

Forth Seabird Group

Forth Islands Bird Report 2020

Compiled by Bill Bruce

March 2021

SEABIRD SPECIES SUMMARIES

Notes:

- AOS / AOB / AON / AOT = apparently occupied sites / burrows / nests / territories.

Due to the coronavirus COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) the whole of the UK was locked down from late March 2020. Travel restrictions were imposed and social distancing measures were put in place. Instructions from BTO and JNCC were to the effect that all seabird work (ie count surveys and ringing) should not take place. As a result, all of the Forth Seabird Group's plans for carrying out seabird counts and Lothian Ringing Group's seabird ringing trips were abandoned.

By the time that restrictions in Scotland started to be eased in early July the season was too far advanced for the Group to consider planning any seabird work.

Any subsequent observations are noted under the Additional Sightings section of this report.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF VISITS AND SIGHTINGS

Inchkeith 10 January 2020 (from Dave Nicol)

(strong westerly, cold, clear. 1200 to 1700)
Dunnock (6)
Robin (4)
Oystercatcher (19)
Curlew (2)
Peregrine (2) – adult female and one juvenile.
Blackbird (c30)
Song Thrush (2)
Redwing (1)
Rock Pipit (c40)
Shag (29)
Cormorant (c20)
Great Black-backed Gull (5)
Herring Gull – very large pre-roosting congregations amounting to hundreds of gulls.
Turnstone (2)
Wren (10)
Carrion Crow (2)

Inchkeith 22 January 2020 (from Dave Nicol)

(1430 to 1700)
Blackbird (3)
Robin (1)
Dunnock (2)
Wren (4)
Red-throated Diver (2) – flying West up the Forth.
Herring Gull – well over a thousand in the same pre-roosting gatherings as before.
Great Black-backed Gull (21)
Red-breasted Merganser (2) – at sea from the boat.
Eider (19)
Feral Pigeon (4)
Curlew (9)
Carrion Crow (1)
Oystercatcher (52)
Rock Pipit (11)
Bar-tailed Godwit (1)
Redshank (7)
Fulmar (c50)
Guillemot (6) – in one flight landing on the sea off the North bays.
Shag (131) – all ending up on Long Craig.

Cormorant (c20)

Inchkeith 29 January 2020 (from Dave Nicol)

(Very strong WSW, cold, very heavy rain. 1330 to 1700)
Twite / Linnet Flock (c60) trying to take cover in and around the fire trench on the South Tip.
Curlew (18)
Turnstone (14)
Long-tailed Duck (1) – a male flying W up the Forth.
Rock Pipit (4)
Robin (2) – one sharing the trench with me and in danger of being stood on.
Peregrine (1)
Fulmar (c30)
Guillemot
Dabchick (2) – one on either side of the main pier in Granton Harbour.
Carrion Crow (2)
Great Black-backed Gull (14)
Eider (12)
Oystercatcher (47)
Wren (1) – sharing the trench with the robin and me.
Purple Sandpiper (1)
Redwing (1)
Blackbird (4)
Buzzard (1) - spotted by Mike Macfarlane.
Sparrowhawk (1) – also spotted by Mike as he shared his pillbox with a mouse.
Ginger Rabbit (1) – on the slope above the Harbour and too big to look like a wild rabbit.

Inchkeith 5 February 2020 (from Dave Nicol)

(strong W, cold, short sunny spells. 1300 to 1730)
Great Black-backed Gull (3)
Herring gull – hundreds
Lesser Black-backed gull – 2 (Harry Bell)
Blackbird (4)
Song Thrush (2)
Linnet (35+)
Oystercatcher (21)
Turnstone (5)
Twite (7)
Fulmar (90+)
Glaucous Gull (1) – a first winter juvenile settling down among the Great Black-

backs on Long Craig after scaring the Herring Gulls on South Tip.

