British Birds* journal, the Seabird Group's journal *Seabird*, or BTO's LifeCycle, where appropriate. Reporting in these publications may facilitate getting in touch with others that have similar observations. Your report also may be incredibly useful for others or to refer back to in the future (as well as intriguing in the present).

GREEN KITTIWAKE GUANO

To kick things off we've got one below from some fieldwork that BTO's seabird tagging team saw last breeding season at the Whinnyfold cliffs in the Buchan Ness to Collieston Coast Special Protection Area (SPA) in Aberdeenshire.

From around June 2024 onwards at Whinnyfold we noticed green colouration of the guano around Kittiwake nests and on the vents on several birds that were caught. In many sub-colonies this discolouration extended to stain the circumference of nest cups (see image above).

This staining has not been observed at the Whinnyfold site across the >40 years that the Grampian Ringing Group has been ringing Kittiwakes, and we are not aware of this observation being recorded in Kittiwakes elsewhere. The colour may come from high levels of

bile in the guano; bile-like faeces can be induced by experimental starvation in seabirds (Hilton *et al.* 2000). We have only come across a single record of green guano in wild seabird populations, in Sooty Tern in the Seychelles, and it was suggested that bile may be the cause. Read more here: <https://wildbirdconservation.wordpress.com/2021/07/15/a-green-poo-puzzle>.

If this is the case in the Kittiwakes then the staining may have been caused by starvation or another factor, e.g. dietary change or liver disease. If the discolouration is a reliable indicator of birds entering starvation, then it could be a useful sign for seabird fieldworkers to monitor in the future. If you spot green staining on Kittiwake nests at colonies that you visit in 2025 do take a photo and send it on if you can – especially if you're at a colony where Kittiwake diets are also monitored – we'd be very keen to hear from you!

REFERENCE

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We want to hear from you about your 2025 seabird survey season!



Kittiwake, by Sarah Kelman/BTO



smp@bto.org

Sandwich Terns across Europe

By Bec Jones, attendee of the European Sandwich Tern Network

When High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) hit UK seabird colonies in 2021, we were totally unprepared for the devastation that followed. This was an outbreak of an unprecedented scale that very rapidly began to raise alarm bells about potential population-level impacts on several species. Guidance was sparse, and those of us working with seabirds suddenly had a very steep learning curve to climb as we tried to work out what needed to be done. The importance of communication and collaboration in an emergency like this cannot be stressed enough. Some countries (e.g. South Africa, Roberts *et al.* 2023) had previously dealt with HPAI outbreaks in seabirds and were able to share lessons they learned. Others were dealing with the same issues at the same time, as the disease swept across Europe. Communication channels were suddenly vital.

Sandwich Terns are migratory, wintering in Africa and breeding at coastal colonies across Europe. They are highly mobile even during the breeding season: birds can make ‘prospecting’ visits to colonies in other countries, birds born in one country can choose to breed in another, and whole colonies can even shift between sites in different years. All this means that we effectively share ‘our’ birds with a number of other countries in Europe and Africa. Borders mean nothing to a Sandwich Tern. Monitoring and conserving a species like this therefore requires collaborative action throughout their range.

Sandwich Terns were one of the species worst hit by HPAI in 2022 and to a slightly lesser extent in 2023. As thousands of birds began to die at colonies across Europe, people working with this species quickly developed a ‘European Sandwich Tern Network’ that allowed wardens, researchers, and other stakeholders in different countries to share information and ideas.

The Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS 2024) took on the role of managing this network. The result was, and is, that information could be rapidly shared on the extent and spread of the disease throughout Europe. The network also collated monitoring data for all of Europe’s Sandwich Tern colonies – including SMP data from UK colonies – covering colony size and breeding productivity. Many of the people collecting these data for SMP also collected valuable information on numbers of dead birds. Mortality information was also being collected at colonies across Europe.

We need to shout-out to everyone who worked at seabird colonies during these outbreaks and collected data in difficult circumstances; thank you!

The network allowed all of this information from 2022 to be collated, in order to attempt to describe and quantify the impacts of HPAI on European Sandwich Terns and to identify any factors that might help with mitigating these impacts. This Herculean effort was undertaken by Knief *et al.* (2024), who estimated that at least 17% of the north-west European breeding population perished during the 2022 outbreak. On a slightly more positive note, it also showed that the careful removal of carcasses from colonies significantly reduced mortality, which was very valuable information for site managers.

In October 2022 and March 2023, the CWSS organised workshops that brought together members of the network from throughout Europe to share information about the outbreak, discuss priorities for data collection, and bring together disease mitigation strategies. These workshops resulted in a set of guidelines (Bregnballe *et al.* 2023) that helped to inform responses to the disease during the 2023 breeding

season. Another workshop was held in October 2023, after another summer of HPAI in European seabirds.

In December 2024, the CWSS organised the most recent European Sandwich Tern Network workshop. This was a much more cheery affair, with no outbreaks recorded during the 2024 breeding season. It was unanimously agreed, however, to continue the network and to maintain these annual meetings. For one thing, we do not want to be caught off guard again in future by another outbreak of HPAI, or some other disease. Additionally, there is more work to be done before we fully understand the impacts of the recent outbreaks. In the UK, SMP data helped inform monitoring research that estimated 35% of the Sandwich Tern breeding population had been lost compared to numbers prior to the outbreak (Tremlett *et al.* 2024), and ongoing population monitoring throughout the breeding range is going to be necessary for us to properly understand longer term impacts.

The network has also been useful for sharing ideas about improving wider population monitoring, for example on the use of cameras to monitor colonies without disturbance, or where colour-ringing programmes would be most useful. It is a great example of the value of cross-border collaboration in wildlife monitoring and conservation, and one of the few silver linings to emerge from the darkness of the recent HPAI outbreaks. Now we just need to find a way to include Africa too ...



Sandwich Tern colony, by Allan Drewitt/BTO

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Our Lost Seabirds appeal finds new seabird ringers

By Nina O'Hanlon, BTO Scotland

Monitoring seabird abundance and productivity is crucial for understanding changes in their populations, and everyone who contributes to the SMP plays an essential role in this. In addition, data on phenology, diet, and survival, such as those collected through the SMP Key Sites, also play a vital role in identifying and understanding drivers of population changes.

Being long-lived, seabirds have high adult survival rates. Therefore, anything that reduces seabird survival will typically result in declines in their overall population numbers. One of the most effective tools we have to monitor seabird survival is ringing with uniquely numbered metal or colour rings, for example, through Retrapping Adults for Survival (RAS) studies, where the aim is then to catch or re-sight the ringed birds in the study area each breeding season. Ringing can also provide insights into the large-scale movement of seabirds when they are away from the breeding colonies, including their migration routes and wintering areas. Furthermore, recoveries of rings during mass mortality events, for example, associated with winter storms or High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreaks, can identify the colonies where dead or sick birds originate. Consequently, ringing data can help policy makers and conservation organisations target actions to conserve seabirds.

In 2021, the BTO launched the *Our Lost Seabirds* appeal to support the monitoring of Britain and Ireland's internationally important seabird populations. A key aim of this appeal was to train and engage new participants in seabird monitoring and ringing. This included creating opportunities for current ringers to get experience of ringing seabirds, which can be difficult

to achieve for many individuals due to high associated costs and not knowing the right people, especially for those that don't live near seabird colonies.

Thanks to the generous donations to *Our Lost Seabirds*, BTO launched two sets of grants in 2022 to increase the number of people involved with seabird ringing across Britain and Ireland. The first supported ringing groups to create additional places on their seabird ringing expeditions for new participants, or to organise new seabird ringing trips. The second helped individuals seeking seabird ringing experience by linking them to ringing groups and helping to cover the costs of trips, which are often in locations (e.g. on offshore islands) far from where people seeking experience are based.

Unfortunately, HPAI curtailed ringing activities during the 2022 seabird breeding season, meaning that only two groups were able to take advantage of the scheme – one in England and one in Wales. However, in 2023 and 2024 a total of 13 and 11 ringing groups successfully received grants, respectively. Over these two years, 59 individuals were able to obtain seabird ringing

experience, mainly across Scotland but also in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. And the feedback we have received from both the groups and individuals has been fantastic, as illustrated in the box-outs here.

Through these grants, we aim to increase the number and diversity of people involved in seabird ringing. This will create a larger pool of ringers that can contribute to current ringing efforts and take the lead on existing ringing trips in the future, as well as organise ringing trips to new inland and coastal seabird colonies. Ultimately, this will increase the number and coverage of seabirds ringed across Britain and Ireland, allowing more robust data on adult and juvenile survival, age of first breeding, and dispersal to be collected. Combined with ongoing monitoring of abundance and breeding success it will be possible to better understand and address the drivers impacting our seabird populations.

The grants for the 2025 breeding season have already been allocated, but if you are a ringer, or ringing group, interested in applying next year, keep an eye out in BTO publications for the call for applications later in the year.

