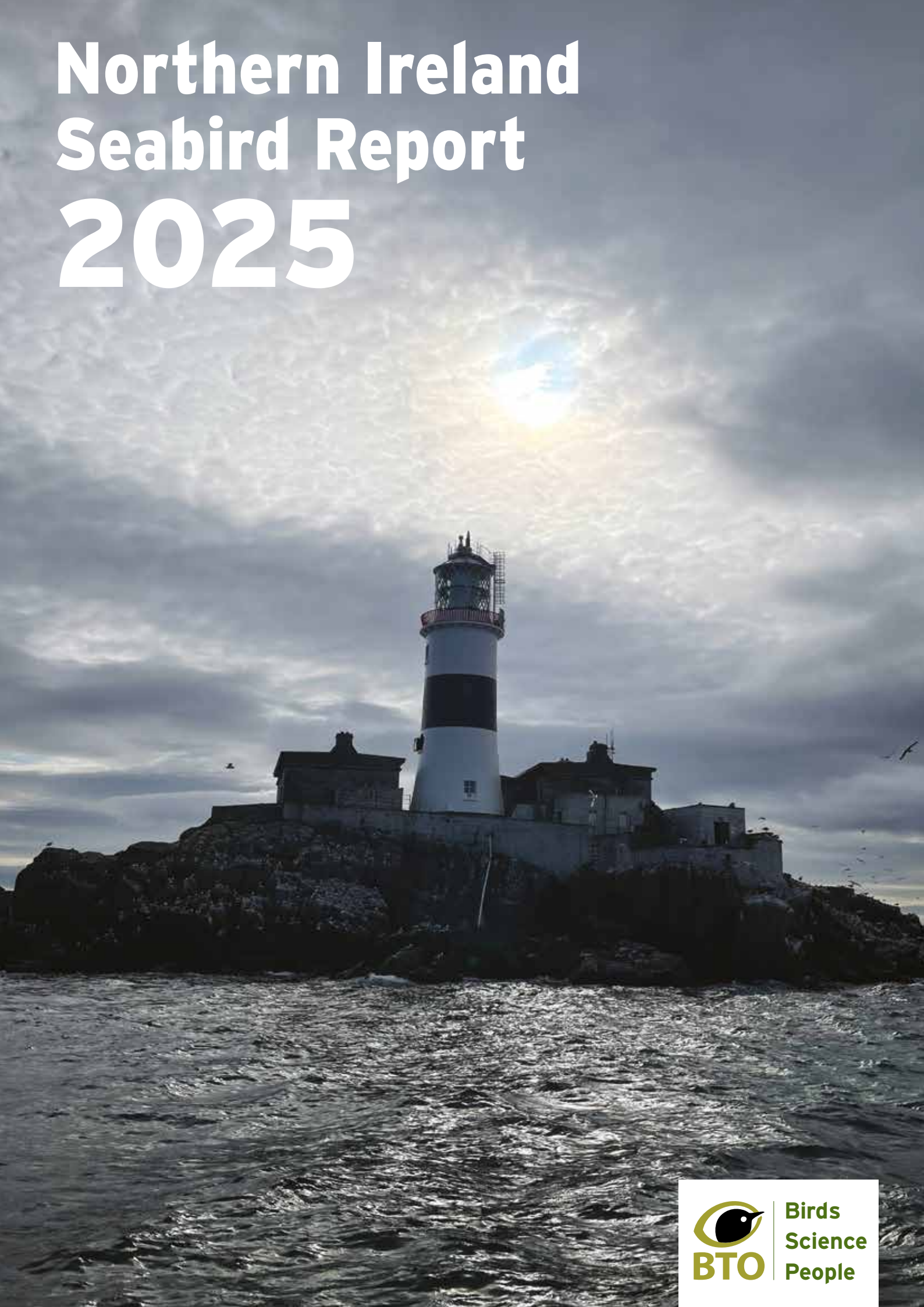
Northern Ireland Seabird Report 2025



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Andrew Upton and Hala El Haddad

This report is the published outcome of the work of the Northern Ireland Seabird Network – a network of volunteers, researchers and organisations – coordinated by the BTO Seabird Coordinator, and funded by NIEA.

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Contents

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Editorial

Andrew Upton & Hala El Haddad

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Shag, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

This is the 13th edition of the *Northern Ireland Seabird Report*, covering the 2025 breeding season and remains the only country-level annual seabird report in the UK and Ireland. This report is the published outcome of the work of the Northern Ireland Seabird Network, overseen by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) on behalf of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). As always, at the core of the Seabird Network in Northern Ireland are our surveyors. Some work for government bodies such as NIEA, and others on behalf of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), such as Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Ulster Wildlife and the National Trust. All are important contributors through the provision of data for 2025 and previous years and provide advice and guidance from their expert staff. We are grateful for their co-operation and assistance. Many other surveyors are volunteers who give their time freely to help. The amount and quality of work undertaken by volunteers in Northern Ireland is exemplary, and we are fortunate that many enthusiastic and talented people are part of the Northern Ireland Seabird Network. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report. Huge thanks also go to NIEA for their continued financial support for both the Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinator role and for the production of this annual report.

This 2025 report on breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland follows the format of the preceding reports.

It is important that this report represents a summary of current species knowledge, and that reference to other, earlier, reports is not necessary. In this we are taking a similar stance to the past *Northern Ireland Seabird Reports* (www.bto.org/our-science/publications/northern-ireland-seabird-report). In 2023, there was a serious outbreak of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) amongst breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland. Thankfully, there were no serious outbreaks of HPAI reported in breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland in 2024 and 2025. HPAI was suspected as the cause of mortalities recorded at some colonies in 2024 and 2025, although HPAI was not confirmed through testing.

As in previous years, several articles have been submitted for inclusion in the *Northern Ireland Seabird Report*. These articles provide further detail on seabird-related topics and highlight some of the exciting seabird research being undertaken in Northern Ireland and further afield. We are very grateful to the authors for giving their time to produce these articles.

This report should not be treated as an official statistics publication. Naturally this summary does not report on all data, but all records collected are of real value in understanding Northern Ireland's seabirds. A report such as this is only as robust as the data that we can collect and submit, so if you have additional seabird population data, either recent or historic, then please submit them online to the BTO/JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) database (www.bto.org/smp) or discuss this with us or Erin Taylor, the SMP Organiser (smp@bto.org). Although the national census period has closed, we would encourage volunteers to continue to monitor their seabird sites, as long-term, annual data collection is exceedingly valuable in tracing the health of our marine ecosystems. In particular, breeding success and survival data are rare in Northern Ireland, and therefore we would love to hear from anyone interested in contributing to productivity monitoring or seabird ringing and survival monitoring (Retrapping Adults for Survival, RAS: https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/ringing/surveys/ras).

We hope you enjoy the 2025 report!

Andrew Upton and Hala El Haddad
BTO NI Senior Research Ecologist and BTO NI Research Ecologist (BTO NI Seabird Coordinators)

Seabird monitoring overview

Puffin, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Seabird colony censuses in Britain and Ireland

There have been four national seabird censuses covering Britain and Ireland. The first, Operation Seafarer, was conducted in 1969 and 1970 by the then recently formed Seabird Group. More than 1,000 surveyors took part. The results were summarised in Cramp *et al.* (1974) *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*. Operation Seafarer was a major achievement and provided the first comprehensive and detailed account of the abundance and distribution of breeding seabirds in the UK and Ireland. However, Operation Seafarer also highlighted major problems in accurately counting some species, namely Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, Leach's Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*, Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, Razorbill *Alca torda*, Guillemot *Uria aalge*, Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle* and Puffin *Fratercula arctica*.

The second census, known as the Seabird Colony Register (SCR), was instigated by the then Nature Conservancy Council and The Seabird Group. Most fieldwork was carried out from 1985 to 1988. The results were published in Lloyd *et al.* (1991) *The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland.* The SCR provided the first assessment of nationwide trends through comparison with results from Operation Seafarer. Recently developed survey techniques provided more reliable baseline estimates for Guillemot, Razorbill and Black Guillemot and served as the foundation for future monitoring of seabird populations. Crucially it also allowed the national importance of individual colonies to be compared, and for sites to be designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the EC 'Birds Directive'. A legacy of the Seabird Colony Register was the establishment of the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP, see below).

The third national census was Seabird 2000. It was coordinated by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in partnership with other organisations: Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), Natural England (NE), NIEA, RSPB, The Seabird Group, Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG), BirdWatch Ireland, and National Parks and Wildlife Service (Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Republic of Ireland). Fieldwork was carried out from 1998 to 2002. Seabird 2000 provided population information on the 24 species of seabird which regularly breed in the UK and Ireland, estimating that over eight million seabirds breed in Britain and Ireland each year. Coverage was as comprehensive as possible and included, for the first time, counts of inland colonies. The updated population estimates allowed the identification of new, and the continued monitoring of existing SPAs, and provided updated national trends. Seabird 2000 used recently developed playback techniques for the first time, providing reliable baseline estimates for petrel and shearwater populations. The results were published in Mitchell *et al.* (2004) *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland* and demonstrated that the seabird assemblage that breeds here is of extraordinary international importance.

The fourth national census, Seabirds Count (**www.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/breeding-seabird-national-censuses**), was developed by the SMP Partnership at that time and was coordinated by JNCC and supported by RSPB. Data collection for the census was undertaken between 2015 and 2021, after delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required an extension from 2020. On top of the professional coverage required to survey challenging colonies, the continued support of the volunteer Northern Ireland Seabird Network – who contribute to this report annually – has played a vital role in filling monitoring gaps for the recent census. The results of the Seabirds Count census were published in Burnell *et al.* (2023) *Seabirds Count: A census of breeding seabirds in Britain and Ireland (2015–2021)*.

The Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP)

Since 1986, seabird populations in the UK and Ireland have been monitored through the SMP (**www.bto.org/smp**) coordinated on behalf of 19 partnership organisations by JNCC until July 2022. In July 2022, a new agreement was signed, and a new partnership formed: the SMP is now jointly funded by BTO and JNCC, in association with RSPB. An Advisory Group of 24 organisations (those who formed the previous partnership, including the new partners and organisations undertaking integrated population monitoring at four 'Key Sites') was also formed to help steer the programme going forward.

Annual data on breeding abundance and breeding success of seabirds are collected from a large network of sites, both regionally and nationally, to enable species' conservation status to be assessed. To examine trends at individual colonies, at country level and across the whole UK, it is essential that individual sites can be monitored consistently for many years.

Data on breeding abundance – the number of breeding pairs or individuals – provide a medium- to long-term measure of how populations are faring. Data on breeding success/productivity – the number of chicks fledged per breeding pair – are regarded as a short term or more immediate measure of changes in the wider environment (Parsons *et al.* 2008).

Studies at the four SMP Key Sites (Isle of May, Canna, Fair Isle and Skomer) provide extra information on adult survival, diet and phenology for selected species, which in conjunction with data on breeding success are used to help to diagnose the changes in abundance. Additional data on survival rates at other sites are collected through the BTO's Retrapping Adults for Survival (RAS) scheme (Horswill *et al.* 2015). There are currently no RAS sites for seabirds in Northern Ireland.

The SMP generates annual trends of abundance and breeding success from these data, which from the 2021 breeding season are published on the BTO website (Harris *et al.* 2024: **www.bto.org/smp-publications**). Past trends were reported on the JNCC website up to 2019 (JNCC 2021: **www.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/smp-report-1986-2019**).Where possible, trends are given at UK or country level. No report was published for 2020 due to COVID-19 and restrictions on fieldwork. The SMP is a vital programme for monitoring seabird population trends between the full national censuses.

Why monitor seabirds?

The SMP enables its partners to monitor the health of the marine environment and inform seabird conservation issues. Monitoring seabirds is important for several reasons:

- seabirds are an important component of marine biodiversity in the UK;
- seabirds are top predators and a useful indicator of the state of marine ecosystems;
- human activities impact upon seabirds, both positively and negatively, and these effects should be monitored;
- the UK is internationally important for seabirds;
- seabirds are protected by law and the UK has obligations to monitor and protect populations; and
- monitoring provides data which underpin targeted conservation policy development and action.

The Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinator role

In 2013, NIEA initiated funding for a 'Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinator' post at BTO. The main aim of the Seabird Coordinator is to facilitate an increase in annual seabird monitoring across Northern Ireland. Critical to this is the active support and engagement of volunteer seabird monitors (the Northern Ireland Seabird Network), who collect much of the seabird data in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Coordinator works closely with the SMP Organiser and SMP partners to ensure that all monitoring data collected by volunteers feeds into the SMP online database (**https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp**), which has included the creation of a definitive register of Northern Ireland sites (page 8). The role also includes the compilation of an annual report on the state of seabird populations (this report), with input from the Northern Ireland Seabird Steering Group, consisting of independent experts, the RSPB, National Trust, Ulster Wildlife, the Marine and Fisheries Division (DAERA) and NIEA (DAERA). The Steering Group also advises on the programme of activities for the Coordinator and the evolution of the Northern Ireland Seabird Network. Additionally, the Coordinator acts as an advisor and representative of the Northern Ireland Seabird Steering Group and volunteer network on the Northern Ireland Seabird Conservation Strategy Steering Group, led by the Marine and Fisheries Division. The

Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinator role is now included in the duties of the BTO Senior Research Ecologist and Research Ecologist for Northern Ireland. This role is unique and provides an exemplar for better support and co-ordination of annual monitoring of seabirds in Britain and Ireland.

Strategies for seabird monitoring and conservation in Northern Ireland

In 2013, a strategy for seabird monitoring in Northern Ireland was developed (Northern Ireland Seabird Data Collection Strategy 2014–19, unpublished report to NIEA). The strategy provided the context and set minimum requirements for the annual monitoring of breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland to facilitate effective management of this natural resource. It focused on the monitoring of populations and productivity in Northern Ireland while also facilitating further detailed studies of those populations. The main objectives were:

- to identify priorities for seabird monitoring in Northern Ireland;
- to identify priorities for seabird research in Northern Ireland;
- to gather data which will assist NIEA and conservation NGOs in managing protected seabird species and habitats;
- to increase the number of seabird breeding sites monitored annually; and
- to increase the number of people involved in seabird monitoring in Northern Ireland.

The objectives of this strategy continue to be kept under review by the NI Seabird Steering Group, and new focus will be added through the development of a Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland. It is being developed by DAERA, with the advice and feedback from an Advisory Group, in tandem with conservation strategies in each of the Devolved Administrations. The Strategy and Action Plan will review and report on the current status of seabird populations and identify and assess their sensitivity to threats and pressures and thus inform management recommendations to maintain and improve conservation status. Following a public consultation (from 23 September to 16 December 2024), this is expected to be published in 2026.

The objectives of the Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Northern Ireland are to:

- collate existing evidence from all seabird monitoring efforts in Northern Ireland and continue to review and update these data as new evidence becomes available;
- identify the knowledge gaps to enhance the evidence base and data availability of seabird distributions and populations;
- integrate potential impacts of threats and pressures on seabirds into future management and decision making;
- identify and deliver targeted management measures to aid the recovery of seabirds and the wider ecosystem upon which they rely;
- bring all stakeholders and the public together to raise awareness of the importance of seabirds in Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland's importance on a wider scale across the British Isles;
- conduct a review of the strategy every six years, with the ability to change species scope to reflect environmental change and species distribution where appropriate.

The Northern Ireland sites register

During 2013 a full register of all known, possible or potential seabird nesting sites, consistent with the SMP site register, was created by the Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinator, and which provided definitive spatial boundaries for each site. This means that every part of the Northern Ireland coastline now has a recording section for data entry in the SMP online database. All known inland sites are also listed. Sites are grouped by general area into 'Master Sites'. Master Sites usually can contain a number of different sites, for example along a stretch of coastline or in a large lough, or they might contain just one site, for example a small, isolated lough. Due to legacy issues from historical record keeping and the way data are held in the SMP online database, a separate site register is maintained for Black Guillemot.

Breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland in 2025

Andrew J. Upton
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Arctic Tern, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

The following species accounts summarise the known status of each breeding seabird species in Northern Ireland (see Table 1). The accounts also provide a summary of population trends at the main breeding sites, where data exist. These data were collected by many participants across Northern Ireland and a list of those contributors is given at the end of this report. Many other people have contributed records from the 1960s onwards, when concerted monitoring began for some species. Without that recording we would not be able to generate these population graphs and tables.

Table 1: Seabird species breeding in Northern Ireland.

