ISSUE 2 | SPRING 2024

SMP*news*

Seabird Monitoring Programme

Monitoring internationally important seabird populations across the UK

Welcome...

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

CONTENTS

PARTNERS

BTO
JNCC
in association with RSPB

Gannet, by Thomas Willoughby

Tracking bird flu

By Linda Wilson and Connie Tremlett, RSPB

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has caused widespread mass mortality in seabirds across the UK since a particularly persistent strain first appeared in 2021. HPAI quickly became one of the biggest immediate threats faced by multiple seabird species, including several for which the UK population is of global importance. Updated colony counts were urgently required to better understand the impacts of HPAI, including for many species/colonies where there is normally poor annual survey coverage. Thanks to generous funders, RSPB established the HPAI Seabird Surveys Project, to work collaboratively to enhance survey coverage in 2023 for 15 priority species chosen according to their conservation status and observed mortality.

All 2023 count data (submitted to SMP by November) have now been compared to pre-HPAI counts, largely obtained from the recent *Seabirds Count* census (see page 3). The recently-published results (link below) show a highly concerning picture, with widespread and extensive declines across species and sites. The previously increasing population trends recorded by *Seabirds Count* for Great Skua, Gannet and Roseate Tern have been completely reversed, while Common and Sandwich Tern also suffered heavy losses having previously remained stable. Great Skua were hit particularly hard, with numbers crashing by over two-thirds at >70% of sites surveyed. Declines of >20% seen in multiple other species unfortunately come on top of previous declines reported by *Seabirds Count*.

The 2023 counts were largely completed before further, widespread HPAI-related mortality later that season, which particularly affected gulls, terns and Guillemots, so the contribution of SMP monitoring will continue to be crucial to assess ongoing impacts of HPAI. Although this project was led by RSPB, it represents a massive effort across many organisations and individuals, and we are extremely grateful to all who contributed data to SMP, and to our funders.

Read the full report at: www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/seabird-surveys-project-report

Latest news

By Sarah Harris, SMP Organiser and SMP*news* editor, BTO

Following on from Issue One of SMP*news*, I present Issue... Two! Thank you to everyone who shared their views on the first issue and we will continue to use ongoing feedback to shape the newsletter going forward. It was heartening to read that Issue One made those interested in seabirds, but not yet taking part in SMP, investigate participation, and those who are active participants said they felt valued – and of course all the scheme's supporters are. Over 70% of responses wanted the newsletter twice a year but with the SMP Report due out annually too, we might need to see how we get on with one of each per year for the moment! Please keep the feedback coming in at: bit.ly/SMPnews_feedback.

In this issue, the RSPB provide a summary from the additional seabird monitoring work of 2023 to help assess the impact of HPAI on our breeding seabirds, my colleague, Emma Caulfield looks inland at seabirds and discusses the challenges and complexities of monitoring these often forgotten seabird colonies – it turns out, if they're not down a sheer cliff face, they're nesting on the top of a high roof, typical! Little Terns, Storm Petrels and auks all feature as part of site, species and ID focuses respectively, and we hear from JNCC's Helen Baker and BTO's Niall Burton in the 'Meet the Team' feature.

We are grateful to two new SMP participants, Kate Cowin and Elaine Freezer for giving us an insight into their first season of becoming a seabird surveyor for the SMP; Kate is watching Fulmars at the coast and Elaine is exploring sites inland carrying out Common Tern monitoring. Welcome and thank you! If anyone (new to the scheme or an SMP stalwart) wants to share their experiences of SMP surveying with us in a future issue, please get in touch. It's great to hear from those out in the field, to mentally compare notes if surveying sites ourselves and for those who are spending too many hours in the office and not enough time near seabirds! To complete the newsletter, we have the standard seabird news, SMP updates and FAQs. Enjoy!

On the topic of the office, we have been busy at BTO ensuring the database is in good shape and site allocations, historic data and boundaries are how they should be, through to looking at how to advance everything from participation numbers, the analysis process, survey methods, the publication of a sampling strategy, and writing specifications for SMP Online developments. All this whilst trying not to get distracted by the fantastic *Seabirds Count* publication (see page 3) which has recently landed on my desk! What a beautiful publication and an invaluable resource for the latest status of Britain and Ireland's seabirds.

SMP-specific publications in the pipeline for 2024 include the upcoming SMP Report 2021/23 out in the autumn. Work on this is well underway – so please ensure that any outstanding data (historic or 2023) are input to SMP Online now so that they can be used in the trend analysis. Thank you.

Taking on the role (or should I say 'challenge'?) of SMP Organiser, I have found both exciting, with regards to the passion behind the scheme and all the things we can do to drive it forward, and frustrating in that everything we want to do can't be achieved overnight. But with your continued support, the future of seabird monitoring looks very, very promising!

Sarah

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

We are grateful to Linda Wilson and Connie Tremlett for the HPAI 2023 monitoring update on the cover page, to Rob Hunton and Hannah Hereward for their 'Focus' articles, and to Kate Cowin and Elaine Freezer for providing insights into their monitoring journey. Thanks also to Helen Baker and Niall Burton for answering our questions in this issue's team introductions. Sarah Harris, SMP Organiser, and fellow BTO colleague, Emma Caulfield, authored the remaining text and articles, and produced 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

BTO Birds Science People www.bto.org

JNCC www.jncc.gov.uk

in association with RSPB www.rspb.org.uk

Organised Puffins, by Gary Clewley/BTO

KEEPING YOUR PUFFINS IN A ROW

We are strongly encouraging prompt data entry for the SMP in order to deliver on more timely reporting and feedback to the scheme's dedicated participants.

The deadline for data entry is now the end of October each year to allow data checking and extraction for trend production.

This applies to both Colony Count (abundance) and Breeding Success (productivity) data.

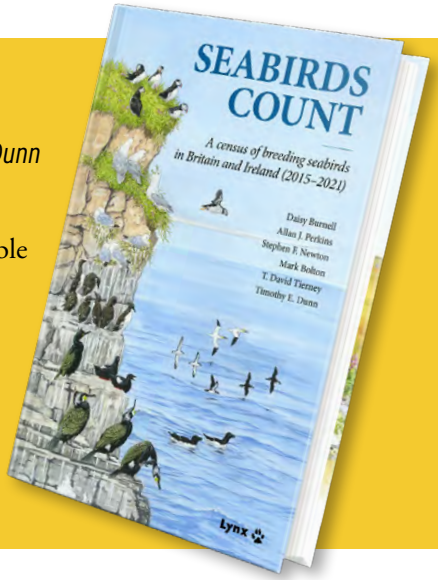
Please help us with this ambition and we will work on getting information out there quickly.

Visit app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp for help and guidance.

SEABIRDS COUNT: OUT NOW!

A census of breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland (2015–2021)

Daisy Burnell, Allan J. Perkins, Stephen F. Newton, Mark Bolton, T. David Tierney & Timothy E. Dunn



You may recall from Issue One of SMP*news* that the results from the latest seabird census of Britain and Ireland were coming soon – well, now they are out and available for purchase at Lynx Nature Books directly, or NHBS, for £44.99.

After many years in the making, the launch and celebration took place at Edinburgh Zoo on 6 December 2023 where key stakeholders – including the SMP Advisory Group (who formed the original census steering group) – funders, government leads, speakers, chapter authors and seabird experts, and enthusiasts all joined together for a collective sigh of relief and celebration of this mammoth undertaking; the new seabird oracle! Well done everyone!

WATCH OUT: SEABIRD PUBLICATIONS OUT IN 2024

UK seabird colony counts in 2023 following the 2021/22 outbreak of HPAI

See RSPB article on page 1 of this issue of SMP*news*.

Northern Ireland Seabird Report, 2023

The *Northern Ireland Seabird Report 2023* provides an update on the country's seabirds and was published this spring. It is the culmination of the efforts of the Northern Ireland Seabird Network: bit.ly/SeabirdReport2023-NI

SMP Report

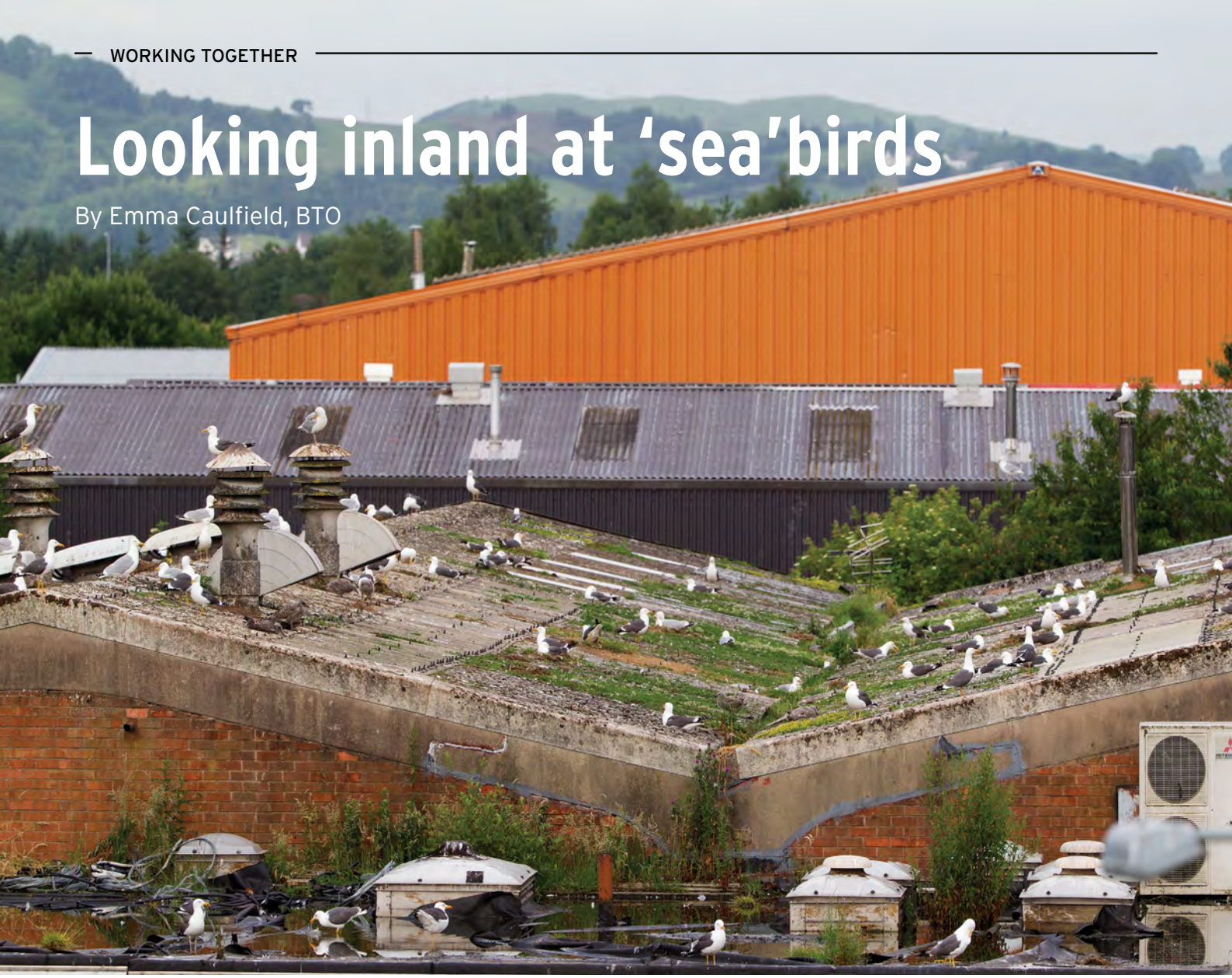
The SMP Report contains the latest breeding seabird abundance change and productivity figures covering the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and Republic of Ireland. This publication is due for release in the autumn and will also allow for updates of **Seabird Indicators**.