Redshank (5)
Purple Sandpiper (4)
Curlew (4)
Robin (3)
Wren (3)
Rock Pipit (6)
Carrion Crow (3)
Shags (84)
Cormorant (18)
Eider – several
Dunnock – 2 near harbour

Rabbit - 1



Glaucous Gull, Inchkeith © Dave Nicol

Bass Rock 29 May 2020 (from Bobby Anderson)

The following counted on south face, post landing:

16 shag, 3 nests in castle walls
3 pair puffin AOS
23 fulmar AOS
5 rock pipits noted lighthouse environs though none obviously nesting... but....?

Bass Rock 7 July 2020 (from Maggie Sheddan)

LBB gull – 3 birds (possibly 1 AOT), Eider (1 duck sitting tight by steps through ruins),

On cliffs many Guillemot, Razorbill, Kittiwake, Herring gull

Fulmar and Shag (many big young).

Gannets – all stages from eggs, chicks no more than 24 hours old, to chicks approx. 5 weeks old. Most birds sitting tight so unable to see whether they are sitting on eggs or chicks.

Looks as though there are more kittiwake nests this year but some shag nests are missing.

On earlier visit: Rock pipit – 1 pair breeding, Puffin - 3 birds seen

Carr Craig 4 July 2020 (from John Hunt)

Cormorant – good number of nests

Bass Rock 17 July 2020 (from Bobby Anderson)

eider sitting tight on nest at castle gate.

Fidra 19 August 2020 (from Emily Burton)

Found in west bay:

Striated Earthstar (*Geastrum striatum*) – several
Common Bugloss

Fidra 19th August 2020 (from Dave Nicol - Mallow Trip)

(Strong E/NE, warm, sunny, spells of thick har, sea:1m)

Rock Pipit (c20)

Shag (c50)

Fulmar - some young still fledging.

Kittiwake (c10) - a few pairs still sitting.

Starling (c40)

Herring Gulls

Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Great Black-backed Gulls

Gannets

Guillemot

Black-headed Gulls

Wood pigeon

Cormorant (c40) - sitting on the Lamb.

Goldfinch

Curlew (2)

Oystercatcher (5)

Red Admiral (1)

Large Whites - a few around.

Silver-Y Moth - quite a few among the nettles.

Striated Earthstar (*Geastrum striatum*) - down in the West bay among the nettles.

Craigleith 8th October 2020 (from Dave Nicol - Mallow Trip)

(0900-1500) (cold, sunny spells, strong W, Sea:1m)

Whooper Swan (13) - passing over going North

Rock Pipit (9)

Linnet (12)

Shag (8)

Curlew (3)
Carrion Crow (4)
Greylag (c200) going over in two flocks. 3 more
trying to land on island.
Wren (3)
Robin (4)
Swallow (4) - heading W and lingering briefly.
Goldfinch (5)
Peregrine (1) juvenile male being harassed by
gulls by the Cormorant Cliff.
Meadow Pipit (4)
Herring Gull (c20)
Gannet (c15)
Black-headed Gull (c40)
Cormorant (4)
Pied Wagtail (3)
Feral Pigeon (c30)
Oystercatcher (1)
Guillemot (1)
7-Spot Ladybird (1)
Sea Campion - very much in evidence.

Herring Gull (4)
Purple Sandpiper (4)
Carrion Crow (2)

FIDRA 26 November 2020 (From Dave Nicol, RSPB Mallow cutting trip)

(0900 - 1430)

(cold, overcast, slight westerly, waves 0.3m)

Raven (2) sitting in the West bay then flying off
to perch on the Castle.

Turnstone (2)
Linnet (c40)
Meadow Pipit (c10)
Rock Pipit (2)
Wren (7)
Starling (c20)
Shag (c15)
Great Black-backed Gull (4)
Herring Gull (c20)
Guillemot (2)
Oystercatcher (3)
Redshank (2)
Feral Pigeon (c20)
Curlew (6)
Whooper Swan (1) - passing over the island
flying North.
Purple Sandpiper (2)
Peregrine Kills - (1) fieldfare and (1) rick pipit
carcasses up above the arch.