Species	NI Priority[1]	BoCCI4 Status[2]	UK BoCC5[3]	IUCN Red List[4] (Europe)
Fulmar	N	AMBER	AMBER	Vulnerable
Manx Shearwater	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Storm Petrel**	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Cormorant	N	AMBER	GREEN	Least Concern
Shag	Y	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Great Skua	Y	AMBER	RED	Least Concern
Kittiwake	Y	RED	RED	Vulnerable
Black-headed Gull	Y	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Mediterranean Gull	Y	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Common Gull	N	AMBER	RED	Least Concern
Lesser Black-backed Gull	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Herring Gull	Y	AMBER	RED	Least Concern
Great Black-backed Gull	N	GREEN	RED	Least Concern
Little Tern	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Sandwich Tern	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Common Tern	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Roseate Tern	Y	AMBER	RED	Least Concern
Arctic Tern	N	AMBER	RED	Least Concern
Guillemot	N	AMBER	AMBER	Least Concern
Razorbill	Y	RED	AMBER	Least Concern
Black Guillemot	Y	AMBER	GREEN	Least Concern
Puffin	Y	RED	RED	Endangered

[1] Northern Ireland Priority species are those identified during the preparation of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy (2002) and subsequently, using criteria set out by stakeholders (www.habitas.org.uk/priority). An updated list was published by DAERA on 2 March 2023 (www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/list-northern-ireland-priority-species-2023). [2] Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 4 (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). [3] The status of the UK's breeding seabirds: an addendum to the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man (Stanbury *et al.* 2024). [4] International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN, 2024). ** Not currently breeding, historical records only.

In Northern Ireland, the Birds of Conservation Concern Ireland (BoCCI) list is used for flagging species conservation issues (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). Following the 2021 reassessment, three species were moved from the Amber List to the Red List in Ireland due to their conservation importance at the European level based on IUCN listings: Kittiwake (Vulnerable), Puffin (Endangered) and Razorbill (Near Threatened), although since this assessment Razorbill has been reclassified by IUCN as Least Concern (IUCN 2023). Since the last assessment in 2013 (Colhoun & Cummins 2013), declines were less severe for Herring Gull and Black-headed Gull populations, resulting in these moving from Red to Amber, and Great Black-backed Gulls moved from Amber- to Green-listed.

The UK list, BoCC5, was also updated in 2021 but, because the new seabird census results were not available, assessments of the status of seabird species were not updated (Stanbury *et al.* 2021). In 2024, the status of the UK's breeding seabirds: an addendum to the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man, was produced (Stanbury *et al.* 2024). This resulted in a number of species moving from being Amber- to Red-listed: Common Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Arctic Tern and Great Skua. One species, Shag, moved from Red- to Amber-listed, while Black Guillemot joined Cormorant on the Green List, having previously been listed as Amber.

There are some notable differences between the All-Ireland BoCCI list (Gilbert *et al.* 2021) and the Status of the UK's breeding seabirds: an addendum to the UK Birds of Conservation Concern (Stanbury *et al.* 2024). In particular, Great Black-backed Gull is now Red-listed in the UK but Green-listed in Ireland. There has been a significant decline in the number of breeding Great Black-backed Gulls in Scotland, which holds almost half the British and Irish population. However, in Northern Ireland there has been a recovery from the recent population crash and the number of breeders shows an increase of 507% since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Great Skua, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Roseate Tern and Arctic Tern are all Red-listed in the UK but Amber-listed in Ireland. The Roseate Tern is not Red-listed on the island of Ireland as it is in the UK, since Rockabill in Co. Dublin supports the largest European colony for the species (Leonard & Wolsey 2016). Despite this, the Roseate Tern remains a precarious breeding species in Northern Ireland. Cormorants are Amber-listed in Ireland but Green-listed in the UK list due to the localised breeding criteria (more than 50% of the breeding population was found at 10 or fewer sites). Razorbill is Red-listed in Ireland but Amber-listed in the UK. Black Guillemot is Amber-listed in Ireland but Green in the UK.

Seabird surveys of abundance and breeding success in the UK and Ireland are undertaken using standard survey guidelines for each species (Walsh *et al.* 1995). Tables 2 and 3 briefly outline the survey units and methods used for estimating the numbers of each species under consideration in Northern Ireland.

Table 2: Units for surveys of seabird numbers/abundance.

Unit	Abbreviation	Description
Apparently Occupied Nest	AON	An active nest occupied by a bird, pair of birds, or with eggs or chicks present.
Apparently Occupied Territory	AOT	When nests cannot be discerned (e.g. for Great Skua), the presence of a nest may be inferred at the time of year when nests are likely to be complete or eggs are newly hatched by the presence of an incubating adult, or adult displaying territorial behaviour.
Apparently Occupied Site	AOS	An active site occupied by a bird, pair of birds, or with eggs or chicks present. Used for species without obvious nests such as Fulmar.
Apparently Occupied Burrow	AOB	An apparently active and occupied burrow which may have a nest.
Individuals	IND	Individual birds.

Table 3: For consistency and for convenience to volunteers in Northern Ireland, we recommend following the methods and the timings outlined below for recording seabird abundance. The methods listed here are derived from Walsh *et al.* (1995) where more detailed descriptions and comparisons of all survey methods can also be found, in addition to methods for measuring breeding success. For an explanation of units, see Table 2.

Species	Unit	Notes
Fulmar	AOS	Count between 09.00 and 17.30, late May to early July. Apparently Occupied Sites are those ledges suitable for nesting with a bird present (Population monitoring method 1).
Manx Shearwater	AOB	Late May to early June. Survey using tape playback between 09.00 and 17.00 (Population monitoring method 2).
Cormorant	AON	Local knowledge of timing of breeding useful, but generally early to mid June (Population monitoring method 1).
Shag	AON	Local knowledge of timing of breeding useful, but generally late May or multiple counts between May and June (Walsh *et al.* 1995).
Great Skua	AOT	Count period late May to mid June.
Kittiwake	AON	Count late May to mid June. Only count completed nests with at least one adult attending.
All gull species (excluding Kittiwake)	AON IND	Count late May to mid June. Counts of adults on nests, or transects to count nests. Alternatively, flush counts of individual adults (Population monitoring method 1, 3 or 5).
All tern species	AON IND	Count period between mid May and late June (especially late May and early June). Counts of adults on nests, or transects to count nests. Alternatively, flush counts of individual adults (Population monitoring method 1, 2 or 3).
Guillemot	IND	Count between 08.00 and 16.00, made in the first three weeks of June, with ~5 repeats if possible. Birds on tidal rocks or sea excluded.
Razorbill	IND	Count between 08.00 and 16.00, made in the first three weeks of June, with ~5 repeats if possible. Birds on tidal rocks or sea excluded.
Black Guillemot	IND	Count any birds seen within c. 300 m of the shore and any on land, between 05.00 and 09.00, during the first three weeks in April.
Puffin	IND	Ideally, AOS/AOB should be counted, following methods described in Walsh *et al.* 1995. For small colonies, as may be present in Northern Ireland (outside of Rathlin Island), count individuals above ground, flying over the colony and birds within 200 m of the shore in April (Census method 3). Evening or early morning visits will produce highest counts.
Storm Petrel	AOB	Storm Petrels are not currently known to breed in Northern Ireland, therefore no recommendations are specifically made here.

Species accounts in this report are structured as follows:

Overview – conservation status, a brief description of the species characteristics, population size estimates from censuses and SMP trends for abundance and breeding success for the UK as a whole, although no trends are currently published for Northern Ireland in the SMP report (Harris *et al.* 2024. **www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/smp_annual_report_2021-23.pdf**).

Abundance – a summary of the latest data available on breeding numbers (abundance) in Northern Ireland, with historical trends where data are available. In most cases, graphs show population trends, and, unless otherwise stated, gaps in graphs mean no count was carried out during that year. Where data are available for all years, a smoothed trend curve is fitted through the data points using a local polynomial regression fitting method ('loess') in the R package 'ggplot2', version 3.4.4 (R version 4.2.2). The curve is presented with a standard error 95% confidence interval at around the smoothed curve. For abundance data which represent the entire population of Northern Ireland (or near to), for example, for Mediterranean Gulls and tern species, cumulative plots are given.

Breeding success – a summary of the latest data available on breeding success in Northern Ireland. For species with sufficient data for visualisation, productivity is plotted per year across all sites where productivity was measured. In these plots, a trend curve is fitted through the data points using the methods described for breeding numbers above. However, it should be noted that these trends are based on small sample sizes and are not weighted for sample size per site and are therefore best used as a quick visual representation only and should be interpreted with caution.

A table detailing specific counts of breeding numbers at defined SMP Master Sites in Northern Ireland between 2016 and 2025 can be found in Table 6 in the Appendix on page 97. Additional data collected on seabirds and other bird species at the UK level, such as range change, seasonality, movement and biometrics and can be found on the BTO BirdFacts pages: **www.bto.org/birdfacts**.

Priority gaps in 2025 and onwards

There will always be sites that require professional effort or additional equipment to fully survey. Each year the Northern Ireland Seabird Steering Group reviews coverage and the table below outlines sites and species of particular priority.

Table 4: Key seabird monitoring gaps identified in 2025.

Site	Difficulties and gaps	Planned coverage
Big Copeland, the Copeland Islands, Co. Down	Access requires landowner permissions and a boat. Big Copeland is a large island and requires experienced survey effort. The important gull and tern colonies on Big Copeland have not been surveyed in recent times.	No.
The Gobbins, Co. Antrim	Boat-based surveys are essential and previously good annual coverage was achieved, providing both abundance and breeding success data.	Last counted in 2023 and 2024.
The Skerries, Co. Antrim	Access is difficult, requires a boat and permission from the owner via NIEA.	Counted in 2025 by drone (awaiting data).
Burial Island, Outer Ards, Co. Down	May have the second largest colony of Great Black-backed Gulls in NI (Kerry Leonard, pers. comm.). Also nesting Cormorants.	No.
North and South Rock, Outer Ards, Co. Down	Small islands requiring a boat to observe nesting Cormorants and gulls.	No.
The Maidens	Access by boat is difficult as the islands are surrounded by strong tides and there is no safe landing area. This site is important for Shag in Northern Ireland.	Shag counted in 2025.
Black Guillemot – islands in Strangford Lough, Co. Down	The complex system of islands in Strangford Lough holds breeding Black Guillemots; however, surveying these requires a boat.	No.
Guns Island, Co. Down	The site may hold a gull colony. Kittiwake formerly bred.	No.
Storm Petrels	While mostly considered to be absent as breeding seabirds in Northern Ireland, Storm Petrels are difficult to survey and may be present on islands such as Rathlin Island, The Skerries and Sheep Island. Playback or bioacoustic equipment and access to a boat are necessary to survey Storm Petrels.	No.

Abundance data are the most commonly collected data in Northern Ireland and provide the most important measure of how our seabirds are faring through time. However, monitoring breeding success and adult survival provides the context by which potential environmental drivers such as climate change, prey availability and predation can be linked to population changes. In Northern Ireland, however, these data are sparse or non-existent for many species. There are great examples of volunteer-led breeding success monitoring currently underway in Northern Ireland, for example at Portrush and Donnard Cove for Kittiwake, while RSPB, National Trust and Ulster Wildlife provide invaluable breeding success information for the islands they monitor, particularly for terns.

Despite these efforts, breeding success data have not been collected recently for many other species. Now that the Seabirds Count (2015–2021) census period is complete, the Northern Ireland Seabird Coordinators aim to increase support for volunteers wishing to collect this vital data. Monitoring adult survival is achieved through general metal ringing and colour-ringing studies (such as Retrapping Adults for Survival, RAS: **www.bto.org/our-science/projects/ringing/surveys/ras**), activities that are also rare in Northern Ireland. BTO is currently running two seabird grants: **grants for ringing groups** to provide additional places on ringing trips for new participants, and; **grants for individuals seeking seabird experience** for holders of a BTO ringing permit (trainees, C- or A-, or S-permit holders) who are 18 years and over. These grants were possible thanks to the donations to BTO's Seabird Appeal (**www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/help-fund-our-work/appeals/our-lost-seabirds**). To report sightings of ringed birds go to Euring (**www.ring.ac**).

Get involved!

If you are interested in seabird monitoring in Northern Ireland, please get in touch with the Seabird Coordinators (**hala.haddad@bto.org** or **andrew.upton@bto.org**) to be added to the Northern Ireland Seabird Network. You can also find some simple introductions to monitoring common species in Northern Ireland in the following Google Drive online: **https://bit.ly/NI_Seabird_Guidance**, which are also available on request from the Seabird Coordinators.

You can see an interactive, zoomable version of the coverage maps online by following this link: **https://bit.ly/NI_Seabird_Sites**. The online maps are coloured by coverage and split between sites for 'all-seabirds' and for Black Guillemots, reflecting the division of the SMP database by these categories. If you click on a site of interest it will be highlighted, showing the extent of the site, its name and information on whether it is currently assigned to a participant. Please explore these online maps if you are interested in contributing seabird monitoring data in Northern Ireland. If you would like help viewing these maps or would like to discuss coverage of any of the sites, please email the Seabird Coordinators.

Species accounts

Shag, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Fulmar

Fulmarus glacialis

Conservation status: Amber-listed in BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in BoCC 5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Vulnerable – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Fulmar, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Overview

Synopsis: Fulmars are tube-nosed seabirds around the size of a small gull that nest in loose cliff-based colonies. They can use relatively small cliff faces, sometimes several miles inland. They are non-migratory and can be seen all year round. The name Fulmar means 'foul gull'.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Fulmars are common in northern Britain. The UK population of Fulmar increased between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses (from ~291,000 to 517,000 pairs) but remained stable between 1985–1988 and 1998–2002 when 501,609 pairs were recorded (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The latest UK breeding population estimate is 319,508 AOS, a 37% decline since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). An increase in the use of commercial discards has been cited as one of the reasons for a massive increase in breeding range and population size across the North Atlantic in the 20th century (Mitchell *et al.* 2004, Phillips *et al.* 1999), and that changes in legislation around fisheries discards may be partly responsible for Fulmar declines (Bicknell *et al.* 2013). Other factors that may be responsible for this decline include accidental deaths due to bycatch, climate change, predation and pollution (Harris *et al.* 2024). Fulmar has been upgraded from Green-listed to Amber-listed in the latest BoCCI due to an increase in their priority status across Europe (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). The long-term (1986–2023) SMP breeding abundance trend for the UK population shows a 39% decline (Harris *et al.* 2024).

At the UK level, the annual SMP productivity index for Fulmar has been variable but generally declining since 2006 and in 2023 was 0.34 chicks fledged per AOS (Harris *et al.* 2024). The overall fall in productivity observed since 1986 may have contributed to their population decline.

At the UK level, the annual productivity index for Fulmar has been variable but generally declining since 2006 and in 2023 was 0.34 chicks fledged per AOS (Harris *et al.* 2024). The overall fall in productivity observed since 1986 may have contributed to their population decline.