Birds of Conservation Concern 5; seabird update

The publication of and results from the *Seabirds Count* has allowed the status of seabird species to be assessed and the ranking of concern levels to be updated in Birds of Conservation Concern, due for publication in the July issue of the *British Birds* journal.

Looking inland at 'sea'birds

By Emma Caulfield, BTO



Urban Gulls, by Edmund Fellowes/BTO

Britain and Ireland's expansive coastlines and offshore islands are home to spectacular aggregations of breeding seabirds throughout the summer months. Significant numbers of birds flock to our coasts each year to breed, returning from far flung wintering locations like the productive waters of the Mid-Atlantic and balmy seas off South America.

Through the SMP, we capture essential information on the breeding numbers and success of 25 focal species across Britain and Ireland. Consistent and effective monitoring effort facilitates a greater understanding of the adaptation and resilience of populations through the movement from traditionally marine breeding sites to the colonisation of inland breeding sites.

Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls have become a noisy fixture of urban environments in recent decades. Urban nesting by these large gulls in Britain was first recorded in the 1940s but emerged as a widespread phenomenon in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, populations in urban spaces have grown, fueled by abundant food resources, high reproductive success, and availability of suitable nesting habitat. Expanding gull colonies are now a prominent feature of towns and cities across Britain and Ireland.

Despite the evident increase in urban gull populations, the majority of UK breeding gull species are likely facing a decline, with significant reductions in populations observed in many natural nesting habitats, particularly along coastal areas. The recently-published *Seabirds Count* publication has revealed alarming declines in natural nesting gull populations across the UK. Over the past two decades since the previous national census, there have been substantial decreases of 38% and 45% in the numbers of Herring Gull and Lesser Black-Backed Gulls respectively in their natural nesting habitats. While estimates indicate urban nesting populations of as few as 176,809, or as many as 194,594 Apparently Occupied Nests (AON) for Herring Gulls and as few as 242,440, or as many as 303,365 AON for Lesser Black-backed Gulls. These figures come with a notable level of uncertainty.

Despite the evident increase in urban gull populations, breeding gulls overall are facing a decline in the UK.

To ensure precise estimates and accurate trends to represent changes in urban gull populations, it is necessary to employ standardised monitoring

techniques that yield consistent and accurate outcomes. A significant challenge encountered during urban gull population surveys is the disparity in counts obtained from ground-based and vantage point surveys when compared to more representative counts via aerial surveys of urban rooftops.

Efforts to establish correction factors (an analytical process) for ground-based surveys by aligning the results with more precise aerial survey counts have proven to be complex due to the variability in counts influenced by factors such as location, species distribution, and observer variability. Nests on roofs are often obstructed from view during ground-based surveys and as a result an unknown proportion of nests is missed by observers. The variable distribution of species on rooftops, some closer to the edge and others more central to the roof, further impacts counts and leads to over- and under-estimates which cannot be easily corrected. The SMP currently does not produce trends for gulls that includes figures of urban nesters due to this uncertainty.

It is thought that the decreases experienced by natural nesters are not matched by the increases seen in urban populations. However, standardisation of methods through an updated handbook, as well as increased coverage at urban nesting sites, are required to increase the quality of evidence on the population trends of urban nesting gulls. A relatively small proportion, about 6% per annum, of breeding gull data received to the SMP is from urban nesting populations. Consequently, there is low confidence in trends produced to accurately predict population fluctuations.

To address these challenges head on, the SMP partners are reviewing current data collection and methods to assess how to appropriately handle urban gull monitoring and the resulting data.

Monitoring of urban gull colonies is something we know people are keen to carry out at their local colonies, so watch this space as we assess how we can best take urban gull monitoring forwards.

Currently, annual SMP trends for Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull are produced with data from natural nest sites only due to the uncertainity in the methods (analytical and survey) and the small number of counts collected annually in cities. This is something we will continue to review. The periodic censuses do produce urban gull trends, and the latest results are available in the *Seabirds Count* publication.

For Common and Black-headed Gull, only coastal data are used in the annual SMP trends. Again, trend analysis and the amount of data feeding into SMP is under constant review. This is an issue we can actively work on now by increasing the number of inland Common and Black-headed Gull colonies monitored each year.

Similar problems are encountered for other inland nesting seabirds like terns and Cormorant. However, for Common Tern and Cormorant, population trend change and productivity analysis does include all data collected both inland and at the coast.

While range expansion of Common Tern to encompass inland nesting sites has been well documented, coverage of breeding sites and reporting to the SMP has remained limited.

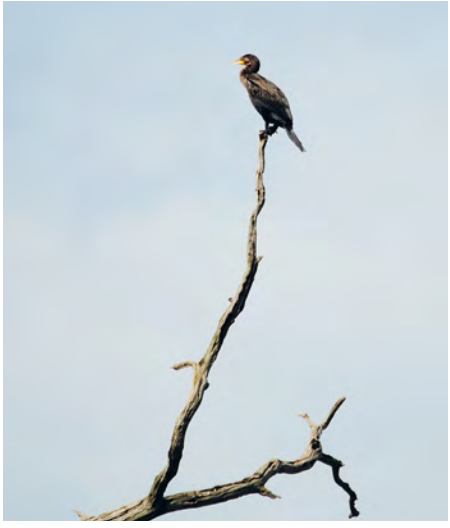
Artificial nesting habitats such as rafts and islands have been constructed at inland locations across Britain and Ireland, providing a valuable strategy to support breeding tern populations. However, colonies using new artificial nesting habitats are not consistently reported to the SMP, meaning we are limited in our sample of such sites. Therefore, it is really important that data from these sites are submitted to SMP, as at present, most data are submitted from coastal sites so the trends might not be representative of what is occuring inland.

The same is true for the monitoring of inland nesting Cormorants, where data points are few and not necessarily representative of the wider breeding population. The longest running BTO survey, the Heronries Census, collects data on nesting Cormorants with a focus on inland sites. However, data received to the SMP and the Heronries Census are not interchangeable. Details required alongside Colony Counts often differ across the surveys and Breeding Success information is not captured in the Heronries Census at all. There is potential for the alignment of both schemes to increase representative data submitted across both schemes and improve the confidence in trends.

The bottom line is that the SMP needs these Colony Counts and the associated site information for Cormorant trends. We want to minimise duplication of effort at sites covered for both the Heronries Censis and SMP – finding a way to collect Breeding Success (productivity) information for SMP without participants having to jump from one scheme's data entry portal to the other.

We face challenges when it comes to inland monitoring: analytical, methodological (as in the case of urban gulls), coverage and data handling. The more participants recording inland nesting seabirds for the SMP, the more opportunity there is to improve, and expand on, the trends, making sure they reflect populations across the UK – both at coastal and inland sites. Continued support from those of you that monitor inland nesting sites is essential for the production of representative trends in the future, for all the species mentioned in this article.

See page 6 for information on how you can best help us now.



Cormorant, by Amy Lewis/BTO

WHAT CAN WE DO NOW TO HELP WITH INLAND MONITORING?

URBAN NESTING GULLS

If you already monitor an urban gull colony in a consistent way and enter these data into SMP Online, please continue to do so. However, we are not actively enlisting new participation at additional sites at the moment, until recommendations are in place for improved methological and sampling approaches.

INLAND NESTING GULLS – AWAY FROM URBAN ROOFTOPS

We are keen to increase monitoring at inland sites which are not in urban environments, for example Common Gulls on moorland and Black-headed Gulls on artifical rafts or islands inland.

If you already monitor a site known to SMP but don't submit the data to SMP, or have a new site that isn't an SMP site already, we can set this up for monitoring and data entry. We also encourage entry of historic data for existing sites too.

INLAND NESTING TERNS

With an increasing number of artificial structures and islands at inland waterbodies being created, we are keen to keep up and ensure these sites are monitored and added to the SMP database. If you know of a local inland site which is not yet on the SMP Online map, or is but isn't monitored, please get in touch.

For inspiration, read the article on page 20 by Elaine Freezer!

INLAND NESTING CORMORANTS

If you are monitoring an inland Cormorant colony, and are happy to enter data into SMP Online, or would like to start recording on a site near you, please get in touch to discuss how best to do this with the SMP and Heronries Organisers.

Ideally, until we better align the data collected by both schemes, data would be input into both the SMP Online database and the Heronries Census system because both currently require slightly different information surrounding Colony Counts, and the Heronries Census does not currently collect Breeding Success information. We do realise, however, that this is a big ask.

VIEW EXISTING SMP SITES app.bto.org/seabirds

GET IN TOUCH smp@bto.org

Inland surveying, by David Tipling/BTO

Sampling strategy

By Nina O'Hanlon, BTO Scotland

The SMP collects data on breeding numbers and productivity for 25 seabird species that regularly breed in Britain and Ireland, with the aim of producing annual trend information to assess their conservation status. However, unfortunately, data are imprecise, absent, or geographically limited for several species, particularly burrow nesters, meaning that this is not possible for all species.

It was therefore a high priority to review the current SMP sampling approach and develop a new sampling strategy to shape future seabird monitoring, and hopefully result in the ability to calculate more seabird species trends.

To inform the new strategy we did several things:

Firstly, we reviewed the recommendations published in previous reviews of the SMP, which covered abundance, breeding productivity, survival, diet and phenology (with the latter three currently collected via the SMP Key Sites).

Secondly, we completed a stock-take of abundance and productivity data currently held within the SMP database. We also summarised data on survival collected through the SMP Key Sites and Retrapping for Adult Survival (RAS) studies, and on productivity from the Nest Record Scheme, to inform recommendations on combining data on seabirds across schemes.

Thirdly, we ran data simulations to assess the precision to which reliable estimates of population size might be obtained under different levels of sampling and through stratification based on site size.

Based on the stock-take of existing data and the results of the data simulations, we built upon the recommendations of previous reviews to provide updated recommendations on approaches for sampling abundance, productivity and survival across seabird species as well as species-specific recommendations on how sites should be selected for monitoring to produce the most robust abundance trends possible.

With a new sampling strategy comes new reporting potential for the species we currently struggle to calculate trends for, such as burrow nesting species.

Manx Shearwater chick, by Jonathan Dodds

We also highlighted wider considerations for the SMP. These include changes to improve the current abundance and productivity trend analysis, updating the Seabird Monitoring Handbook detailing methods, and adapting the SMP Engagement Plan to guide implementation of the new sampling strategy through informed coordinated and targeted volunteer and professional monitoring.

