

New Seabird Census reveals catastrophic declines in Scotland's seabirds



Parliamentary briefing – January 2024

Summary

- The results of the new seabird census, [Seabirds Count](#), published in November 2023 provide an overview of the state of breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland and it paints a particularly grim picture for Scotland's seabirds, with 70% of species in decline.
- Climate change impacts (including warming sea temperatures and severe weather), predation by invasive species, lack of food and human activities (including offshore marine renewables and fisheries) are identified as the main drivers of these devastating losses, the worst declines ever recorded in Scotland's seabird populations.
- There may be more bad news as the census was completed before the severe outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) which has since devastated many seabird colonies including 2 of the 3 species identified as increasing – gannets and great skuas.
- The first census in 20 years comes at a crucial moment, as our seabirds, and our planet, face escalating challenges and provides a wake-up call to the severity of Scotland's nature and climate emergency and the vital need to tackle both hand in hand.
- Tackling climate change means keeping fossil fuels in the ground and decarbonising our energy systems. Offshore renewables will play a key part in this decarbonisation agenda but in order to address the nature emergency must be planned and built with nature in mind from the outset. Consenting in the least damaging places for seabirds and other marine life, designed to minimise harm to seabirds from collision and displacement through careful turbine placement and design and accompanied by measures to fully mitigate and compensate for any remaining risks to seabirds and other wildlife.

What did the new census tell us about Scottish seabird populations?



Trends in Scotland



Species and % change since S.2000	Species and % change since S.2000	Species and % change since S.2000
Northern Gannet +40	Razorbill -2	Black Guillemot -11
Great Skua +14	Sandwich Tern -5	European Shag -22
European Storm-petrel (+48)	Great Cormorant -6	Common Tern -24
		Little Tern -29
		Common Guillemot -31
		Atlantic Puffin (-32)
		Northern Fulmar -37
		Common Gull -53
		Arctic Tern -54
		Black-legged Kittiwake -57
		Great Black-backed Gull -63
		Arctic Skua -66
		Black-headed Gull -75
		Leach's Storm-petrel -79

Overall trend uncertain due to survey method changes at some sites

Manx Shearwater	
Herring Gull	Urban: uncertain / Natural: -44
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Urban: uncertain / Natural: -48

1. Scotland is incredibly important for seabirds both globally and at a European level. Scotland is home to **23 of the 25 seabird species which breed in Britain and Ireland and hosts 51% of the total population.**

2. Of the 20 species for which we have confidence in their Scottish trends, 14 have declined. **This is 70% of species in decline.** Those under the white line in the table declined by more than 50%
3. The **causes of decline vary between species and regions** but have common themes including: (i) Predation, (ii) climate change - warming sea temperature affecting food supply, and adverse weather events impacting nest sites, (iii) lack of food as a result of both climate change and fisheries, and (iv) human activities such as marine renewable energy development and bycatch in fisheries.
4. Of the three species reported to have increased two species - Northern Gannet and Great Skua - **were severely impacted by HPAI**, which was first seen in seabirds after completion of the census meaning it is not reflected in the census results.

What needs to happen to halt seabird declines:

It is vital that effective action is taken urgently if we are to turn around the fortunes of these amazing, often iconic species. RSPB is calling for urgent action to address the many pressures facing Scotland's globally important seabirds. In the midst of a climate and nature crisis this means that much-needed efforts to tackle climate change such as the development of offshore renewables must be delivered in a way that also addresses the biodiversity crisis. For seabirds this means minimising impacts from the outset and throughout development as well as measures that will build resilience and assist the recovery of Scotland's seabird populations.

These should include action to:

1. **Improve food availability:** Closing Scottish (and UK) waters to industrial sandeel fishing and wider action to protect other seabird prey species.
2. **Tackle fisheries bycatch:** Introduce effective measures to minimise seabird deaths through effective mitigation and at sea monitoring of bycatch – the unintended capture in fishing lines and nets that is estimated to kill thousands of seabirds across Scottish waters each year.
3. **Tackle and prevent predation:** Deliver a rolling programme of island restoration, and effective biosecurity across Scotland.
4. **Effectively managed protected areas:** Protect the most important places for seabirds on land and at sea, through effective protection measures, monitoring and management.
5. **Take Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) into account:** as an additional and major threat that further highlights the urgency with which we need resilience-building actions for our vulnerable seabirds.
6. **Deliver, implement and resource an effective Scottish Seabird Conservation Strategy:** This needs to include robust, ambitious and timebound actions to address significant declines in seabird populations acknowledging existing and emerging pressures. It also needs to include the essential science and research programme needed to support.
7. **Adopt a Nature Positive Planning approach to renewables that frontloads action for nature:** To achieve its net-zero goals, Scotland must cease further fossil fuel extractions and prioritize renewable energy development. However, it is crucial to balance these efforts with the protection of marine biodiversity. The census data on seabirds, particularly in protected areas, aids in evaluating the risks and impacts of offshore wind projects.
8. **Front load nature into decision-making and securing sufficient funding from the outset:** Scotland must in parallel to this delivery address its international and domestic responsibilities to recover and restore biodiversity. The two must happen hand in hand and not in separate silos of policy commitment or hierarchy. Scotland's seas can be healthy and resilient, supporting thriving populations of marine wildlife as well as home to sustainable and profitable marine industries which provide much-needed green jobs. However, this can only be done with nature front-loaded and at the heart of decision-making, and with effective funding commitments from the outset.

For further information, please contact:

Helen McLachlan
Head of Marine Policy
[EMAIL REDACTED]

Nora Casey
Senior Parliamentary Officer
[EMAIL REDACTED]