1. "I learned how to handle Herring Gulls and 'black-backed' gull juveniles and adults, how to use colour rings and G and F metal rings, and how to catch juveniles for ringing. This gives me the experience I need to join future seabird ringing trips. Additionally, I met people who gave me a lot of advice about how to gain experience bird ringing, and made connections which might lead to further training opportunities in future."

Kerry Smith, Flat Holm Island, Wales



Flat Holm ringing expedition, by Holly Puddy



Key: Quote from hosting Ringing Group
Quote from a new participant
Number: Expedition location on the map

2. "The whole process of taking new/young ringers out to catch and handle new species is always exciting and rewarding and is an increasingly large part of my motivation for ringing in general."
Iain Livingstone, Clyde, Scotland

3. "One of the most useful and interesting aspects of these trips is the opportunity to discuss some of the many seabird issues with other ringers, scientists, researchers, university students and academics."
Bruce Taggart, Looe Island, England

4. "Everyone had an amazing time... including our BTO attendee Josh from England. In fact, his leaving comment was that we had ruined bird ringing for him as there wasn't a lot he could do back home that would compare to the weekend. We sent him home with the smell of 'stormie' oil in his skin!"
Debbie Nelson, Malin Beg, Republic of Ireland

4. "This experience has also boosted my confidence to reach out to more seabird ringing groups, hopefully further expanding my knowledge and skills in seabird research."
Josh Brown, Malin Beg, Republic of Ireland



5. "As a student and ringing trainee, it is difficult to access opportunities to do seabird ringing. One would need to know the right person and be well-connected in the ringing world to get an invite. The BTO grant is eradicating this barrier, allowing me to have a foot in the door and access more opportunities for training."
Jelaine Gan, Eilean nan Ròn, Sutherland, Scotland

5. "The team formed a strong bond and myself and the other members of the team were able to pass on our knowledge of wildlife of the island but more generally in Scotland so that they were able to see in the wild Otter, Beaver, as well as nesting Golden Eagle and Osprey to mention just a few, either ends of the main time on the island.

They are all keen to come back and join us next year so I think this is probably the best indication that the scheme may lead to some longer-term recruitment into the teams that go there and sustain the project in the long term"
Stefan Bodnar, Eilean nan Ròn, Sutherland, Scotland



Monitoring seabirds at sea

By Sarah Harris, BTO

Around coastal locations of Britain and Ireland, you can sometimes find a birder or two, hunkered down, fixated, looking through a telescope targeted out to sea: a seawatcher in their natural habitat! Good conditions for a seawatch are often bad conditions for those onshore to be on a cliff top. Alas, the thought of a passing, wayward rarity is often enough to get the layers on, and the flask and snacks at the ready. Once on site, on a good day, it can be hard to stop watching!

At some sites, more structured and consistent seawatching is both endured and enjoyed, whatever the weather, with count data entered into Trektellen – a website and database that records migration data (find out more at www.trektellen.org/). These data – submitted largely by volunteer seawatchers from across 19 UK sites (mapped on page 11) – have been used in a recent study to investigate how and if seawatching data can expand the toolkit for monitoring seabird numbers in the wake of bird flu (Magregor *et al.* 2024). Of course, the SMP has continued to monitor seabirds through recent outbreaks of severe High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI), with some increased monitoring conducted in the last couple of years (see Issue 2 of *SMPnews* for more on this), but can we delve further?

Being long-lived, seabirds can skip breeding seasons and monitoring birds during the non-breeding period, away from breeding colonies, allows a more complete assessment of population change. Using seawatching data from the UK's east coast, this research examined whether the autumnal at-sea abundance of 24 UK-breeding seabird species was impacted by the HPAI outbreak. For each species, counts from their peak migration times were used e.g. for Sandwich Tern from July to September and for Great Skua August to October.

Data from BirdTrack* (where records of sick and dead birds suspected to have bird flu can be submitted), along with official government reporting and changes in bird ringing recovery rates, were used to assess which years were identified as pre- and post- large-scale, population-impacting HPAI outbreak years. Furthermore, seawatching weather conditions and observer effort were considered.

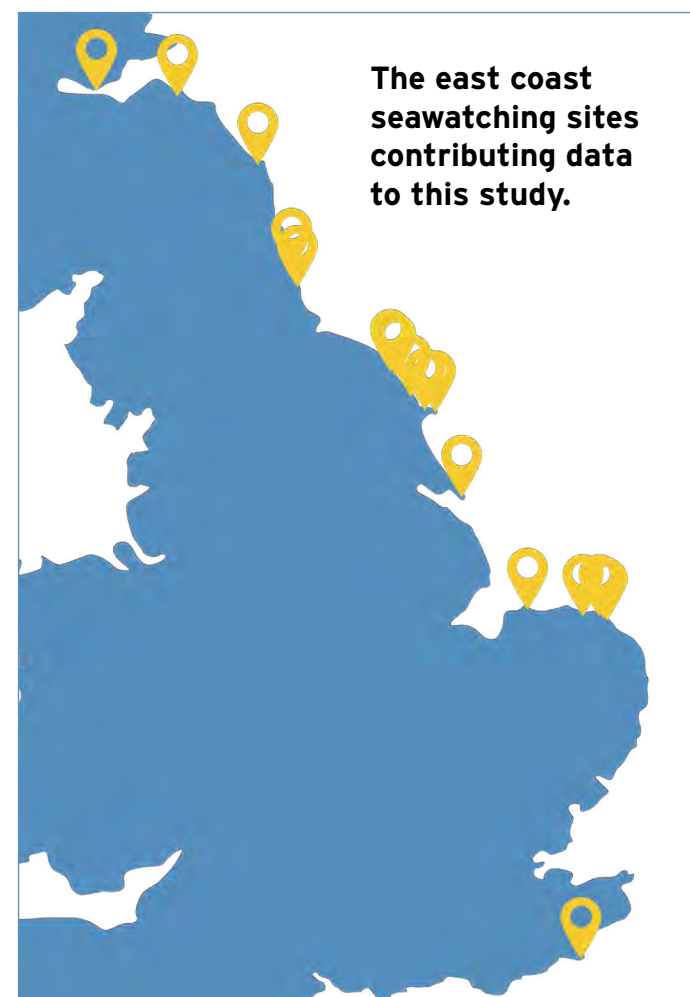
Six species had statistically significant or near-significant change in at-sea abundance following the impact of known or suspected HPAI outbreaks. Great Skua, Black-headed Gull and Sandwich Tern all suffered substantial mortality at UK breeding sites and this was reflected in the seawatching data. There were also increases in the number of bird ringing recoveries during this recent HPAI outbreak, which is indicative of increased mortality. Declines in at-sea abundance were also seen in Roseate Tern but this was not statistically significant, and thought to be due to low numbers of this species counted during seawatches providing low statistical confidence.

Declines in at-sea abundance were also detected in Cormorant and Fulmar but HPAI is not thought to have had a major impact on their populations in the UK. However, there are some thoughts as to why this might be: an ongoing decline was detected in at-sea Cormorant data that started prior to the recent HPAI outbreak, and for both species, we can not rule out the possibility of influences from breeding colonies further afield, outside of the UK. For example, Fulmars breeding on the Faroe Islands regularly pass south through the North Sea during autumn, as do individuals breeding in more northerly areas of the UK that lack data. Further monitoring for these two species is recommended to examine HPAI impacts, given these results and the remote locations of some colonies.

Declines in at-sea abundance were not detected for Manx Shearwater, Storm Petrel, Shag, Arctic Skua, Common Gull, Little Tern, Black Guillemot, Puffin, nor several species whose breeding populations were impacted by HPAI, namely Gannet, Mediterranean Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Kittiwake, Common Tern and Arctic Tern. However, at-sea abundance estimates for several of these impacted species had large confidence limits and imprecise recording, e.g. grouped as 'auk sp.' (Razorbill and Guillemot) or 'commic terns' (grouped Common and Arctic Tern), and thus could have masked some genuine declines.

There are several reasons why declines in at-sea abundance of expected species (based on mortality reporting and ringing recovery rates, e.g. due to HPAI) were not detected. These include a lack of statistical power in the data available (some species are often recorded as presence-only, rather than counted, e.g. Gannets and gulls), resulting in large confidence limits, which could have masked some genuine declines.

There was also variation across the UK in how HPAI impacted some species, for example Herring Gull, Kittiwake and Arctic Tern, with severe outbreaks occurring in a subset of sites. Therefore, birds from non-impacted breeding populations within and outside the UK would still pass through the North Sea. With regards to the latter point, an assessment of populations across the entire East Atlantic flyway could improve our understanding of flyways used by various breeding populations, e.g. through tracking studies. HPAI mortality was higher in Guillemot than Razorbill, and Razorbill populations were increasing pre-outbreak, and this could mask a Guillemot decline because the two species could only be analysed together at the 'auk species' level.