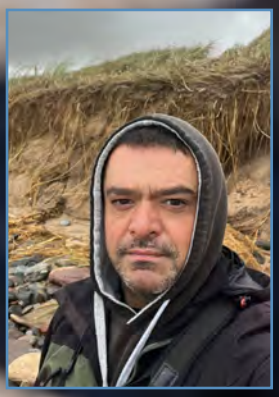
Ensuring the collection of robust data on seabird numbers, productivity and survival, as well as diet and phenology, is vital to identify key stressors acting on populations, detect population impacts of known stressors and implement appropriate conservation and management actions. This is particularly crucial for species such as Manx Shearwater, Great Skua and Gannet, for which the UK holds internationally important numbers.

This work was commissioned by JNCC with funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) programme, and undertaken as part of the SMP development programme.

FIND THE STRATEGY

O'Hanlon, N.J., Harris, S.J., Thaxter, C.B., Boersch-Supan, P.H., Robinson, R.A., Balmer, D.E. & Burton, N.H.K. 2024. *Seabird population and demographic monitoring in the UK: a review and recommendations for future sampling*. BTO Research Report 754, BTO Thetford.

bit.ly/SMP_samplingstrategy



Beacon Ponds

By Rob Hunton, Spurn Bird Observatory Manager

Beacon Ponds is the southern part of Beacon Lagoons Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), located south of Easington village, and to the north of Kilnsea village and Spurn Point National Nature Reserve in East Yorkshire. Consisting of a mosaic of coastal habitats, principally saline lagoons and remnant dunes, it is a very dynamic area due to the rapid erosion occurring along the Holderness coastline; posing conservation challenges.

The site is leased by the Spurn Bird Observatory Trust from the South Holderness Countryside Society, and hosts the only breeding colony of Little Tern in Yorkshire.

Little Terns have been breeding around the Spurn area since at least the early 1800s, and have been present at Beacon Lagoons since 1977. Since then, data have fed into the SMP for each year.

Little Terns here nest on open sand or shingle beaches with little or no vegetation, often close to the high tide line. They create a small nest by scraping out the sand or shingle from beneath them. This makes them particularly susceptible to disturbance from beachgoers and from high tides which risk washing away their nests.

A 'watcher' was employed by the county council in 1895 to protect the Little Terns breeding at The Point – just south of Beacon Ponds, and along the Spurn peninsula – from egg collectors and excursionists who regularly came across from Grimsby and Cleethorpes on a steamboat. The colony on the peninsula at this time was around 200 pairs strong. Sadly, this appointment was short lived. With no one to protect them in 1898 and 1899, systematic collection went unchecked and one known collector from Grimsby took 34 eggs in 1899 alone! Even the children living on Spurn Point at the time were engaged in the collecting of the tern eggs.

Another watcher was employed in 1900, but his job was made all the more difficult by a wrecked vessel loaded with timber which was strewn around The Point. The clean up operation caused a significant amount of disturbance but despite this, around 100 pairs managed to hatch eggs.

A second colony was formed in 1912 in the Beacon area, north of the peninsula, where 80 nests were discovered. Both colonies continued to survive and modest numbers were maintained up until the start of the Second World War, involving around 100 pairs, with an even split between each colony.

After the war, pressure from increased numbers of day-trippers led to a decline in breeding numbers on the peninsula, and just single figures bred there in the 1960s. There were no attempts to breed on the peninsula between 1964 and 1976. Three pairs attempted to breed in 1977, but were washed out by the Humber tide.

However, that same year, the colony at Beacon Lagoons was reestablished, albeit in small numbers. The first full-time seasonal warden was employed in 1985 to protect the terns, and there has been wardening here every breeding season since.

Little Tern chick, Beacon Ponds, by Thomas Willoughby

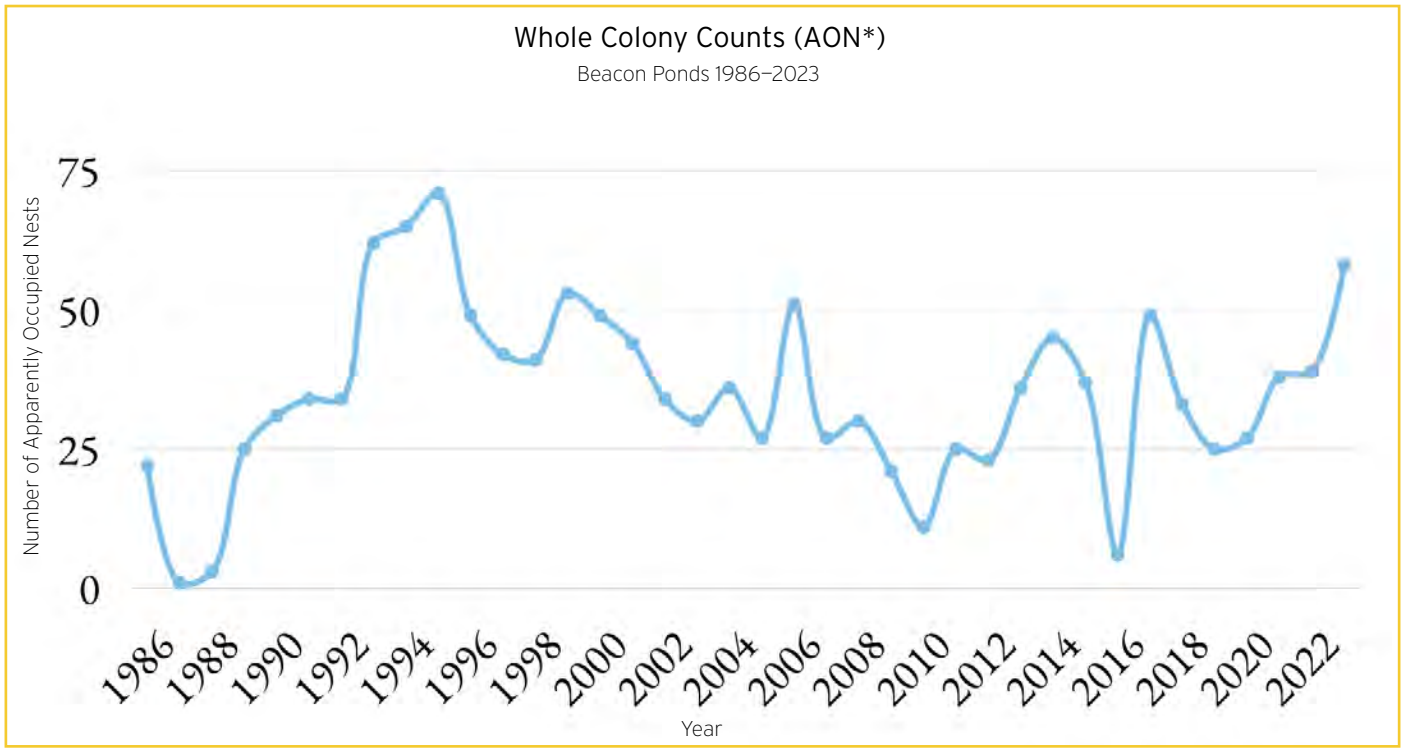
Fast forward and increased funding from 2011, better electric fences, and increased numbers of wardens and volunteers to cover 24/7 shifts has resulted in a marked improvement to the success of the colony.

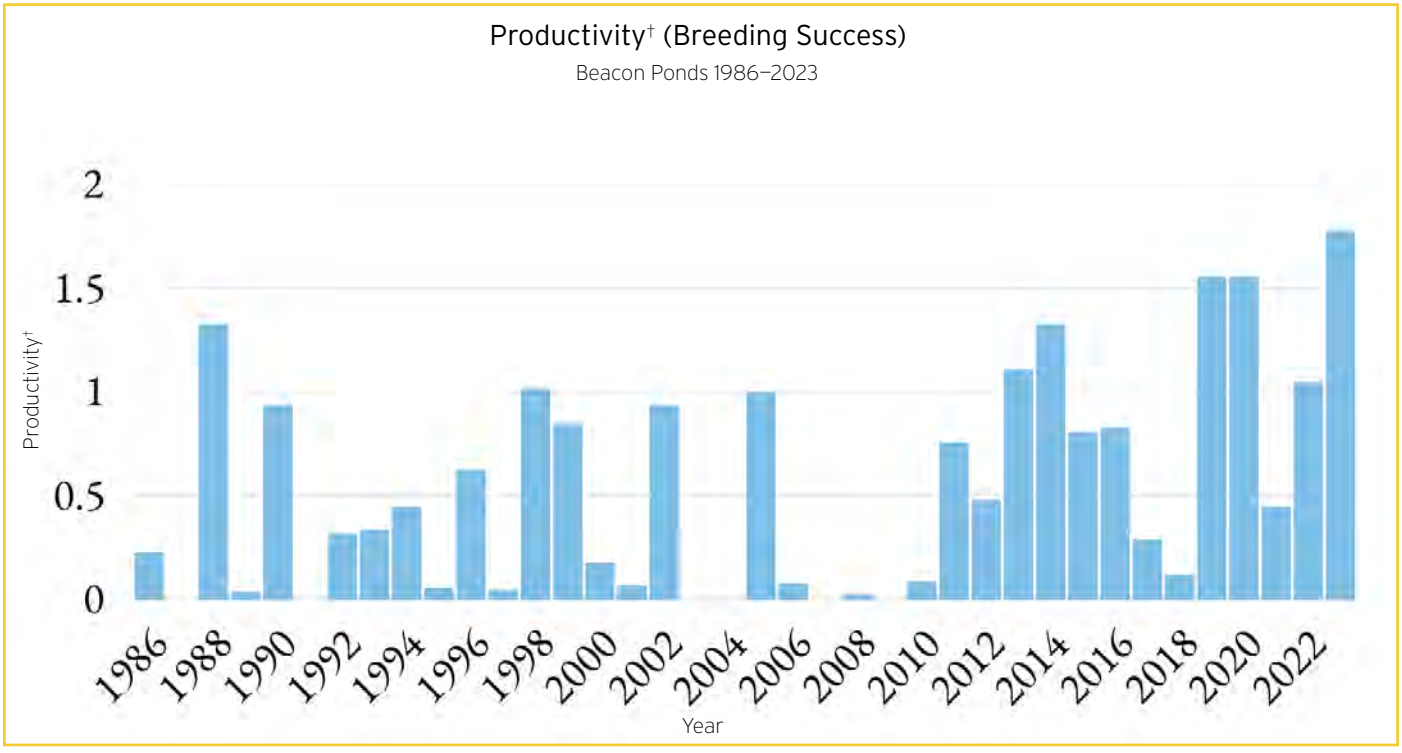
In 2013 a total of 40 chicks fledged from 36 pairs, and in 2014, 60 young fledged from 45 pairs. This total was eclipsed in 2023, when a whopping 107 chicks fledged from 58 pairs!

The graphs below, taken from data exported from SMP Online, illustrate the number of Apparently Occupied Nests at Beacon Lagoons assessed by Whole Colony Counts and the productivity – the number of chicks reaching fledging age – since 1986.

Recreational disturbance remains a serious issue for the colony, but isn't the only concern. Predation of eggs early in the season has been recorded from Carrion Crow, Red Fox and Hedgehog. Predation of chicks and adults later in the season has also been recorded from Kestrel, Merlin, Little Owl and Red Fox.

Other potential predators are regularly encountered including Sparrowhawk, Short-eared Owl, Badger, Otter, Grass Snake and even Grey Squirrel! All have been recorded in or around the colony. Incredibly in 2023 a European Pine Marten was seen within a mile





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

of the colony, giving the wardens and management team a few sleepless nights! Luckily, there was no evidence that it found its way to the colony.

