

7 August 2024

A SLOW START TO SEABIRD BREEDING SEASON AND REDUCTION IN NESTING ACTIVITY CAUSES CONCERN FOR CONSERVATION CHARITY

- **National Trust for Scotland experts observed a ‘sluggish’ start to seabird breeding season at the special places in its care**
- **Decline in number of nesting and breeding seabirds at Trust colonies located across Scotland recorded during annual monitoring surveys**
- **New seabird ecologists join the charity to help in its efforts to protect Scotland’s seabird populations**

Seabird experts at the National Trust for Scotland have raised concerns after observing a slow start to the seabird breeding season, which runs from April to September each year, and a reduction in nesting activity for key species such as Fulmars, Guillemots and Shags. The data was gathered during annual monitoring surveys by the conservation charity’s staff, and groups it supports on its islands, to measure the health of the seabird population in its care.

With over 1million seabirds nesting at Trust places every year, the conservation charity has recruited additional staff to work on new initiatives aimed at protecting Scotland’s natural heritage. Two new seabird ecologists, James Crymble and Elizabeth (Liz) Morgan, have joined the Trust at a crucial time and one of their first jobs has been to help its rangers to complete the annual monitoring surveys and record vital data about the seabird species that breed in Scotland.

James, who has worked as a seabird researcher on islands around the world, brings his experience managing invasive species and island biosecurity to the Trust. Liz, a seabird scientist and qualified bird ringer with a PhD in seabird ecology, has wide-ranging expertise that will be an asset to the charity in its efforts to protect Scotland’s wildlife for future generations to enjoy.

James said: “Preliminary results are in from our rangers recent monitoring surveys and though numbers do seem to be down for many species, it is not all doom and gloom. Kittiwakes, which had undergone dramatic population declines in Scotland over the last 30 years, appear to be bucking the trend this year with numbers increasing at most of our locations. It is a mixed picture for other species at our sites, with no Fulmars breeding on Canna this year. However, their numbers are looking better on Fair Isle, making it larger now than St Kilda, which has traditionally been the largest Fulmar colony in the UK. We are working to determine the root cause. We suspect for some species that part of the reason for the poor breeding season may be a knock-on effect from the avian flu that has been having a devastating impact on Scotland’s seabird populations in recent years.”

Liz added: "Some of these declines in seabird numbers such as Great Skua can be put down to the impact of avian flu over the last couple of years, but other things will also have impacted population numbers and nesting activity this year too. We suspect that the drop in numbers may be due to poor conditions experienced by birds over winter, such as stormy weather, which makes it hard for them to feed, and a lack of food more generally. Seabirds will sometimes take a 'sabbatical', taking a year off from having chicks, especially if they are not feeling at their best, which may be the case for some birds this year. So, there is hope things will improve next year."

Rangers working across the Trusts sites noted some interesting observations in Guillemot colonies from their monitoring surveys this year, with some birds looking a bit 'odd'. Liz commented:

"Several guillemots have been seen with unusual plumage variation during our survey work, with their typical smart chocolate brown summer plumage broken up by patches of speckled white. We would normally expect to see this in autumn as birds start moulting into their winter plumage. We can't say for certain whether these are birds that have not quite made it into full breeding condition, having moulted out of their breeding plumage early or if they are younger birds, so we will continue to observe them over the rest of the breeding season."

The new ecologists will be working with Senior Seabird Officer Ellie Owen, alongside a dedicated team of rangers to deliver twelve new initiatives designed to actively boost Scotland's important seabird species.

James, who is interested in using novel technologies to improve seabird conservation and research methods, said: "It's an exciting time to be working in seabird conservation. Some projects that once could only be dreamed of might soon be a reality, thanks to ever developing technologies. With so many important islands and colonies managed by the Trust, I am really looking forward to getting stuck into a hugely varied program of work.

"Since joining, I've been involved in various projects including one on Lunga, part of the Treshnish Isles. It aims to gain a better understanding of how to inspire people's connection to seabirds in the safest and most responsible way, so that visitors can observe the birds while also giving them enough space to avoid disturbing them and their chicks. Lessons learned on Lunga will help us to advise on the safest ways to connect with wildlife to benefit all seabirds not just on our sites, but across Scotland."

Following their work on Lunga, James, Liz, and the wider team visited St Kilda to monitor seabird species affected by the recent avian flu epidemic. Certain species such as the Great Skua were badly hit by the disease with two thirds of the colony wiped out on the islands.

Liz said: "The Trust manages more seabirds than any other Scottish conservation charity and it is a privilege to get to work on such significant and spectacular seabird colonies.

