

# NEWS WIRE

ALL THE BIGGEST BIRD NEWS & EVENTS

COMPILED BY: KIRK PARSONS

## SEABIRD SAVIOURS

A project to rid Scilly of rats and protect seabirds is hailed a success. By Jonny Rankin

**I**N A TIME beset by conservation challenges and species declines, it is easy to overlook the successes, and one of last year's was undoubtedly the Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project.

Bird-wise, the UK is mainly of international importance for its seabirds. Our seabird colonies are world-beating.

**“In 2015, 28 Manx Shearwaters were fledged, and five Storm Petrels!”**

Now, thanks to the project, our conservation efforts are world-beating, too!

Since 2013, the project has undertaken the largest rat removal effort anywhere in the world, removing them from the inhabited islands of St Agnes and also Gugh. It will greatly reduce the number of eggs and chicks predated.

I met members of the Seabird Recovery Project the same month

they confirmed Storm Petrels were breeding on St Agnes and Gugh for the first time in living memory. The team were deservedly proud and elated; the mood was infectious and there was great excitement as we inspected the nesting sites.

The project is a partnership led by the RSPB but reliant upon a number of project partners and supporters. It works directly with the local community with each household hosting a bait box.

After meticulous planning, the team were allowed to implement the programme from 9 November 2013. By the 30th, St Agnes and Gugh were effectively rat-free!

In September 2014, the first 10 Manx Shearwater chicks were fledged, directly as a result of the eradication of the rats. In 2015, 28 Manx Shearwaters were fledged, and five Storm Petrels!

To put this into context, Storm Petrels breed nowhere else in England aside from the Scilly, and Lundy is the only other English island where you'll find Manx Shearwater breeding.



Niki Banfield

As well as the target seabirds, rat removal could go on to benefit other burrow nesters such as Puffin and perhaps even Wheatear. And both the White-toothed Shrew and Rabbit populations on St Agnes and Gugh have increased in response to the rat eradication too. While the most inhabited island of St Mary's marks a task too far in terms of rat removal on Scilly, a sweep of the top islands could be possible, with inhabited Bryher, Tresco and St Martin's potentially subject to a rat removal attempt in the future.

As we explored St Agnes, walking the Western Edge and Troytown Farm campsite, I saw signs explaining to campers what the haunting serenade which had kept them from sleep was – the breeding Manx Shearwaters. To return and experience camping with Manx Shearwaters is now high on my to-do list. What a way to celebrate the project's success; watch the shearwaters rafted up in the daytime, and then hear them while lying beneath the stars.



Niki Banfield

### ↑ BURROW

Jaclyn Pearson of the IoS Seabird Recovery Project, and writer Jonny Rankin, examine a Manx Shearwater burrow (top)

### ↑ NESTING

Storm Petrel nesting material – inclusive of tiny feathers

### ← SUPPORT

Jaclyn meets two of the Isle of Scilly residents who fully support the 'rat removal' project



Jonny Rankin

# PLAN TO HELP SAVE THE TURTLE DOVE

A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP between building materials manufacturer CEMEX and the RSPB to encourage Turtle Doves to breed at the company's quarries has been hailed as a success, with three juvenile birds being observed at CEMEX quarries. The Turtle Dove was upgraded to Vulnerable on the global Red List in 2015, and is the UK's fastest declining bird. With numbers halving every six years, there is a real possibility that it will soon disappear from Britain altogether.

In order to combat this severe decline, The RSPB and CEMEX partnered in a three year project which included such measures as habitat creation and planting a special flower mix at four of the firm's quarries, to provide food for the birds.

Encouraged by this success, CEMEX France has also launched a pilot site, and CEMEX Spain is working closely with the Spanish Ornithological Society in order to completely cover the Turtle Dove's western flyway in Europe. The project has once again shown how valuable partnerships between conservationists and business can be for all concerned.



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RSPB's Paul Buckley and WWT's Dr Debbie Pain with Julie Girling MEP

## MEP becomes Bewick's Swans 'species champion'

Bewick's Swans now have a political champion in the form of Julie Girling, MEP for the South West. She recently met with conservationists from the WWT and the RSPB at Slimbridge to discuss the fate of the swans, whose numbers have declined by more than a third since the 1990s.

Both organisations warmly welcomed Mrs Girling to her new role as Species Champion for Bewick's Swans, with the hope that her influence will ensure the future of both the species and of the EU Nature Directives, currently under review by the European Parliament. The MEP said that the decline of the swan, which visits 12 European countries on its migration between Russia and the UK every year, was a "tragedy", adding that it was essential that "we work across borders to ensure the preservation of migratory birds."



James Osmond / Alamy Stock Photo

## WATERBIRDS' SURVEY

ONE OF THE world's longest-running and most globally extensive biodiversity monitoring programmes, the International Waterbirds Census, is celebrating 50 years. It saw thousands of Wetland Bird Survey volunteers across Britain and Ireland heading out to count waders, wildfowl and other waterbirds at their local lakes and estuaries, and, in a typical January, more than three million birds are recorded, 10% of the yearly global total. This number shows just how important the British Isles are to so many of Europe's waterbirds. This winter's survey was combined with a special Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey aimed at increasing our knowledge of certain species.

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## Moor scheme boosts birds

A SURVEY OF breeding bird species at Eastern Moors in Derbyshire's Peak District has shown the area to be a surprising haven for upland species that are vanishing from the rest of Britain.