The increasing regularity of storms later into the spring and through summer is a concern, one which the wardens and volunteers can have very little influence over. During the autumn and winter, Beacon Ponds is regularly topped up by the sea when the tides are high and the waves surge over the top of the sand hills and dunes, which normally provide some protection to the eastern side of the ponds. This process is welcomed over the winter months, when it gouges out the emergent vegetation growing between the dunes, bringing in more shingle and topping up the water level in the lagoon. However, the rapidly changing climate is altering the timings of this and we are seeing stronger winds and higher tides in the late spring and early summer, often before the eggs have hatched.

In 2022, the majority of the colony nested on the beach to the east of the dunes, driven out that way by encroaching vegetation due to there being no significant ingress from the North Sea tides. As a result Sea and Sand Couch Grass, Common Restharrow and Marram Grass were developing in the core nesting areas.

This new location meant the Little Terns were completely exposed to the tide and to disturbance on the beach.

Thankfully, through the winter of 2022/23, consent was granted by Natural England for the removal of the emerging vegetation in carefully selected areas of the colony. When the terns arrived back in the spring, it became evident very quickly that the work undertaken was to their liking. Numbers quickly built up and birds began displaying over the core nesting area, the males bringing in fish to their prospective partners, and the scraping of nests was underway earlier than in recent years, despite the weather being very similar – it was *that* good in the colony!

The breeding season of 2023 proved to be hugely successful, with all but

Habitat management at Beacon Ponds, by Mike Coverdale

Little Tern, by Tom Wright

Little Tern wardens of 2023: Tom Wright, Jacob Spinks, Joshua Brown, Harry Coghill, Eva Finney, Erin Gold and Joe Griffin

LITTLE TERN COLOUR RINGING PROJECT

Spurn Bird Observatory is currently running a colour ringing project where, in addition to the standard BTO metal ring, a plastic (Darvic) ring with larger numbers and letters on them is fitted allowing for easier identification and reporting of individual birds in the field without requiring recapture. The Little Terns at Beacon Ponds are fitted with yellow Darvic rings with black letters/numbers U01 through to U99. These are fitted to the left tarsus of large chicks and right tarsus of the adults.

Darvic-ringed Little Tern chick, by Thomas Willoughby, Wardening team of 2023, by Rob Hunton

The idea behind the colour ringing projects was to explore how much site fidelity the terns exhibited, and to detect any movement between colonies.

We have already received some interesting ringing recoveries from 'our' Little Tern colony (all involving birds which were ringed here as chicks):

- The national longevity record for Little Terns was held for a short while after a chick which was ringed here on 16 June 1993 was found dead at Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, on 15 August 2016, aged 23!
- A BTO metal-ringed chick ringed here in June 1999 was later trapped as a breeding adult in Zeebrugge, Belgium in 2004, and then in Heist, Belgium in 2007.
- One of the first Darvic-ringed chicks (U04) ringed on 16 July 2014 was seen roosting on a beach at Crimdon Dene in Cleveland on 21 July 2016.
- A BTO metal-ringed chick ringed at Beacon Lagoons in 2013 was trapped breeding at Gronant, Wales, and another ringed in 2015 was trapped as a breeding adult at Foulney, Cumbria and later seen at Gronant (both in 2018). This shows us that there is definitely some movement between colonies. These were both fitted with Darvics for that area when trapped.

spurnbirdobservatory.co.uk/science-and-research/projects

one of the 58 pairs inside the core area being successful, and a whopping 107 chicks fledging.

The habitat work conducted over the winter of 2022/23 will be complemented by ongoing manual work to manage the amount of vegetation during the winter months. We will be monitoring and reporting back to Natural England so that the long-term effects of the work can properly be assessed.

This success, and the hard work and dedication of the team both past and present, were recognised with the Humber Nature Partnership 2023 award being presented to the Easington Ponds Little Tern Project management team in November. Chair of the Humber Nature Partnership, Paul Learoyd, announced that *"the project is an outstanding example of what can be achieved when a dedicated group of people set their minds to helping a species struggling to survive on the Humber. Congratulations to everyone who has been involved in the project over the years."*

THANK YOU

Spurn Bird Observatory Trust would like to take this opportunity to thank all the fantastic, dedicated volunteers and staff who have helped 'Spurn's terns' over the many years, and to our project partners and funders who make this work possible. Thank you.

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Spurn Bird Observatory Trust, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Natural England, Environment Agency and South Holderness Countryside Society. Working with, and supported by, the Humber Nature Partnership.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Spurn Bird Observatory Trust recruits several seasonal Little Tern wardens and residential volunteers each year on behalf of the Little Tern management committee. The roles involve protecting the colony at Beacon Ponds, helping with public liaison, and monitoring the breeding shorebirds in the area – including the Little Terns. These roles are advertised on the observatories website and social media outlets each winter.

VISITING SPURN

Spurn Bird Observatory is one of Britain's most exciting east coast birding locations and has provided accommodation for nearly 60 years for thousands of people who enjoy watching birds and other wildlife.

X (formally Twitter): @Spurn_Terns

Awards presentation, by Humber Nature

The Storm Petrel

By Hannah Hereward, BTO Cymru

European Storm Petrels are one of the smallest flying Atlantic seabirds. They breed on rodent-free islands and some isolated headlands across the North Atlantic Ocean. In Britain and Ireland they can be found on many of our offshore islands, but they are an incredibly elusive seabird: firstly, because they only return to land during the breeding season, secondly, only then at night and thirdly, offshore they are a small bird and so are hard to spot amidst the waves on seawatching trips.

During the non-breeding season, individuals migrate south. In fact, ringing records have identified that Storm Petrels have migrated as far as the Indian Ocean coastline of Mozambique!

Adult Storm Petrels are around the same physical size as a House Sparrow and weigh a mere 20–30 g. To look at, the adults are mostly black but with a white rump and distinctive white bars on the underwing. Alongside size and colour, an interesting feature of the storm petrel group is that their feathers hold a sweet-musty smell which is very distinctive (some might say lovely!).

Storm Petrels typically nest in burrows. These include rock crevices and soil burrows – often using tunnels created by other species, for example Rabbits – as well as under boulders. In these burrows, they create a small nest cup, into which a single white egg is laid. Both parents incubate the egg and later feed the chick until it has fully grown and is ready to leave the nest. At peak weight, chicks are typically double that of their parents!

As with many seabirds, there are various conservation concerns for the storm petrel group, the top three threats to their survival have been identified as: fisheries bycatch, climate change-induced severe weather and invasive predators.

Well established global conservation tools in the form of eradication programmes have led to many success stories in dealing with the latter issue. These programmes are carefully planned and executed to strategically remove the target invasive species and there are often incredibly fast increases in numbers of seabirds returning to breed as a result.

Several of these programmes have successfully occurred on UK offshore islands, for example, St Agnes and Gugh of the Isles of Scilly archipelago, Lundy Island, and the Shiant Isles. Continued monitoring after an island is declared free of the invasive species is important to ensure they stay invasive species-free, as is checking no unwanted visitors have arrived at a colony for the first time. One way to do this is having a conservation detection dog (for detecting rats, for example); in Wales we have 'Jinx' who formed part of the EU LIFE-funded 'Biosecurity for LIFE' project, now succeeded by legacy projects.

Ready for action! Jinx and Handler, Greg Moran, by Dave Astins, Storm Petrel : Tom Wright

FACT BOX
Status: Birds of Conservation Concern 'Amber-listed', globally of Least Concern.
Measurements: 37–41 cm wingspan, 26 g weight.
Breeds: in the Western Palearctic side of the North Atlantic and on western Mediterranean coasts. Also breeding in Aegean and Adriatic seas.
Winters: in the South Atlantic, off the shores of western and southern Africa, and in the southern Indian Ocean.
Diet: surface organisms including small fish, squid, crustaceans and jellyfish, also offal from fisheries discards.
Life span: 11 years typically. Maximum recorded is 38 years and 17 days from date ringed.
Breeding: typically starts at four years, single brood per year containing a single egg.
Nest sites: in burrows, among rocks or in dry-stone walls and artificial structures. Found on some isolated headlands and rodent-free islands.

Using recordings of Storm Petrel calls to assess 'playback response rates' as a monitoring method is key to gaining an understanding of breeding numbers in many colonies.

Tape playback, and Storm Petrel chick, Skokholm, by Giselle Eagle/WTSWW

Additional threats to Storm Petrels include Artificial Light At Night (ALAN), which can attract fledged chicks to mainland sites, disorientating them, causing them to land and potentially be predated.

To better understand the impact of these, and other, threats to the Storm Petrels, detailed breeding success and population count data are needed. However, their breeding behaviour makes the Storm Petrel one of the hardest species to monitor, because it is difficult to truly monitor their population and breeding attempts in natural nests. This is not only because they breed on remote islands which can be hard to access, and hidden away in burrows, but also because they are incredibly sensitive to disturbance, so any monitoring needs to be conducted carefully.

However, various methods are now used to monitor them. One of the survey methods to assess population numbers is to analyse the number of responses to a recording of a Storm Petrel call (termed 'playback response rates'), which can be used to work out the number of occupied burrows in the colony. This is a structured survey that a host organisations and individuals are in the process of conducting on various UK offshore islands.

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of breeding success rates, an increasingly utilised method is to survey birds nesting in artificial nest boxes. Some of these have been established for many years, *e.g.,* Mousa in Scotland, and others have been more recently established, for example, the 'Petrel Stations' on Skokholm Island.

These are set up in such a way that the inhabitant Storm Petrel pairs can continue their nesting attempt whilst also providing easy, disturbance-reduced ways for humans to monitor the progress. This allows for monitoring of in-nest behaviours, potential threats, and ultimately the overall breeding success rates.

These and other monitoring methods combined, aid in producing population estimates and breeding success figures for this species. Regularly monitoring these artifical sites will help researchers to assess any potential changes and identify threats, to further aid future conservation efforts for the Storm Petrel.

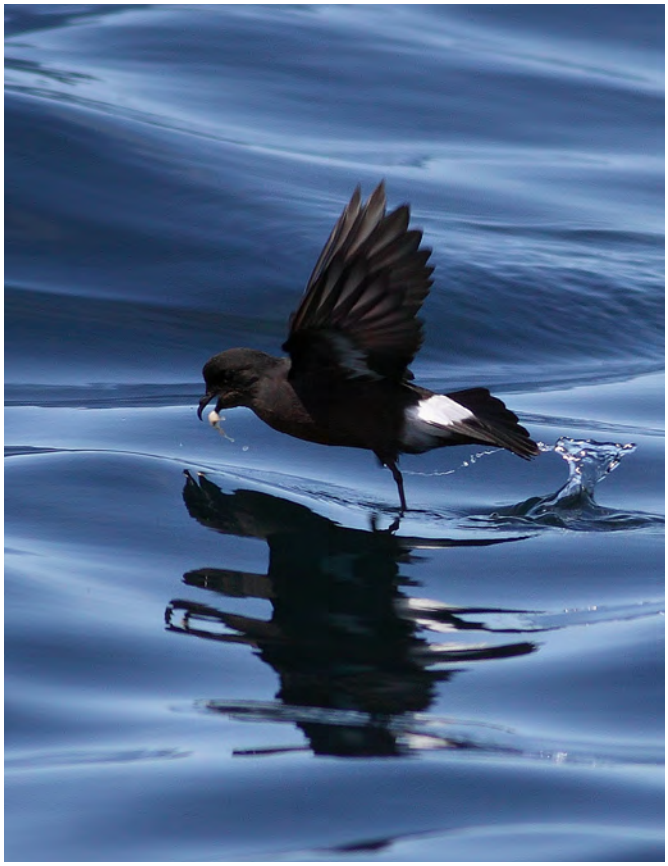
Artifical nest sites have allowed for disturbance-free viewing of the private lives of Storm Petrels. On Skokholm, footage from cameras installed within the nest chambers has allowed for remote nest monitoring, and is also bringing a greater understanding of 'playback response rates' which could have implications for the analysis of data from surveys using this method.