Seawatching, by Sarah Harris/BTO

◀ **Sites on map (from north to south):** Scoughall (East Lothian), Ferry Hills (Fife), Budle Point and Seaton Sluice (Northumberland), Whitburn (County Durham), Long Nab, Marine Drive, Scarborough, Filey Brigg and Hunmany Gap (North Yorkshire), Bempton Cliffs, Flamborough Head, and Spurn (East Yorkshire), Scolt Head, Weybourne, Sheringham, Cromer and Mundesley (Norfolk), and Dungeness (Kent).

Seabirds live complex life histories. They often breed in colonies which make up a subset of a wider population, which alongside being long-lived and reaching breeding age later, means that pressures such as HPAI might not reach immature or non-breeding birds; which will also be counted during seawatches alongside breeding birds.

It is important to note that seawatching data can have limitations. Weather conditions before and/or during the count can be influential, for example, high counts are more likely in strong winds, especially from the north/north-east during autumn along the east coast for species such as Manx Shearwater, Fulmar, Gannet, Arctic and Great Skua and Storm Petrel. The opposite is true for Mediterranean Gull and *Larus* species, where high counts tend to be during or following south-easterly

winds – potentially due to birds being pushed over to the UK from continental Europe. In general, across seawatching sites, Cormorant, Shag and Common Tern numbers are highly variable.

This study has highlighted that additional information can be gained from seawatching that can complement SMP annual monitoring and periodic censuses. While the latter monitoring approaches are absolutely core to seabird monitoring, they are restricted to tracking abundance changes and productivity in breeding individuals. This means we lack monitoring data on non-breeding populations (i.e. immatures and individuals that skip breeding) which, depending on when a species reaches breeding age, could consist of a large proportion of the overall population, and on all individuals outside of the breeding season.

Structured seawatching has the potential to plug the gap in year-round seabird monitoring for many species. This is already practiced widely in the Netherlands with structured and consistent counts taking place. Given the findings of this paper, improvements in seawatching methods (e.g. one hour recording periods; effort recorded; all weather conditions; counting all species) have the potential to result in even greater statistical power to detect changes in seabird abundance during migration and to compliment the suite of monitoring approaches for seabirds.

**BirdTrack is a Partnership scheme between BTO, RSPB, BirdWatch Ireland, Scottish Ornithologists' Club and Welsh Ornithological Society.*

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Rye Meads

By Alan Harris, Rye Meads Ringing Group stalwart



Alan Harris, by Sarah Harris, Rye Meads tern raft, by Alan Harris

One of the many downsides to birding in the county of Hertfordshire is that it is landlocked; it has no coast. The upside is of course that seabirds do take on a completely different status in birding terms; the three skua species I've seen there over the years are etched into my visual memory better than any I've seen elsewhere. When I pitched up at the doors of the Rye Meads Ringing Group (RMRG) little did I know I would (in 2024) be celebrating 50 years as a seabird surveyor. In fact, I hadn't even appreciated I was one!

My first winter with the RMRG consisted of early morning finch netting, midday material scrounging from nearby landfill and evening bunting roosts. Polystyrene blocks, wood doors, even metal garage doors and framework timbers were all carried back, the purpose of which was to make 'artificial tern rafts'. I never understood that moniker; they were actual, real tern rafts! The construction site at the edge of the largest lagoon was a health and safety inspector's nightmare. To test the efficacy of decking you jumped up and down on it; if you fell through into

the icy water it was deemed 'no good'. Those early cobbled together tern rafts would morph into the standard design used throughout the south-east of England in the years that followed. Ours are now properly and safely maintained by our RSPB partners on site, their dedicated volunteers doing a grand job using purchased and fit for purpose materials!

Until our first raft was launched in 1972, Common Terns had bred in the gravel pits of the Lee Valley, north of London, since the 1960s – a very few scattered pairs, with little success. The year before our first raft went out a pair had bred successfully in an adjacent gravel pit on a floating upturned 40 litre oil drum, the clutch of three sitting in a row along the circular ridged perimeter rim. A pair bred successfully the first year that we provided a raft, and our colony soon grew. The success rate in those early years was phenomenal – predation was pretty much nil, food resources in the clean rivers and new gravel pits were high and in the first 10 years of the colony, productivity never fell below two young per pair.

As the colony became established, returning birds arrived earlier, and at the peak time of growth in the mid 1980s they would arrive in the first days of April. They plateaued at around 40 pairs, with a slight fall from the early 1990s at a time when other tern rafts were deployed elsewhere in the lakes of the Lee Valley. Our birds produced the terns to colonise them, and an interesting expansion took place whereby terns were presumably able to exploit new fisheries (a kind of 'why fly seven miles to get fish when you can live closer?'). As the whole valley population increased, this advantage of living away from other competing terns diminished and our colony began to grow again, peaking at 52 pairs in 2003.

In total a staggering 2,701 Common Terns have been ringed at Rye Meads, giving insights into their colonisation of the south-east, autumn staging, departure routes and wintering grounds. Two in-depth papers have been published on the Rye Meads Common Tern colony and a PhD completed studying the wider Lee Valley picture.



Group members, Gary and Daniel, rowing out to the tern rafts, by Alan Harris

By 2006 our monitoring indicated that things were not so good for the terns as numbers fell and productivity began to drop off. Adults had started to arrive later, and not settle to breed as quickly as before. This suggested they were struggling to arrive in good condition and taking longer to get 'match fit'. Increasingly poor summer weather hampered their efforts.

In 2008 the first pair of Black-headed Gulls arrived. More seabirds. The terns were already in trouble of course, but the gulls didn't help. Black-headed Gulls increased dramatically and within 10 years there were 294 pairs. Observations from regurgitated food from gull nestlings suggests they fed 100% on bacon rind! Although the gulls didn't actually bother the terns much (sometimes a gull would try, usually unsuccessfully, to rob a returning tern of its fish), the main problem caused by gulls is that they arrive earlier and establish nesting territories before the terns arrive, which is now in late April and early May. Getting a space became a problem, but the late arrival and failure to get straight down to nesting seemed to confirm that the terns were not arriving in good condition anyway. The later they lay, the less productive they are. By 2018, we were recording the first eggs when 30 years earlier we would have been ringing the first chicks. They were now about a month late, and how did that affect their success? We suspect food resources locally are an issue, diminished by new predators of fish and poorer water quality.

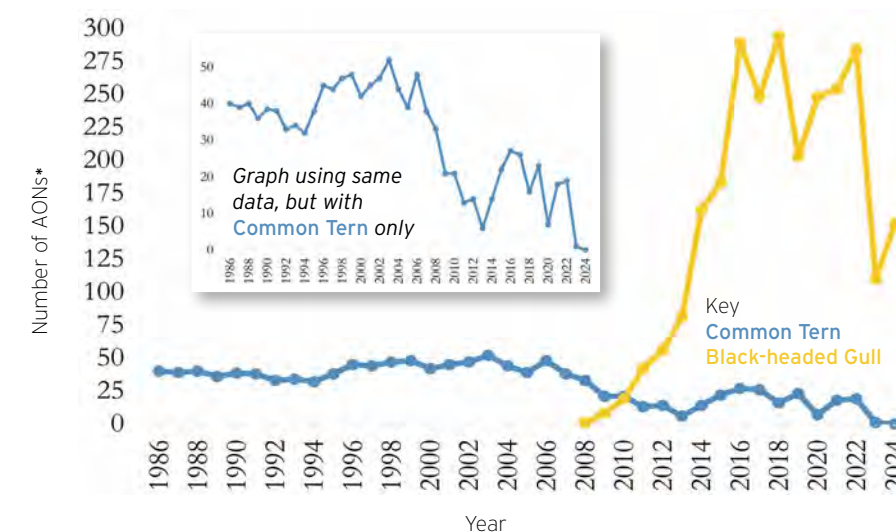
I can't tell you exactly why food resources for terns in the Lee Valley have fallen, but I don't see the shoals of Minnows and Bleak in the river I used

to. I come up with all the usual causes that any lay person might suggest. Who knows, maybe the most bizarre ideas may actually be nearer the mark than one would think? My small fish predator guesses are Cormorants and

egrets, bigger fish, crayfish and even dragonfly nymphs eating fish eggs – they have all increased dramatically here. Water quality, turbidity and flooding would all be detrimental to fishing success for a tern, and ecological

