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Issue 7, November 2015

Seabirds

South West



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Storm petrels and Manx shearwaters breed on St Agnes and Gugh after rat removal

Jaclyn Pearson

From the Special Protection Area surveys which Dr Vickie Heaney's team carried out, six adult storm petrels were recorded in nesting areas on St Agnes and Gugh in July. We hoped this meant they were successfully breeding again for the first time in living memory – but we needed the proof. In September, under cover of darkness and armed with head torches, audio recorders, a burrowscope and a deal of patience, we went out again and this time recorded the calls of five chicks. One chick was actually filmed in its nest site: head to our website and watch the footage ios-seabirds.org.uk

The good news did not stop there, as we were recording chicks on St Agnes and Gugh, so were researchers on Lundy. Storm petrels are extremely rare breeding birds in England – confined entirely to the westcountry. Up until last year the only place they nested was on a few outer rocks and islands in the Isles of Scilly. So following the removal of rats from Lundy over 10 years ago and the removal of rats from St Agnes and Gugh two years ago; the benefits of island restoration for these tiny sparrow sized seabirds is clear.

What's more, in this second year after rat removal no fewer than 28 Manx shearwater chicks have now also been recorded on St Agnes and Gugh; last year the number was 10. We still need everyone's help to keep these islands

rat free. If you notice anything suspicious when on St Agnes and Gugh, call the 'Rat on a Rat number' 01720 422153.

The Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project is a partnership project between RSPB, Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, Isles of Scilly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Natural England and Duchy of Cornwall. The project is funded by LIFE, the EU's programme for financing key environmental schemes across the continent and the Heritage Lottery Fund.



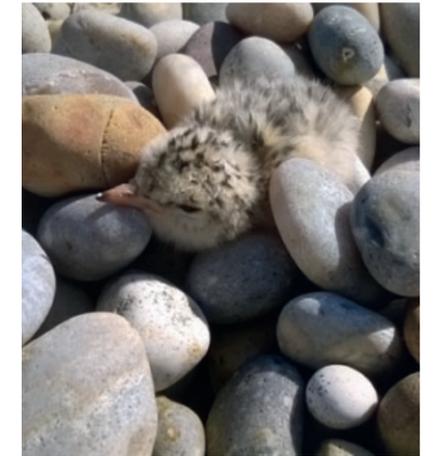
Dorset's little terns survive a challenging year

Helen Booker

Every year our little tern project team, with the help of many local volunteers, protects these delicate tiny seabirds from disturbance and predation while they breed at their favoured spot on Chesil Beach in Dorset. The current project has been running for seven years now and we have seen the little tern colony recover, producing more young each year. This year has been a great challenge for the team who not only had to contend with an early electric fence failure in bad weather,

resulting in the predation of 12 nests by a fox, but have also had to defend the colony from greater attention by local hungry kestrels. The team and the volunteers have done an amazing job, with the 33 nesting pairs successfully fledging an estimated 34 young – a fantastic result and another boost to the future of the colony.

Thanks again to our partners, Natural England, Dorset Wildlife Trust, The Crown Estate, Portland Court Leet, and the Chesil Bank and Fleet Nature Reserve, each of whom is committed to the colony's recovery.



Just a seagull?

Helene Jessop

Gulls are often taken for granted but large gulls (especially herring gulls and lesser black backed gulls) are in trouble, despite increases in urban nesting birds. Declines are ongoing in coastal populations, such that herring gulls are now a red listed species. There is an urgent need for survey work to establish the current status of species; but this is hampered by lack of resources for a comprehensive UK-wide survey of all seabirds, including large gulls. The RSPB is hoping to plug some of the survey gaps. Research is also needed into reasons for the declines of coastal nesting gulls.