HOW TO HELP

There are 191 sites in the SMP database containing Storm Petrel colony count data and three with Breeding Success information. Long-term monitoring of both abundance and breeding success better enables the drivers of population change to be determined. However, this species is very difficult to monitor and colonies tend to be in difficult to reach locations. Many of the locations with breeding birds which are accessible are being monitored at some level already.

To help with the monitoring of Storm Petrels, you would need to volunteer for a group or organisation currently carrying out surveys in the breeding season. For example, places such as Skokholm Island Bird Observatory advertise residential volunteer positions most years, and in the summer this would include some work with Storm Petrels. So keep your eyes peeled for such opportunities.

If you are already monitoring a Storm Petrel colony, please check that the data is reaching the SMP database.



Storm Petrel at sea, by Joe Pender.
Storm Petrels in the nest, taken from video footage, by Chris Payne/WTSWW

Petrel Stations, by Richard Brown/WTSWW
Building the station, by Giselle Eagle/WTSWW

The original Skokholm Island Petrel Station (top image). After its adoption by Storm Petrels at the cliff-top quarry where an existing colony was present, a second station was built within a drystone wall undergoing repairs (middle and bottom image) in 2023. This is located by the observatory's guest and volunteer accommodation in the centre of the island. Here, Storm Petrels can already be heard at night, during the breeding season, from the drystone walls so this additional accommodation will hopefully be as attractive and used in the years to come.

Making it happen: the faces behind SMP

By Kate Cowin and Elaine Freezer, SMP participants – both joining SMP for the first time in 2023

Introducing:
Kate Cowin on the coast of Whitley Bay, North Tyneside

I have always loved birds, and seabirds were my favourite with many nesting sites in Northumberland and Yorkshire.

From 1991 until recently, we owned a second home in Orkney. Beachcombing, collecting seal bones and bird skulls and sending rings to the BTO strengthened my connection. I loved that BTO sent a reply with the details of the bird submitted, it made me feel it was important work.

That first year in Orkney brought me closer to Fulmars. We had waded out to a partially submerged blockship on the 4th Churchill Barrier and found ourselves face to face with a chick and an adult nearby. We hurried away and didn't get squirted by the bird's classic defensive vomiting!

I moved to the seaside at Whitley Bay in 2021, joined BTO's Garden BirdWatch and live very near the lower promenades where I walk my dog each afternoon.

I discovered a small colony of Fulmars on the low cliffs at the back of the promenade, so when I read that a volunteer was needed to monitor the Whitley Bay colony, I couldn't wait, especially since they hadn't been counted since the year 2000!

I am so happy to have joined the SMP, counting the colony size and breeding success. Sarah Harris, SMP Organiser, has been really helpful, dealing quickly with all my questions. As a pensioner, I am something of a technophobe so taking quality photos was beyond me and at times the website challenged me, but I got there in the end.

The colony is located behind a derelict paddling pool, 8 meters across and about 46 meters wide. Not the easiest object for fledging Fulmars to navigate!

For ease of counting, I split the cliff into three areas, North, Middle and South. The largest presence was 29 birds so I was surprised when the actual number nesting was just three pairs, plus a pair who visited infrequently and lost their egg quite early on, from a highly unsuitable site. There was just one chick in each area, named 'N', 'M' and 'S'.

Time spent on Orkney brought Kate closer to Fulmars. Little did Kate know, there would be a colony in need of monitoring near home in Whitley Bay later along the line.

Photographs of Fulmars on Orkney, and Fulmar colony site at Whitley, by Kate Cowin

All three nests were quite high but none of the chicks could be seen from the pavement above the cliff, or obliquely from the sloping path linking the lower promenade to the pavement. No eggshells were found, apart from the lost egg. By early July, the colony was much quieter, with most non-nesting birds having left.

Fulmars are so sociable and seem very supportive of each other, often gathering in groups as lookouts on the grassy ledges at the top. I soon learned that if I paid too much attention, they would stand up to stare and cackle at me, so I observed them more covertly, and took long distance photos to confirm locations, avoiding binoculars until two of the chicks became difficult to see behind vegetation. I also didn't want the many walkers to know there was something interesting happening, and explained to four sets of cliff climbers that they couldn't climb there but would be OK a bit further along – they were very understanding.

The three chicks seemed to be left on their own most of the time. There were more adult visits in the last days before the chicks flew but I didn't witness any chicks leaving. I recently met someone who saw Chick 'N' on the ground on 31 August. It shuffled 21 metres around the top edge of the empty pool, squeezed under the railings, dropped into the sea at high tide and immediately flew away. I must have missed it by minutes, and next year will go without the dog as fledging approaches.

"It has been fascinating to watch all their behaviours and wonder what it means. I have learned so much and am very excited to repeat it next year and see what patterns, if any, emerge."

Prospective volunteers should know that a very limited number of visits are expected and I only did more because I was there with my dog anyway!

The final results from 2023 monitoring were 13 Apparently Occupied Sites with three successfully fledged chicks. I look forward to seeing what unfolds with 'my' Fulmars in 2024!

Fulmar colony, by Kate Cowin. Fulmar, by Liz Cutting/BTO

Introducing:
Elaine Freezer at a brand new inland patch on the outskirts of Southampton, Hampshire

My journey to SMP started last year when I was away on a birding trip at Bempton Cliffs falling even more for the Gannet, Razorbills and all the other seabirds that are so captivating.

It was a fabulous trip and left me wanting to be able to do more to help, although I wasn't sure where to start. Serendipitously, whilst on the trip, I received the BTO email publicising their Seabird Ecology course. I registered straight away.

The course was educational and inspiring and so immediately afterwards I visited the SMP website looking for volunteering opportunities near me.

This left me wondering just how do you monitor gulls nesting on tall buildings, so I emailed the SMP for advice.

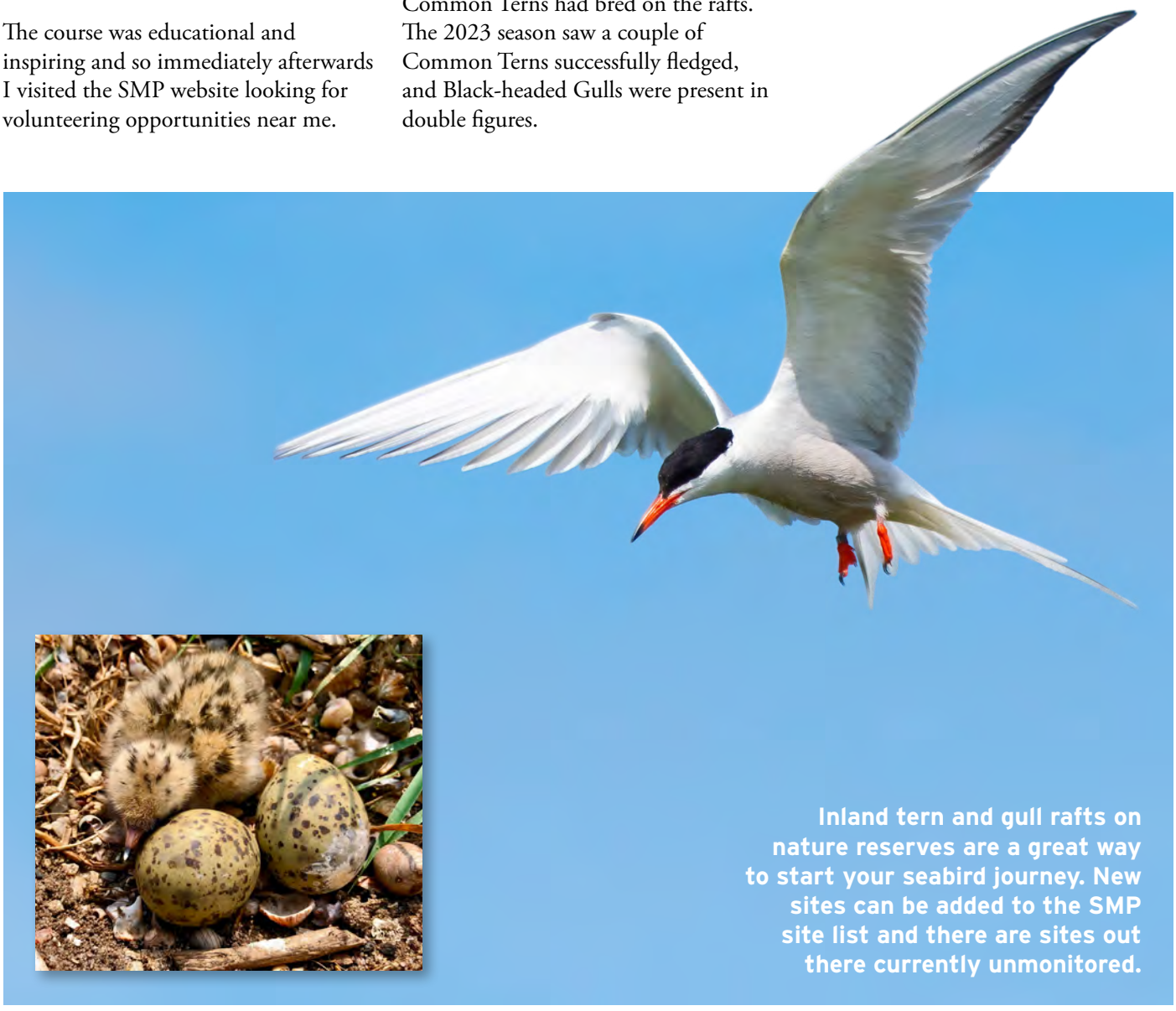
The amazing Sarah Harris, the SMP Organiser, sent me a really helpful reply and instead suggested looking to see if there was any evidence of breeding Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls at a small local nature reserve.

So off I went and I was delighted to report back with the good news that Common Terns had bred on the rafts. The 2023 season saw a couple of Common Terns successfully fledged, and Black-headed Gulls were present in double figures.

"I'm now looking forward to the forthcoming breeding season and knowing that the data I collect will help the programme."