Since the RSPB and the National Trust took over the management of the moors, which lie on the edge of Sheffield, Whinchat numbers have more than doubled, Sky Lark (pictured) numbers have trebled, and numbers of Meadow Pipit and Curlew, which were both decreasing over the UK, have also increased.

Conservationists believe that the success of these species is due to a reduction in grazing and a shift towards using the land to raise cattle, which has led to an increase of potential nest sites and food sources such as insects.



Blickwinkel / Alamy Stock Photo

### IN NUMBERS

7,000: Bewick's Swans winter in the UK every year, around 40% of the estimated north-west European population

60 pairs: The amount of Whinchats found in 2015 on the Eastern Moors, compared to 25 in 2010.

60 years: How long ago WWT Founder Sir Peter Scott discovered the Greenland White-fronted Goose

35,573: The highest number of Greenland White-fronted Geese recorded in the UK. That was in 1999.

30-40 million: The number of waterbirds counted every year by the International Waterbirds Census

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### VIEWS SOUGHT ON BAN

The Welsh Assembly Government is holding a consultation with stakeholders about a potential ban on shooting Greenland White-fronted Geese in Wales, after a concerted effort from the Welsh Ornithological Society, RSPB and others, as well as a petition that raised 3,600 supporters. The consultation ends in March and more details can be found in the 'environment and countryside' section at [gov.wales/consultations/](http://gov.wales/consultations/)

### GOLDFINCH SURVEY

Sunflowers are capturing the hearts of British Goldfinches. Records from the first two months of the BTO's Goldfinch Feeding Survey, set up to examine why Goldfinches were becoming more common visitors in British gardens, have shown that sunflower hearts are 40% more popular with these colourful songbirds than niger seeds. More details are at [www.bto.org/goldfinch-survey](http://www.bto.org/goldfinch-survey)

### RAPTOR 'LIVING LARDERS'

It seems that Eleonora's Falcons may be imprisoning small birds to serve as a living larder. The behaviour has apparently been witnessed in Morocco, with the falcons pulling out the tail and flight feathers of warblers and trapping them in rock fissures. Shrikes have long been known for keeping larders of dead animals on thorn bushes, but this is the first time scientists have recorded the behaviour involving live prey.

### MOSS PROJECT FUNDING

The RSPB's Spreading the Moss project has received funding worth £250,000 from landfill tax charity, WREN. It will be spent on planting sphagnum moss over 100 hectares of the moor, co-managed by the RSPB and United Utilities. It should help increase the amount of blanket bog, a globally scarce habitat. It helps tackle climate change by trapping carbon, and also provides water filtration, which helps threatened moorland birds, such as Curlew and Golden Plover. 🍂



# GRUMPY OLD BIRDER

**Bo Beolens** says messing with our parks ruins the chance for some decent birdwatching

**R**EGULAR READERS will know how genuine my affection is for undisciplined dog walkers. They will also know how I believe that our over-romanticised idea of the countryside coupled with the idea that nature should be tamed, is leading to habitat loss and eviction of wildlife. Landscape architect Capability Brown looked at the farm fields and forest of aristocratic estates and, in the words of the film industry 're-imagined' them. Like an artist ignoring a tree if it spoils their composition, Mr Brown removed anything that interfered with his idea of how nature should be. And so, dear readers, the concept of the 'park' was born.

It was not, of course, meant for the hoi polloi. The high-born and high-handed demolished villages, turfed tilth toilers from their tenant farms and ripped up trees in the wrong place to add them in the 'right' place. Dry valleys were dammed and streams re-routed for their own viewing pleasure and to show off to other high-born environmental hooligans! This was good news for Roe Deer, gamebirds and fountain makers. It was not so good for nature. Unfortunately, we have retained this ideal ever since.

“ So, thanks Mr Park Keeper for tidying up the rampant 'weeds' so favoured by skulking warblers ”

When I moved here, my local park was a well-known autumn hotspot for Firecrests and Yellow-browed Warblers, Pallas's Warblers and even Collared Flycatchers. An almost hidden garden was surrounded by a fence covered in Ivy.

The playing fields were surrounded by shrubby borders and copses of trees, through which winter flocks fiddled in the foliage, with maybe an overwintering chiffchaff and a blackcap or two.

I, and other town-bound nature appreciators, could see Redstarts and



Willridge images / Alamy Stock Photo

↑ MISSED  
Firecrests used to be a regular sight in Bo's local park

flycatchers on their way to Africa or Redwings and Fieldfares avoiding the frigid north. Admittedly, every now and again, a person walking by holding their dog's lead would interrupt our tranquil birding.

But then, Capability Brown's descendants decided that the hidden garden should be viewable from a path, that no one uses, and the Ivy was stripped from its perimeter. Offended by Cow Parsley and elderberries, Ground Ivy and Dogwood, every nook and cranny was cleared of ground cover. NOTHING is now allowed to live under the trees except clipped grass.

So, now, the off-lead dogs can run through every sheltered corner, and the passing motorists have unobstructed views of stark trunks and bare fences.

So, thanks Mr Park Keeper for tidying up the rampant 'weeds' and unnecessary under-storey, so favoured by skulking warblers, and also for raking up all that leaf litter that the winter thrushes loved to scratch through!

**Bo Beolens** runs [fatbirder.com](http://fatbirder.com) and other websites. He has written a number of books

## GET IN TOUCH

Have any changes to your local park affected its wildlife? Tell us about it at [birdwatching@bauermedia.co.uk](mailto:birdwatching@bauermedia.co.uk)