



The Status of Seabirds Breeding in the Isles of Scilly 2015

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The summer of 2015 saw the first comprehensive breeding survey of all the seabirds breeding in Scilly since 2006. As part of the Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project a team of RSPB staff and volunteers surveyed over 60 rocks and islands and in total 8,292 territories of 13 species of seabird were recorded from 55 rocks and islands, achieving complete coverage of the archipelago.

Although it is a mixed bag with some species increasing in number, whilst others declined, we found that the overall number of seabirds breeding within the Isles of Scilly has decreased by 10% in the last 9 years. This represents a drop of 11.6% since the SPA baseline of 9,161 pairs in 1999/2000 and a 31.3% decrease in the size of the assemblage since SSSI designation in 1983 when 12,063 breeding pairs of seabird were recorded.

The diversity of the seabird assemblage is almost unchanged since 2006 with all of the 13 species of seabird regularly breeding in Scilly still present in 2015. However, sandwich and roseate terns, only intermittent breeders into the 1990s, have been lost and the numbers of 8 of the 13 main species have shown a decrease in the last 9 years (see Table 1).

Table 1 A brief summary of the status of the seabirds breeding in Scilly

Species (Importance**)	Breeding pairs 2015	% Change since 2006	Long-term trends
Manx shearwater Regional	523	+206%	3-fold increase in the last 9 years and new colonies found
Common guillemot	291	+88%	Increasing – population almost trebled since 1983
Razorbill Regional	471	+38%	Steady increase – population more than doubled since 1983
Great black-backed gull National	1023**	+14%	General decline in 1980s (still down 31% on 1983), increasing since 1999
Fulmar Regional	286	+3%	Massive increases since first bred 1951, appears to be slowing now
Atlantic puffin Regional	167	-4%	Generally stable since 1999, 45% increase since 1980s
European storm petrel International	1299**	-7%	Declining – down 12% since 2000
Herring gull	574	-20%	Continued steep decline – down 75% on peak of 2249 pairs in 1974
European shag National	1010*	-22%	General decline since peak of 1470 pairs in 1977
Lesser black-backed gull International	2531**	-24%	Continued decline- down 38% on peak of 4050 pairs in 1983
Great cormorant	30	-40%	Sharp decline since 1990s, generally stable at 50-60 pairs prior to that
Black-legged kittiwake	75	-72%	Continued steep decline – now just 9% of peak of 861 pairs in 1983
Common tern Regional	12	-85%	Continued steep decline and intermittent breeding since peak of 210 pairs in 1983
Overall numbers	8292	-10%	Steady decline since peak of 12063 pairs in 1983. 31% decline since SSSI designation (1983 count); -12% since SPA designation (Seabird 2000 figures)

* Taking the definition for international or national importance as the population total exceeding 1% of the NW European or UK total respectively, and regional importance as exceeding 10% of the southwest total

**Represents >10% of overall breeding assemblage

Manx shearwaters & Storm petrels

One of the greatest changes for seabirds in Scilly in the last 9 years has been the removal of rats from St. Agnes and Gugh in 2013/14. This has resulted in an increase in numbers and successful breeding of Manx shearwaters on these islands with a minimum of 10 chicks fledged in 2014 and 28 in 2015. In fact 2015 proved a bumper year for shearwaters with increases at all the sites where birds had previously been recorded breeding in Scilly, as well as colonies being located at 5 new sites in 2015, most notably at the North ends of both Tresco and St. Martin's. Record numbers of shearwaters were also seen rafting on evening trips around St. Agnes and Annet (1000+ birds) in 2015, as well as the novel records of birds seen in good numbers between St. Agnes and St. Mary's during the daytime (W. Wagstaff &