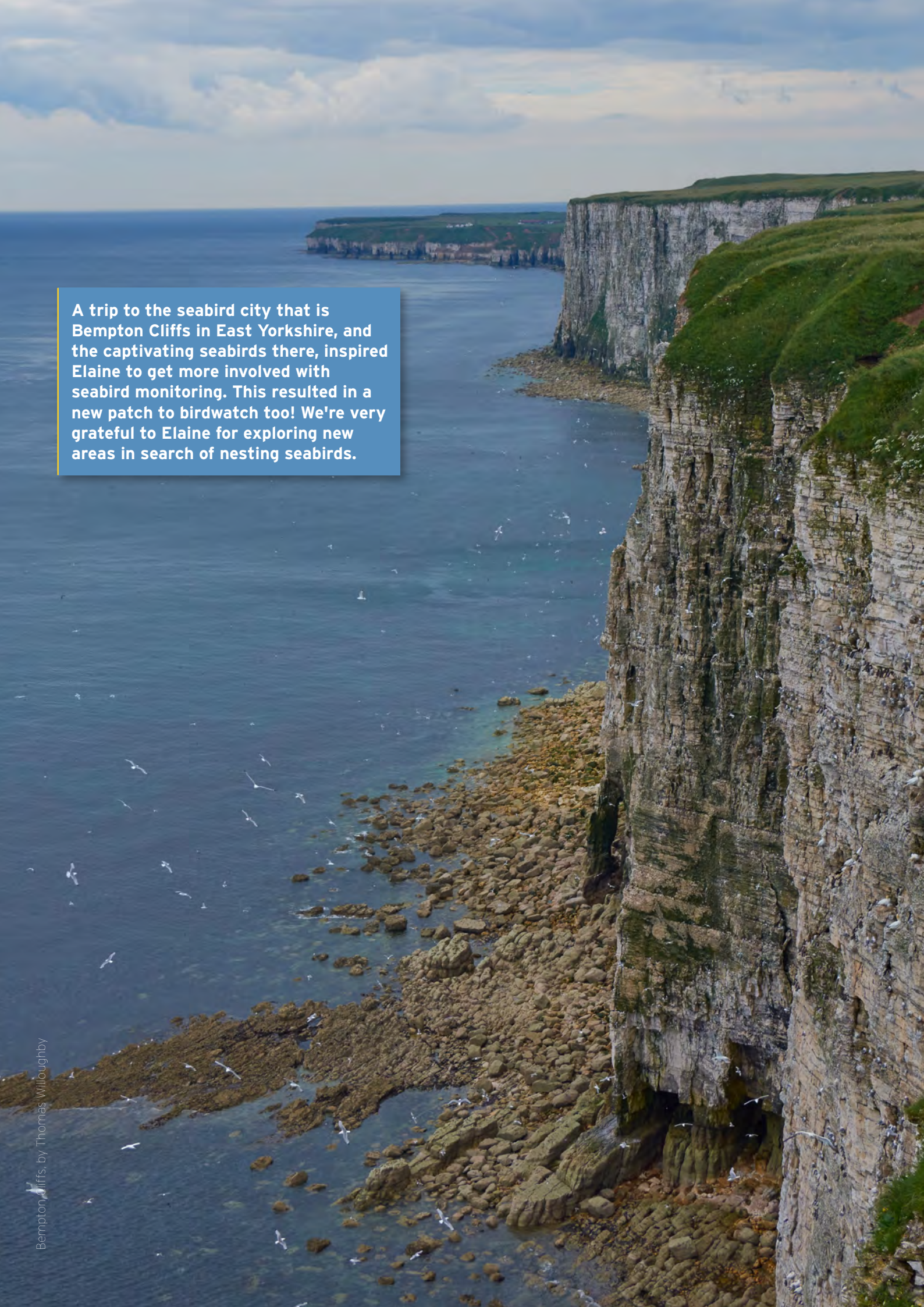
Additionally, I now patch bird at this site – which was barely recorded on BirdTrack – in recent months and I have enjoyed not just seabirds but regular Kingfishers (yes, plural!) and even the occasional Osprey too.

Thank you SMP!



Inland tern and gull rafts on nature reserves are a great way to start your seabird journey. New sites can be added to the SMP site list and there are sites out there currently unmonitored.

Common Tern, by Thomas Willoughby. Common Tern eggs and chick, by Tom Cadwallender. Common Tern raft in Hampshire, by Elaine Freezer



A trip to the seabird city that is Bempton Cliffs in East Yorkshire, and the captivating seabirds there, inspired Elaine to get more involved with seabird monitoring. This resulted in a new patch to birdwatch too! We're very grateful to Elaine for exploring new areas in search of nesting seabirds.

Bempton Cliffs, by Thomas Willoughby

Aukward Auks

By Sarah Harris, BTO

In this issue of SMP*news* we are taking a look at the breeding plumage of auks. This includes Puffin, Guillemot, Razorbill and Black Guillemot. The aim with this ID feature is to cover all the species encountered during SMP surveys and to make their identification easier for all.

In the images below, we display the birds in their fine breeding plumage, but also as silhouettes. The latter is so important in bird identification, with the 'near or far' effect making estimating size a challenge out in the wild, whereas learning structure, sometimes with the aid of a silhouette, is absolutely key.

To start with, we'll look at the most striking of the four breeding auk species here in the UK – the **Puffin**. Structurally, it is squat with a bulging chest and proportionally large beak to head ratio. The beak is chunky and almost as thick as its head is deep. The head is also large in proportion to its body and it has a short tail. In summer, the beak is unmistakably colourful, they have orange feet, a white front and face, and black back.

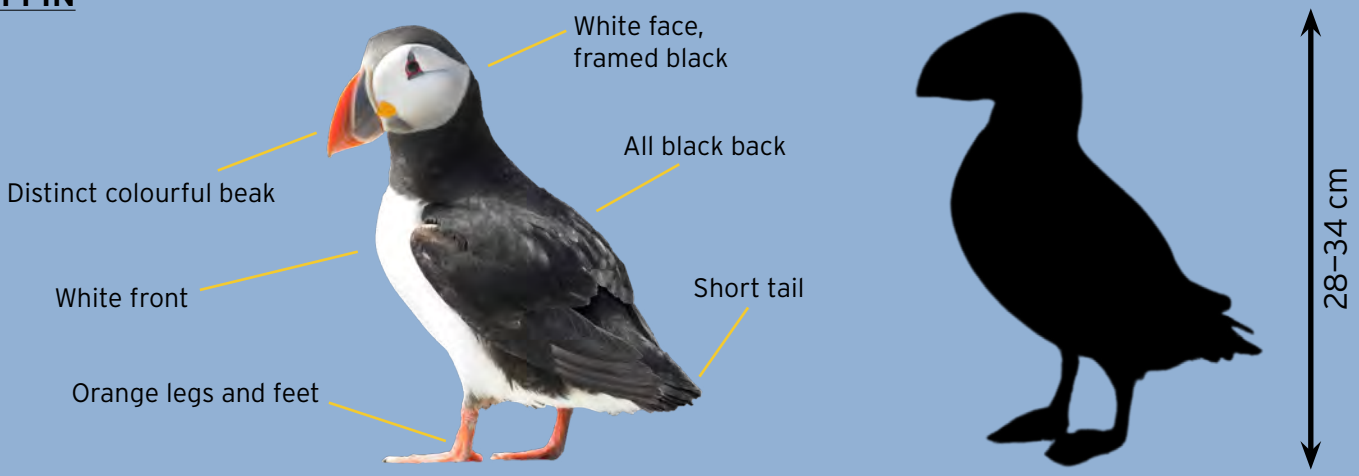
You are most likely to encounter Puffins in the breeding season at the coast from south-west Wales and western Ireland, up to the Northern Isles of Scotland and St Kilda and back down the east coast to Yorkshire. In the winter months, they become open sea wanderers.

Next up, the **Guillemot**. Structurally, this is a slender auk with an elegant neck and long, thin, pointed beak, and a short, stumpy tail. They tend to stand resting on their leg below the 'knee' (known as the tarsus), rather than their 'feet', as seen in the Puffin. Their legs and feet are black, and in flight protrude beyond the tail-tip (unlike in Razorbill). It is a black to chocolate brown tone on its back, head and neck, and has a small white line three-quarters of the way down the back where the trailing edge of the inner wing feathers (its secondaries) are white and on show when the bird is standing, wings shut. The inside of their beak is a fantastic yellow.

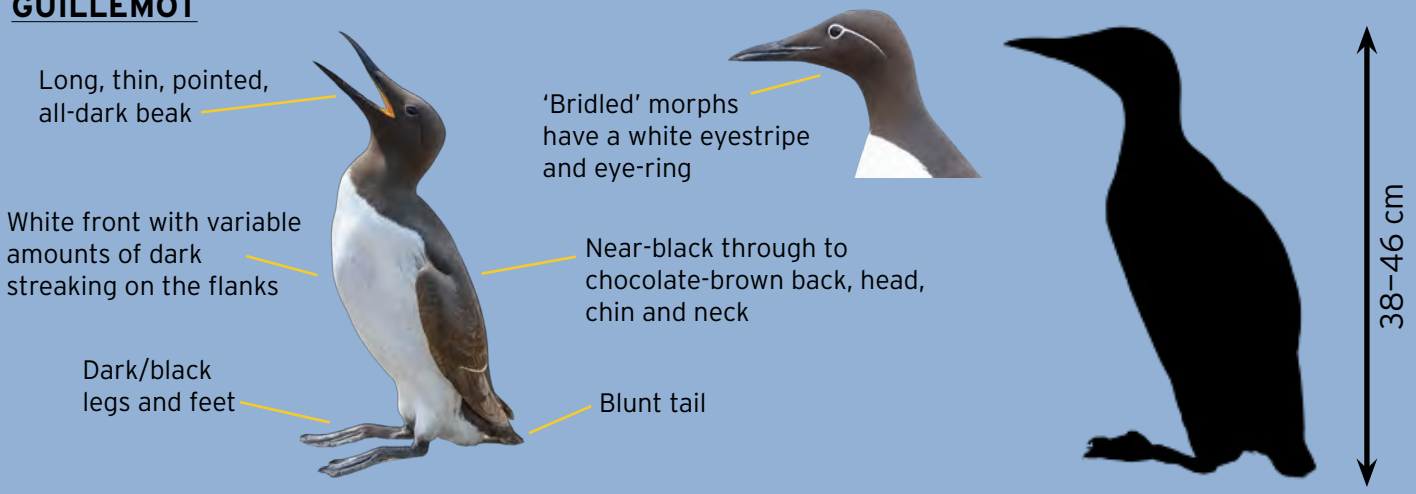
Nesting on cliff faces in large colonies, and the commonest breeding auk in the UK, they can be found along much of the coastline, with the exception of the south-east.

Probably the most easily confused of the auks are the Guillemot and **Razorbill**. The Razorbill has... a razor-like beak! Deep and blunt-ended with a small hook on the end, and not something you want to be on the receiving end of! The beak has

PUFFIN



GUILLEMOT



a white vertical line half way along, complemented by a white line of feathers stretching from the top of the beak to the eye in an elegant 'sweep'.

Guillemots either have a plain dark head and bill or, if a 'bridled' morph, a white eye ring and strip curving down the face towards the neck *behind* the eye – not in front as with Razorbill.

Depending on the latitude of the population, Guillemots are black through to chocolate-brown above, whereas Razorbill are jet black above wherever they call home. Similar to Guillemots, Razorbills have a delicious apricot colour inside their beak.

Razorbills are stocky with a thick neck and square head, unlike the slim Guillemot, and have a longer and pointier tail too. As with Guillemot, they have dark legs and feet and sit back on their leg below the 'knee'.