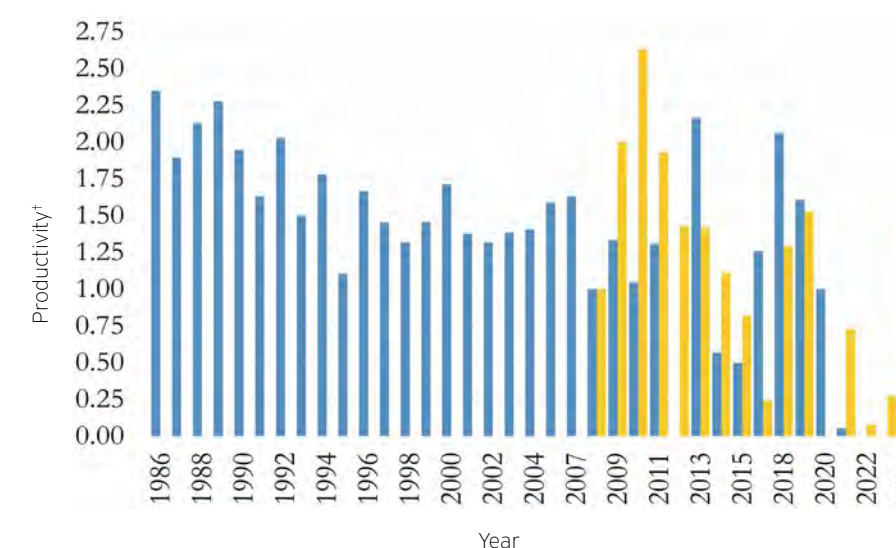
Abundance* (Colony Counts)

Rye Meads RSPB reserve 1986–2024



Productivity† (Breeding Success)

Rye Meads RSPB reserve 1986–2024



*AON: Apparently Occupied Nests, †Productivity = fledged chicks divided by AONs, giving the mean number of fledged chicks across nesting attempts.



succession (little fish grow big in 'new' lakes, and eat or out-compete little fish) will have played a part. Then there is climate change, with the UK getting wetter and windier summers undoubtedly having an effect. A few days of heavy rain at hatching time can be catastrophic. Terns are long-lived birds but they still need a few good years every now and then, which (like many birds) they are just not getting now.

One area where we can directly put in measures to try and help the terns is with breeding space

More rafts are unlikely to be the answer – you just get more gulls, and anyway it is just not feasible to cover the lake with rafts. Black-headed Gulls like to synchronise their egg laying so that the colony remains strong throughout the nesting period and able to defend itself. Late layers get left on their own at the end and are vulnerable. We noticed that very few new pairs join the colony once birds are incubating, but instead go elsewhere to find a colony where they will be in synchronisation. So, from around 2016 we began to 'save' a raft and put it out in mid-May for the terns. This strategy is a winner and was proving successful ... until the woes of the last few years. Until COVID-19.

2020 saw us in lockdown before the rafts were launched. Nevertheless some gulls and terns nested successfully on the rafts moored to the bank. It was their good fortune that the local chicken keeper had just culled local Foxes following an unfortunate slaughter at the coops. *Then* it was nighttime raids by Otters, *then* it was bird flu. Predation by large gulls is a recent issue too – minimal on fenced rafts, but damaging on unfenced islands where the 'swim in under the terns' approach is deployed effectively by Lesser Black-backed Gulls. In 2023 we had our first instances of Black-headed Gulls nesting in bushes on the bankside (in response to ground predators?). In 2021 a Mediterranean Gull held territory. In 2024 we found our Black-headed Gulls back on the up with a very successful season – 152 pairs, 220 fledging, but the Common Terns, so badly hit by bird flu in the valley, did not breed at all.

The point of all this is you can monitor seabirds effectively inland without a great deal of effort, yet reap massive rewards. And there are a lot of seabirds nesting inland – probably more than you'd think. And in the case of inland seabirds there is a very real chance to do something practical to improve

their fortunes in a way that would be impossible at most coastal situations.

It makes a refreshing change to think that at inland sites like the Lee Valley, seabirds can only breed successfully due to the actions of humans

THE RYE MEADS RINGING GROUP is a volunteer group that has been studying the birds and other wildlife at Rye Meads, Hertfordshire, since 1960. Bird ringing, logging all sightings, conducting breeding bird surveys, nest monitoring and habitat and infrastructure management are all part of their work. Many papers have been published based on the group's extensive datasets.

To find out more about the group and how to get involved, visit: www.rmrq.org.uk

OTHER INLAND SEABIRD SITES Is there a seabird colony near you in need of surveyors? Check the SMP map to find out: <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>

Group member, Julia, mapping nests on the raft, by Ben Hillier



Inland raft, by Ben Hillier

The Arctic Skua

By Nina O'Hanlon, BTO Scotland

Arctic Skuas are arguably one of our most stunning seabirds, with their sleek, predatory elegance. Well-known for their kleptoparasitic foraging strategy, they steal fish mid-air from other seabirds in dramatic displays of speed and skill. Adding to their appeal, this medium-sized seabird with long pointed wings has two distinctive colour morphs. Dark phase individuals, which are dark brown all over, are more commonly found breeding in southern parts of their range, such as Scotland, whilst light phase individuals, which have pale bellies that contrast with their dark wings, back and cap, dominate northern latitudes. In flight, both reveal a flash of white in their wings. Being long-distance migrants, both phases of Arctic Skuas can be seen migrating along UK coastlines in spring and autumn as they journey to and from their northern breeding grounds.

In the UK, breeding Arctic Skuas are restricted to the west and north of Scotland, where they typically form loose colonies on moorlands or coastal grasslands, laying one to three eggs in shallow scrapes in the vegetation. They generally arrive back at the breeding colony in May and depart again in August, depending on the success of their breeding season.

These remarkable birds are one of Britain and Ireland's rarest breeding seabirds. Numbers of breeding Arctic Skuas have plummeted by 83% over the SMP recording period (1986–2023), leading to their inclusion on the Red List of UK Birds of Conservation Concern. Scotland lies at the southern edge of their breeding range, which spans arctic latitudes (hence their name) from Alaska through Greenland and Fennoscandia to Siberia. However, similar declines have been observed across north-west Europe, particularly in Norway, leading to the species' classification as Endangered on the IUCN European Red List.

The cause of the Arctic Skua's dramatic decline in Scotland has been linked to food shortages due to declines in other seabird species, such as Kittiwakes, Arctic Terns and Puffins, that Arctic Skuas rely on for kleptoparasitism. This is exacerbated by competition and predation from the larger Great Skua, particularly in years where the availability of fish prey is low, which can result in Great Skuas preying on the nests and recently fledged chicks of other seabirds, including Arctic Skuas. Great Skuas can also out compete Arctic Skuas for breeding territories, especially as they tend to return to the breeding colonies earlier.

Tagging studies on Fair Isle (Shetland) and Rousay (Orkney) during the breeding season, using global positioning system (GPS) tags revealed the vast distances birds from some colonies are having to travel in order to successfully forage, with some reaching as far as Dogger Bank, over 550 km from Fair Isle. These distances appear to be putting a strain on the breeding birds and negatively impacting their nesting productivity. This is supported by comparisons with colonies on Rousay – where foraging distances are associated with higher productivity – and Fair Isle, where longer foraging distances correspond with lower productivity. Interestingly, these foraging routes mirror those used by foraging auk species tagged in nearby colonies. Bringing such data together will help to identify the key pressures facing our breeding seabirds.

Most research into Arctic Skua declines has been focused on the breeding season, as it is much easier to study seabirds when they are at the colony than during the non-breeding season when they are typically far from land. But, as long-distance migrants, Arctic Skuas spend only about a third of the year at their breeding colonies. It is likely that Arctic Skuas also encounter threats outside the breeding season, during migration and winter – it is just much more difficult to identify these.

FACT BOX

Status: UK Birds of Conservation Concern 'Red-listed', globally of Least Concern.

Measurements: 108–118 cm wingspan, 360–476 g weight.

Breeds: across northernmost coasts from Greenland to Siberia, and across northern North America

Winters: in productive seas around South America, Africa, and Australasia as well as in the Mediterranean and the tropics.

Diet: typically steals fish from other seabirds (kleptoparasitism), but they have a varied diet with eggs, berries, insects, rodents and small birds also consumed.

Lifespan: 12 years typically. Maximum recorded is 25 years, 10 months 24 days from date ringed.

Breeding: starts at four years, single brood per year containing between one and three (most commonly two) eggs.

Nest sites: in loose colonies on moorlands or coastal grasslands, often close to colonies of the seabirds which they target for food. Nest a shallow scrape in the vegetation.

Thanks to ringing recoveries and a recent study using geolocators, we know that Scottish Arctic Skuas winter off western and southern Africa, and parts of South America. When migrating to and from these southern wintering areas, Arctic Skuas rely on staging areas to rest and refuel en route. An area of high marine productivity in the mid-North Atlantic was found to be particularly important for the skuas during spring migration. Part of this region has recently been designated as a Marine Protected Area due to its importance for numerous seabird species, and other marine fauna, including Kittiwakes, Arctic Terns and Long-tailed Skuas. This mid-Atlantic staging area has also been identified as important to Arctic Skuas from other breeding populations in the North-east Atlantic, thanks to data from geolocator tracking studies in Svalbard, Norway and the Faroe Islands. Particularly during northbound migration, such staging areas are important to ensure they are in good condition for the upcoming breeding season.