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In Northern Ireland, Fulmars are a widespread breeding species, with the most important site being at Rathlin Island. Other notable sites were Downhill and Binevenagh on the north coast, although numbers here have declined, and The Gobbins and Muck Island on the east coast. Small numbers are scattered around the coast where suitable cliff habitat occurs. Between the 1985–1988 and 1998–2002 censuses Fulmar numbers increased in Northern Ireland from 3,540 to 5,992 breeding pairs (Mitchell *et al.* 2004, JNCC 2021). Since Seabird 2000, annual monitoring indicates that numbers in Northern Ireland have generally decreased, following the trend for the UK as a whole (JNCC 2021). Specifically, Seabirds Count (2015–2021) found 2,566 AOS in Northern Ireland, a decline of 57% from Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

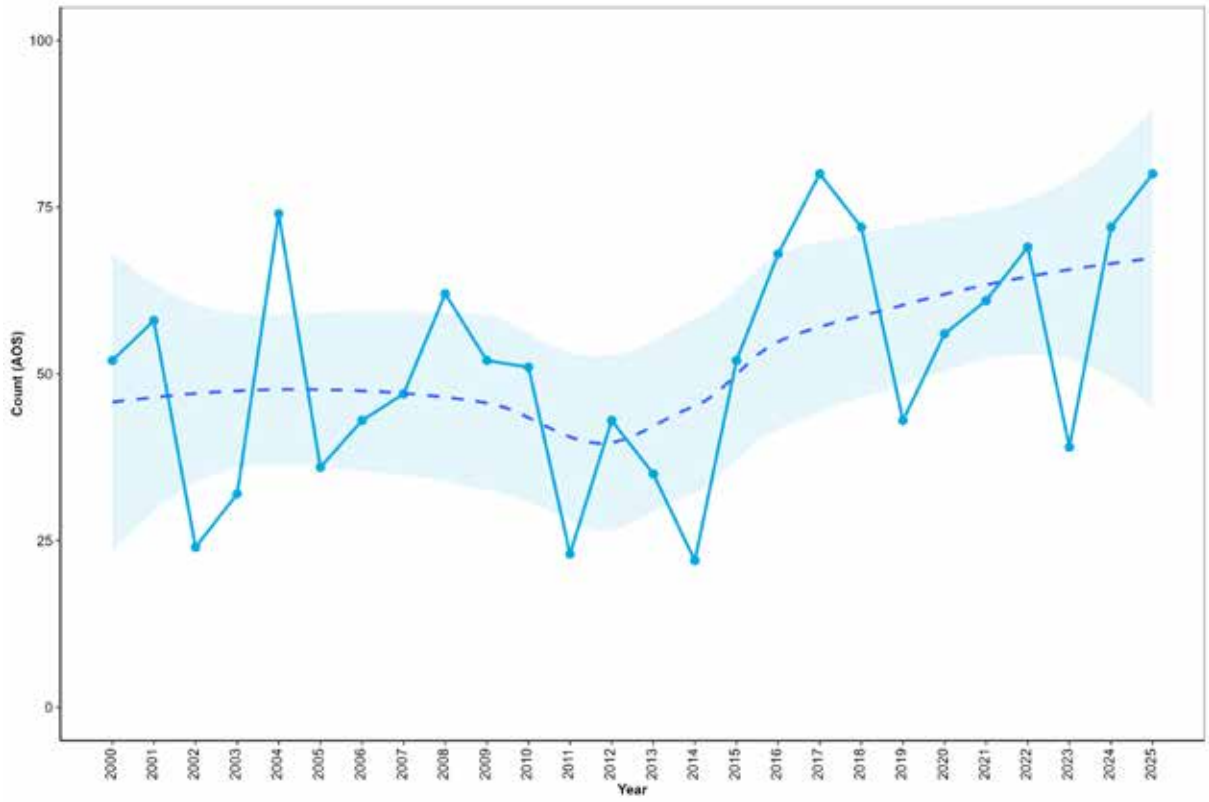
The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore productivity estimates cannot be modelled at the regional-level (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2024

Fulmar continues to be at a low ebb in Northern Ireland (Table 6, Appendix). At sites monitored annually, numbers at some sites increased in 2025 compared to 2024, while others declined.

Numbers were relatively high again on Isle of Muck with 80 AOS counted in 2025 (compared to 72 AOS in 2024, Figure 1). A total of 27 AOS was counted along the East Antrim Coast, up from 20 AOS in 2023 and 2024. Numbers have been relatively stable at The Gobbins since 2000, apart from a spike in numbers during 2016–2018. The Gobbins was surveyed in 2024 (238 AOS) and 2023 (164 AOS), with both counts lower than the previous count of 326 AOS recorded in 2018. On Lighthouse Island, Copeland Islands, 10 AOS were counted in 2025, compared to 16 AOS in 2024. Fulmars have recently ceased to breed along the Newcastle – Maggy's Leap coastline (Andy Carden, pers comm.).

Figure 1: Fulmar counts (AOS) at Muck Island, 2000–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Fulmar numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

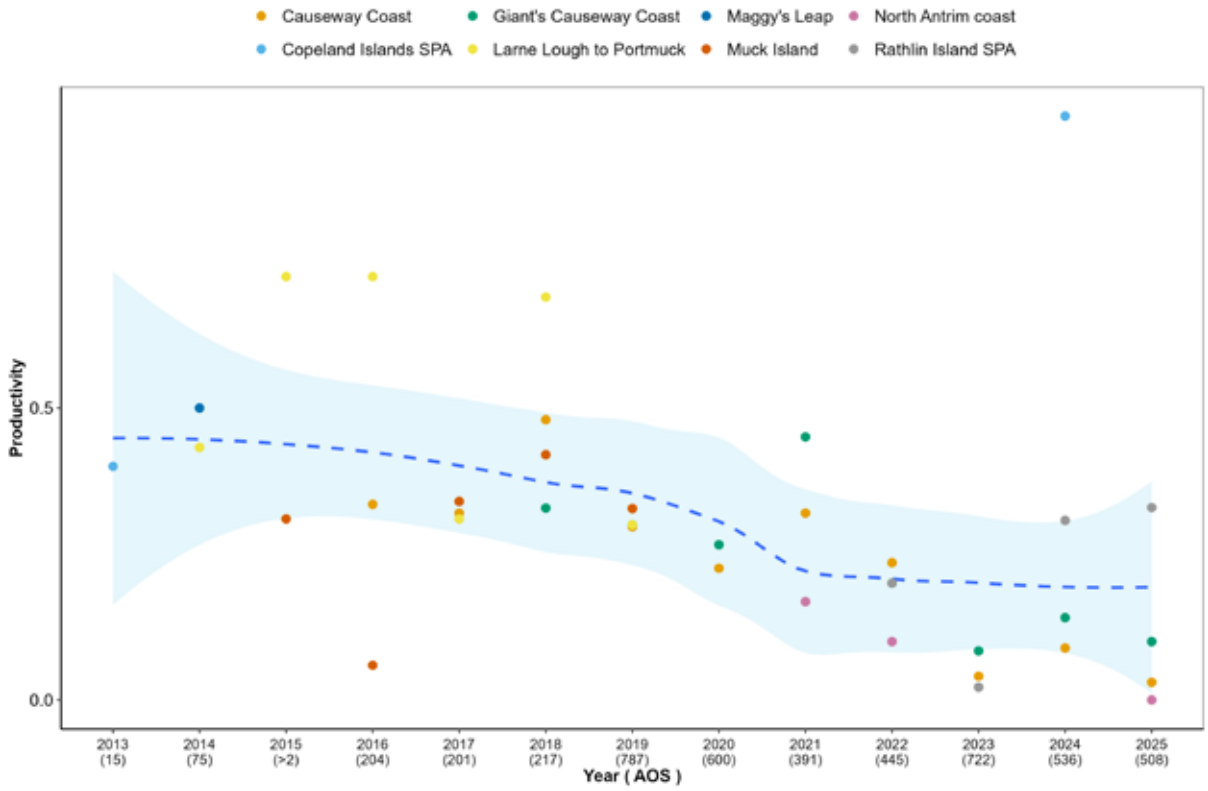


There has been a 16.7% decline since 2021 on Rathlin Island and only 927 AOS were counted in 2025 (see Rathlin Island Breeding Seabird Census 2025 report on Page 78). At the RSPB study plot on Rathlin Island, only five AOS were present, down from six AOS in 2024 and seven AOS in 2023. Elsewhere on the north coast, 77 AOS were counted at Sheep Island in 2025, together with 72 AOS at the adjacent Larrybane Bay and 20 AOS on Carrick-a-Rede. In addition, seven AOS were counted at Ballintoy, 16 AOS at White Park Bay and five AOS at Portrush. In Co. Derry/Londonderry, there were 112 AOS recorded at Downhill in 2023 compared to the Seabird 2000 count of 995 AOS (a 86% decline). At neighbouring Binevenagh, nine AOS were counted in 2023, down from a high of 217 in 2000. The particular cause of the losses of Fulmar at Downhill and Binevenagh are unclear, but given the steep declines, it may be that local conditions are a factor.

Breeding success in 2025

Over the past 10 years, Fulmar productivity has been highly variable between Northern Irish colonies and breeding seasons (Figure 2), although has generally remained below 0.50 chicks per pair. In 2025, Fulmar productivity was monitored at six sites along the North Antrim coast. Figure 2 shows an overall decline in productivity among Fulmar colonies in Northern Ireland since 2013, with an average productivity in 2025 of only 0.16 chicks per pair (n=254 AOS). This is similar to the figure of 0.17 chicks per pair in 2024. The site with the highest productivity this year was once again Rathlin Island, with 0.33 chicks per pair (Else *et al.* 2025). The lack of data from other sites around Northern Ireland in 2025 limits the inference that can be made for productivity at the country-level.

Figure 2: Productivity (chicks/AOS) for Fulmar 2013–2025 across eight sites in Northern Ireland. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Fulmar productivity between 2013 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Copeland Islands, Ballygalley Head, Maggy's Leap, Muck Island, Portmuck, The Gobbins, Park Head and Portnaboe, among others. The total number of AOS monitored per year is included in brackets under the year.



Manx Shearwater

Puffinus puffinus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Manx Shearwater, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: Manx Shearwaters are burrow-nesting, tube-nosed seabirds. They are highly pelagic, spending most of the year at sea and only coming ashore under the cover of darkness, to avoid avian predators. They are also the longest-living seabird recorded in the UK, with one recorded as more than 50 years old (BTO 2023).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Manx Shearwaters breed in Britain and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Their secretive, burrow nesting lifestyle makes them a difficult species to survey, and the breeding population was only comprehensively surveyed for the first time during Seabird 2000 (1998–2002, Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The largest colony in the world is on the island of Skomer in Wales. Recent surveys of strongholds in Wales and Scotland suggest that the population of these islands may have increased by 50% to around 600,000 AOS since the last 1998–2002 census (JNCC 2021). The Seabirds Count 2015–2021 (Burnell *et al.* 2023) confirmed this, with the UK population estimated at 786,743 AOS, a 163% increase since Seabird 2000. However, many of the counts between the two censuses are not directly comparable due to methodological and analytical differences, therefore considerable caution is required in interpreting these changes (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

Due to the difficulty in surveying Manx Shearwater burrows, annual changes in breeding abundance are not reported by the SMP. This also means few sites in the UK are monitored for productivity. From those that are, average Manx Shearwater productivity was 0.60 chicks per pair per year between 1986 and 2023, and there is little year-to-year variation (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

The only confirmed extant colony in Northern Ireland is on the Copeland Islands, where there are birds on Lighthouse Island and Big Copeland. The Copeland Islands were surveyed in 2021 but figures are not yet available. During the previous survey in 2007 (Stewart & Leonard 2007), there were approximately 3,444 AOB (95% CI: 2,620–4,269) on Lighthouse Island and 1,406 AOB (95% CI: 612–1,432) on Big Copeland. There was an apparent 5.3% increase on the previous survey in 2000, although the former survey result was within the confidence limits of the 2007 population estimate. The Seabirds Count census did not contain data on Manx Shearwater in Northern Ireland from the 2015–2021 survey period; however, they used estimates from 2007 for Rathlin Island and the Copeland Islands (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

Rathlin Island formerly held a colony of unknown size (Brooke 1990) and surveys for Seabird 2000 and in 2007 did not detect any birds. Deane (1954) estimated 150 AOB on Rathlin Island but the Operation Seafarer (1969–1970) figure was 1,000–10,000 AOB (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The inaccessibility of the cliffs and the cryptic nature of the species make these estimates unreliable. All that is certain is that a huge decline has occurred on the island.

Breeding success was monitored on Lighthouse Island by Copeland Bird Observatory between 2007 and 2013, using study burrows. These consist of modified burrows with a concrete slab placed over the nesting chamber to allow easy access. In the seven years of monitoring, average breeding success on Copeland (0.74 chicks/AOB) was usually a little higher than at other sites in the UK (0.65 chicks/AOS, JNCC 2021, Harris *et al.* 2024), although extremely wet weather in 2007 resulted in a success rate of just 0.38 chicks per pair.

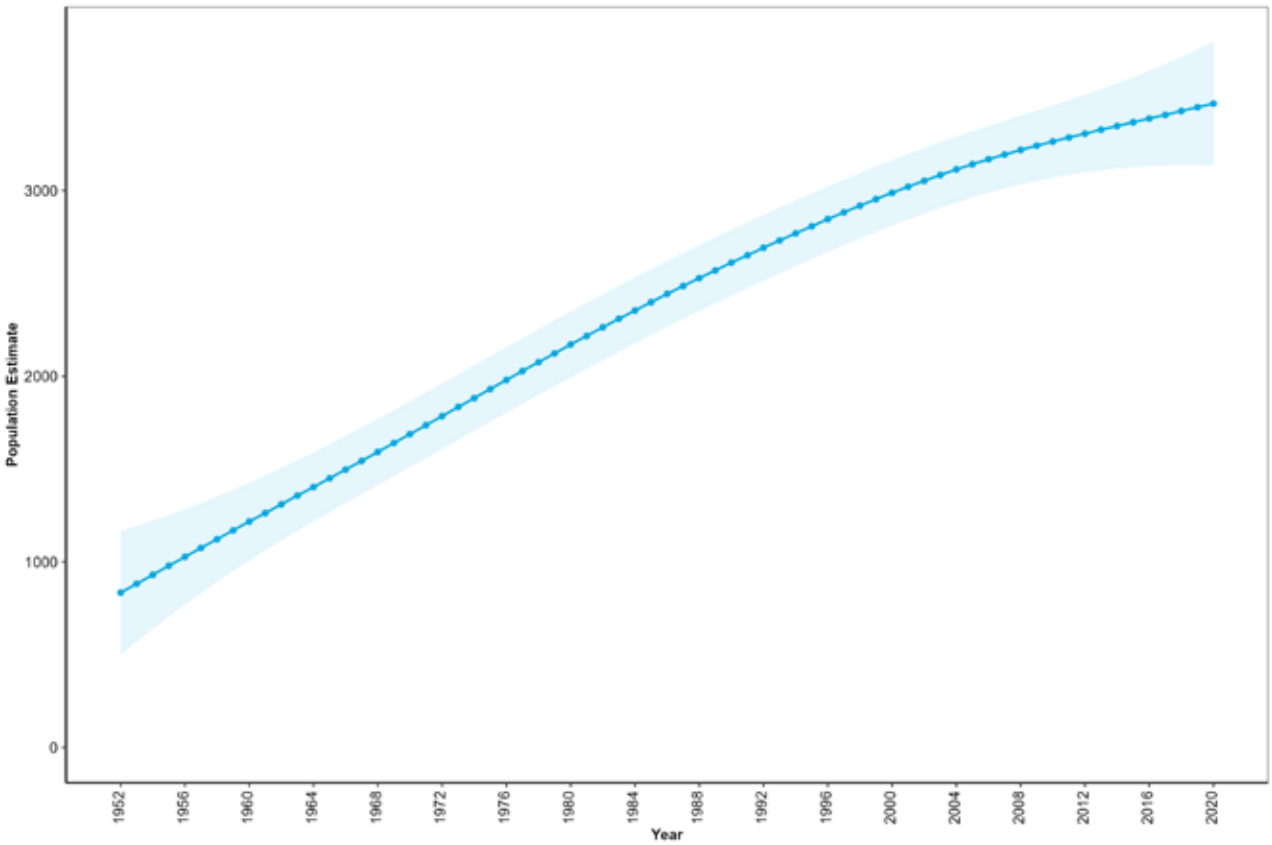
Abundance in 2025

There is no annual surveying of Manx Shearwaters in Northern Ireland, but a census of the Copeland Islands was made as part of the MarPAMM project in 2021, with results still to be reported. Population estimates across 1952 to 2020 for Lighthouse Island are displayed in Figure 3 (Esmonde 2024). On Rathlin Island, monitoring has been carried out by the RSPB LIFE Raft project since 2022 using night vision equipment; birds were recorded landing on ledges and it is suspected that birds are breeding in low numbers. Difficulties in accessing the area where birds are present makes it impossible to estimate numbers (McFaul & McFaul 2024). However, birds were found to be nesting successfully in two parts of the island during 2025 with nesting activity considered likely at a further two locations, indicating great potential for natural recovery of this species after the Rat eradication programme. This is the first confirmation of successful breeding on Rathlin for around 40 years (Else *et al.* 2025). See article on page 74 for further details and the article on BBC News online: **www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy042yly5r5o**

Breeding success in 2025

Breeding success data are not routinely collected for Manx Shearwater in Northern Ireland. In 2018, a sample of study burrows on Lighthouse Island was monitored by the Oxford Navigation Group (**www.oxnav.org**) with the support of the Copeland Bird Observatory. Of the 117 burrows checked, 39 contained eggs and were shallow enough to follow to the chick rearing phase. In August, 30 of these study burrows contained chicks. If it is assumed that chick presence in August is a good (if slightly inflated) indicator of the number of fledged young, therefore the productivity of the sample of occupied nests in 2018 was estimated as 0.77 chicks per pair.

Figure 3: Manx Shearwater population estimates on Lighthouse Island from 1952 to 2020. These estimates were created using the Copeland Bird Observatory's ringing and Capture-Mark-Recapture (CMR) records across 70 years. A generalised additive model was used to calculate the estimates and the shaded blue region shows the upper and lower estimates of the population by year (Esmonde 2024).