The cries of large gulls are an iconic feature of the British seaside yet in recent years the plight of these magnificent seabirds has been overshadowed by concerns expressed by some about roof nesting gulls and worrying calls for large-scale culls of these protected birds. The RSPB's view is we need to know how many gulls we have throughout the UK, and understand the factors driving declines and increases in gulls in different locations to propose ways to restore coastal populations and to begin to discuss effective means of minimising

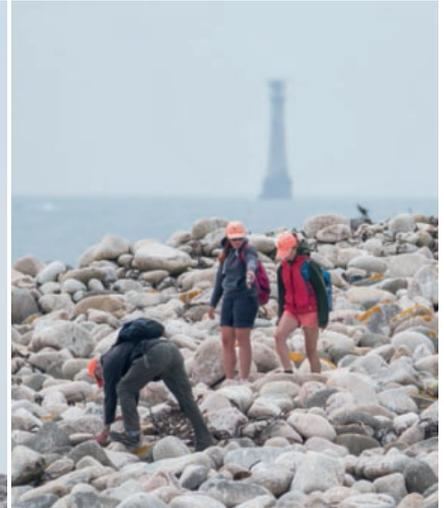
the conflict that sometimes occurs between people and gulls when they nest on roofs and forage in towns. In relation to these issues, we have invited local authorities in SW England, from unitary authorities to town councils, to complete a survey on any gull issues and actions in their areas and an RSPB briefing statement on urban gulls for the public and councils is available – e-mail: SWseabirds@rspb.org.uk



Balearic shearwaters in partnership with MARINElife

Helen Booker

Balearic shearwaters are the only globally critically endangered seabird in UK waters. As their name suggests, they breed in the Balearic islands in the Mediterranean but migrate north across the Bay of Biscay with internationally important numbers reaching SW England, in particular between July and October. Once they leave land they are vulnerable to being caught in fishing gear or being exposed to mass pollution events. Understanding how they use our seas and if there are areas they particularly rely on, is important to be able to protect them while they are with us. This year we teamed up with MARINElife to support their inshore Balearic shearwater and dolphin survey, a synchronised boat and land based survey to monitor all SW inshore waters in one day. The aim was to see how many Balearic shearwaters were using the SW at any one time. The survey was 18 August 2015, with many seawatchers volunteering time to help, from Portland in Dorset to Lundy off the North Devon Coast. Many thanks to all who took part. Results in the next edition!



Mixed fortunes for Scilly's seabirds

Dr Vickie Heaney

This summer a team of four RSPB staff members and as many as 30 individuals including local volunteers and RSPB sabbatical staff carried out a full survey of the breeding seabirds in the Isles of Scilly. The last full survey of this Special Protection Area in 2006 confirmed Scilly as the most significant seabird colony in the southwest, supporting over 9,000 pairs. The survey was part funded by Natural England, LIFE and HLF.

Juggling weather, tides and relying on intrepid boatmen, the survey involved landing on as many as 50 individual rocks and islands to count the number of active nests. For most species including gulls and terns this was a straightforward case of searching the shoreline for nests with eggs in, but for other

Species	Trend 2006 to 2015
Manx shearwater, guillemot, razorbill	Significant increases
Great black-backed gull	Slight increase
Storm petrel, puffin, fulmar	Stable or slight decrease
Kittiwake, common tern, herring gull, lesser black-backed gull, shag, cormorant	Significant decreases

birds such as fulmars, which tend to nest in cliffy areas, a count of sitting birds from the boat was the best plan. The most difficult birds to count were the Manx shearwaters and storm petrels – both of which nest underground. Scilly supports one of only two English colonies of these birds (the other site being Lundy) and to find their nests we played a recording of the birds' call at possible nest entrances and recorded any replies from birds sitting on their eggs.

Initial analysis of the survey results indicates a mixed bag for our seabirds' fortunes. Auks appear to be doing very well, a trend reported throughout the region and it has been a bumper year for Manx shearwaters. However, as suspected, large declines have been recorded in the number of kittiwakes and terns, both of which have suffered repeated breeding failures in the last nine years. In addition there are large declines in the internationally important numbers of shags and lesser black-backed gulls breeding in the islands.

Help us to help the marine environment

If there's no home for nature, there will be no nature. Safeguarding our marine environment requires adequate protection for its special species and habitats, and sustainable use of its resources. The RSPB and other wildlife charities rely on supporters to give us the voice necessary to save nature. Why not be a part of these amazing success stories? Seabirds can't campaign against threats to their environment but we can act on their behalf.

Please join the RSPB by visiting rspb.org.uk or call us to find out more on **01392 432691**. Find us on Facebook (facebook.com/RSPBSW) and Twitter (@RSPBSouthWest).

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The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

Images: cover photo by Ed Marshall, Manx shearwater by Nick Tomalin, little tern by Morgan Vaughan, herring gull by Liz Shaw, shag, guillemots and razorbill by Ed Marshall, survey work by Ed Marshall.