HOW TO HELP

Arctic Skua often nest in remote locations and therefore monitoring is not logistically easy. However, the survey methodology is not very complex – if your 'stealth mode' is on point! For Colony Counts (abundance), Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT) are identified during daylight hours between late May and mid July (preferably June) through walking transects or scanning suitable habitat from vantage points. Within the SMP database, larger Arctic Skua colonies are included as sites (e.g. those on Fair Isle and Rousay, Scotland), whilst where individuals nest in low densities on moorland, AOTs are recorded within 1-km squares. The long-term monitoring of both abundance and breeding success better enables the drivers of population change to be determined.

If you are already monitoring an Arctic Skua colony, please check that the data is reaching the SMP database. SMP Online map and registration (for all breeding seabird species): <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>



Making it happen: the faces behind SMP

Following on from newly recruited SMP surveyors, Kate and Elaine, sharing their experiences in Issue 2 of SMPnews, this issue brings insights from long-standing SMP participant and dedicated volunteer bird surveyor, Murray Orchard.



Medway Mediterranean Gull colony, by Bob Knight

My first experience of seabirds came in 1971, during a family holiday to Pembrokeshire. We went on a day trip to Skomer Island and I recall seeing my first ever Puffin as it tried to land on a rocky outcrop in front of us, complete with fish in bill, but I had no binoculars! Following this my dad bought me a pair, and I remember looking out from our caravan at Amroth and seeing bright white birds with black wing tips diving in the sea – my first Gannets! Both duly ticked in my copy of *The Observer's Book of Birds*. I was 13.

Over the years I've made several trips back to the Pembrokeshire islands, but the most memorable was a week's stay (full board!) on Skokholm with a friend back in 1980. During the week we studied the nesting Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins at close quarters from various watch points, but the highlight was the night walks to witness the huge numbers of Manx Shearwaters leaving their burrows. One flew into me and blooded my forehead: a badge of honour! We also sat on the rocks at The Quarry and watched Storm Petrels fluttering through the darkness into their nesting crevices. On one very special day we were taken on a trip to Grassholm, where we landed and climbed to the highest point to look down on

the thousands of nesting Gannets, something you can't do now! You never forget things like that. And I haven't.

Trips to experience seabirds, whether to the Pembrokeshire islands, the Farne Islands or Bempton Cliffs were a real treat, as I lived in Kent, and now Hertfordshire. However, even these counties do have seabirds! In Kent, I had a favourite place on top of the Dover cliffs where I could sit and watch nesting Kittiwakes at close range. There used to be a colony of over 2,500 pairs, but the last few birds bred in 2012, and now the cliffs are quiet and empty, although we still have some Fulmars. Both species only started breeding in Kent during the late 1960s, and now one has gone again. A stark indication of the changes occurring with our seabirds and the need to monitor their populations.

During recent years I've been lucky to get involved with boat trips out on the Medway Estuary, primarily to do the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) counts, but in spring and summer we record the breeding gulls and terns. The saltmarsh islands support significant numbers of breeding Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls, plus smaller numbers of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and now a pair or two

of Great Black-backed Gulls – a real breeding rarity in Kent that only commenced breeding in 2003, after an absence of 160 years! Terns also breed; with Common, a handful of Little, and Kent's only colony of Sandwich Terns. Our trips out to the islands provide the only means of effectively monitoring these gull and tern populations. It's not easy, as we can only count from the boat, and sometimes the weather and high spring tides can wreak havoc on a breeding season.

My favourites are the Sandwich Terns. It's a heart in mouth moment each year when we make our first trip out to check the island where they breed

Colonies can suddenly disappear and move elsewhere. The Medway colony has been present since 1997, but have the birds returned? If so, how many? And later in the season, will they fledge many young? Of course, we also count the other species too! The Medway and Swale islands are usually the second most important site in the UK for Mediterranean Gulls, a relatively recent coloniser that only started annual breeding in Kent in 1984, and along with our handful of Little Terns are on the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP)

species list, so recording them takes on extra significance.

Now I'm involved with SMP, there's a real focus for counting and recording these gulls and terns. By entering counts on the SMP database, I know I'm providing valuable data towards the national inventory of our seabirds.

During my time in Kent, I've witnessed the disappearance of Kittiwakes as breeding birds and the appearance of Mediterranean and Great Black-backed Gulls, plus significant changes in the populations of the other species. These events highlight the importance of the SMP and the need for people to cover sites and report their data.



Murray surveying for SMP, by Bob Knight



Medway Sandwich Tern colony, by Ian Ridgers

TAKING PART IN SURVEYS – including partnership schemes such as SMP!

Murray takes part in many bird survey projects, including SMP and the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) mentioned in this article. There are a host of wildlife survey projects requiring varying levels of skill and interests out there, with a selection advertised on the BTO website.

➔ **Where could bird surveying take you? www.bto.org/projects**

Small gulls

By Sarah Harris, BTO

Gulls can be daunting to many, but identification of adult, breeding plumage birds is key when monitoring gull colonies. Thankfully, habitat preferences can help narrow down the options. In each issue of *SMPnews*, we'll take bite-sized looks at the plumage and structure of different groups. This time, we're focusing on the regularly breeding small gull species: **Black-headed Gull**, **Mediterranean Gull**, **Common Gull** and **Kittiwake**.

In the images below, we display the birds in their breeding plumage, and also highlight their size, although for these four species there is some overlap!

We'll take a quick look at habitat preferences for nest sites. The odd one out is the **Kittiwake**, which nests on

narrow ledges on cliffs and artificial structures such as bridges, buildings, or offshore oil rigs. Colonies are found at the coast or in more inland locations along rivers close to estuaries, such as colonies in Newcastle. **Kittiwake** nests can be found around most coastlines of Britain and Ireland.

Common Gull nest in a range of habitats, from inland sites on moorlands and riverbanks to beaches and grassy cliff ledges at the coast. Most colonies in Britain and Ireland are in the north and west, with some localised colonies in the southeast.

Black-headed Gull and **Mediterranean Gull** are often found nesting in mixed colonies on the ground. Both favour sites near water including coastal lagoons, saltmarsh, bogs, marshes, inland wetland areas, estuaries and artificial structures, such as tern rafts (see article on page 12). **Black-headed Gull** can occasionally be found nesting in bushes or low trees, and on rooftops. **Mediterranean Gull** are currently

less widespread in Britain and Ireland compared to **Black-headed Gull**, but are spreading north and westwards!

Although this article is titled 'Small gulls', both the **Common Gull** and **Kittiwake** would be best described as medium-sized gulls. **Black-headed Gull** are small and elegant, with **Mediterranean Gull** being slightly larger overall.

Black-headed Gull have a slender, deep red beak that lacks a pronounced downwards 'bulge' on the lower mandible, near the tip (known as the gonydeal angle), and legs that are the same colour. The iris is dark and the head has a dark brown hood that does not reach the hindneck. The wings have a broad white leading edge and a dark trailing outer wing (a pattern otherwise seen only on Bonaparte's Gull and Slender-billed Gull).

In comparison, the **Mediterranean Gull** has a darker, black hood that extends down the back of the hindneck.

The head is proportionally flatter and larger than that of the **Black-headed Gull**, and it has a fuller neck. The mid-red beak is thicker, with a pronounced gonydeal angle, black subterminal band and pale tip. The legs are longer than **Black-headed Gull**, and red. It has shorter, broader, more rounded wings than the **Black-headed Gull**, and an overall fuller body. The upper parts are very pale – a pearly grey – with almost translucent primary feathers. The white wing-tips are an easy way to distinguish them in flight.

We cover summer breeding plumage here, but in winter both the **Black-headed Gull** and **Mediterranean Gull** lose much of the brown/black on their heads. However, their beak and leg colour still easily separates them from **Kittiwake** and **Common Gull**. On to the medium sized gulls ...

Both **Kittiwake** and **Common Gull** have very rounded, white heads, a slim yellowish-green (**Common Gull**)

or brighter yellow (**Kittiwake**) beak, and dark eyes, giving them a 'cute', gentle expression.

Kittiwake are more compact than **Common Gull**, with short, black/dark brown legs. They have a more slender 'hand' (the distal part of the wing where the flight feathers are) than the **Common Gull**. **Kittiwake** have a three-tone upperwing with a paler grey mantle (back) and coverts than **Common Gull**. **Kittiwake** lack the clear white trailing edge to the wing and have whitish bases to the primary feathers. They have extreme black wing-tips with limited white.

Common Gull are blue-grey above, have a broad white trailing edge to the wings (in contrast to **Kittiwake**) and black wing-tips, but with broad white 'mirrors' (elongated dots) and primary tips. They also have a whiter tertial crescent than the **Kittiwake**. This is the crescent of white at the the back end of the mantle, seen on a resting bird (see image below).