Storm Petrel

Hydrobates pelagicus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – listed in Annex 1 and as a migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Storm Petrel, by Joe Pender

Overview

Synopsis: Storm Petrels are sparrow-sized tube-nosed seabirds. They are highly pelagic, only returning to land to breed. They eat mostly plankton and small fish on the surface of the sea without alighting, almost appearing to walk on water, pattering across the water's surface.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

The UK breeding population of Storm Petrel was only comprehensively surveyed for the first time during Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) using a standard playback method (Mitchell *et al.* 2004, Ratcliffe *et al.* 1998), when ~25,700 pairs were estimated. Surveys for Storm Petrels are intensive and costly, and therefore rare; however, recent surveys of Scottish islands suggest an increase in population size since the 1998–2002 census (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The Seabirds Count census (2015–2021) found that the UK population had increased by 41% since Seabird 2000 to an estimated 37,655 AOS (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, caution is required as the confidence intervals of the UK population estimates from the Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count censuses overlap (Burnell *et al.* 2023). While new monitoring techniques, such as passive infra-red and endoscopes, are being tested for their usefulness in monitoring, these methods are still costly in terms of fieldwork effort and equipment (Perkins *et al.* 2017). For similar reasons, there is a lack of annual data collected on abundance and productivity so SMP trends are not produced for this species (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

The species has no known breeding sites in Northern Ireland. In their review of the birds of Ireland, Ussher & Warren (1900) stated that "*two small islands off the north coast of Co. Antrim*" were reported to have populations of storm petrels. The only small islands which they could realistically have been referring to are Sheep Island and one of The Skerries, Co. Antrim. A volunteer visit to The Skerries in 2021 reported that there were few areas of suitable nesting habitat available on the islands for Storm Petrels, and that the large gull population on Large Skerries where Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* burrows could provide some nesting habitat may deter Storm Petrels from breeding here. Deane (1954) reported up to a dozen pairs on Sheep Island, but the species is considered unlikely to be still there. A visit to Sheep Island in 2024 found that Storm Petrels were unlikely to breed due to the prevalence of Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* (Daniel Johnston, pers. comm.).

Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Green-listed in BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Cormorant, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Overview

Synopsis: The Cormorant is a widespread breeding species, often found in dense colonies. The characteristic open-winged posture they adopt after fishing is due to the need to dry their feathers, which are not waterproof.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The UK population estimate from Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census was 8,900 AON, an increase of 10% since the previous census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The most recent census, Seabirds Count (2015–2021), showed that the UK population of Cormorant has remained stable at 8,829 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK breeding SMP abundance index for Cormorants between 1986–2023 indicates that the population has fluctuated slightly over this time period, the 2023 index was 5% above the 1986 baseline (Harris *et al.* 2024). The latest UK winter population estimate is 64,500 (Frost *et al.* 2021, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

An insufficient number of Cormorant colonies are monitored across the UK to allow for the production of valid annual SMP productivity trends (Harris *et al.* 2024). Previously, the UK average productivity was 1.84 chicks fledged per nest between 1991 and 2019, with nests fledging (JNCC 2021).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

The increase seen at the UK-level between the 1985–1988 and 1998–2002 censuses was in contrast to the trend in Northern Ireland, where Cormorant numbers dropped from 736 AON to 663 AON during the same period and down to 561 AON during Seabirds Count (Burnell *et al.* 2023). There are no inland breeding colonies of the European sub-species *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* in Northern Ireland. Cormorants have historically principally bred at two sites – Sheep Island (north coast, Co. Antrim) and Bird Island (Strangford Lough). In 2010, the Sheep Island colony split with some birds moving to The Skerries. Smaller numbers are found at The Gobbins and Burial Island on the Outer Ards Peninsula, although the latter site is not monitored annually. The latest Northern Ireland winter population estimate is approximately 2,500 (Frost *et al.* 2019, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled at the regional level (Harris *et al.* 2024).

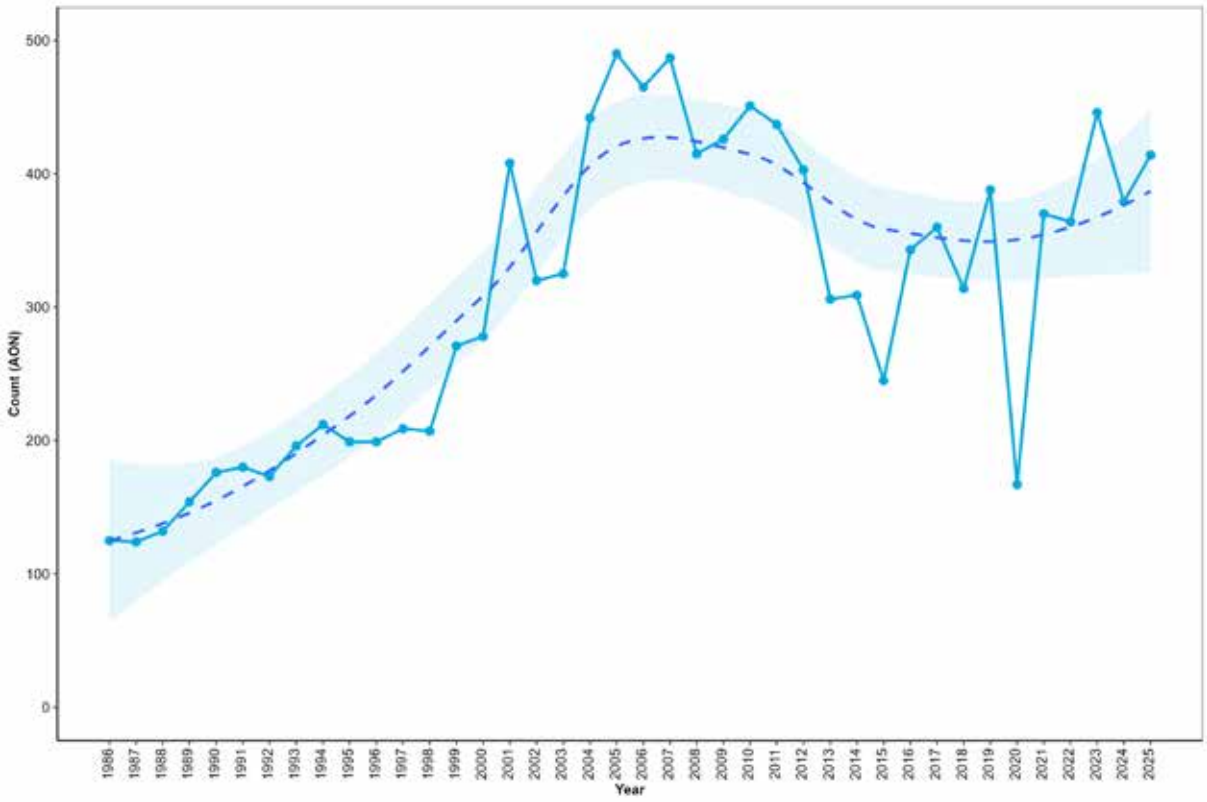
Abundance in 2025

Long-term annual data dating back to 1986 are available for Strangford Lough, where numbers increased erratically until 2005, to a peak of 490 AON. Since then, numbers have fallen but appeared to be increasing again in recent years, with 414 AON in 2025 compared to 379 AON in 2024. Since 1986, Cormorants have only nested on one island in Strangford Lough (Bird Island). However, an exciting development in 2023 was the establishment of a second colony at Strangford Lough on West Boretree Island and this grew significantly to 107 AON in 2025, compared to 20 AON in 2024 (Hugh Thurgate, pers comm.).

Numbers of Cormorants on Sheep Island declined between 2005 and 2015, before stabilising in more recent years. A full census of Sheep Island was carried out using a drone as part of the MarPAMM project in 2021, finding 139 AON. This was the highest count since 2010 which may be in part due to the better coverage achieved using the vantage of the drone (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022a). However, a similar drone survey conducted

by NIEA found 86 AON on Sheep Island in 2022, confirmed by a simultaneous scoped vantage-point count, demonstrating that breeding numbers can vary widely year-to-year. This may be due to the prolonged breeding season of Cormorants and a sensitivity to disturbance (Richard Donaghey, pers comm.). Sheep Island was surveyed in 2025 through direct observations by RSPB Consultancy Services on behalf of National Trust and a total of 81 AON was recorded, with mean clutch size 3.4 eggs per nest from a sample of 79 nests (National Trust).

Figure 4: Cormorant counts (AON) at the Strangford Lough SPA, 1986–2024. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Cormorant numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



The Skerries has only been surveyed since 2010 and counts have varied substantially between years. It seems probable that the original population of Sheep Island is now spread between the two sites, while exchange with the colony at Inishowen (Co. Donegal) is also thought possible but has not been validated (e.g. by movements of colour ringed birds). In 2022, NIEA conducted a simultaneous drone and vantage point survey of Castle Island (Little Skerries), counting 193 AON, which was a 135% increase on 2021's boat-based count. A drone survey of The Skerries was undertaken in 2025 by RSPB Consultancy Services on behalf of National Trust, but results are not yet available. In 2025, five AON were counted amongst the Kittiwake colony at Portrush, compared to four AON in 2024. A small colony of Cormorants has nested at this site for a number of years (Cliff Henry, pers comm.).

Periodic counts of the numbers at The Gobbins cliffs dating back to 1969 have shown fluctuating numbers, dropping to as low as two AON in 2007, returning to 33 AON in 2008. Numbers have been relatively stable in recent years with seven AON in 2023 and six AON in 2024.

Breeding success in 2025

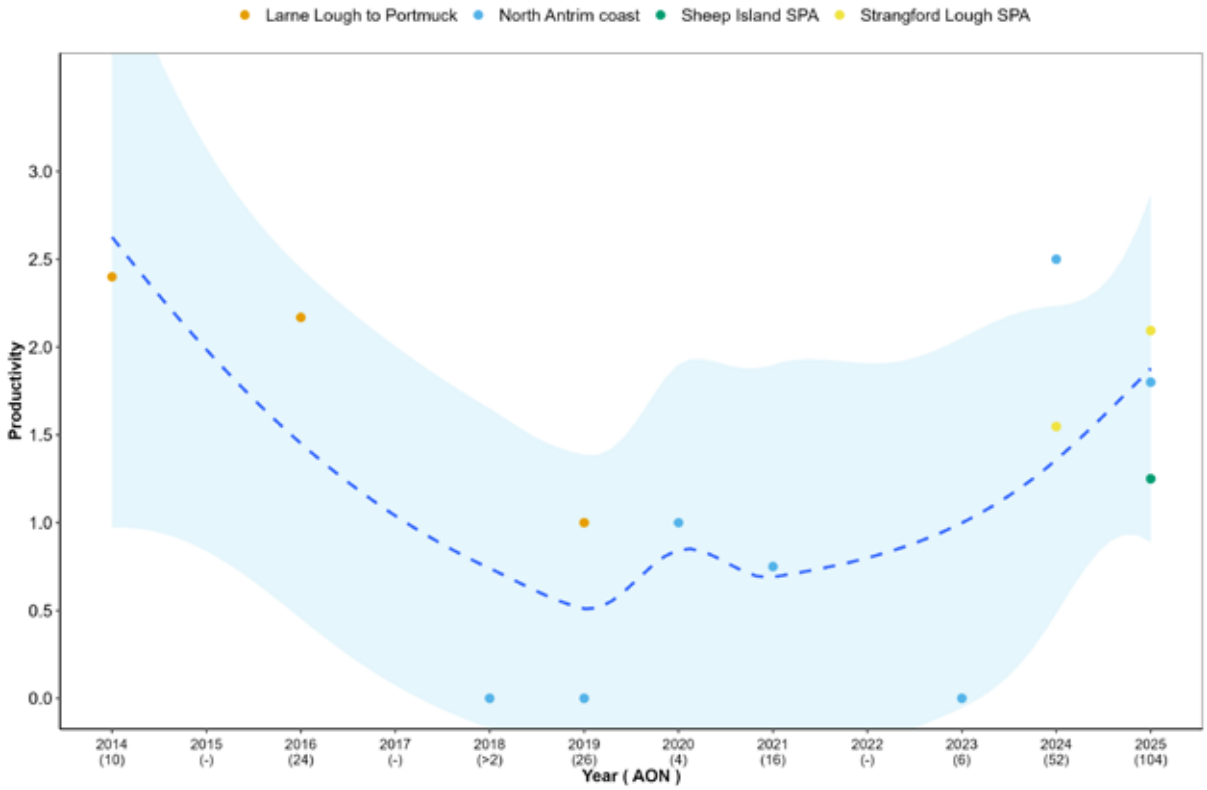
Historically, breeding success has not been measured for any of the large colonies of Cormorants in Northern Ireland. Due to their breeding asynchrony, many visits are required to colonies through the season to assess the productivity of Cormorants. Historically, NIEA made single-visit surveys to Sheep Island and The Skerries annually to count numbers of eggs and chicks in the Cormorant colonies; however, the multiple visits required to generate true productivity estimates were not made. In 2025, a minimum of one chick fledged per AON from five AON at Portrush, compared to 2.5 chicks in 2024 (Cliff Henry, pers. comm.).

Due to the limited collection of breeding productivity data for Cormorant in Northern Ireland, BTO installed two camera traps on Bird Island and one on West Boretree Island, both Strangford Lough, and two on Sheep Island in 2025 to supplement efforts to monitor Cormorant breeding timing and productivity. Birds nested earlier on Strangford Lough (by 11 days on average) than on Sheep Island in 2025 and some of the nests on Sheep Island suffered from predation from Great Black-backed Gulls and Herring Gulls. Productivity for 2025 is summarised in Table 5. For Bird Island it was 1.60 chicks fledged per nest in 2025, which is very similar to the 1.55 in 2024 (Daniel Johnston, BTO, pers comm.).

Table 5: Productivity for Cormorant 2025 across three sites (Daniel Johnston).

Island	Nests monitored	Productivity (chicks fledged per nest)
Sheep Island	8	1.25
Bird Island, Strangford Lough	35	1.60
West Boretree Island, Strangford Lough	4	2.50

Figure 5: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Cormorant 2014–2025 across three sites in Northern Ireland. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Cormorant productivity between 2014 and 2025 include: Bird Island on Strangford Lough, Portrush, The Gobbins and Sheep Island. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Shag

Gulosus aristotelis

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (BIUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Shags, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: Slightly smaller than the Cormorant, the European Shag (Shag) is endemic to the north-east Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It is a marine inshore species that is almost never observed out of sight of land (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The name of the Shag refers to the tuft of feathers on its head.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

Over a third of the world population of the sub-species *aristotelis* breeds in the UK and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK population size was estimated to be 26,643 AON during Seabird 2000 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Latest estimates put the UK population at 20,209 AON, a decline of 24% since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK long-term breeding SMP abundance index shows a similar 27% decline between 1986 and 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024). Annual return rates of adults are usually in the order of 80–90% (JNCC 2021) but Shags are vulnerable to one-off events such as extreme winter storms and the return rate may drop to below 15% because of their impact (Frederiksen *et al.* 2008, Heubeck *et al.* 2015). The latest UK winter population estimate is 110,000 (Frost *et al.* 2021, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

A shortage of Sandeels *Ammodytes* sp. is thought to have contributed to low productivity in some colonies and years. In Scotland, Shag productivity was on average 1.28 chicks per pair between 1986 and 2019 (JNCC 2021). The long-term SMP trend for productivity from 1986–2023 is stable, with the most recent figure being 1.38 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024). Population Viability Analysis calculations by Cook & Robinson (2010) suggested that if all demographic parameters remained the same (for example, survival, clutch size, etc.) the UK population would decline by 9% over a period of 25 years.