Razorbills nest in the south-west, on the west coast of Wales, from the Isle of Man northwards into Scotland and around most of Scotland and Northern Ireland's coastlines. They have a limited distribution along the east coast of England and do not breed in the south-east. Similar to the next species to be described, the Black Guillemot, Razorbill seek boulders and crevices in remote areas to breed, but will also utilise sheltered ledges on steep cliffs, where they can cause identification conundrums when pairs are nestled among rows and rows of nesting Guillemots.

Black Guillemots, also known as Tysties, are restricted in their range to the north and west of Scotland, Northern Ireland, north-west Wales, Cumbria and the Isle of Man. Black Guillemot nest among boulders, in rock crevices and in artificial structures, such as harbour walls with suitable holes for nesting in.

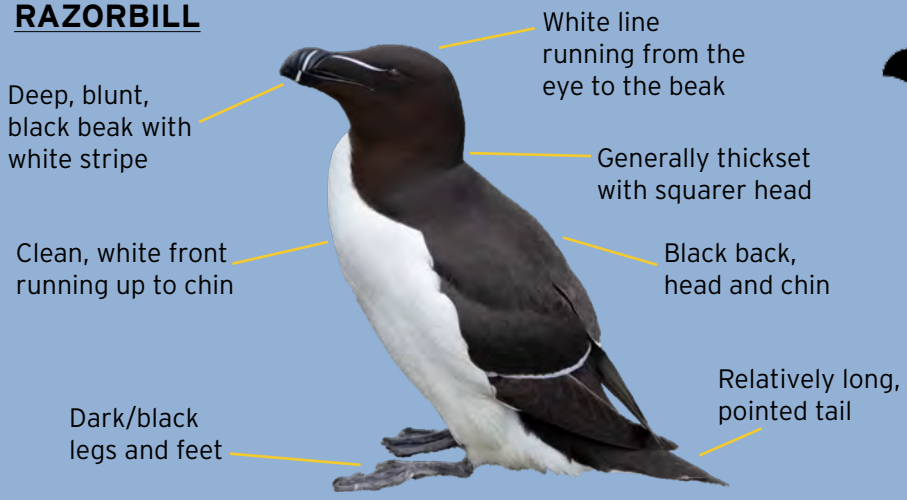
They are quite 'dumpy' (said with pure admiration!) compared to Guillemot and Razorbill and more pear-shaped than the top-heavy Puffin. They have a thin beak, but not as sharp-tipped as the Guillemot's and this is brilliant red inside, the same as its legs and feet – for a coordinated look. Otherwise, they are black all over with big white patches on the upperwing which show halfway down the back of the bird when at rest.

So think: where are you? What is the habitat? Beak and feet? Structure (top-heavy, slim, stocky or pear)? And then the finer detail. But most importantly, which is your favourite (now not so aukward to identify) auk?

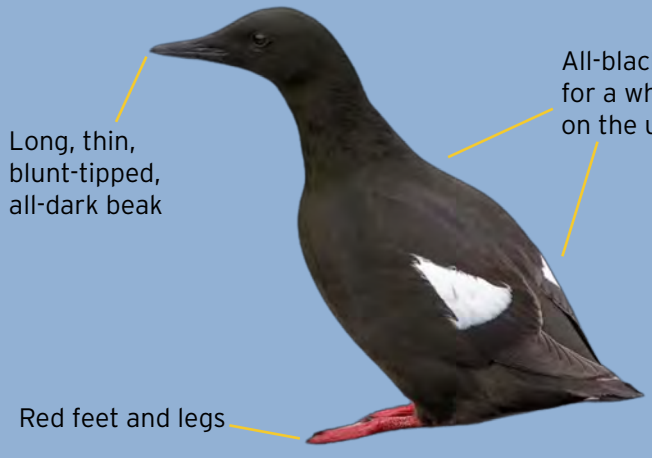
ID VIDEOS
The BTO Training Team have created ID videos, freely available online. These include 'Winter Auks' for the identification of auks outside of the breeding season.

Access these at: www.bto.org/develop-your-skills/bird-identification/videos

RAZORBILL



BLACK GUILLEMOT



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. 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 (Principal Ecologist – Seabirds), 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!

Where are you based and what do you do?

I'm based in Aberdeen, Scotland, and I am co-leader of the JNCC Marine Species Team, with responsibility for marine ornithology evidence and advice. The team works on seabird and marine waterbird monitoring, seabird research, and providing advice to governments on conservation, including the effects of offshore industries.

What is your experience in working with seabirds?

I started off doing research on woodland birds but then had opportunity to diversify when I worked in the USA. I did two seasons on Midway Atoll banding (ringing in UK terms) Bonin Petrels and collecting demographic data, monitoring albatross productivity plots (including rebanding old birds) and surveying other breeding seabirds. I also helped with banding and taking blood samples from Hawaiian Petrels on Maui. I spent a year on Fair Isle where I also got to help with seabird surveys and ringing as part of long-term demographic monitoring.

What was your first environmental/conservation job?

It was a post-doctoral position with the University of Tennessee but researching Hawaiian honeycreepers and Nene on the island of Maui.

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

Yes, I did some conservation management, bird surveys and bird ringing as a volunteer.

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

The birds – which never cease to amaze and inspire; I especially liked getting to know individuals, their characters and life stories, even if short.

I'm now a manager of a seabird team and I really like helping colleagues achieve the things that they are passionate about and to make a difference to conservation.

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

'Frank'.

Do you have a favourite seabird experience?

Waking up to the sounds of 400,000 Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses on Midway Atoll after flying in at night (to avoid air strikes).

What are your hobbies?

Apart from birding, I like ambling about the countryside enjoying wildlife, especially fungi and flowers. I'm a bit arty too and draw, paint, print, weave, play with clay, and take photos.

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

I'm a bit obsessive about fungi and lead a local citizen science project on using DNA sequencing for identification and recording, especially ectomycorrhizal fungi in Caledonian pinewoods and birch woods. I specialise in Brittlegills and can extract and amplify DNA at home. I'm also a member of the British

Brittlegill *Russula decolorans*, by Helen Baker

Common Gull, by Edmund Fellowes/BTO

Mycological Society's Field Mycology and Conservation Committee.

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

I would buy a big chunk of northern Scotland where I could restore native forest and spend all my time watching wildlife flourishing in it. I'd also set up a charity to research and support sustainable landscape and seascape transformation for the benefit of wildlife and local communities.

Why do you think the SMP is an important scheme?

SMP is critical for understanding the status of many of our seabirds and providing an indication of possible drivers of change. It has been central to seabird protection and conservation since its inception. Seabirds, as apex predators, can tell us much about the health of our marine ecosystems and are relatively easy to monitor compared with other marine wildlife, so SMP provides us with valuable context for wider marine research and conservation.

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

Favourite book: Snowdrops, by Naomi Slade.
Song: The Lark Ascending, by Vaughan Williams; does that count? [Editor: Yes!]
Desert Island item: A decent knife.

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

A vet.

How do you stay motivated in your work?

It can be hard at times, but even making a tiny difference every so often to bird conservation is enough. I've been fortunate enough to help write nature positive international policy and support development of domestic policy, which might seem boring to some but does make a difference. I'm also really privileged to work with some brilliant people in JNCC and the wider ornithological community, which is inspiring.

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

Common Gull and Razorbill. Two isn't enough either!

Introducing:
Niall Burton

Where are you based and what do you do?

I am based in BTO's Thetford headquarters and lead our Wetland and Marine Research Team.

The team works closely with the BTO's Surveys Team to support development of the SMP, the BTO/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey and BTO/JNCC/NatureScot Goose and Swan Monitoring Programme.

Our research uses those monitoring data and field studies to explore the wide range of factors that may affect waterbird and seabird population dynamics, including climate change, disease, habitat change and loss, and the impacts of coastal and offshore developments.

What is your experience in working with seabirds?

My research has broadened over time from a wader focus to all waterbirds and seabirds, with most seabird experience in relation to gulls. This has included supporting both the current and previous Winter Gull Survey, as well as a range of tracking projects, especially on Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

What was your first environmental/conservation job?

Watching the sexual habits of Peacocks at Whipsnade Zoo for an Open University evolutionary study evaluating the importance of their trains in mating success!

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

Yes, I did. As a volunteer with RSPB on their reserves in East Anglia, and through the volunteer surveys coordinated by BTO, including nest recording and bird ringing.

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

Understanding individual birds' life histories and their behaviour has always been of fascination. Supporting the development of our monitoring to the longer-term benefit of our research and understanding is at the core of my current role.

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

'Tractor boy!' [Editor's note: something about football and Ipswich and tractors]

Do you have a favourite seabird experience?

Combining interests in birds and historic places, the seabird cliffs at Dunstanburgh Castle are a favourite place.

What are your hobbies?

Birding and wider natural history, visiting places that are both good for wildlife and of historic interest. I've also been a keen nest recorder much of my life. Photography and gardening too.

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

I've been undertaking a long-term study on Tree Pipits here in Thetford Forest, looking at breeding success and monitoring survival through colour-ringing and also using acoustic recording to identify individuals.

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

Outside! I would want to spend more time supporting local monitoring and conservation initiatives.

Why do you think the SMP is an important scheme?

Britain and Ireland support globally important populations of seabirds, and the information collected by the SMP on species numbers has been invaluable both in assessing the status of species and in protected site designation. These abundance data, together with monitoring of productivity, and of survival and diet through the SMP Key Sites, has greatly benefited understanding of the drivers of population change.

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 Forest of Hours by Kerstin Ekman.
Song: Don't we get eight for the desert island? Where to start!? Well, let's go with Where Do I Begin by Beth Orton and the Chemical Brothers.
Desert Island item: a machete (survival first!)

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

My father worked at the Natural History Museum at Tring, so I had an ambition at an early age to follow him into a career related to nature.

How do you stay motivated in your work?

Working with a fantastic, dedicated and supportive team. Knowing that those that I work with, and those who support our work, have common values and aims is so important, especially when progress can sometimes not be as fast as we would all like. Tiny victories and bursts of speed!

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

Black-headed Gull and Black Guillemot, or more fondly known as 'Tysties'.

Tree Pipit nest, by Niall Burton

SMP update

By Sarah Harris and Emma Caulfield, BTO

The SMP continues to grow and evolve and there is lots going on, from trend analysis improvements, participant engagement, drone use workshops for survey organisers, through to the formation of a Task and Finish group looking into how best to monitor urban gulls. Not to mention the additional survey needs to monitor the impacts of HPAI (bird flu) on our seabird colonies.

SMP ONLINE DEVELOPMENTS

This winter, work began on planning and specifying developments to the SMP Online data entry system.

Work to build a data verification and checking system within the application is nearly ready for testing by a selection of SMP Online users – both new users and experienced. This system will help us ensure data accuracy by flagging unusual records at the time of data entry, as well as being used during the end of season checks by BTO HQ. Additionally, specifications are being drawn up for a variety of work. This includes tweaks to the data entry page to allow easier data submission, improved site mapping functions, ability to store information about sites within the system, *i.e.* site details. Fear not, it is all going to be OK – with new functions comes new guidance and this will include videos, written instructions and possibly some drop-in sessions on using SMP Online when the works are complete in the coming years.

