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## **A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE GANNET COLONY AT ST KILDA REVEALS NEW STATS**

- **The National Trust for Scotland has completed its first drone census of the Northern gannet population at St Kilda World Heritage Site.**
- **The census has revealed that St Kilda is now home to the world's largest gannet colony with over 59,000 breeding pairs, partly due to the devastating population decline caused by avian flu at Bass Rock.**
- **The Trust's 'Save our Seabirds' appeal is welcoming donations to help support its vital seabird conservation projects.**

As part of The National Trust for Scotland's vital seabird conservation work, the charity has completed its first drone census of the Northern gannet population at St Kilda, which has revealed it is now home to the world's largest colony of this seabird.

Gannets are the UK's largest seabird and can be found across the North Atlantic. Adults are distinguished by their white feathers, large wingspan of up to 2 metres, black wingtips, and the unique yellow blush of their head. They breed in significant numbers at St Kilda and have been part of the island's landscape and history for many centuries.

The advanced drone census took place on the archipelago's island of Boreray and its two satellite sea stacks, Stac Li and Stac an Armin, at St Kilda in 2023. The results have revealed that St Kilda is now home to the world's largest gannet colony with over 59,000 breeding pairs. The census was carried out by the Trust's seabird ecologists and dedicated volunteers and took around six hours to complete, with counts and data analysis taking place over several months through the following winter. The census has been repeated in 2025, and the Trust's seabird ecologists will be analysing the data this winter.

Throughout much of the last century, St Kilda was home to the world's largest gannet colony. While its population remained relatively stable, a notable increase in the Bass Rock population on the east coast of Scotland saw it replace St Kilda as the world's largest colony in 2014. However, in 2022, a deadly strain of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (avian flu) swept across the North Atlantic, decimating seabird numbers and resulting in a 25-30% decline in the gannet population at Bass Rock since 2014, which is now home to over 46,000 breeding pairs.

The impact of avian flu on the gannet colony at St Kilda appears to have been less severe than at some other colonies across the UK, with its population declining by around 2% since the last census, which was conducted using images taken from an aeroplane in 2013. Trust seabird ecologists speculate that St Kilda's jagged topography inhibited disease transmission compared to flatter areas of gannet habitats. One of the most impacted areas of the colony was situated in the flatter sections on Stac Li, which

supports their theory that Avian Flu can be more easily transmitted on flat terrain, compared to the steeper sections of the colony.

Craig Nisbet, National Trust for Scotland Seabird and Marine Ranger at St Kilda, said: "This was the first year that drones have been used to conduct a census of the gannet colony at St Kilda. The use of drones has not only ensured minimal disturbance while monitoring these birds, but it has also provided new and improved methods for obtaining results compared to previous surveys, with high-quality images.

"While it is of course positive news that the gannet population at St Kilda has remained stable, the declines recorded at other colonies are a consequence of the very real and severe threats all seabirds face today. Frequent counting of seabird colonies is particularly important during periods of disease outbreak or increases in other threats, such as climate change and dwindling food supply, and this new monitoring technique ensures we can do this as accurately as possible."

Susan Bain, Western Isles Manager at the National Trust for Scotland, said: "We are very fortunate to have such a unique place in our care, which is once again home to the world's largest gannet colony. It is incredibly important that we capture this data to identify how wildlife is faring across the places our charity cares for. It's only by identifying the declines and trends in our seabirds that we can begin to consider how to help them. We're grateful to our supporters for enabling us to continue to understand, care for and protect our natural heritage."

Ellie Owen, Senior Seabird Officer at the National Trust for Scotland, said: "Scotland's seabird colonies are of global importance, but they are facing unprecedented challenges. By implementing protection measures, we can work together to protect Scotland's seabirds. As custodians of many of Scotland's iconic seabird islands, we have a unique responsibility to safeguard these species from threats to give them the best chance of survival, and support through the Save our Seabirds appeal ensures we can continue taking action to protect seabirds."

St Kilda is the UK's only dual UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of only 39 in the world, and is home to nearly 1 million seabirds. The Trust's [Save our Seabirds](#) appeal is welcoming donations to support its vital seabird conservation projects. A paper summarizing the 2023 census is due for publication in Scottish Birds later in 2025 and can currently be accessed through [ResearchGate](#).

National Trust for Scotland appeals support the charity's vision to care for, share and protect Scotland's nature, beauty and heritage for everyone to enjoy, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022. For more information about St Kilda, visit the [National Trust for Scotland website](#).

## **ENDS**

Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/373bW0V8Jb>

## **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](http://www.nts.org.uk).

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