ID VIDEOS

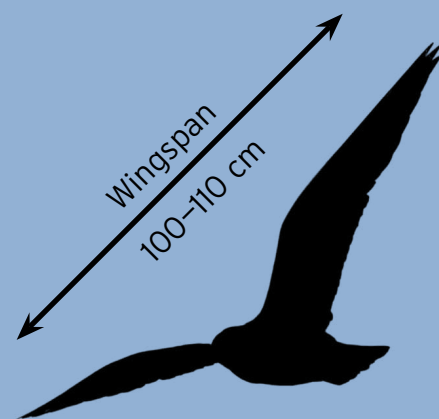
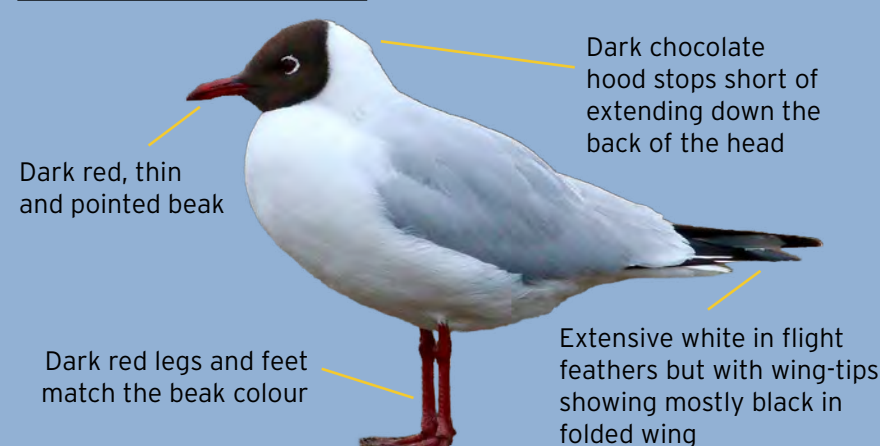
The BTO Training Team has created ID videos, freely available online. These include videos covering 'Kittiwake and Other Small Gulls', 'small black-headed gulls: Little, Mediterranean and Black-headed' and a host of other seabird and non-seabird ID resources.

Access these at:

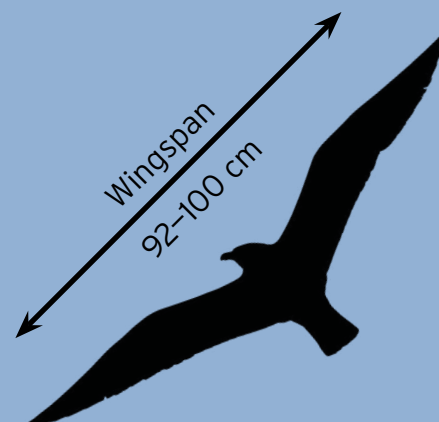
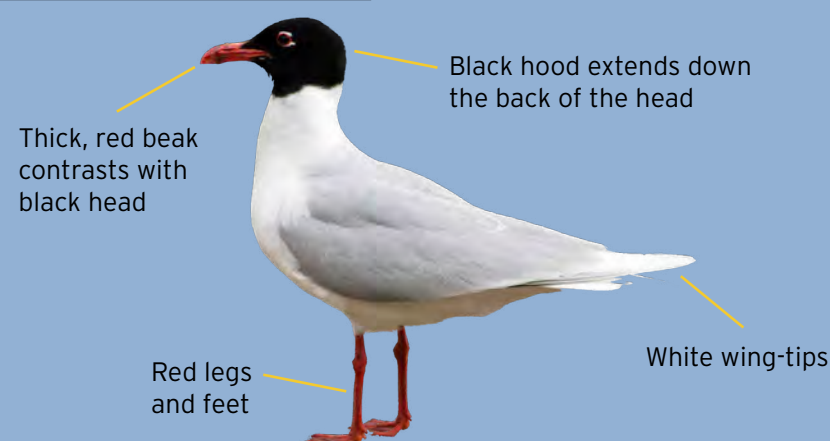
www.bto.org/learn/skills/bird-identification/video

So think: Where are you? What is the habitat? What are the proportions and structure? What are the beak and feet colours? What is the head colour (note seasonal changes)? And then move onto the even finer plumage detail, such as wing-tip patterns.

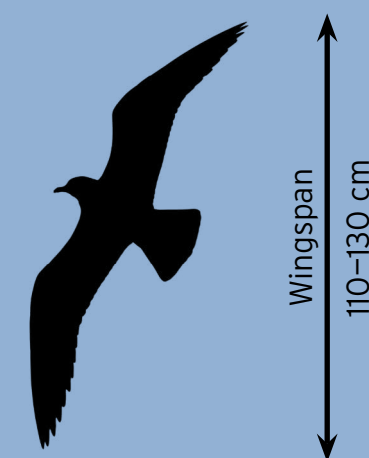
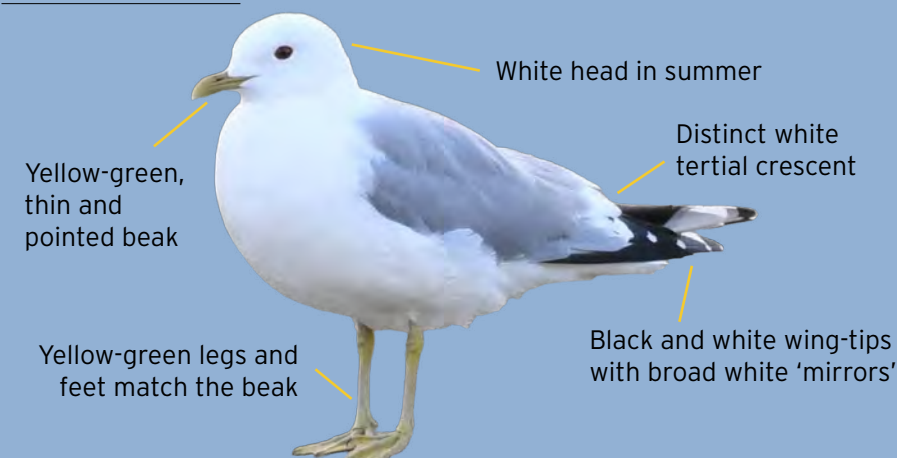
BLACK-HEADED GULL



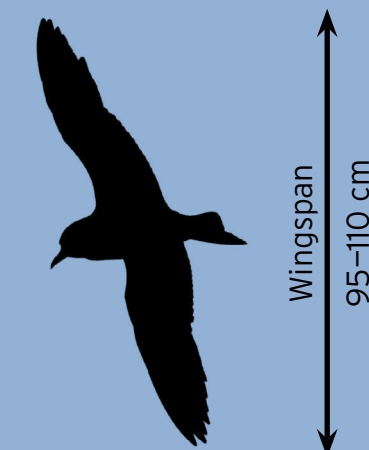
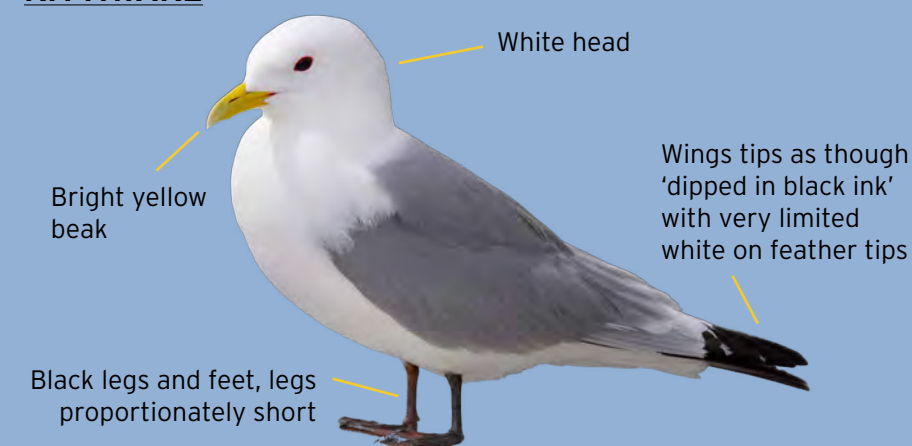
MEDITERRANEAN GULL



COMMON GULL



KITTIWAKE



The SMP team

The SMP team at BTO includes Sarah Harris as SMP Organiser and first point of contact for SMP queries. Sarah is responsible for the running of the scheme, liaising with professional and voluntary participants, maintaining the databases, promoting the scheme, and producing the Annual Report, newsletter and other outputs. Nina O’Hanlon, Research Ecologist in the Wetland and Marine Research Team is responsible for the data analysis and annual trend production, and works alongside James Clarke, Ecological Statistician, who is working on the development of SMP trend production methods. Hala Haddad and Andrew Upton are supporting the Seabird Network in Northern Ireland, and Dawn Balmer is Head of Surveys, which includes SMP among other monitoring schemes. Niall Burton (Head and Principal Ecologist) and Liz Humphreys (Head of Marine Research), also part of the Wetland and Marine Team, are responsible for strategic development of the scheme and marine research at BTO. James Pearce-Higgins is the Director of Science and therefore responsible for all survey and research work at BTO.