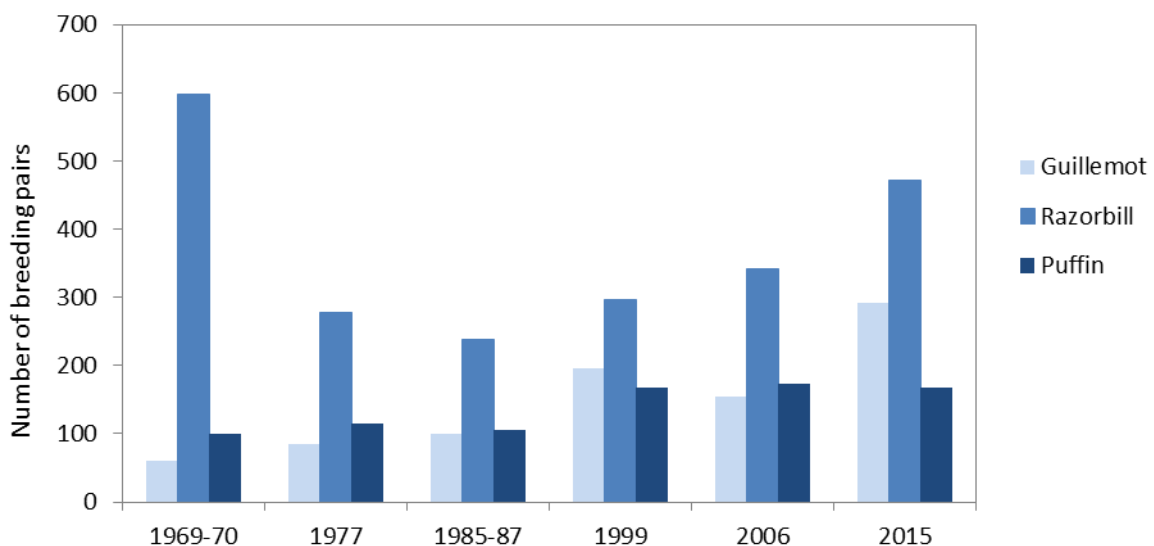
J Peacock *pers. comm & pers. obs.*) Overall, the number of apparently occupied shearwater burrows in Scilly has trebled in the last 9 years; from 171 pairs in 2006 to 523 in 2015 spread across 10 islands. As well as rat removal in Scilly, this is likely due to changes in the wider southwest area and large increases in regional shearwater populations following removal of rats from Lundy and slightly further afield in Wales.

As with Manx shearwater this is only the third comparable systematic all islands survey; prior to this estimates of the numbers of storm petrels breeding in Scilly were vague, ranging in the ‘thousands’ and differences in methods used made it hard to draw any conclusions. Using diurnal call playback to elicit responses from incubating birds underground we estimated a total of 1299 pairs across 14 islands representing sustained decline of 7% in the last 9 years and 12% since the first count in 2000. However, just two years since rat removal, storm petrels re-colonised both St. Agnes and Gugh and chicks were heard from burrows on both islands in August and September 2015.

Razorbills, Guillemots & Puffins

In line with regional trends the numbers of razorbills have increased steadily in Scilly from the early 1980s with the current survey recording 471 pairs at 15 sites (see Figure 2). Despite a low count in 2006 guillemots are also increasing with a peak of 291 pairs in 2015 at 5 sites. Although numbers of puffins in Scilly were formerly huge, there were enormous losses between the 1920s and 1950s across the region. Numbers appeared to stabilise in Scilly through the 1970s and 1980s and have remained relatively stable around 170 pairs for the last 15 years. In the last 9 years a drop in the number of pairs breeding on Annet appears to have been compensated by an increase in pairs at Mincarlo. In addition, 2015 saw the first record of a few pairs at Menawethan in the Eastern Isles in recent memory. Recent declines in the number of puffins breeding in the UK have led to it being Red Listed as a bird of conservation concern in October 2015, making it all the more important that we continue to monitor and protect our Scilly birds.