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In Northern Ireland, the Shag is mostly restricted to Co. Antrim, with the largest colonies being at The Maidens (offshore from Larne) and Rathlin Island, with other breeding pairs scattered widely around the coast in smaller groups. The Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census estimated that there were 301 AON in Northern Ireland, which was a decrease of 32% since the previous census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The most recent Seabirds Count (2015–2021) results show that there were 278 AON in Northern Ireland, which is a 4% decline from Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

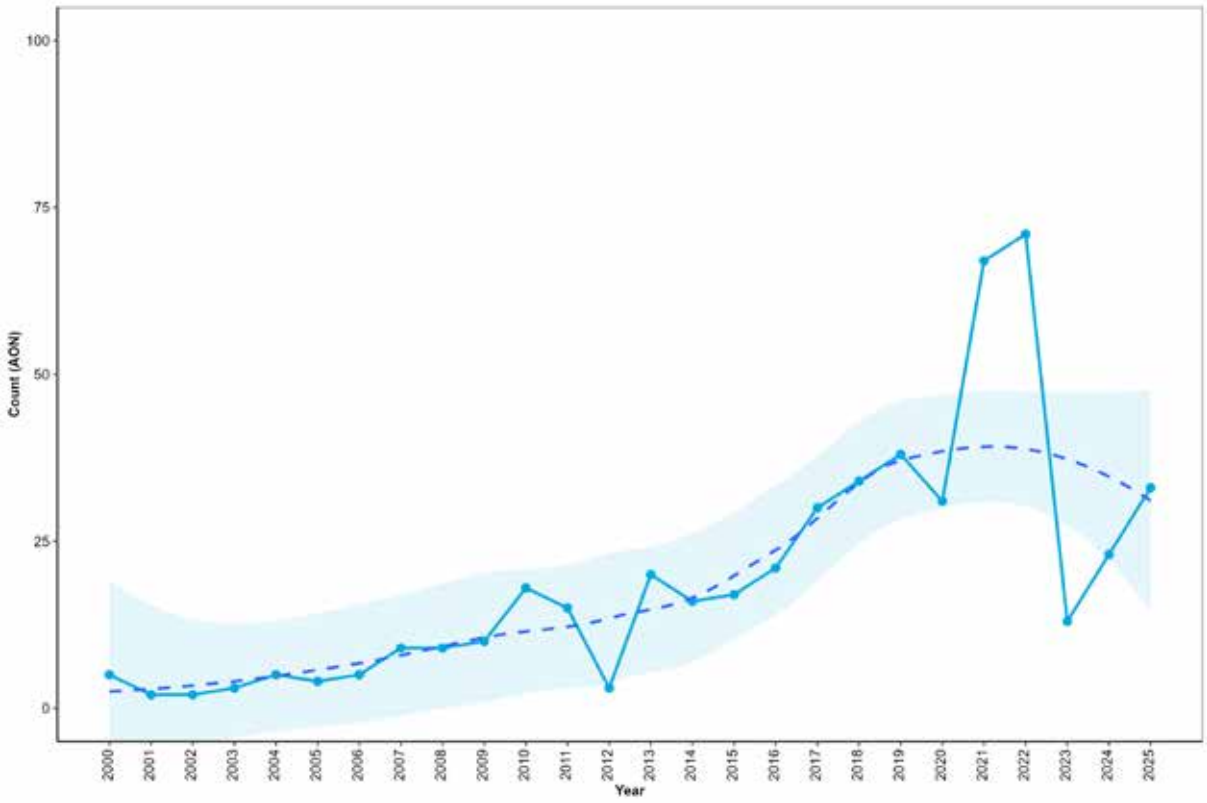
A full census of Rathlin Island and of the north Antrim coastline between Runkerry and Murlough occurred as part of the MarPAMM project in 2021. On Rathlin Island, Shag have increased by 28% since the 1998–2002 census to 74 AON. In 2025, 82 AON were counted at the main colony on Rathlin Island at Rue West, which is higher than the counts in 2024 (51 AON) and 2023 (65 AON). The total count for Rathlin Island was 84 AON in 2025, although this is considered to be an underestimate due to an unknown number of pairs breeding deep in caves on the island, which were inaccessible during the boat surveys (Hazel Watson, pers comm.). Therefore, the total population was estimated to be 89–94 AON (see Rathlin Island Breeding Seabird Census 2025 report on Page 78).

On the north coast, 32 AON were recorded on The Skerries in 2021, a decline of 50% on the last count made in 2015 (although higher than the 11 AON recorded in 2000). In 2023, higher numbers were recorded at Downhill (18 AON) and in the Portrush sub-sites (12 AON, Table 6, Appendix) than the previous counts in 2022. In 2025, 75 AON were counted on Sheep Island with an additional 3 AON at the adjacent Larrybane Bay.

Numbers at Muck Island have increased since 2000, and reached a peak of 71 AON in 2022, the highest count for the site on record (Figure 6). However, numbers have subsequently dropped to only 23 AON in 2024 and 33 AON in 2025. Numbers at The Gobbins nearby were at their highest recorded in 2023 with 33 AON (Table 6, Appendix), although reduced numbers were present in 2024 with 23 AON, close to the average for this site. The colony was not counted in 2025. The Maidens was previously counted in 2018 with 20 AON estimated. In 2025, the number of nesting pairs were much higher than anticipated, with a total of 120 AON estimated, and breeding productivity was very good (David Galbraith, pers. comm.).

Eight AON were counted between Newcastle to Maggy's Leap, Co. Down in 2025, compared to nine AON in 2024.

Figure 6: Shag counts (AON) at Muck Island, 2000–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Shag numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



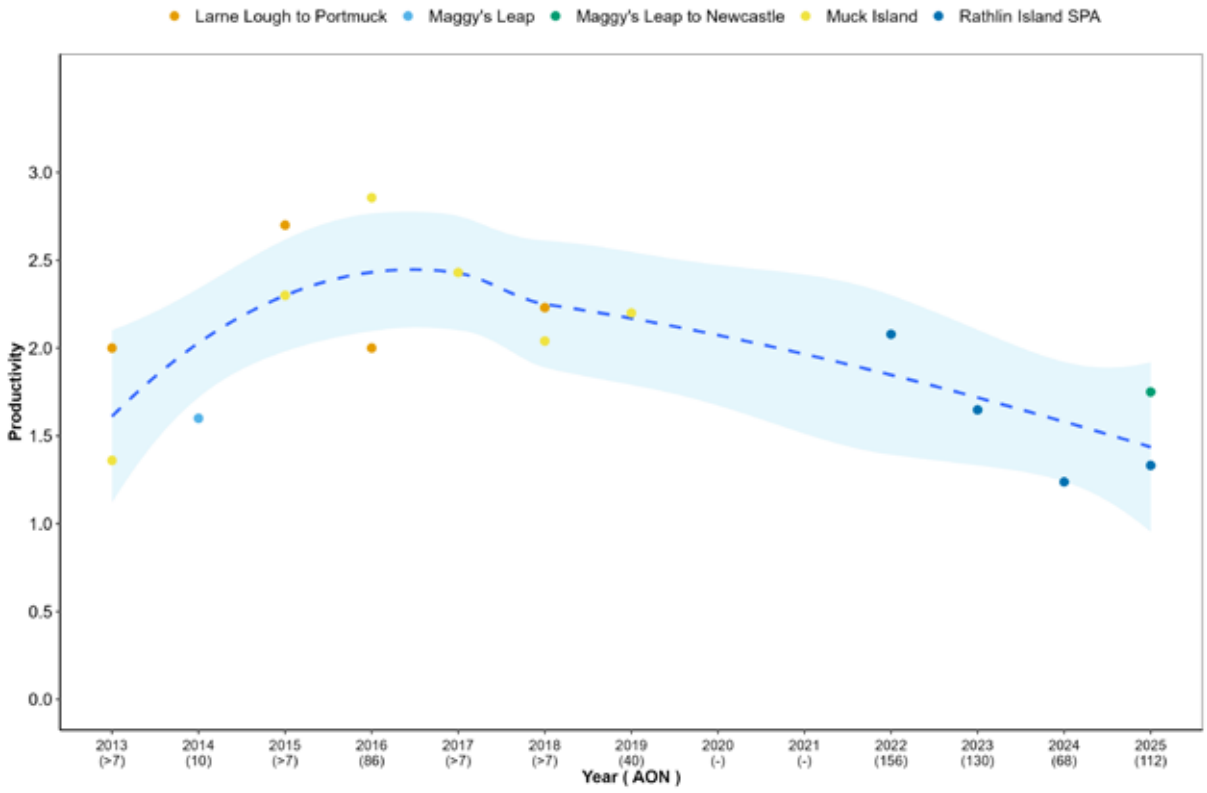
Breeding success in 2025

Productivity data for Shag in 2025 were collected on Rathlin Island at Rue West, where 1.33 chicks fledged per AON from 48 nests. This is similar to 2024, when 1.26 chicks fledged per AON, but lower than productivity in the previous two years. Birds were a month late nesting on Rathlin Island this year compared to 2023 (Else *et al.* 2025). At Maggy's Leap, Co. Down productivity was 1.75 chicks fledged per AON from eight nests (Andy Carden).

In 2019, the Muck Island colony produced 44 chicks from 20 AON, a slightly higher figure than in the previous two years (Kerry Leonard, pers. comm.). Productivity data have not been recorded at The Gobbins since 2018.

However, it is worth noting that the number of nests monitored per year is likely to be variable and, in some cases (e.g. 2014), very low. Although the trend in productivity appears to be fairly stable in recent years, the trend line has a large 95% confidence interval (blue shading) as a result of the small number of sites being monitored for Shag and records not being available for all years, therefore caution in interpreting this is required (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Shag 2013–2025 across four sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 2020 or 2021. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Shag productivity between 2013 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Maggy's Leap, Muck Island, and The Gobbins. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Great Skua

Stercorarius skua

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabirds Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Great Skua, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: Great Skuas are Herring Gull-sized, heavy-set seabirds, also colloquially known as 'Bonxies', a name that may derive from the old Norse for 'dumpy'. Great Skuas are known for their aggressive behaviour towards human intruders on their territories.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The UK population increased by 148% between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, by a further 26% by Seabird 2000 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The Seabirds Count (2015–2021) showed that the UK population of Great Skua increased to 10,937 AOT since the previous Seabird 2000 census (Burnell *et al.* 2023). During this census, Britain and Ireland therefore held over 60% of the world's breeding population of Great Skua (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Orkney and Shetland are the core breeding areas, but the species also extends through northern Scotland to the Western Isles (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Unfortunately, the outbreak of HPAI in 2020 and 2021 affected the positive trend of the UK's Great Skua population. The RSPB reported a decline of 76% of the most important Great Skua colonies due to HPAI (Tremlett *et al.* 2024).

Annual sampling of breeding abundance is insufficient to generate reliable SMP abundance trends for the UK or country level (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Productivity across the UK has varied considerably over the SMP recording period, averaging 0.2 and 1.1 chicks per AOT between 1986 and 2019 (JNCC 2021) and there has been an overall decline since 2006. The most recent UK SMP figure was 0.44 chicks fledged per AOT in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Great Skua is a rare breeding species on the island of Ireland (Burke *et al.* 2020). The first occurrence of Great Skuas breeding in Northern Ireland occurred in 2011 on Rathlin Island. This pair has had an average breeding success of 1.67 chicks per year since their arrival up to 2021 (JNCC 2021). In the Republic of Ireland, the first breeding occurred in the late 1990s in Co. Mayo (Mitchell *et al.* 2004) and there are now approximately 15 AOT, although no complete survey has been undertaken (Steve Newton, pers. comm.). There were 36 AOT in Ireland during Seabirds Count, involving 34 AOT in the Republic of Ireland and two AOT in Northern Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

Abundance in 2025

There was just a single AOT on Rathlin Island in 2025, the same as between 2022 and 2024 (McFaul 2025). The 2021 MarPAMM surveys recorded a total of two AOT for the whole island, with other individuals also present.

Breeding success in 2025

The pair on Rathlin Island showed no signs of nesting this year. It has now been four years since the species nested successfully on Rathlin Island (McFaul 2025).

Kittiwake

Rissa tridactyla

Conservation status: Red-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabirds Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Vulnerable – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Kittiwakes, by Liz Cutting / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: The Kittiwake is the most numerous gull species in the world, and perhaps surprisingly, also the most numerous breeding gull in the UK (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Unlike the UK's other gull species, the Kittiwake is closely tied to the sea and adapted to nesting on steep sea cliffs, although it has recently taken to nesting on human-made structures (Burnell *et al.* 2023, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Seabirds Count (2015–2021), found that the UK Kittiwake population has declined by 43% since Seabird 2000 to 215,913 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). In the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census, the UK population was estimated to be 378,847 AON, a decline of 25% since the previous census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The long term annual SMP abundance trend indicates a decline of 51% between 1986 and 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

There has been considerable variation in UK Kittiwake productivity across the SMP recording period. There was an overall decline until 2008, following which productivity values increased slightly. The UK SMP productivity estimate averaged 0.62 chicks per AON between 2014 and 2019 (JNCC 2021). The SMP productivity estimate for the UK was 0.75 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Relative to the overall UK and Ireland trend since 1986, and its historical status, the Northern Ireland population is still reasonably stable. The largest colony by far in Northern Ireland is on Rathlin Island, the second largest colony at The Gobbins being only approximately 10% the size of the Rathlin Island colony. Other small colonies are dotted around the coast at Muck Island, Newcastle–Maggy's Leap, Castlerock, Carrick-a-rede, Dunluce and The Skerries. Colonies at Gun's Island and Strangford Lough have become extinct in the last 15 years. Seabirds Count 2015–2021 recorded 17,152 AON in Northern Ireland, a 33% increase from Seabird 2000; therefore, Kittiwakes are faring better in Northern Ireland than other parts of the UK and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Kittiwake has been upgraded from Amber-listed to Red-listed in the latest BoCCI due to being classified by the IUCN as Globally Vulnerable (Gilbert *et al.* 2021).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled. However, productivity estimates are available at an all-Ireland level up to 2019 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

A total of 690 AON was counted in 2025 along the coastline from Newcastle to Maggy's Leap, Co. Down, a 17% increase on the 588 AON recorded in 2024.

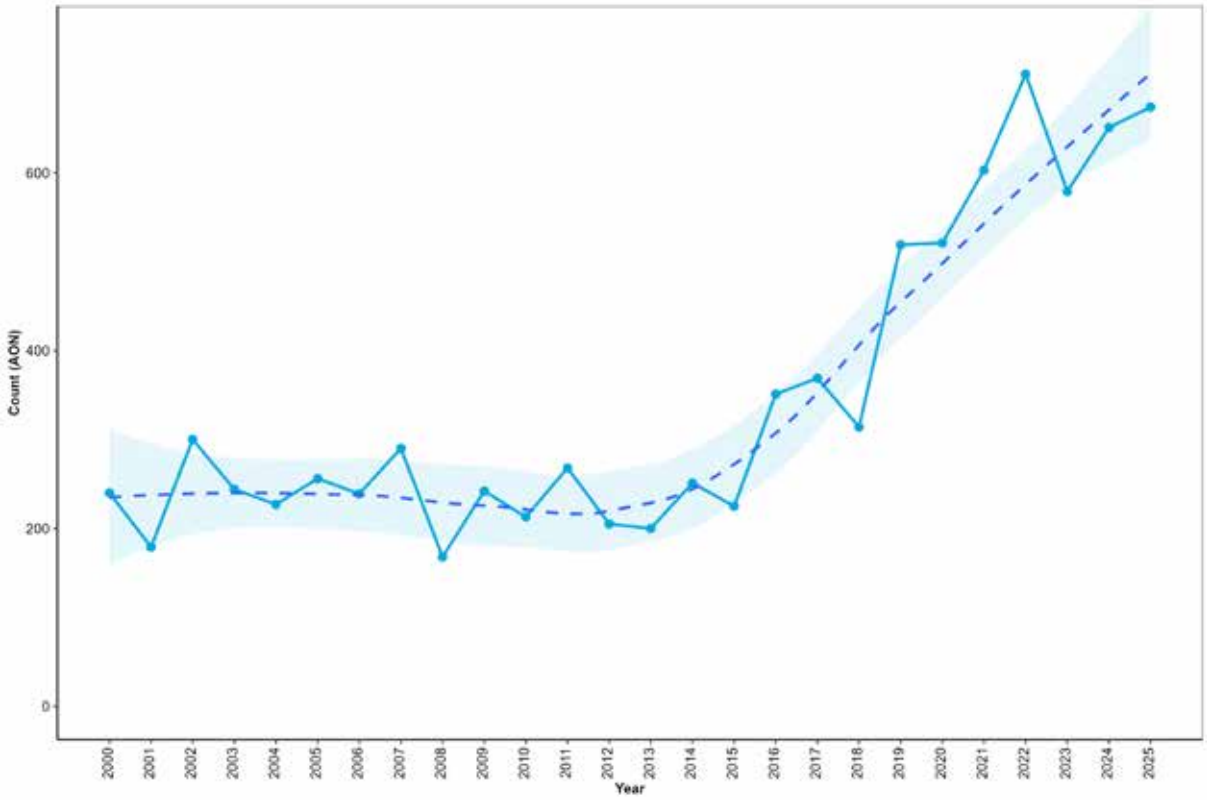
The number of Kittiwakes in the RSPB Rathlin Island study plot decreased slightly from 66 AON in 2024 to 60 AON in 2025. The MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island in 2021 found that Kittiwakes had increased on the island by 38% to 13,706 AON since the Seabird 2000 census. RSPB carried out a follow-up census of Rathlin Island in 2023 to monitor the impact of HPAI on the colony and found that Kittiwake numbers had declined by 31% since 2021, with 9,629 AON counted (Mackley *et al.* 2023). The 2025 island census found a total of 10,504 AON, a 9% increase since 2023 but 23% lower than the 2021 census (see page 78 for Rathlin Island breeding seabird census report).