Representatives from the Partnership organisations include Tim Dunn (Seabird Monitoring Manager), Helen Baker (Marine Species Team Co-Leader) and Sarah Money (Marine Ornithologist) from JNCC, and Mark Bolton and Tom Evans, both Principal Conservation Scientists at RSPB. The SMP ‘family’ runs wider than this though with representatives from a total of 24 organisations, including from the four SMP Key Sites, included in the SMP Advisory Group. Each newsletter, we will meet new faces from this passionate mix of seabird enthusiasts!



Introducing:
Dawn Balmer

Manx Shearwater chick, by Dawn Balmer

Where are you based and what do you do?

I’m based at BTO – The Nunnery in Thetford, Norfolk. My role is Head of Surveys and I project manage the SMP amongst other things.

What is your experience in working with seabirds?

I’ve volunteered for SMP since 2018 and count the small Black-headed Gull colony at Livermere Lake in Suffolk. I’ve had a small amount of seabird ringing experience on Great Saltee, Republic of Ireland, and Bardsey Island, Wales, and many years ago we ran regular trips to West Cornwall to catch Storm Petrels in late summer.

What was your first environmental/conservation job?

I’ve been very fortunate to work for BTO all my career, joining as a 22-year-old to work in the Census Unit analysing Common Birds Census maps. Over 30 years later, I’ve had the opportunity to undertake lots

of fieldwork, organise demographic scheme projects, be BirdTrack Organiser and Coordinator for *Bird Atlas 2007–11*.

Did you volunteer prior to gaining a job in this sector?

As a teenager I volunteered regularly for the Shropshire Wildlife Trust in Shrewsbury in school holidays, helping out with a range of office tasks including data entry for the first *Shropshire Bird Atlas* (an early sign!). I had a couple of weeks volunteering for RSPB at Loch Garten and Blacktoft Sands which was a lot of fun.

What is your favourite thing about your career, and your role now?

I have been incredibly lucky to work on such a wide range of projects and work with some amazing people – staff and volunteers. I’m always amazed by the skills and passion of our volunteers and I’ve had the privilege of getting to know so many over the years. Having the opportunity to coordinate *Bird*

Atlas 2007–11 is a real highlight of my career – a massive team effort to collate the data and produce the atlas book and to see the impact it has had on conservation. I love my job as Head of Surveys, working with such a talented team to deliver a programme of long-term and periodic citizen science surveys.

If you had a warning label, what would yours say?

‘Does not turn off!’ I like to be busy.

Do you have a favourite seabird experience?

I think it has to be spending time on Bardsey Island with Manx Shearwaters all around at night. Listening to them calling as they whizz around and come into land. Thanks to the Bardsey Bird Obs staff for allowing me to help out with catching and ringing adults at night, and monitoring chick growth and ringing young during the day. Popping to the outside loo at night and finding a Manx Shear shuffling around the back yard and going to bed to the



Livermere & Bardsey, by Dawn Balmer

sound of Manxies calling are memories that will live forever.

What are your hobbies?

I’ve been a birder most of my life, with my first notebook started when I was six years old. I enjoy all aspects of natural history and love taking photographs. Just being outdoors is brilliant. I’ve spent a lot of time in the last 10 years helping out at my local sports clubs and regional events. I’m a British Athletics timekeeper for track events and I’m a Level 2 (Starter) for Swim England – things you do when you have a sporty child!

What is your current (non-work) passion project?

I always enjoy taking part in local fieldwork and try to do as much as I can in my spare time. I’ve signed up to cover a few squares in the Brecks for the Woodlark, Dartford Warbler and Nightjar surveys taking place this summer. Over the winter I’ve spent quite a bit of time in the Norfolk Fens looking at flocks of wild swans and doing some bird ring-reading.

If money were no object, how would you spend your time?

Probably more birding, local survey work and maybe some train journeys across Europe.

Why do you think the SMP is an important scheme?

Britain and Ireland are host to internationally important numbers of

seabirds and we have a responsibility to monitor their abundance and breeding success and provide the best annual data we can that lead to improved policies and conservation action.

What is your favourite book, favourite song and what one item would you choose if you were stranded on a desert island?

Favourite book: Tricky. I really enjoy reading fiction but rarely return to read again. It will have to be *Birds of Europe* by Lars Jonsson as I love the illustrations. I do remember I was obsessed with Peter Grant’s *Gulls: A Guide to Identification* book as a student.

Song: Impossible! I will go with The Oxford Girl by Oysterband. I’m a big fan of Oysterband, Nick Drake and Martha Wainwright but love loads of different music.

Desert Island item: Binoculars!

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

When I was very young I wanted to be a detective (probably why I like crime fiction so much!) but from about age 12 I was pretty set on a career in conservation, especially birds. I’m very lucky to have achieved that.

How do you stay motivated in your work?

I’m very passionate about birds, science and people and working at BTO has just been the most perfect fit for me. There’s always so much to do (sometimes too much!) but I just like to get on with it.

Lastly, and most importantly, what are your top two seabirds? (because just one isn’t enough!)

Mediterranean Gull and Manx Shearwater! I’ve always loved Mediterranean Gulls for the thrill of picking them out in flocks of gulls and their superb smart plumages at all ages. It’s great to see them expanding as a breeding species too! Manx Shearwaters are always a joy to see on seawatches and marvel at their incredible migration and my experiences on Bardsey in a breeding colony makes them even more special.

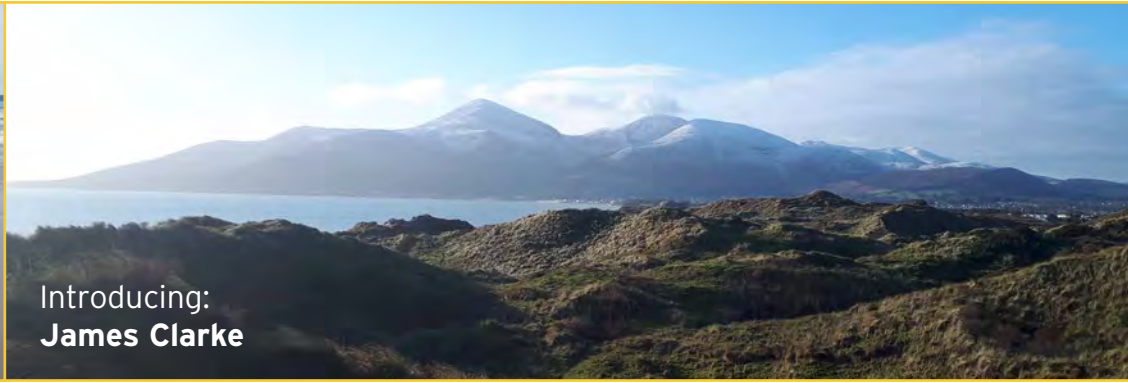


Duke of Burgandy, by James Clarke

To find out about the team member who likes logarithms, butterflies, hills and is an expert grass measurer ... turn to page 24 where *Meet the Team* continues ...



Introducing:
James Clarke



Murlough National Nature Reserve,
by James Clarke.

Where are you based and what do you do?

I work from the BTO office in Thetford and am an Ecological Statistician within the BTO Stats Team. My role involves helping a variety of projects with their statistical analysis, including SMP, to ensure that the statistics that we produce at BTO are as robust as possible.



What is your experience in working with seabirds?

My role with BTO would be the first time working directly with seabirds. Before this I have worked mainly on UK butterfly data and on some fish data.

What was your first environmental/conservation job?

My first environmental job was as a research intern with Queen's University Belfast. I was helping on a grassland resilience project determining how pasture fields across Ireland responded to drought conditions. This mainly involved driving across Ireland taking soil samples and measuring grass.

Did you volunteer prior to gaining a job in this sector?

Yes, quite a few times. My most substantial volunteer stints were at the Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre where I performed cetacean surveys and informed the public about the marine wildlife in the area. I was also a volunteer ranger with the National Trust at Murlough National Nature Reserve in County Down, and within the nearby Mourne mountains, where I helped manage the land and survey the wildlife.

What is your favourite thing about your career, and your role now?

I really enjoy the opportunity of working on a variety of different projects. Being able to adapt to

different datasets and the challenges of each, whilst constantly learning new methodologies. This ensures that no day is boring (for me anyway).

If you had a warning label, what would yours say?

'May talk to you about logarithms' (if they come up during small talk).

Do you have a favourite seabird experience?

As a kid my family would go on holidays to Wales a lot. Being on or around islands such as Skomer, Ramsey and Grassholm and their seabird colonies were magical experiences and got me hooked as a kid.

What are your hobbies?

I have played squash since I was five and have played guitar for the past 20 years, and I still really enjoy doing both in my free time. I also love reading, sea swimming, running and hiking. Although I feel Norfolk could do with more hills!

What is your current (non-work) passion project?