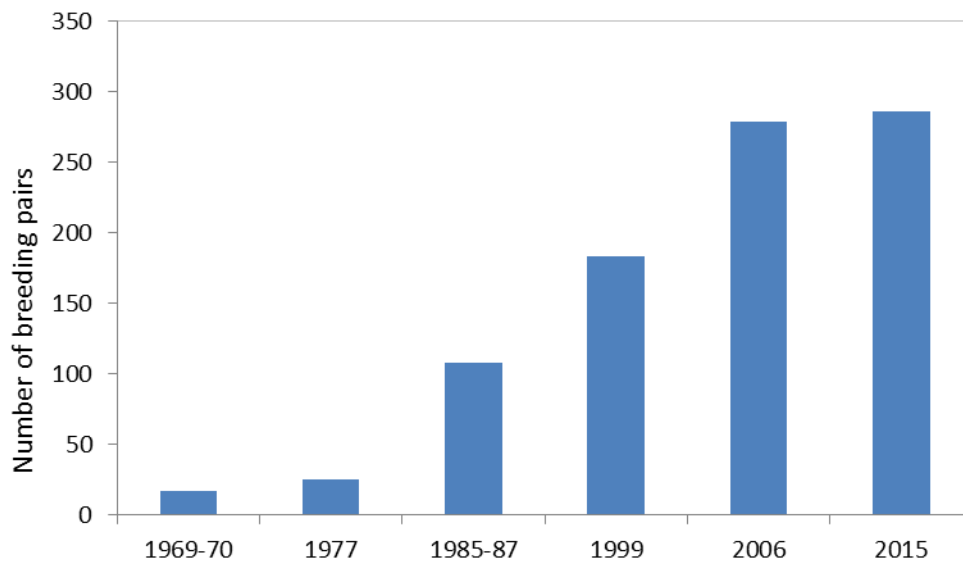
Figure 2. Numbers of breeding Auks 1969-2015



Fulmars

Fulmars first colonised the islands in 1951 and increased rapidly in line with national trends. Numbers have continued to increase in recent years to just shy of 300 pairs across 18 islands, though are showing signs of slowing down in line with elsewhere in the southwest and nationally.

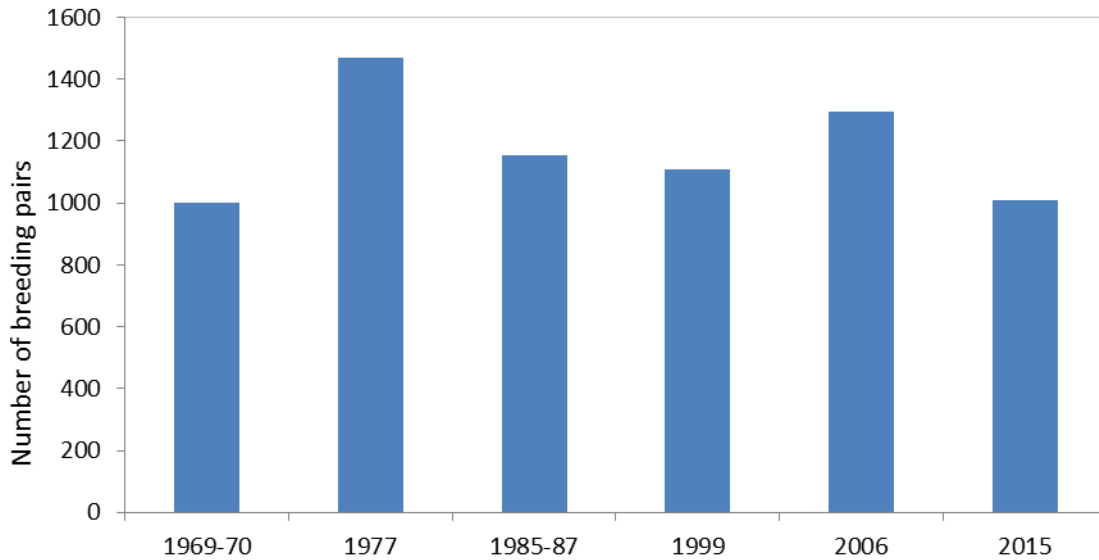
Figure 3. Numbers of breeding Fulmar 1969-2015



Shags & Cormorants

Numbers of cormorants have remained remarkably similar in Scilly between 50 and 60 pairs since records began in the 1940s. However, recent counts show a sharp decline starting in the 1990s to just 30 pairs at 3 sites in 2015. The number of shags breeding in Scilly has shown a general decline since a peak of 1470 pairs in 1977, although the 2006 count suggested an upturn, numbers are now at 1010 pairs across 31 islands (12.2% of the assemblage total) more similar to the level recorded in the 1960s. Nationally cormorants have been increasing, whereas shags have shown large declines. Recent losses to colonies at Foula and the Farne Islands mean that our Scilly population is now possibly the largest colony in the UK.