ZERO COUNTS

The calculations stage of SMP trends relies on consistent coverage and data figures in the system. The current analysis programme estimates missing data for sites, and this can sometimes be higher than zero if there are historical counts in the system and no zero counts to show the birds are no longer there. This means a zero count for Little Tern is as important as a 103 Little Tern count at a site previously occupied. This applies to both Plot and Whole Colony Counts.

Entering data for sites where a colony is now gone does not sound like the best use of time – but it is! And the best news is that it doesn't take long to log in SMP Online once a season. We will keep you posted regarding how many years in a row we need zero counts from a site as we update and improve data analysis over the next few years. For now though, please be a Zero Hero!

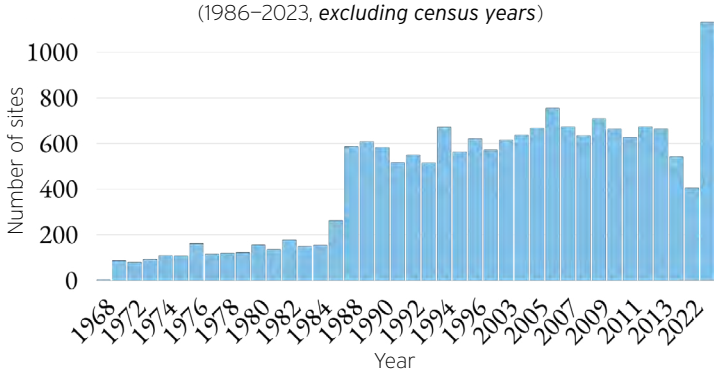
PARTICIPANTS & COVERAGE *(as of 14/05/2024)*

We have seen an increase in currently allocated participants registered to SMP Online (for either Colony Counts, Breeding Success or both) and allocated sites from 170 in the last issue of SMP*news*, to 232 registered now. It is important to have surveyors allocated the sites they count so that they can check everything in the system is as it should be – from maps to historic data, and of course data entry straight from the source, the person who knows the sites and present birds best.

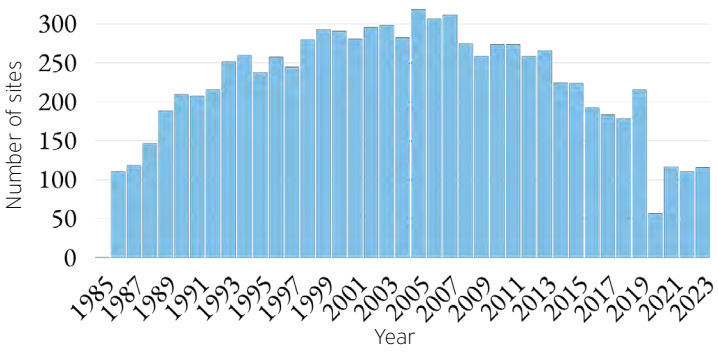
In 2023, we had additional monitoring for the HPAI work led by RSPB (see page 1), and this boosted Colony Count coverage for the year. Additionally, we are slowly growing and reaching more seabird surveyors, receiving offshore data and historic data too. We have received Colony Count data for 1,134 sites and Breeding Success data from 116 sites in 2023 so far. Thank you to everyone who took part in a survey and to everyone who got in touch to either submit data collected already, or first-time SMP-ers wanting to start taking part.

If you have seabird data you'd like to contribute to SMP, want to join the scheme, or are unable to login when you should be able to, please email smp@bto.org.

Colony Count site coverage by year
(1986–2023, *excluding census years*)

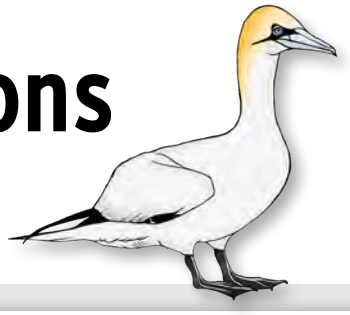


Breeding Success site coverage by year
(1986–2023)



Frequently Asked Questions

By Sarah Harris and Emma Caulfield, BTO



I'd like to survey a local area of cliff, but I can't identify all the seabird species that nest there, is it OK just to survey the ones I know?

Yes. Ideally, we would like to receive data for all the species in a SMP site, however, some people specialise in a certain species, or are confident identifying Fulmar, but struggle with the gulls, for example.

In these cases, you are welcome to count the one species you can confidently identify. It might be that in time, confidence grows for the other species in the area, and you start to count those too. Or, even better, you form a team with a variety of expertise, and the species are divided among the team – more than one person can be allocated a site if they are working closely together to coordinate monitoring.

When is the SMP Report up to 2023 expected?

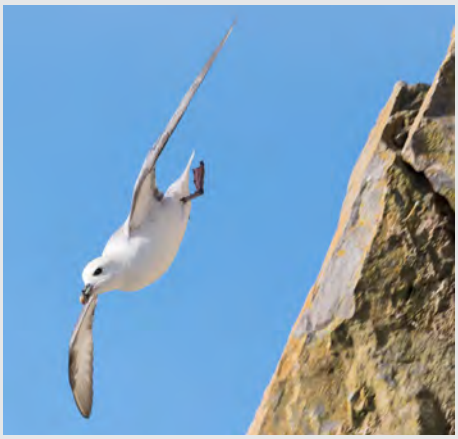
We are in the currently producing a bumper SMP Report covering the years 2021, 2022 and 2023! This is due to be published in the autumn of 2024.

From then on, we aim to have more timely reporting, although this will rely on prompt data entry following the breeding season. We ask that all data are input by the end of October each year ready for data checking and trend production – together, let's do this!

Do you want my historic breeding seabird records?

Yes! Absolutely! We can then use these data in future trend analysis and research work.

We accept data from any year and if you have been surveying a site, or used to survey a site, and the data never reached the SMP database, we want to hear from you! We can create new sites where there isn't an existing site in the system or can add data to existing sites where it is missing for a given year or time period.



How can I survey a cliff without a boat?

Some sites are impossible to see in full from the land, such as sheer cliffs. This means the use of boats is the only way to get a comprehensive, comparable count, and this means they might only be possible to survey during census years or periodically. In time, we hope to enhance sampling methods to allow annual, repeatable, plot counts at such sites between the years of complete counts in a way that the analysis process can handle.

Can I store site map information and annotated photographs of colonies and plots in SMP Online?

This information is vital at some sites for accurate and consistent recording, whether it be finding the plot and understanding where it is on the cliff-face through to showing the best vantage points from which to overlook a colony – anything that helps future participants or reminds current participants exactly how a site should be surveyed.

Currently, this information is stored by individuals or organisations on their own computers or in folders. We have aspirations to allow for comments to be stored against sites within SMP Online and if possible, allow for the upload of images and maps too! This would safeguard this information for the future and allow it to be accessible to participants on SMP Online. We'll keep you posted as to what is possible and when developments of the online application might be expected.

For now, please keep this information safe or create it for sites where background knowledge is not yet recorded.

I'm an SMP participant, can I contribute to SMPnews?

Yes! Please drop us an email at smp@bto.org. We'd love to hear about your site, research, seabird study species or survey queries.

Fulmar, by Philip Croft/BTO. Gannet artwork, by George Woodford

What considerations do I need to make with regard to bird flu and SMP surveying?

Familiarise yourself with the symptons of Avian Influenza in birds. Symptons vary between species but are listed below. Continued monitoring of birds is important in order to track the impact. However, this needs to be conducted safely and sensibly.

If you suspect, or have a confirmed outbreak of Avian Influenza at a site you survey, please contact your relevant country agency for advice. Please report the outbreak via the instructions outlined below.

If you carry out bird ringing as part of your seabird monitoring work, check the latest update on the BTO HPAI Ringing Framework which is emailed to bird ringers when updates are made, and is available to view in full on the Bird Ringers pages.

For the latest guidance and links, visit: www.bto.org/avian-influenza

REPORTING 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.
EURING: www.euring.org

AVIAN INFLUENZA

Commonly known as bird flu, this is an influenza caused by viruses adapted to birds, in a similar way to the human adapted influenza known as simply 'the (human) flu'. Flu viruses can vary in their ability to cause disease: there are high pathogenicity (HPAI) or low pathogenicity (LPAI) variants. Over the last couple of years, wild birds and the poultry industry have been dealing with the onslaught of a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, strain H5N1.

Symptoms of a bird with HPAI include: swollen head; blue discolouration of the neck and throat; loss of appetite; respiratory distress such as gaping beak, coughing, sneezing, gurgling, rattling; diarrhoea; fewer eggs laid; increased mortality; and neurological signs such as trembling, falling over, swimming or walking in circles.

Outbreaks of Avian Influenza are not uncommon, however, the effects of H5N1 have been particularly severe. Over the winter of 2021/22 an outbreak was confirmed on the Solway Firth and shocking images were released showing hundreds of dead Barnacle Geese strewn across the estuary landscape. Normally, we see the outbreaks subside as spring and summer return, however on this occasion, the virus spread to the UK's seabird populations as well as raptors, wildfowl, waders, gamebirds and other bird species.

Being long-lived species, seabirds are slow to reach sexual maturity and often produce low numbers of eggs each year, and are therefore slow to recover from losses. Additionally, many seabird species are already facing pressures from threats such as climate change, marine renewables, pollution, invasive species, fisheries and disturbance.

Our cover article by RSPB staff Linda Wilson and Connie Tremlett highlights the importance of monitoring the impacts of HPAI and the results from additional 2023 surveying. Thank you to everyone involved with this additional monitoring and for the prompt data entry that followed. This was a great team effort, led by RSPB, supported by 12 additional organisations, eight funders or grant providers, six boat operators and many, many volunteers and staff.

Working together with other organisations and country agencies, we are well placed to manage monitoring activities with both biosecurity and the importance of the data in the forefront of our minds.

Icons, by Pixabay/Canva.com

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. SMP funding contributions provided by JNCC support this additional monitoring by staff and volunteers.

Monitoring visits in 2022 to Canna, Fair Isle and the Isle of May were disrupted as a result of the outbreak of HPAI (bird flu) that spread through seabird colonies in Scotland (and then the rest of the UK) that spring, and the consequent suspension of ringing and other research activities at seabird breeding colonies in Scotland from late June. This particularly impacted monitoring of breeding productivity, although invaluable data were nevertheless still collected from all sites. Reports from 2022 will be published and made available shortly through JNCC's Monitoring/Survey Report Series: https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/

Key Site monitoring was able to continue as planned in 2023, and will be invaluable in understanding the impacts of HPAI. Reports from 2023 onwards will be published through the SMP website hosted by BTO.

Your newsletter, your say


SMPnews
Monitoring internationally important seabird populations across the UK
Welcome...
CONTENTS
Tracking bird flu
PARTNERS
BTO
JNCC

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 SMP*news*.

Contact details

Full details of the SMP Team can be found on page 24, and we will meet different team members in each issue of SMP*news*. However, below are details for the main point of contact for the scheme:

Sarah Harris, SMP Organiser, BTO
SMP organisation and scheme lead.
Direct email: **sarah.harris@bto.org**

SMP, Surveys Team,
British Trust for Ornithology
The Nunnery
Thetford
IP24 2PU
Tel: **01842 750050**
Email: **smp@bto.org**
Website: **www.bto.org/smp**
X (formally Twitter): **@smp_seabirds**