MarPAMM surveys of the North Antrim coastline between Runkerry and Murlough in 2021 found that Kittiwakes had declined by 10% to 792 AON. During 2025, 463 AON were counted at Sheep Island, 501 AON at Carrick-a-Rede and 237 AON at Larrybane Bay.

Kittiwakes at Portrush appear to have increased annually during the Seabirds Count census period (2015–2021) but decreased from 499 AON in 2022 to 366 AON in 2023 (Table 6, Appendix), although numbers recovered to 445 AON in 2025. A small section of one of the sub-sites appeared to be impacted by Raven *Corvus corax* predation this year (Richard Donaghey, pers comm.). The colony at Downhill increased to 172 AON in 2025, compared to 117 AON in 2023.

The population of Kittiwakes monitored by Ulster Wildlife on Muck Island increased in 2022 to 711 AON (Figure 8), the highest total counted on the island since the first count for the SCR in 1987 (830 AON). Numbers decreased to 579 AON in 2023, then increased to 651 AON in 2024 and 674 AON in 2025. At nearby The Gobbins, numbers have remained relatively stable since 2000, with 936 AON in 2024 and 1,126 AON in 2023, compared to the previous count of 1,145 AON in 2019 (Table 6, Appendix).

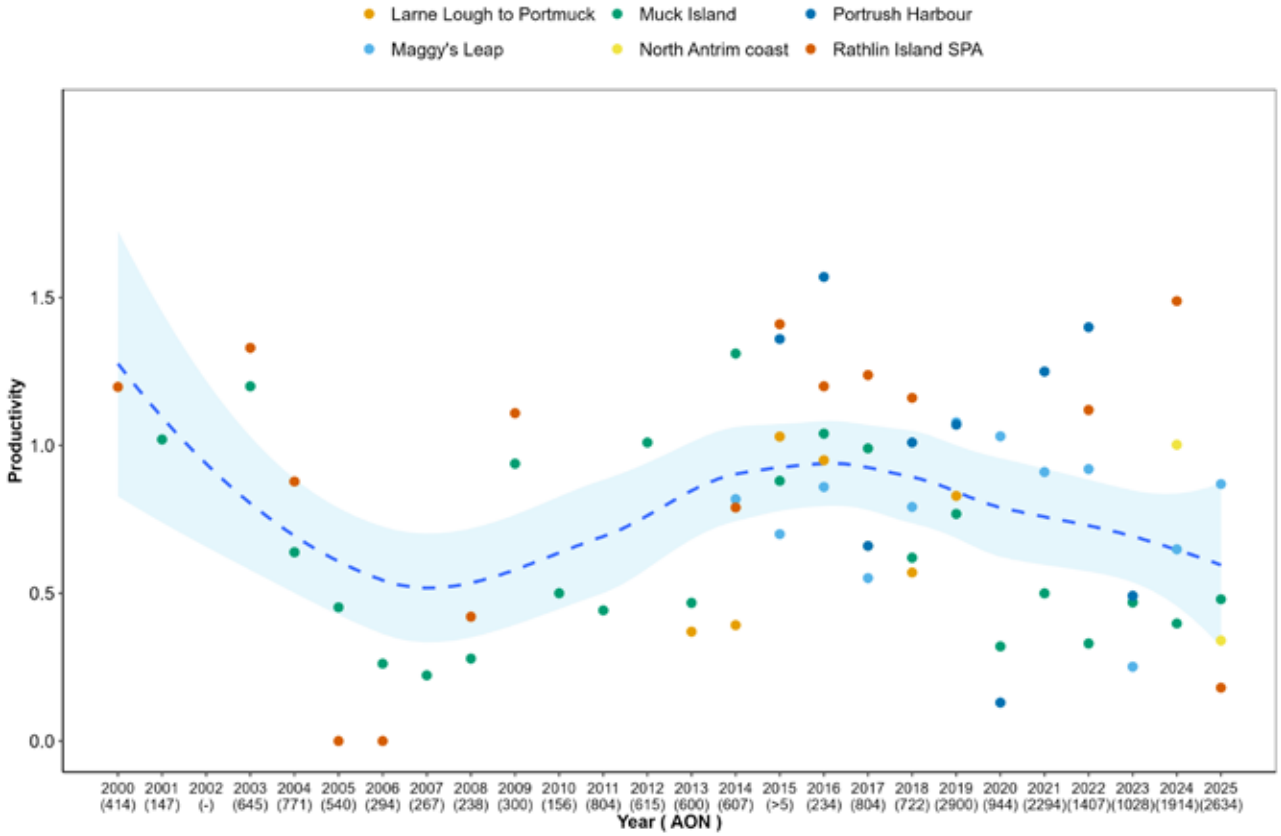
Figure 8: Kittiwake counts (AON) at Muck Island, 2000–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Kittiwake numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

Four sites were monitored for productivity in 2025 (Figure 9): Donnard Cove (Andy Carden), Portrush (Cliff Henry), Isle of Muck (Andy Crory) and Rathlin Island (RSPB LIFE Raft project). Since a peak in 2016, productivity has declined gradually, reaching the second lowest productivity figure reported for Portrush and the lowest figure reported for Maggy's Leap in 2023. The average productivity for the four monitored sites in 2025 was 0.42 chicks fledged per nest, which was lower than in 2024 when 0.89 chicks fledged per AON. Colonies on the North Coast had a particularly poor breeding season. In 2025, breeding success was 0.48 chicks fledged per nest on Isle of Muck (n=674 AON), 0.87 chicks per nest at Donnard Cove (n=99 AON), and 0.34 chick per nest at Portrush (n=256 AON). Rathlin Island had a very poor year with only 0.18 chicks fledged per nest (n=288 AON) compared to 1.48 chicks in 2024. Only 18% of monitored nests on Rathlin managed to fledge a chick and observations indicated that poor feeding conditions led to high mortality among chicks (Else *et al.* 2025). More certainty around overall Northern Irish trends could be gained by increasing the number of sites monitored.

Figure 9: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Kittiwake 2000–2025 across six sites in Northern Ireland. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Kittiwake productivity between 2000 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Maggy's Leap, Muck Island, Portrush, and The Gobbins. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Black-headed Gull

Chroicocephalus ridibundus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Black-headed Gull, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: Black-headed Gulls are small gulls found throughout the UK both around the coasts and inland. They are particularly abundant in the winter when the UK breeding population is joined by migrants from continental Europe (Wernham *et al.* 2002).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The Black-headed Gull is a common breeding species in the UK, with approximately 2–4% of the world population recorded during the Seabirds Count census (2015–2021) with a UK population of 97,950 AON – a 29% decline in the UK since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Although Seabird 2000 showed an apparent increase compared to previous censuses, this was due to more comprehensive surveying in Seabird 2000, which may have masked an actual population decline (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). It is therefore unclear how the population may compare to earlier decades because previous UK surveys were incomplete, with many inland colonies remaining uncounted. However, between the last two censuses, Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count (2015–2021), inland colonies were targeted so comparisons can be made more readily. The long-term SMP trend (1986–2023) for abundance shows a 5% decline in the UK (Harris *et al.* 2024). The UK is estimated to host nearly 2,200,000 individuals in the winter (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

In the UK, productivity fluctuates from 0.00–1.30 chicks per AON, with the most recent UK SMP productivity estimate being 0.22 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In Northern Ireland, the Black-headed Gull is a widespread breeding species in relatively few large colonies, with major concentrations at Strangford Lough, Belfast Lough, Larne Lough, Lough Neagh and Lower Lough Erne. Seabirds Count (2015–2021) found 12,465 AON in Northern Ireland, a 23% increase since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The winter population of Northern Ireland is estimated to be 44,000 individuals (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020). Black-headed Gull was downgraded from Red-listed to Amber-listed in the latest BoCCI due to less-severe declines in recent years (Gilbert *et al.* 2021).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024). The potential impact of predators such as American Mink *Mustela vison* (Craik 1997), Otters *Lutra lutra* and Brown Rat on inland colonies in Northern Ireland are largely unstudied. Collecting productivity data for Black-headed Gulls is a high priority.

Abundance in 2025

Black-headed Gull numbers were lower at a number of sites during 2025 than previous years and this is likely to be due to the impacts of HPAI in 2023 (Ciara Laverty, Hugh Thurgate, both pers comm.). Numbers at Larne Lough grew from just 109 AON in 1987 to a high of 3,201 AON in 2016 (Figure 10; Table 6, Appendix). This was the first time in several years that a completely accurate census was carried out. While the completeness of the 2016 count is likely to have been responsible for some of the increase in recorded numbers, Black-headed Gull populations can fluctuate between years, something which has been previously seen at Larne Lough. In 2025, 1,871 AON were counted by RSPB on Blue Circle and Swan Islands, which represents a 15% increase in numbers since 2024 when only 1,620 AON were counted, following an outbreak of HPAI which hit the colony during 2023 (Table 6, Appendix).

At RSPB's Belfast Lough reserve, the Black-headed Gull colony recovered to 620 AON in 2025, up from 402 AON in 2024. A total of 1,500 AON was estimated in 2022. Black-headed Gulls have been relatively stable at RSPB's Portmore Lough reserve (part of the Lough Neagh and Lough Beg SPA) over the past few years. Ninety-five AON were recorded in 2025, a slight decrease on the 104 AON counted in 2024 (Table 6, Appendix).

A combined total of 385 AON were counted in 2025 by the National Trust and WWT on Strangford Lough and Castle Espie (Table 6, Appendix), which was a considerable decline from the 1,179 AON counted in 2023 and 653 AON in 2024. Prior to this, the breeding population appeared to have mostly stabilised since 2013 after a large decline from the peak seen in the early 1990s (Figure 11). A breakdown of counts across different islands can be found in the Strangford report on page 92. On Cockle Island on the Outer Ards, 52 AON were counted, which is a significant decline from the 112 AON present in 2024 and 255 AON present in 2023. An additional 49 AON were counted at Green Island, Portavogie on the Outer Ards. Nine AON were counted on Green Island, Carlingford Lough, the first breeding after a long absence.

The MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island found that Black-headed Gull had almost declined to extinction (-99%) since the 1998–2002 census, with only five AON counted on the island in 2021, compared to 383 AON in 1999. There was a welcome increase in numbers in 2025, with 43 AON estimated on Rathlin Island (Else *et al.* 2025).

There are also inland breeding populations of Black-headed Gulls in Northern Ireland. In Co. Fermanagh, only four AON were counted at Moorlough Lake in 2025 which represents a substantial decline since 2022 when 58 AON were recorded. A total of 1,245 AON was counted on Gravel Ridge Island, Lower Lough Erne in 2025, similar to the last count of 1,255 AON in 2022, which was the lowest on record since 2018 (Table 6, Appendix). Fifteen islands in Lough Neagh were surveyed during May/June 2025 by the Lough Neagh Partnership and seven held Black-headed Gull colonies. A total of 2,988 individuals was counted, lower than the 3,689 individuals counted in 2024. Abundance data are challenging to collect consistently from the Lough Neagh islands making between-year comparisons difficult, particularly given late counts due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, and the relative merits and drawbacks of reporting peak or average counts. A count of the main breeding islands gave an estimate of 11,595 individuals in 2016, but numbers then fell to approximately 8,120 individuals in 2017 and 8,906 in 2018 (Table 6, Appendix, Bob Davidson and Stephen Foster). Lough Neagh supported 30,000 breeding pairs of Black-headed Gulls on 12 islands in the 1980s; subsequently the gulls have abandoned breeding on Shallow Flat and Coney Island Flat, and have decreased in number on Padian Island, Owen Roe and Scaddy Island (Allen & Mellon 2018).

Figure 10: Black-headed Gull counts (AON) at Larne Lough, 1994–2025. No counts took place 2001–2004, 2010, and an incomplete count in 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Black-headed Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

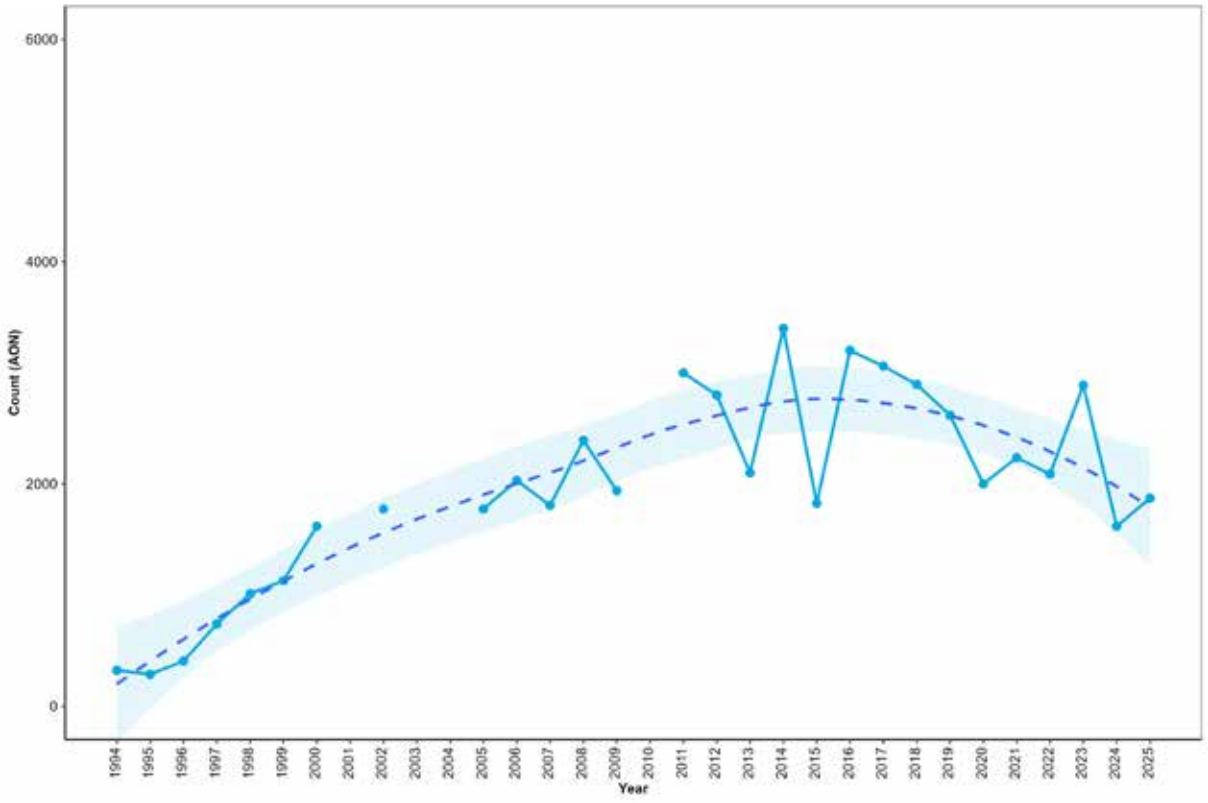
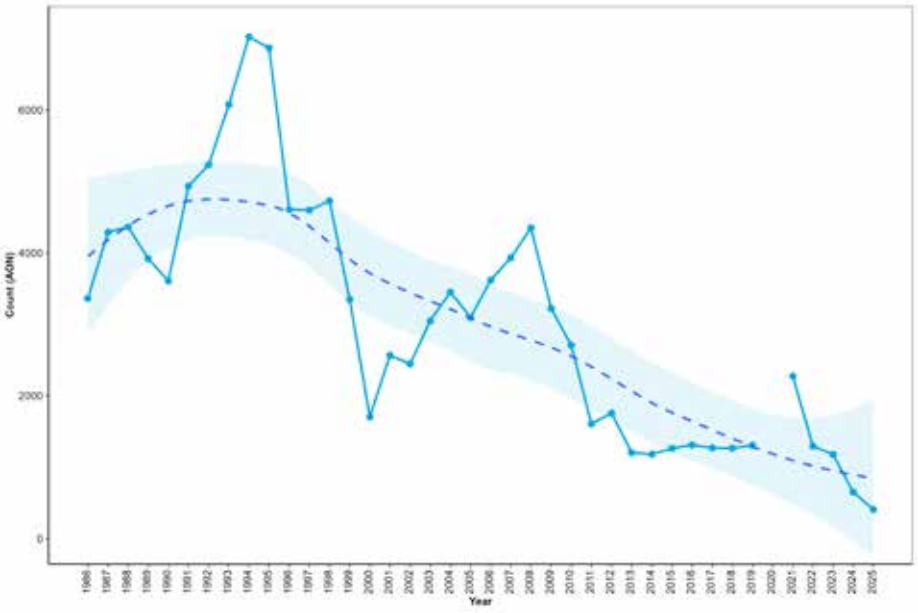