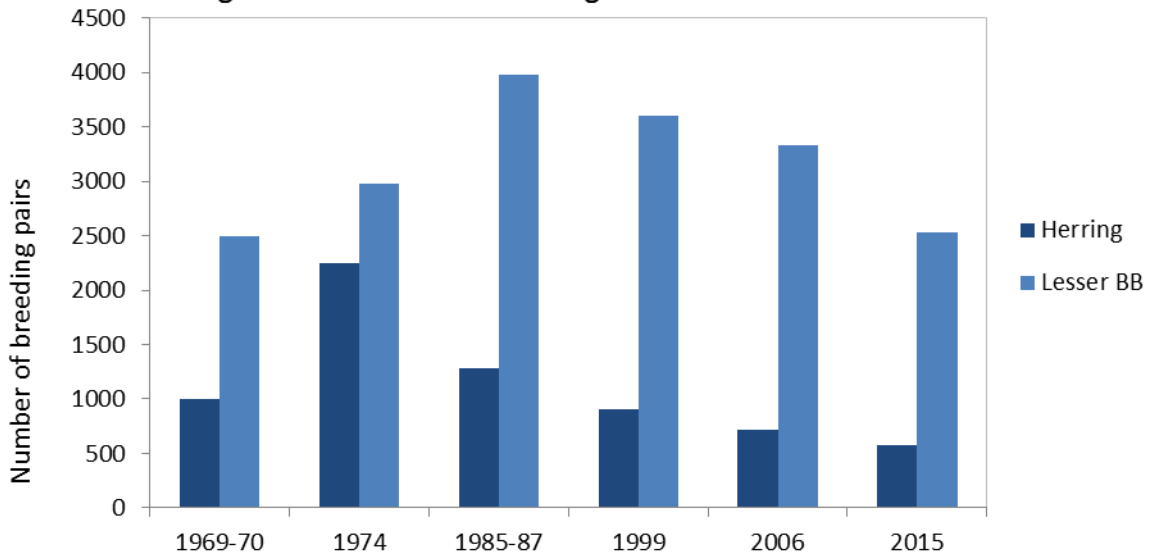
Figure 4. Numbers of breeding Shag 1969-2015



Great black-backed, Herring & Lesser black-backed gulls

As well as worrying declines in the number of breeding shag, the numbers of the smaller gulls have declined steeply in the last 9 years. In contrast to regional trends, lesser black-backed gulls, for which Scilly is internationally important, have been in decline since a peak of 4050 pairs in the early 1980s to the current total of 2531 pairs on 30 islands (30.5% of the total assemblage). A sustained decline in the numbers of breeding herring gulls in the last 35 years is also of concern, although this reduction is in line with national trends for which it is now Red Listed. Since a low of 808 pairs in 1999 the number of great black-backed gulls in the islands has increased steadily to the current total of just over 1000 pairs (now measuring 12.3% of the total assemblage).

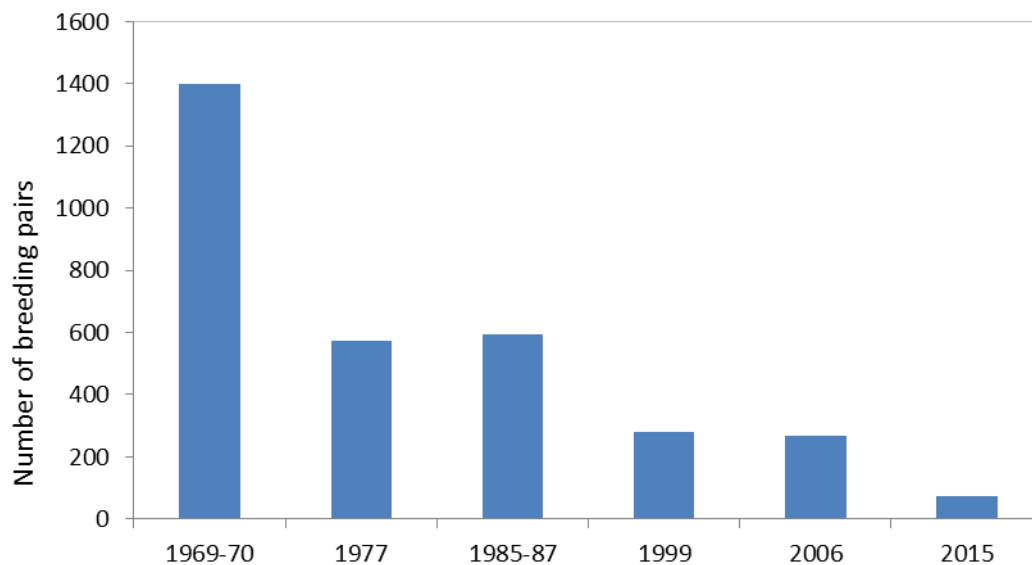
Figure 5. Numbers of breeding Gulls 1969-2015