Also seen when passing The Lamb

Oystercatcher (3)
Cormorant (c15)
Great Black-backed Gull (8)

FSG FOOTNOTES

Reports and monitoring figures for previous years can be found on the group's website:

www.forthseabirdgroup.org.uk

DATES FOR MAIN ISLAND COUNTS

Bass Rock	no count
Craigeleith	no count
The Lamb	no count
Fidra	no count
Eyebroughty	no count
Inchkeith	no count
Carr Craig	no count
Haystack	no count
Inchcolm	no count
Inchmickery	no count
Inchgarvie	no count
Long Craig	through breeding season
Isle of May	through breeding season

Tree Mallow Project – SOS Puffin

For further information about this project go to the Scottish Seabird Centre website at

www.seabird.org or for information on tree mallow go to www.abdn.ac.uk/treemallow

COUNTERS & CONTRIBUTORS

Thanks to everyone who helped with counts or provided data for this report

Data passed on to (includes):

Dr R M Sellers for inclusion in the annual Cormorant Breeding Colony Survey;
JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme.

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Colour-ringed Birds

Colour-ringed Shags

Any sightings of colour-ringed Shags, particularly in autumn, are vital to understanding their movements. Please send sightings to shags@ceh.ac.uk

Colour-ringed Gulls

In the last few years a number of gulls have been ringed with engraved colour rings. These have already generated some fascinating sightings with Great Black-backed Gulls from Isle of May being seen in Ireland, France & Belgium and a Herring Gull in Cornwall. Sightings closer to home are just as valuable as they help understand timing of movement and site fidelity. Reports of Great Black-backed Gulls to markoksien@btinternet.com, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls to nescotlandgulls@gmail.com

Lothian Ringing Group

Leith Docks Common Tern Colony Count 2020

Report to Scottish Natural Heritage and Forth Ports

Introduction

The Lothian Ringing Group (LRG) has been monitoring the Common Tern colony in Leith Docks since 1986. In recent years the colony has been the largest in Scotland (995+ pairs in 2017) and one of the largest colonies in Britain and Ireland. Because of its European importance, the site of the colony, on an artificial island at the entrance to the Imperial Dock, is a Special Protection Area under the EU Wild Birds Directive, classified 23rd September, 2004.

Method

The count was done between 13:45 and 15:15 BST on 19th June, 2020 by John Davies and Ian Andrews (LRG). The colony was counted from the south-west and north-east dock-sides opposite the island on which the colony is sited. Apparently occupied nests (AONs) were counted as individual adult Common Terns sitting on nests. Sitting birds, observed through a telescope (Kowa 32 x 80), were counted from the north-west to the south-east on either side of the island. The count was done in sections between the eight mooring bollards on the island in order to make the count easier and for comparison with previous years' counts. Eggs were seen, but no chicks, although one bird appeared to be brooding a small chick(s).

Results

A total of 360 AONs were counted – 228 from the south-west and 132 from the north-east dock-sides. This method of counting, from both dock-sides, means that some birds were counted twice from each side, but some birds hidden in vegetation on the island were not counted at all. In previous years, counts done from the dock-sides compared with nest counts done on the island have shown a close similarity, within +/- 3%. This gives a range for this year's count of between 349 and 371 AONs.

Roseate Terns and Roseate Tern hybrids have nested in the Common Tern colony on the island in the past three years (2017, 2018 & 2019), but no Roseates were seen during this year's count.