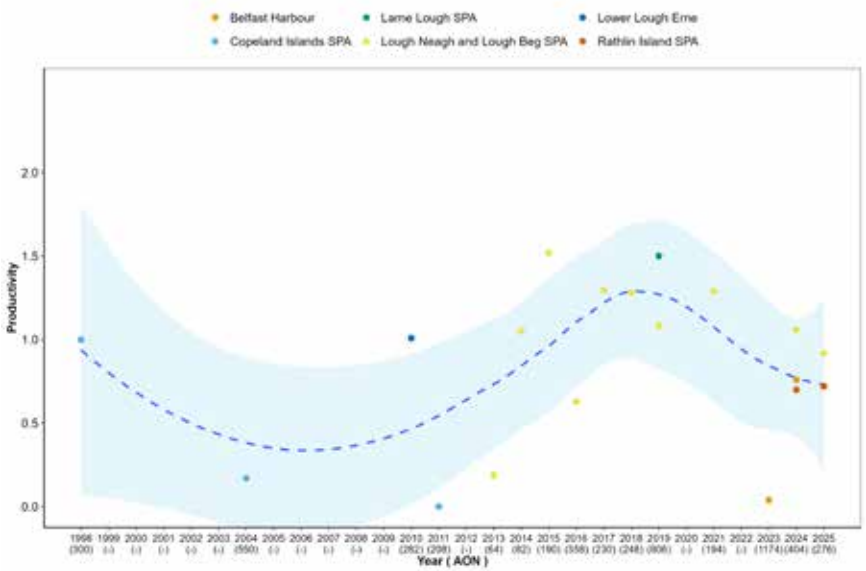
Figure 11: Black-headed Gull counts (AON) at Strangford Lough, 1986–2025. No counts took place in 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Black-headed Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

In 2025, Black-headed Gull productivity data were submitted for Rathlin Island and Portmore Lough. At Rathlin Island, 31 juveniles were counted, which would give a productivity of 0.7 chicks fledged per AON from 43 nests, which is the same figure as in 2024 (Else *et al.* 2025). Elsewhere, 'good' productivity was reported at Larne Lough and 'very good' productivity at Portmore Lough (both RSPB). In 2025, productivity at Portmore Lough was 0.92 chicks fledged per AON from 95 nests, compared to 1.06 chicks fledged per AON in 2024 (n=104 AON). The last time breeding productivity data was collected for Larne Lough was in 2019, when approximately 1.50 chicks fledged per AON (Booth Jones 2020). At Belfast Lough in 2024, a sample of 58 AON fledged an average of 0.76 chicks per AON, a considerable improvement on 2023 when only 0.03 chicks fledged per AON (n=587 AON) due to the colony being badly affected by an HPAI outbreak.

Figure 12: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Black-headed Gull 1998–2025 across six sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 1999 to 2003, 2005 to 2009, or 2022. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Black-headed Gull productivity between 1998 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Copeland Islands, Belfast Lough, Portmore Lough, Larne Lough, and Lower Lough Erne. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Mediterranean Gull

Ichthyaetus melanocephalus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – Annex 1 and migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Mediterranean Gull, by Allan Drewitt / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Slightly larger and stockier than the Black-headed Gull with a stouter bill, the Mediterranean Gull is a relative newcomer to the UK and Ireland's breeding seabird assemblage. Mediterranean Gulls expanded their range and population size from their traditional distribution around the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean in the 1950s and 1960s, with their first confirmed breeding in the UK occurring in Hampshire in 1968 (Slack 2007).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: From just one pair in the 1985–1988 census, numbers have increased to 132 AON during Seabird 2000 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004) and 2,295 AON during Seabirds Count in 2015–2021 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Most large colonies are located in south and south-east England, although the species' distribution is expanding northward with smaller colonies becoming established elsewhere (Burnell *et al.* 2023). An estimated 4,000 Mediterranean Gulls winter in the UK (Woodward *et al.* 2020). Few productivity data are collected for Mediterranean Gulls, and as result productivity at the UK level is not reported by the SMP (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends:

The Mediterranean Gull is a rare breeding species on the island of Ireland (Burke *et al.* 2020). After first breeding in Co. Antrim 1995, initially between one and three AON were recorded annually in Northern Ireland, across three different sites. Numbers have gradually increased, however, particularly since Mediterranean Gulls started breeding at Belfast Lough RSPB reserve in 2016 and the Northern Ireland population peaked at 14 AON in 2018. The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

Numbers of breeding Mediterranean Gulls appear to have dropped since the peak in 2018 (Table 6, Appendix), although due to COVID-19 fieldwork restrictions, few records were made in 2020. While in 2021 there were only four confirmed breeding pairs, in 2022 numbers had again risen with a total of 10 pairs between Strangford, Larne and Belfast Loughs (Figure 13). One male Mediterranean Gull returned to Lower Lough Erne in 2022 and was believed to have incubated two nests, but there was no evidence of successful hatching (RSPB).

The overall trend was of a slight decline in the number of breeding pairs in Northern Ireland in 2025. There was a slight increase in the number of Mediterranean Gulls at both Belfast Lough and Larne Lough this year with three AON present at each site, compared to two AON at each site in 2024 and five AON at each site in 2023. On Strangford Lough, there was only one AON in 2025, compared with three AON in 2024. There was also a single bird at Lower Lough Erne, although there was no evidence of it being paired up.

Breeding success in 2025

Due to the low number of breeding pairs in Northern Ireland, assessment of breeding success is very limited (Figure 14). Two breeding records were submitted for Mediterranean Gulls in 2025. Two chicks were fledged from three nests recorded at Larne Lough in 2025 (0.67 chicks per AON) compared to two chicks fledged from four nests (0.50 chicks per AON) in 2022. On Strangford Lough, no chicks fledged from the one AON in 2025 (see Strangford Lough nesting report on page 92). Breeding productivity was not monitored at Belfast Lough in 2025, although two chicks were fledged from two nests recorded at Belfast Lough in 2024 (one chick per AON).

Figure 13: Cumulative Mediterranean Gull count (AON) in Northern Ireland, 2013–2025. Data were only available for 2020 from Larne Lough. The total bar height represents the number of Mediterranean Gull pairs per year, and the colour represents the number in each site.

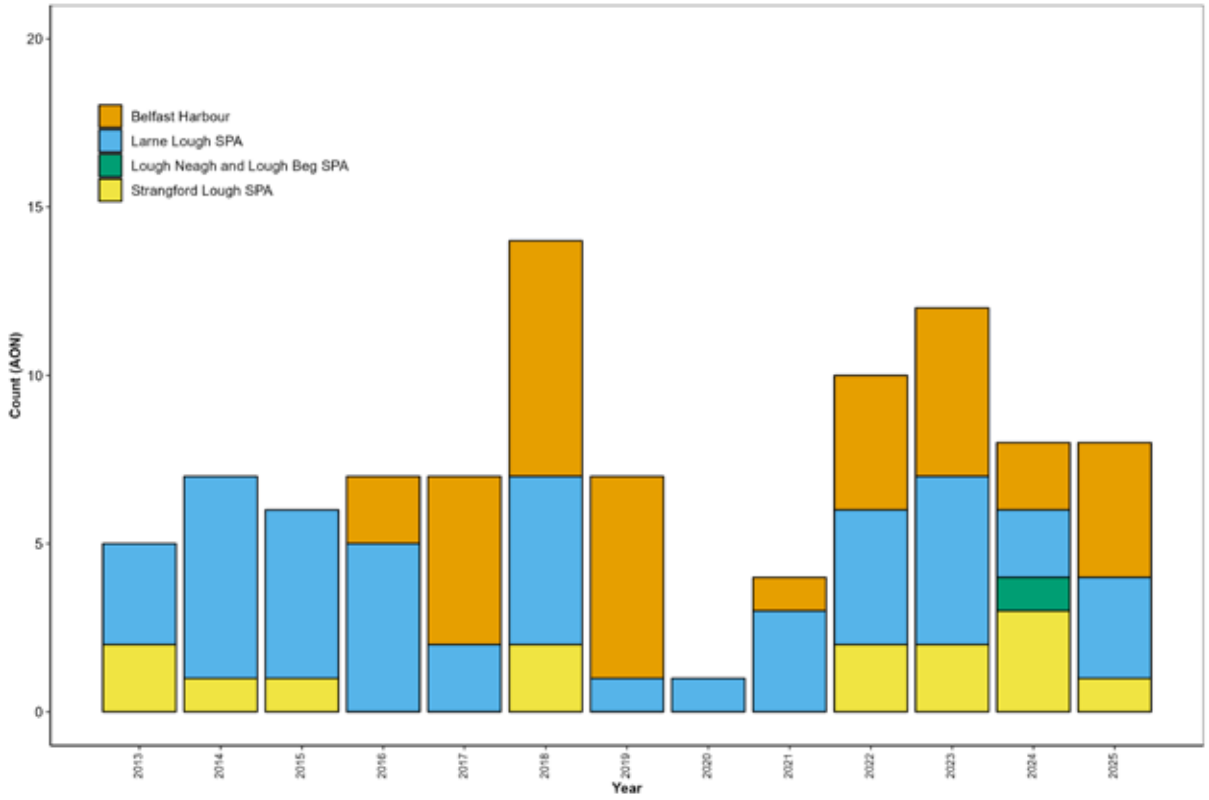
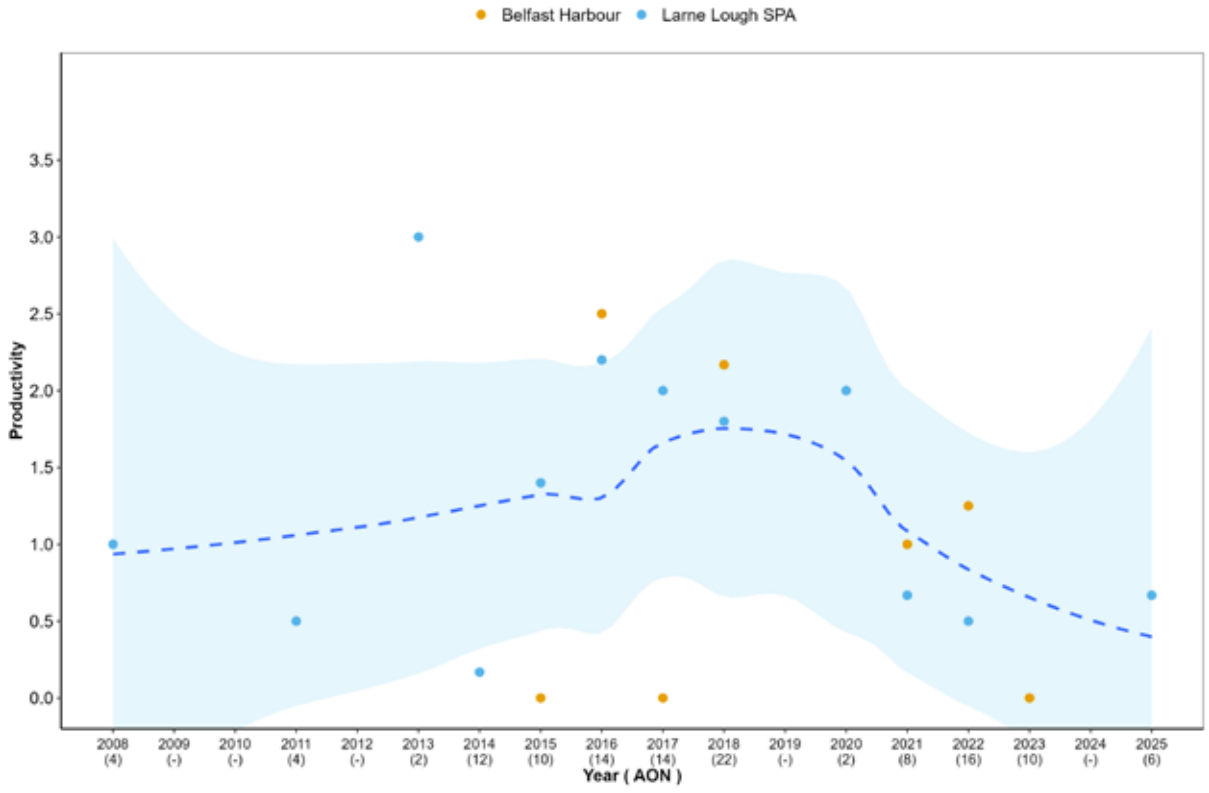


Figure 14: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Mediterranean Gull 2008–2025 across two sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 2009, 2010, 2012, 2019, and 2024. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Mediterranean Gull productivity between 2008 and 2025 include: Belfast Lough and Larne Lough. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Common Gull

Larus canus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive –migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Common Gulls, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: A dainty gull, resembling a small Herring Gull, this species nests colonially around coasts and inland sites. Common Gulls can often be seen paddling their feet to encourage worms to surface in grassy areas (Vernon 1972).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Scotland holds 89% of breeding Common Gulls across Britain and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023), so the rest of the UK and Ireland is relatively insignificant for this species. In the Seabird 2000 census, there were an estimated 48,714 AON in the UK. However, because inland colonies were not counted in previous censuses, a comprehensive estimate of Common Gull population change was not available. Seabirds Count (2015–2021) found that the UK population had more than halved since Seabird 2000 to only 23,540 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). During Seabirds Count (2015–2021), 45% of recorded UK breeding Common Gulls bred inland (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Due to its importance in the UK context, the Scottish SMP abundance trend can be used cautiously to represent the UK-level trend and shows a 19% decline in coastal breeding Common Gulls between 1986–2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024). The winter population of Common Gull in the UK is estimated to be 710,000 individuals (680,000–730,000) (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

Common Gull productivity is not well studied at the UK-scale, but a long-term study on the impact of American Mink predation on gulls and terns in western Scotland found that between 1989 and 2019 average productivity was 0.38 chicks per pair (JNCC 2021). The most recent SMP productivity data for the UK gives 0.55 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Historically, the Common Gull was a scarce breeding species in Northern Ireland, belying its name. However, coastal-nesting Common Gulls had increased in their population size from 192 to 532 AON between the 1985–1988 and 1998–2002 censuses (Mitchell *et al.* 2004), and small numbers have appeared at several additional locations, although unfortunately they have not been formally monitored (Kerry Leonard, pers. comm.). For example, one such new colony was discovered in late July 2013 at Torr Head, Co. Antrim. Seabirds Count found 758 AON in Northern Ireland, a 42% increase from Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). By far the largest concentrations are on the Copeland Islands and at Strangford Lough, and inland at Lower Lough Erne. Approximately 10,000 Common Gulls visit Northern Ireland in the winter (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

Four areas around Northern Ireland have been regularly monitored for Common Gull in recent years: Strangford Lough, Larne Lough, Outer Ards and Lower Lough Erne (Table 6, Appendix). At these sites Common Gulls have generally increased over time. Numbers of Common Gulls grew steadily in Strangford Lough in the 1990s, but have been less stable since, with a huge increase in the 2000s followed by a decline since the early 2010s. Only 258 AON were counted in 2025, compared with 282 AON in 2024. For further details, please refer to the Strangford report on page 92.

The next largest colony is in Lower Lough Erne (Table 6, Appendix), where an estimated 238 AON were counted in 2022, which was similar to 2021's count of 249 AON. While counts were not carried out in 2020,

in 2019 it was not possible to count one important colony at Lower Lough Erne, so although the count of 337 AON was the highest on record (Table 6, Appendix), this was probably an underestimate (Brad Robson, RSPB, pers. comm.). Lower Lough Erne was partially counted in 2025, with 137 AON present and a further 344 individuals were estimated on four islands where it was not possible to carry out an accurate count of nests (Fionnbarr Cross, pers. comm.).

Numbers of Common Gulls at the smaller Larne Lough colony have been increasing in recent years and 2025 saw a record count of 52 AON, up from 49 AON in 2024 (Figure 15). Up to nine AON have been recorded annually in Cockle Island (Outer Ards SPA) since 1986, with seven AON counted in 2025 compared to six AON in 2024 (Table 6, Appendix). On Muck Island, 15 AON were present in 2025, an increase on the three AON counted in 2024.