I've loved being immersed in the sights, sounds and smells of seabird islands again during my recent work on St Kilda. In response to avian flu, we are increasing our monitoring effort for affected species and looking at ways to support their recovery. The main project involves collecting samples from birds and fitting them with coloured rings as part of a wider 'ECOFLU' study led by Edinburgh University.

"The study aims to look at the levels of immunity in populations of Great Skuas and Puffins throughout Scotland, that will allow us to understand if birds have immunity, how they were infected, and potentially how to prevent another outbreak. Fitting the seabirds with coloured rings gives them an individual identity, so they can be tracked throughout their lifetime. It will help us to better monitor the survival of the Skua population on St Kilda as they recover from avian flu. In the last few days Avian Flu has again been detected in Scottish seabirds. This underlines how important our work is to monitor Avian flu and support our seabirds while they endure this additional pressure."

The new seabird ecologist roles and their activity with the Senior Seabird Officer are supported by Tim and Kim Allan, members of the National Trust for Scotland Patrons' Club. This funding has enabled the Trust to leverage further support from other funding sources facilitated through its Love our Nature project to support its conservation work.

The Love Our Nature project is supported by funding raised by players of People's Postcode Lottery, awarded through the Postcode Earth Trust, who have now raised more than £1.3 billion for thousands of charities and local good cause. This includes over £3.4m for the National Trust for Scotland since 2014, to support nature conservation across a variety of different habitats including coastal and marine areas, peatlands, wetlands, woodland, and eight National Nature Reserves cared for by the Trust.

Ellie Owen, National Trust for Scotland's Senior Seabird Officer, said: "We are incredibly grateful for the support of Tim and Kim Allan that is helping us develop new abilities to improve things for seabirds. The ongoing support of our members also gives us a boost and their enthusiasm when we meet them on our reserves keeps us motivated to seek different ways to support seabirds. Without funding from players of People's Postcode Lottery, we would not be able to break new ground in finding ways to care for, share and protect Scotland's seabirds for the benefit of everyone, now and into the future."

The seabird ecologist roles and projects to protect seabird populations supports the National Trust for Scotland's vision to provide access and enjoyment of Scotland's nature, beauty and heritage for everyone, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022. For more information on the National Trust for Scotland, visit www.nts.org.uk.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/UZ3PA4iuWf>

Bird population updates at National Trust for Scotland places:

Canna – The Canna ringing group reported that no Fulmars bred on Canna this year (with numbers dropping from around 600 pairs in the early 1990s). Shags and Guillemot are also having a particularly bad season, but Puffin and Kittiwake appear to be stable.

Fair Isle – Fair Isle Bird Observatory monitoring results indicate Fulmar numbers are increasing making it larger now than St Kilda, which has traditionally been the largest Fulmar colony in the UK. Shags numbers seem to be ok but many birds failed to breed this year.

Iona – All species are down in numbers with the cliffs looking quite sparse.

Mingulay – Fulmar numbers are down, but Great Skua numbers seem to be stable with lots of fluffy chicks appearing. Kittiwakes seem to be doing well and there has been a slight increase in Razorbill pairs. There has been a good increase on the Guillemot numbers too.

Staffa – Puffin and Fulmar are slightly down on last year but are stable. Tystie numbers are similar to last year, but Shags have experienced a massive decline from 52 nests last year to just 14 nests this year.

St Abbs – Shags have declined dramatically from 126 nests last year to just 37 nests this year. On a positive note, the few nests that are there seem to be doing well. Herring Gull numbers are up slightly, and productivity is being monitored for the first time this year. Guillemot and Razorbill numbers are down by 23% and birds have been seen with unusual plumage variation. The Gannet population is going from strength to strength, with an increase of 24% this year and Kittiwake numbers are also up by 9%. Fulmars are stable with numbers similar to last year.

St Kilda – Kittiwake breeding numbers are the highest they have been since 2008, up by 26% from last year. Gannets in some areas of the colonies are looking sparse after the avian flu population crash. The number of Skua territories are around the same as last year and Fulmar, Guillemot and Razorbill numbers are also similar to last year. Large Gull numbers are down with some birds on territories but without nests.

Treshnish Isles – Counts undertaken by the Treshnish Isles Auk Ringing Group (TIARG) report there have been marked increases in breeding numbers since last year for Razorbill, Fulmar, and Puffin. Guillemot also seems to be showing a substantial increase in numbers compared to last year although with the breeding season being uncharacteristically late, it is suspected many of these birds may be non-breeders. Indications from tagged birds may suggest Guillemot survival may be down on last year. Several Guillemots have been seen with unusual plumage variation. Unfortunately, many Shags do not appear to be breeding this year. There has been a 74% drop in Shag numbers compared to last year with some key absent nests.

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022, the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.