Discussion

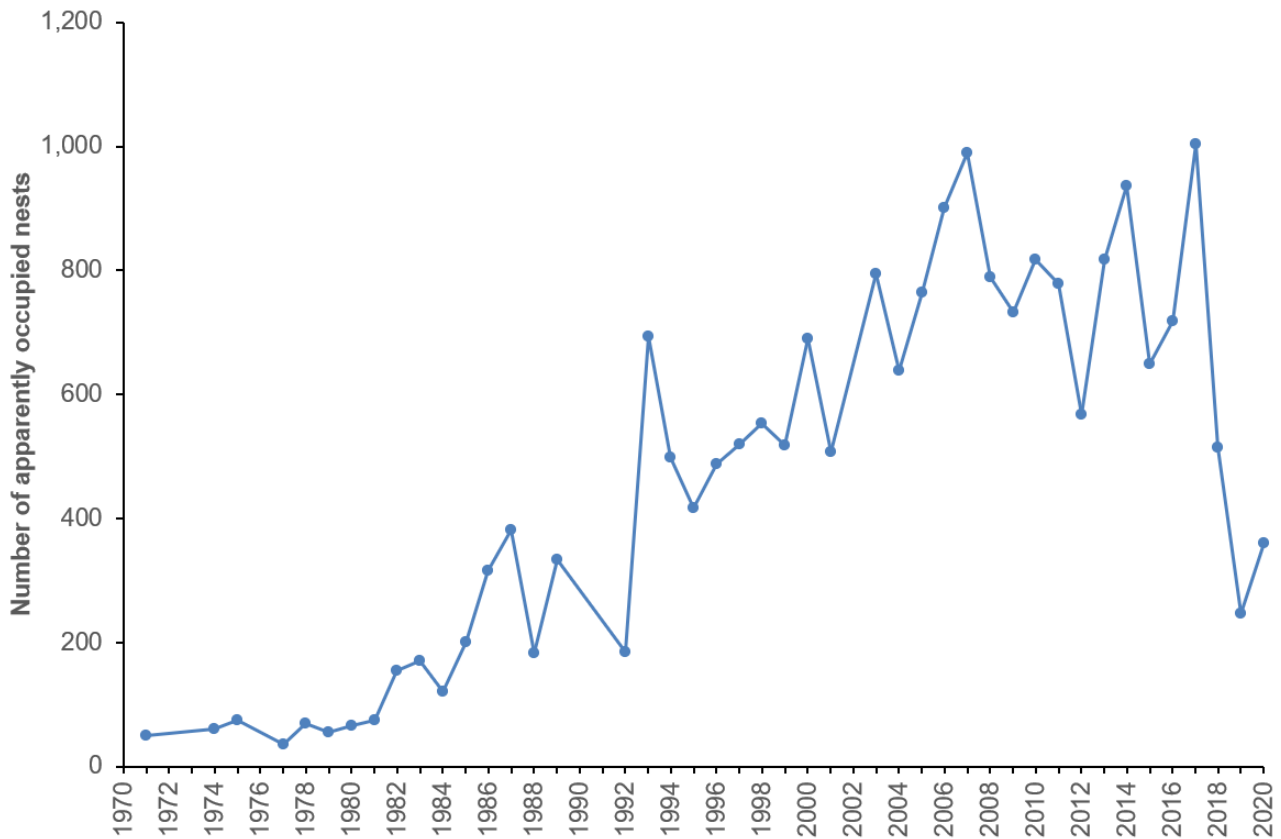
This year's count was done around the same date as recent years' counts. However, in previous years the counts were done within a few days of the first chicks hatching. Only one bird was seen apparently brooding a small chick(s) during this count. This will not have altered the accuracy of this year's count, nor comparison with previous years' counts.

From a maximum of 995 AONs in 2017, the colony has declined in size in the last two years to 514 AONs in 2018 and 246 AONs in 2019 (Figure 1). This decline has co-coincided with port activities next to the colony. The colony was abandoned with no chicks fledged in 2018 and in 2019.

This year's count is a significant increase (46%) to last year's. However, port activity next to the colony has begun again with another oil pipe coating contract. As last year, this involves vessels moored in the old lock system between the island tern colony and the dockside. The overhanging Granada gantry cranes then unload and load pipes on and off vessels. This causes noticeable disturbance to the colony.

It is hoped that LRG can continue to monitor the colony this year as in previous years.

Figure 1. Numbers of Common Terns nesting at Leith Docks, Lothian, 1971-2020 (source: Lothian Recorder's files and LRG since 1986).