Kittiwakes & Terns

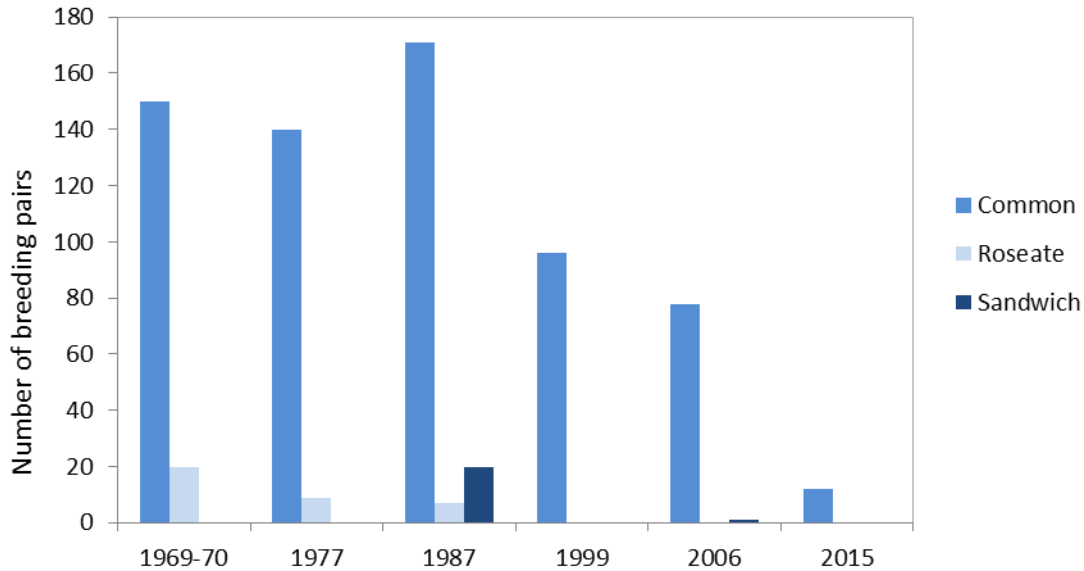
By far the biggest seabird declines have been seen in the numbers of kittiwakes and terns nesting in the islands in the last 9 years. Kittiwakes returned to breed in Scilly in 1938 after an absence of nearly 40 years and increased steadily through the 1970s. Since the 1980s though, they have suffered a worryingly steep decline to just 75 pairs at a single site in 2015. This steep decline is mirrored across the region and much of the birds' British range.

Figure 6. Numbers of breeding Kittiwake 1969-2015



Numbers of common terns breeding in Scilly have decreased steadily since a peak of 210 pairs in the early 1980s. In recent years they have started to breed intermittently with only 12 pairs attempting to breed at two sites 2015 (all failing in early incubation) and they look possible to be lost as a regular breeding species for Scilly in the near future. There have been no recent breeding records for Roseate, Sandwich or Arctic terns in Scilly.

Figure 7. Numbers of breeding Terns 1969-2015



Factors driving change in seabird numbers in Scilly

There has been a complex pattern of change in the seabird community in Scilly, with a few species having increased or remained relatively stable, whilst many have declined and there has been a significant and worrying decline in the number of seabirds nesting in the islands overall. The changes in the numbers within the assemblage are mostly in line with national trends, although as these wider trends are based on the last national survey Seabird 2000 they may not represent the current situation. The reasons for these changes differ between species and relate to regional and global issues as well as more local factors operating on the breeding grounds in Scilly.

Further management is required to reverse these declines; in particular the continuation of the predator control programme, as well as other habitat and disturbance management as necessary. The Isles of Scilly Seabird Conservation Strategy has been jointly updated by the RSPB, Natural England, the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust and the Isles of Scilly Bird Group, to set out a prioritised work pattern based upon species and island groups.

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The Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project is a partnership between RSPB, Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Duchy of Cornwall, Isles of Scilly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) partnership and the Isles of Scilly Bird Group. The project is funded by LIFE, the EU's financial instrument for the environment and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