I am currently trying to improve my Irish language skills. I'm getting there, slowly but surely.

If money were no object, how would you spend your time?

Being outside as much as possible. I loved my time volunteering on reserves and within the mountains, being out and about in all weathers.

Why do you think the SMP is an important scheme?

Seabirds are such an important part of these islands, but it is a difficult time for many of them with such things as resource depletion and avian influenza. It is therefore so important that we understand the state of the populations

to help us understand any changes and, ultimately, attempt to mitigate declines to these amazing species.

What is your favourite book, favourite song and what one item would you choose if you were stranded on a desert island?

Favourite book: *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien. Just the right combination of people becoming bicycles and armies of one-legged men for a book to have.

Song: That's a difficult choice. I could go for some Neil Young, Cat Power or Gillian Welch, but I'd probably choose *The Sailor's Bonnet* by The Gloaming. A truly beautiful song.

Desert Island item: My guitar. That'd keep me entertained.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

I knew that I wanted to work with wildlife quite early when growing up. I was obsessed with being outside identifying everything in the garden and on the local patches.

How do you stay motivated in your work?

I really enjoy my work so I find it easy to stay motivated. Whenever a difficult problem comes up that just brings extra motivation to figure it out. Feeling passionate about wildlife and, therefore, the outcomes of the analyses definitely helps when doing the stats.

Lastly, and most importantly, what are your top two seabirds? (because just one isn't enough!)

My top seabird is without a doubt the Gannet. I could sit and watch them diving into the sea for hours. Second would be Black Guillemot. I think they have great personalities. It's always nice to come across them within quiet harbours.

Green Hairstreak, by Liz Cutting/BTO.



Gannet, by Edmund Fellowes/BTO

By Emma Caulfield and Sarah Harris, BTO

These efforts, alongside our engagement initiatives, are intricately connected, making it challenging to determine the order in which we work through these tasks, and ideally, how to move forward with everything in harmony. However, we are confidently progressing in the right direction and ensuring a coordinated approach is key.

The SMP has relied on the dedication and effort of volunteers and professional surveyors to help track the numbers of breeding seabirds and their productivity across Britain and Ireland.

1. New data entry form

We know that entering data, especially after a long day in the field or if working through a backlog, can sometimes feel like a chore. That's why we've introduced a new data entry interface that is simpler to navigate and quicker to use, along with helpful new features including...

Visit locking/unlocking: You can now lock your visit details, making it much faster to enter data for multiple species during a single survey. You can also change visit details and enter counts for different days, all within the same form.

Verification checks: The system automatically flags unusual entries, like a very high count or an out-of-season visit, so you can review them before submitting. This will help us during the data verification process.

These changes will work to improve your experience entering data into the online system, will speed up the process, and reduce typographical errors.

We've also introduced a brand-new **site mapping tool**, making it easier to find and understand the colonies you survey – or want to take on.

Boundary suggestions: If a site boundary doesn't match what the bounds of your survey area has always been, you can now suggest an edit. This will help us keep our site information accurate and up-to-date.



The all-new
SMP Online
guidance
information

The top of the data entry form relates to **visit details**. These are the details related to the day you completed the survey. Here you can input survey dates and times, as well as recorders (e.g. if you were counting as part of a team or if you are submitting the data on behalf of someone else). The only mandatory field is the start date. However, it improved the quality of the data in our system if you also include survey times and end date (if the counts were completed over multiple days).

Some sites will have a map, highlighting the boundaries of the site. If a site has no boundary information for your site, it will appear as a point.

If you notice that the geographic information is incorrect, you can suggest a correction by clicking on the **"Suggest a Change"** button on the bottom left. This will take you to the boundary editing tool.

IMPORTANT:
The SMP Organiser will only accept boundary changes if they reflect the **area that has always been counted** for that site. This is to ensure that the data collected currently is comparable with data that was collected in the past. If you would like to extend a site to a new area, you will need to create a new site. Contact smp@bto.org to add sites.

IMPORTANT: If you are submitting multiple counts for the same visit, you can lock these details and save them for the next count. If you don't lock the visit details, they will clear for the next count submission. This allows you to submit multiple visits in the same form. Please ensure that you lock the visit details if you intend to submit multiple counts in the next section.

Lock/unlock visit

Lakenheath Fen SSSI

Site info

Photos

History

Name

Lakenheath Fen SSSI

County

Suffolk

Master site

Suffolk Island Gulls

Site category

Water Feature

Site type

Island

Habitat type

Shrubland

Active?

☒

Colony Site?

☐

Master site?

☐

Breeding site?

☐

Grid Reference

TL498590

Site boundary/adjacent landrains?

☐ Suggest a change

Many sites in the system currently do not have boundaries attributed to them, so you can submit site maps through the new mapping tools which will mean any future surveyors at a site will know where to survey, maintaining the consistency of surveys over time.

All these changes make it much easier to find gaps in our coverage, and ensure site data reflect real-world conditions.

Log in to SMP Online and take a look around (<https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>). Try out the new features, explore the mapping tool, and see how the system can make your recording easier. Instructions on how to use the new tools can be found under the Help tab at the top of the application.

Breeding Success data in 2024 have been received for 141 SMP sites, and for 23 species in total. The species with Breeding Success data for previous years but absent from the database in 2024 were Storm and Leach's Petrels, and Yellow-legged Gull.

For Colony Counts, 578 sites received data covering 24 species. Again, some species recorded historically (Little and Yellow-legged Gull, and Leach's Petrel) are not in the system for 2024.

As of 14 April 2025, there were 298 allocated SMP participants (an increase from 232 in May in 2024) in the system, although acknowledging some of these individuals may represent survey efforts from a wider group.

Zeros count! During the SMP data analysis, we need to know where sites no longer host a given species, as opposed to the birds not being surveyed. In these cases, we need zero counts to be added against any locally 'extinct' species so we know they were genuinely no longer present at this location.



By Sarah Harris, BTO

Yes! Email smp@bto.org to find out more about a bulk upload. The preferred method of data entry will always be directly via SMP Online. This way the data pass through verification checks and surveyors can check site details are correct too. But in some cases, a bulk upload is the only practical data entry method.

No. Please enter the final outcome (count for Colony Counts, and pairs/nests to fledged chicks for Breeding Success). Date ranges or each visit date can be added alongside the final results for the season. This prevents any multiple counts in a given year being misused, e.g. added together, when used in the trend calculations.

How do I report suspected Avian Influenza?



Do not touch dead birds with your bare hands. If you have to touch a bird, invert a plastic bag over your hand and pick it up in the plastic.



Report avian mortality to Defra online:
www.gov.uk/guidance/report-dead-wild-birds
If in Northern Ireland, see guidance at:
www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/wild-birds-and-advice-public
If in the Republic of Ireland, visit the Avian Check website
at: <https://aviancheck.apps.services.agriculture.gov.ie>



IN ADDITION to alerting the above, sightings of dead birds should be submitted to BirdTrack for monitoring purposes, and birds with rings logged via the EURING website: BirdTrack: www.birdtrack.net, e.g, during SMP surveying, and EURING: www.euring.org

We have the second annual **SMP Report**, to 2024, scheduled for publication in the autumn and the **Key Site reports** planned for publication in the summer – complete with a new look!



Backchat...

Key Sites

The SMP Key Sites at Canna, Fair Isle, the Isle of May and Skomer conduct detailed annual monitoring of adult seabird survival, diet and phenology, in addition to abundance and productivity, enabling the mechanisms of population changes in response to pressures to be better understood. SMP funding contributions provided by JNCC support this additional monitoring by staff and volunteers.

Following the outbreak of HPAI (bird flu) that spread through seabird colonies across the UK in 2022, data collected from the Key Sites in 2023 and 2024 will be invaluable in understanding the impacts on populations and their recovery.

Reports for 2022 (and previous years) will be published and made available through JNCC's Monitoring/Survey Report Series: <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/>. Reports from 2023 onwards will be published through the SMP website hosted by BTO.

Your newsletter, your say

We want to hear your thoughts on the Seabird Monitoring Programme newsletter – shaping the content as we go and adding new ideas where we can, ensuring engaging and informative content that is of interest to you. We want to hear from everyone, whether you are an existing SMP participant, a new participant, a volunteer, a paid professional, or someone simply interested in seabirds, the marine environment or wildlife in general.

In order to collate thoughts in one place, an online survey form has been created to gather ideas in a succinct way. Please follow this link to submit your views: bit.ly/SMPnews_feedback

Thank you for reading this issue of SMPnews.



Contact details

Full details of the SMP Team can be found on page 22, and we will meet different team members in each issue of SMPnews. However, below are details for the main point of contact for the scheme:

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SMP organisation and scheme lead.
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Email: smp@bto.org
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Bluesky: [@smp-seabirds.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/smp-seabirds.bsky.social)
X (formerly Twitter): [@smp_seabirds](https://twitter.com/smp_seabirds)