Acknowledgements

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John C. Davies
Lothian Ringing Group
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Carlingnose SWT Reserve

An extract taken from an item written by John Done in the Autumn 2020/Winter 2021 edition of the SWT Fife and Kinross Group's Fife Area Wildlife News:

“Great news! The common terns took over the ruined pier. There appeared to be no problems with predation by the gulls and I estimated at least 100 individuals were on the pier in June and July. They also bred on the dolphin in West Bay and I saw at least 6 small young being fed there several times in July.”

Appendix 3**BTO rings recovered**

Species	BTO Ring	Darvic	Date found/seen	Place found/seen	Condition	Date Ringed	Place ringed	Notes
Fulmar	FH01659		23-May-20	Hardelot, Pas-de-Calais, France	Freshly dead (about 1 wk)	30-Jul-07	Inchgarvie	Found by Véronique Faucheur, 682km from ringing site

Appendix 4

St Abb's Head NNR – taken from their Facebook

[St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve](#)

15 October at 19:03 ·

GANNETS

If you're not a fan of Gannets then tune out now! Bringing you an update on the colonisation of St Abb's Head by Britain's biggest seabird.

After a few failed breeding attempts in previous years, 2020 finally saw the Gannets become properly established on Foul Carr on the cliffs of St Abb's. A minimum of 14 nests being built, 6 pairs actually laying eggs, all hatching and 5 birds going on to fledge!

The first egg was seen on 14th May, quite late for a Gannets which are normally early breeders. The first chick was seen on 30th June and the first chick fledging in late September. It's been good to still have a few seabirds long after the rest of the colonies have departed for people to enjoy. There is actually still one chick still with us, clearly reluctant to take the plunge into the cold North Sea! If you're quick you just might catch it!

It's a shame we couldn't bring you live updates from the colony, but hopefully these pics tell a bit of a story, showing nests, chicks and some of the many interactions. An amazing sight this year involved watching an adult Gannet brood and preen a Guillemot chick for 20 minutes after chasing off the adult! Something I've never seen before having worked in a few big Gannet colonies! The longer you watch for, the more you see!

There are always winners and losers in nature and the spread of Gannets could come at the expense of traditional Guillemot nesting areas. It will be interesting to see what happens in the coming years and whatever does happen, it's always spectacular to watch the interactions of this incredible seabird colony!!!



[St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve](#)

27 October at 17:04 ·

The best of the rest.....

After the Gannet update, here's a quick update on the rest of the seabirds in this strange year at the Head.

Kittiwakes had a good season, with their population looking very similar to last years figure. It appears that after several years of steep decline, their numbers seem to be stabilising and even increasing in some parts of the colony. You have to look for reasons to be cheerful when working with seabirds. In the last 25 years they've undergone a drastic decline of around 70%, a stat mirrored in other seabird colonies around the UK. Fingers crossed their numbers continue to grow.

Our Herring Gulls saw a decline this year, which is worrying for this often maligned apex predator....

Shags also had a reasonable year, with another low population total but good productivity. Quite a few broods of three fledged from around the colony, illustrating a plentiful supply of food for these inshore feeding dinosaurs!

We only count the auks (Razorbills and Guillemots) every 5 years, but numbers seemed steady and plenty of Razorbills are starting to appear in new parts of the reserve which is good news for this enigmatic auk. These birds can live for over 40 years and dove to depths over 150m! Machines!

Fulmars retained a steady population with only a small decline in their numbers. We couldn't get out to count from the sea this year due to COVID so if we look at previous sea counts, most of our seabird populations have remained at a very similar level this year.

Anyway, here are a few pictures and a bit more info on what makes St Abb's Head such a special place - it's seabird residents!!! Hopefully we can do much more work with the seabirds next year when things might be a bit more 'normal!'.



Isle of May NNR Seabird Summary 2020

Due to the nature of 2020 with the Covid-19 restrictions, staff were not present on the island until 8th June. This was just in time to undertake population counts of the seabirds and counts began on 11th June. Adverse weather, fog and strong northerly winds, delayed the counts further with the final day of counts on 23rd June.

