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NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND COMPLETES SIGNIFICANT WILDLIFE CENSUS AT ST KILDA

- **The first time since 1999 the whole archipelago of St Kilda was counted; the census found a 61% decline in cliff nesting species**
- **Efforts comprised almost 1,500 hours; seabirds counted by hiking over the main island and from the sea using binoculars**
- **Census highlights the importance in taking action to save Scotland's seabirds**

Scotland's largest conservation charity, the National Trust for Scotland, has completed a cliff-nesting seabird census on St Kilda as part of its vital work to help protect Scotland's National Nature Reserves.

The census – the first fully comparable survey of the whole of St Kilda since 1999 – is part of the Trust's *Love for Nature* project, an ambitious programme of nature conservation work which aims to safeguard Scotland's natural heritage.

Almost 93 years after the St Kilda evacuation on 29 August 1930, when the last St Kildans left the archipelago, this significant new census by the Trust's expert seabird staff and dedicated volunteers identified a 61% decline across four species of cliff nesting seabird: fulmars, guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes.

At one time St Kilda was the only place in the UK which was home to fulmars. The charity's staff and volunteers were dismayed while carrying out this year's census as it became clear there were far fewer fulmars than they had hoped to find. Taking the data from their notebooks, they realised that fulmars have declined by a huge 69% since the last full census of all four islands that make up St Kilda, which took place over twenty years ago in 1999. For every fulmar nest they were counting, there should have been three more.

The declines are even greater for the kittiwake, a small gull with a lemon-yellow beak, that the team found has declined by 84% since 1999. Guillemots and razorbills, which huddle together on the cliffs in large numbers during the summer, contributing the droning gargling noises of the seabird colony cacophony, have also declined by over 35%, making the noise just that bit quieter.

To carry out the census, the team counted from land, hiking to every nook and cranny of the main island in the archipelago, Hirta, and from the sea, using binoculars. The census took around 1,400 hours to complete during the first three weeks in June. Three members of the Trust team, including St Kilda's Seabird Ranger Craig Nisbet and Senior Seabird Officer Ellie Owen, were joined by six highly skilled volunteers and other Trust staff.

Seabirds have long been synonymous with St Kilda, even impacting the unusual buildings which were created to store produce and fowling equipment. Before the evacuation of the final 36 St Kildans on 29 August 1930, thousands of people lived on the island – farming, fishing, and, most importantly, harvesting seabirds and their eggs.

Susan Bain, Western Isles Manager at the National Trust for Scotland, said: “The decline in seabirds on St Kilda is not only concerning from a natural heritage viewpoint but also from a cultural heritage viewpoint. The exploitation of seabirds was integral to the community that lived on St Kilda, it is what allowed them to settle and live on such a small island for thousands of years. They ate the meat and eggs, used the oil for light and ointment and traded the feathers. Many of the few songs that have survived tell of fowling expeditions and the dangers associated with it. The decline in seabirds diminishes the World Heritage Site and is a clear signal that our marine ecosystem is under immense pressure.”

Ellie Owen, Senior Seabird Officer at the National Trust for Scotland, commented: “The census took a lot of time and resource to complete but it's 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 including Tim and Kim Allan who sponsored this census, enabling us to continue to understand, care for and protect our natural heritage.

“We don't have a full picture of what has led to the decline on St Kilda, but climate change has certainly played a part, affecting elements such as the food supply in the surrounding sea. Declines in natural prey such as sandeels are likely also impacting them, and closing Scotland's waters to the foreign-based sandeel fishery would be a powerful step to helping our seabirds. We also need to work with government and fisheries to reduce the accidental bycatch of fulmars on longlines, using available mitigation measures.

“I would encourage every individual across the country to be curious as to how they can play a part in saving Scotland's seabirds, to ensure future generations can continue to marvel at them. With over 1 million seabirds at places in our care, we know how important this is - whether it's following the 'check, clean, close' rule which keeps islands safe from people accidentally introducing predators such as rats to seabird islands, or giving seabirds space from both people and dogs when they visit their colonies or on beaches. People can also become an active part of the research effort by taking part in seabird citizen science projects, like our charity's *Seabirds, Camera, Action* initiative,

where we are asking our supporters to take and submit photos of seabirds carrying fish at any of the Trust's places to help monitor what food seabirds are feeding their chicks. And one of the best ways to help currently is to be involved in any number of wildlife campaigns – from sharing responses to the Scottish Government's Sandeel Fishing consultation, to supporting the Trust's Save our Seabirds campaign.

"Visitors to St Kilda and our other coastal places will witness incredible wildlife experiences. While there are now 20,712 fulmars on St Kilda alone, there used to be 66,934, so it's vital that we don't just accept this and that all of us do everything in our power to help nature to flourish, and to help conserve and protect Scotland's seabirds."

The Love our Nature project is supported through funding from players of People's Postcode Lottery, who have now raised more than £1 billion for thousands of charities and local good causes. This includes a total of over £2.5m for the National Trust for Scotland to support its work to enrich and protect Scotland's landscapes and wildlife, since 2014, for which it is very grateful.

The role of the National Trust for Scotland's Senior Seabird Officer and activity is supported by Tim and Kim Allan, members of the National Trust for Scotland's Patrons' Club, a generous group of donors who support the conservation charity.

For more information on how you can support Scotland's seabirds, visit www.nts.org.uk/campaigns/seabirds.

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Editors' Notes

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.