A full count of the gulls and eiders was due to take place this season however, with the restrictions in place, we were limited with the number of personnel on the reserve so this has been delayed to 2021.

The majority of the seabirds saw an increased in breeding numbers, the most notable was the kittiwake, an increase of 62% with 4,947 apparently occupied nests (AON). The table below shows the populations of the cliff nesting seabirds and the percentage change from 2019.

Population change of cliff-nesting seabirds, 2019-2020

	Fulmar (AOS)	Shag (AON)	Kittiwake (AON)	Guillemot		Razorbill	
				Ind.	Pairs	Ind.	Pairs
2020 total (AIC)	324	495	4,947	23,303	16,865	6,292	4,124
2019 total (AIC)	280	389	3,061	21,493	15,974	5,377	4,166
Change 2019- 2020	44	106	1,886	1,810	891	915	-42
%age change 2019-2020	15.7	27.2	61.6	8.4	5.6	17.0	-1.0

The terns had a mixed season, on an essential maintenance day visit in May the terns were present in good numbers at both breeding areas, Beacon and Kirkhaven. On our return in June it was clear the Beacon colony had suffered from predated, presumably crows and oystercatchers. Some pairs had moved to the Kirkhaven colony, including common terns that

only usually breed at the Beacon. Overall, the numbers were down from last year but still an average number for the Isle of May.

Population change of breeding terns, 2019-2020

	Common Tern	Arctic Tern	Sandwich Tern
2020 total	15	400	0
2019 total	51	486	10
Change 2019-2020	-36	-86	-10
%age change 2019-2020	-70.6	-17.7	-100

Bex Outram
Isle of May Nature Reserve Assistant Manager

Locked down but still getting out!

In a year when we've all had our mobility restricted by you-know-what, at times I've found it difficult to motivate myself to revisit the same areas time and again. One of the things I do to add some additional interest is to look for colour-ringed birds on the local shores. At this point, I'll apologise in advance to those among you who have far greater knowledge of this field than I do, I'm really writing for those who might find it a worthwhile and rewarding thing to do with some of their enforced leisure.

A few years back, while trying to photograph shorebirds, I noticed that some of the Sanderling in my pictures had different combinations of colour rings on both legs, but that all had a green "flag" (an extended ring) projecting on the left leg. Using the European Colour-Ring Birding site <http://www.cr-birding.org/> I was able to find the contact details for the relevant ringing scheme; in this case, the Orkney Ringing Group, and I've been sending them sightings since then.

Following on from that, I decided I'd start looking a bit harder at the birds on my local patch, and in doing that, I've recorded birds from Scotland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, and even a Lesser Black-back ringed in the Coto de Doñana in S Spain. Not just gulls and shorebirds either, I've reported a couple of colour-ringed Twite this winter.

If you think you'd like to have a go at this, I find that the most reliable way to find ringed birds is to photograph the groups of birds resting on the shore, and check out the enlarged pictures later. I just find that method more convenient than lugging a scope around, but that also works of course. Using the camera, on one occasion I was able to get sufficient detail from a photo of a fishing Sandwich Tern to pass info on to the Grampian Ringing Group, and in the process, I also learned a few interesting things from the ringer's reply. Sometimes reporting a sighting just requires you to enter the information on a website, but often you're in touch with the ringer personally, and they're sometimes happy to add information beyond the basic life history.

One bird I see quite often is a minor local celebrity, a Black-headed Gull known as "Joy" (Colour ring JOY1) who's fairly well known because of her tendency to hang around the area near the burger van for some reason. She's been doing this every autumn and winter since at least 2012, when she was ringed as an adult at her nesting site on the fringes of Oslo. Next time a gull is eyeing you hopefully as you eat your fish supper, maybe give a thought to where it lives the other part of its life.

Mike Macfarlane



JOY1 – ringed in Norway and seen regularly in Leven, Fife

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