Outside regularly monitored areas, other aggregations of Common Gulls exist primarily on the Copeland Islands and on Rathlin Island. On the Copeland Islands, although numbers have declined, birds have spread out from a few large sub-colonies to form new satellite sub-colonies around the shore of all three islands. The Copeland Islands have not been completely surveyed since 2012 when there were 452 AON, down from a peak of 830 AON in 2009. More recently, 15 AON were recorded on Lighthouse Island in both 2018 and 2022. Five AON were counted in 2025, slightly down from six AON in 2024. The MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island found that the Rathlin Island population stayed fairly stable since the 1998–2002 census, at 69 AON (an 8% increase). The 2025 count of 161 AON is far higher than the 69 AON recorded in the 2021 census, although it is believed that this species was strongly under-recorded in that census (Ric Else, pers comm.).

A few Common Gulls breed at Carlingford Lough, and in 2025 there were 18 AON, an increase on the eight AON in 2024 (Table 6, Appendix). However, the colony was suspected as having been impacted by HPAI in 2025, with four juveniles found dead, although no carcasses were tested for HPAI (RSPB report to DAERA, 2025 / RSPB data in Epicollect Wild Bird Mortality Non-systematic survey of mortality in wild birds England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2025). Eleven AON were counted in 2025 at Ballintoy Harbour (Clare Dore, pers comm.) and three AON were at Carrick-a-Rede in 2025.

Figure 15: Common Gull counts (AON) at Strangford Lough, 1995–2025. No counts were made in 2001 or 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Common Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

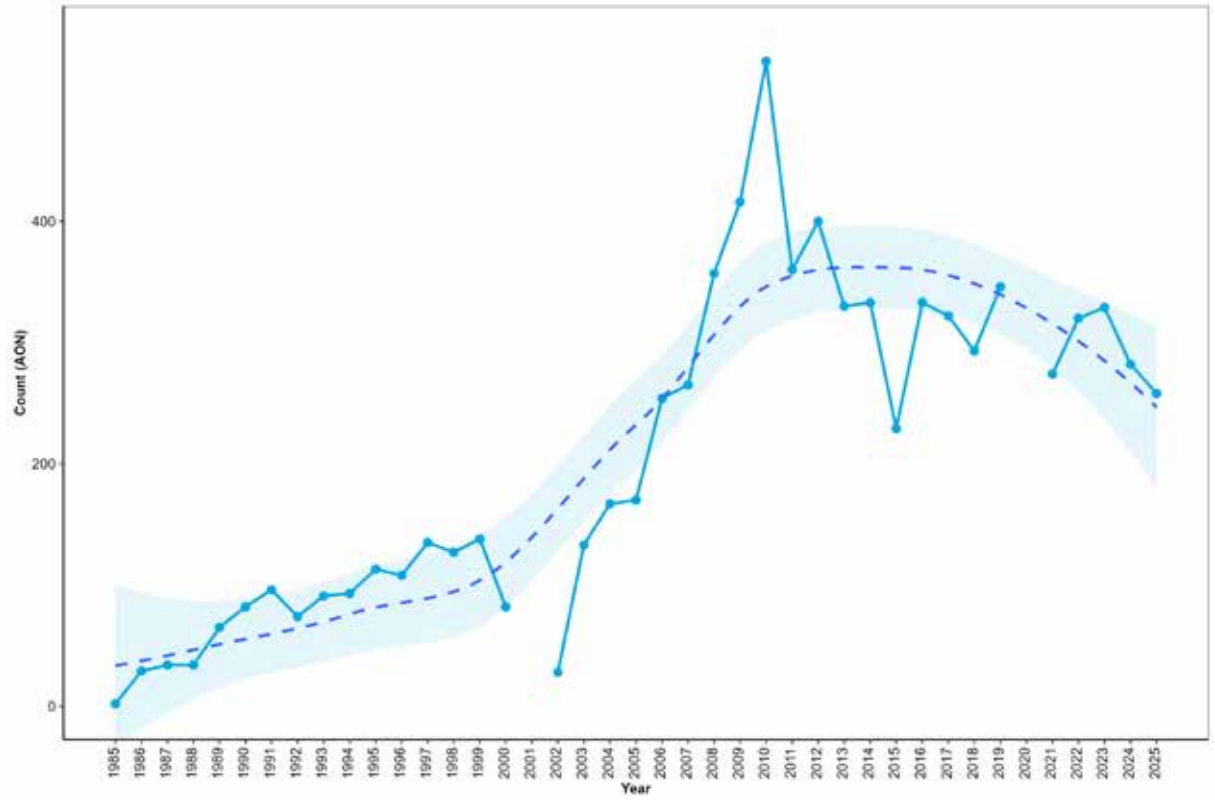


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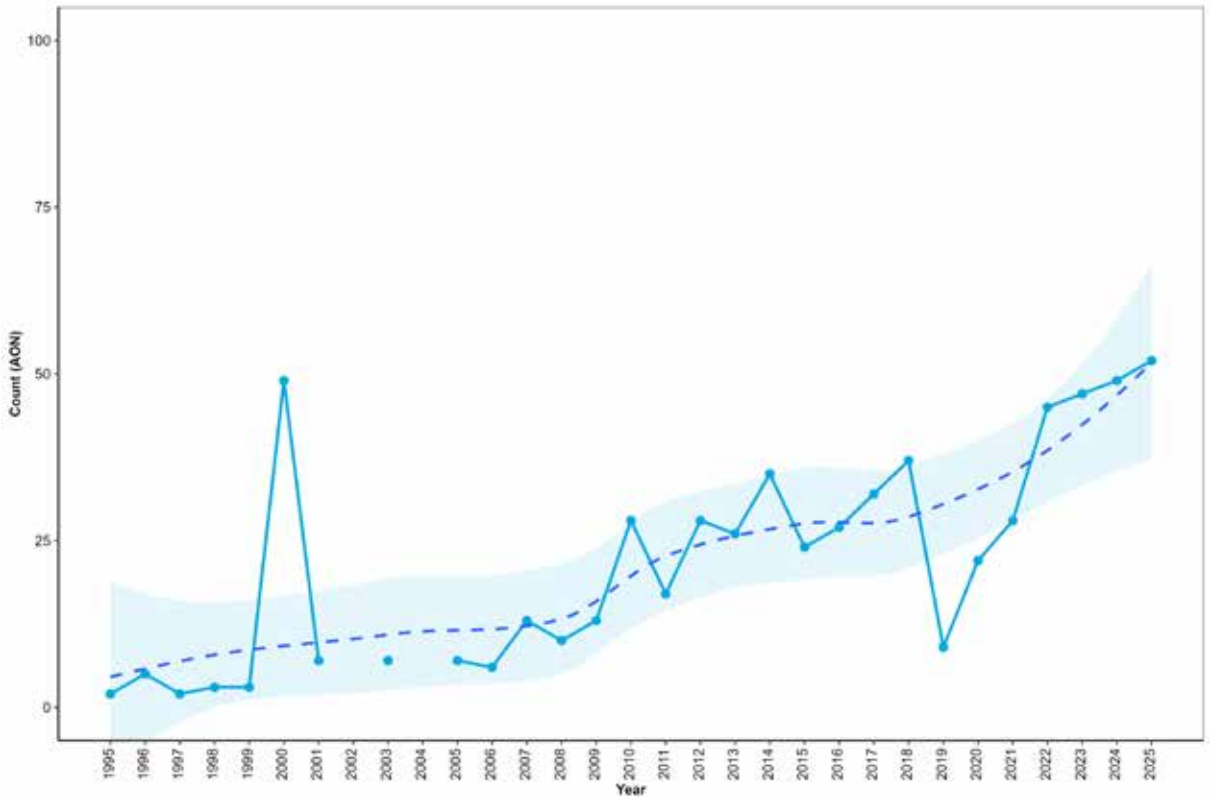
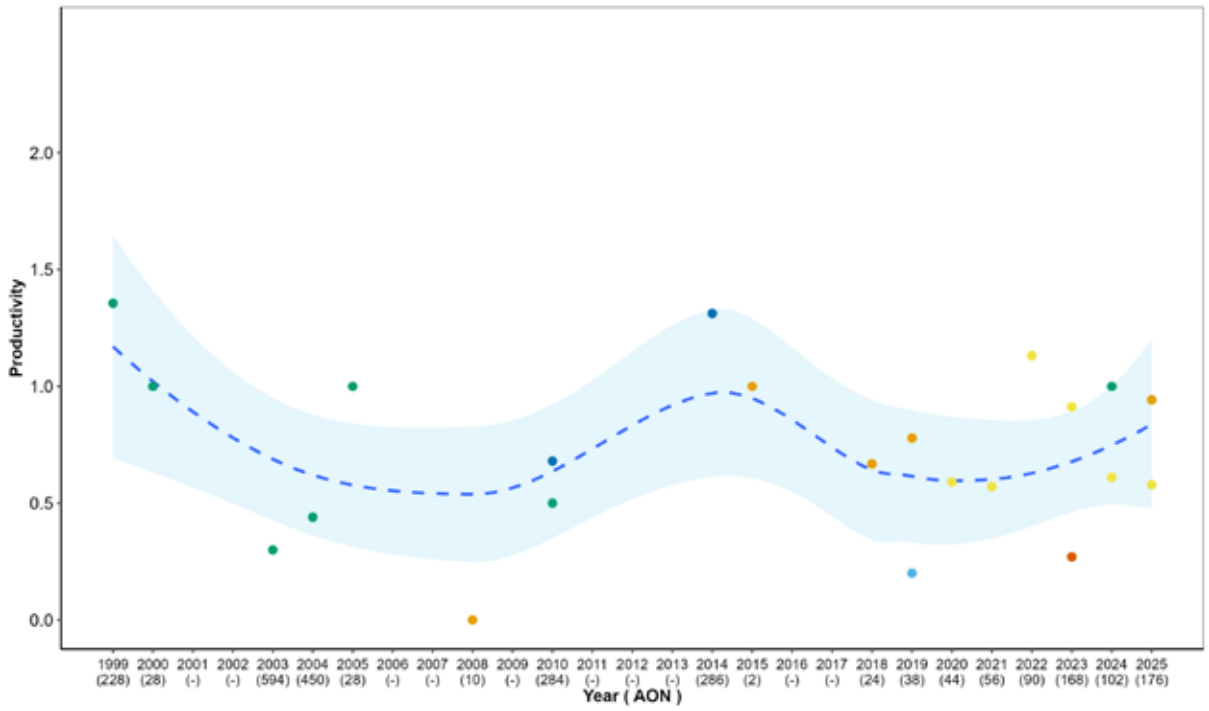
Figure 16: Common Gull counts (AON) at Larne Lough, 1985–2025. No counts were made in 2002 or 2004. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Common Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

In 2025, breeding productivity for Common Gull was only monitored at Larne Lough and Carlingford Lough, both by RSPB (Figure 17). The productivity was similar at Larne Lough in 2025 at 0.58 chicks fledged per AON (n=52 AON), compared to 0.61 chicks per AON in 2023. At Green Island, Carlingford Lough, productivity was 0.94 chicks fledged per AON (Monika Wojcieszek, pers comm.). Productivity at Rathlin Island was recorded in 2023, with 0.27 chicks fledging per AON from 37 AON.

Figure 17: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Common Gull 1999–2025 across six sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011 to 2013, or 2016. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Common Gull productivity between 1999 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Copeland Islands, Larne Lough, and Lower Lough Erne, among others. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Lesser Black-backed Gull

Larus fuscus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive –migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023.

Lesser Black-backed Gull, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Lesser Black-backed Gulls nest colonially often with other gull species, particularly Herring Gulls (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). However, unlike Herring Gulls, many Lesser Black-backed Gulls from the UK migrate to the Iberian Peninsula or North Africa during the non-breeding period (Rock 2002).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Based on data from Seabirds Count (2015–2021), Britain and Ireland hold a minimum of 36% of the estimated world population of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. During Seabird 2000, the breeding population was estimated at 123,253 AON, an increase of 40% since the previous census period (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). However, with the species' spread to urban sites, it is likely that some colonies remained uncounted. The Seabirds Count census utilised a new methodology to count urban-nesting Lesser Black-backed Gulls to improve the accuracy of the population estimate. Combining the counts of both natural and urban nesters, the UK population was estimated to be 324,465 AON (95% CI: 294,267–357,253), almost a three-fold increase since Seabird 2000 (1998–2002), driven by the large increase in urban nesting gulls (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, caution is advised with this total as the survey methods used during Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count differed. There is a lot of uncertainty in the Seabirds Count methods and results. Based on SMP data, the 65% downward trend in the Lesser Black-backed Gull long-term abundance index from 1986–2023 is based only on natural-nesting gulls (defined as moors, cliffs, marshes, beaches and other areas of semi-natural habitat, i.e. non-urban) and may not be representative of the UK population as a whole (Harris *et al.* 2024). Although many of the UK's breeding Lesser Black-backed Gulls migrate during the winter, the winter population is estimated to be 130,000 individuals (120,000–130,000) (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020), boosted by an influx of birds from Iceland and Fennoscandia.

At the UK-level, productivity measured at natural-nesting colonies has fluctuated widely over the SMP recording period, particularly in recent years. Based on SMP data, the UK productivity averaged 0.52 chicks per AON between 1989 and 2019 (JNCC 2021), whilst most recently in 2023 it was 0.48 chicks fledged per pair (Harris *et al.* 2024). The factors causing low productivity in Lesser Black-backed Gulls are not fully understood but include predation at some colonies. There is a lack of equivalent productivity estimates for urban sites.

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The Lesser Black-backed Gull is a widespread breeding species in Northern Ireland, mainly in a few large colonies at Strangford Lough, Copeland Islands, and inland at Lower Lough Erne and Lough Neagh. There are smaller numbers at Rathlin Island, The Skerries and Muck Island. Across Northern Ireland as a whole, numbers of coastal-nesting Lesser Black-backed Gulls doubled between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, and increased by a further 131% by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002), when 1,033 AON were counted (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Inland colonies were only censused for the first time in Seabird 2000 (940 AON), so comparisons with previous censuses are unavailable for these sites (JNCC 2021). Central Belfast was the only urban colony to be surveyed in Seabird 2000, with 63 AON recorded (Mitchell *et al.* 2004), so the full extent of urban nesting Lesser Black-backed Gulls at that time is unknown in Northern Ireland. Seabirds Count (2015–2021) estimated that the Northern Ireland population was 6,388 AON (95% CI: 5,439–7,556), including both urban and natural nesters, a six-fold increase since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, this figure should be treated with caution as there is some uncertainty around the number of urban nesters. Seabirds Count estimated the number of urban nesters to be 2,434 AON (95% CI: 1,485–3,603) in Northern Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

Around 550 Lesser Black-backed Gulls may occur in Northern Ireland in the winter (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

Lower Lough Erne supports a large proportion of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Northern Ireland. In 2022, the population on Lower Lough Erne was estimated to be 1,653 AON, the maximum on record for the site up to that date. However, this count includes the 2019 record of 765 AON at Rabbit Island, as this particular colony could not be visited in 2022. Lower Lough Erne (including Rabbit Island) was counted in 2025 and a record 2,929 AON were nesting across eight islands (RSPB).

Another large concentration is found in Strangford Lough where, with the exception of a dip in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the population has increased consistently since the first records in 1987 (Figure 18). Since the record high count in 2021, numbers have declined by 35% and only 271 AON were recorded in 2025 (compared to 288 AON in 2024). A breakdown of counts across different islands can be found in the Strangford report on page 92.

Fifteen islands in Lough Neagh were surveyed in 2025 by the Lough Neagh Partnership (excluding Portmore Lough RSPB reserve) where a total of 1,554 individuals was recorded across nine sites using peak flush counts. This compares with 1,109 individuals in 2024 and 1,543 individuals counted in 2022. Abundance data are challenging to collect consistently from the Lough Neagh islands making between-year comparisons difficult.

While the Loughs are generally well covered for Lesser Black-backed Gulls, coastal colonies are less regularly counted, or coverage is incomplete. Addressing part of this gap, the MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island in 2021 found that Lesser Black-backed Gulls had increased on the island by 309% to 519 AON since the Seabird 2000 census, while between Runkerry and Murlough, they increased by 1200% to 91 AOT/AON. The RSPB LIFE Raft project counted 710 AON in 2025 across the whole of Rathlin Island, slightly down on the 726 AON recorded in 2024. Additionally, a volunteer survey of The Skerries counted 537 AON in 2021, a significant and under-recorded population. A drone survey of The Skerries was carried out in 2025 (awaiting data to be analysed). Six AON were counted on Sheep Island in 2025.

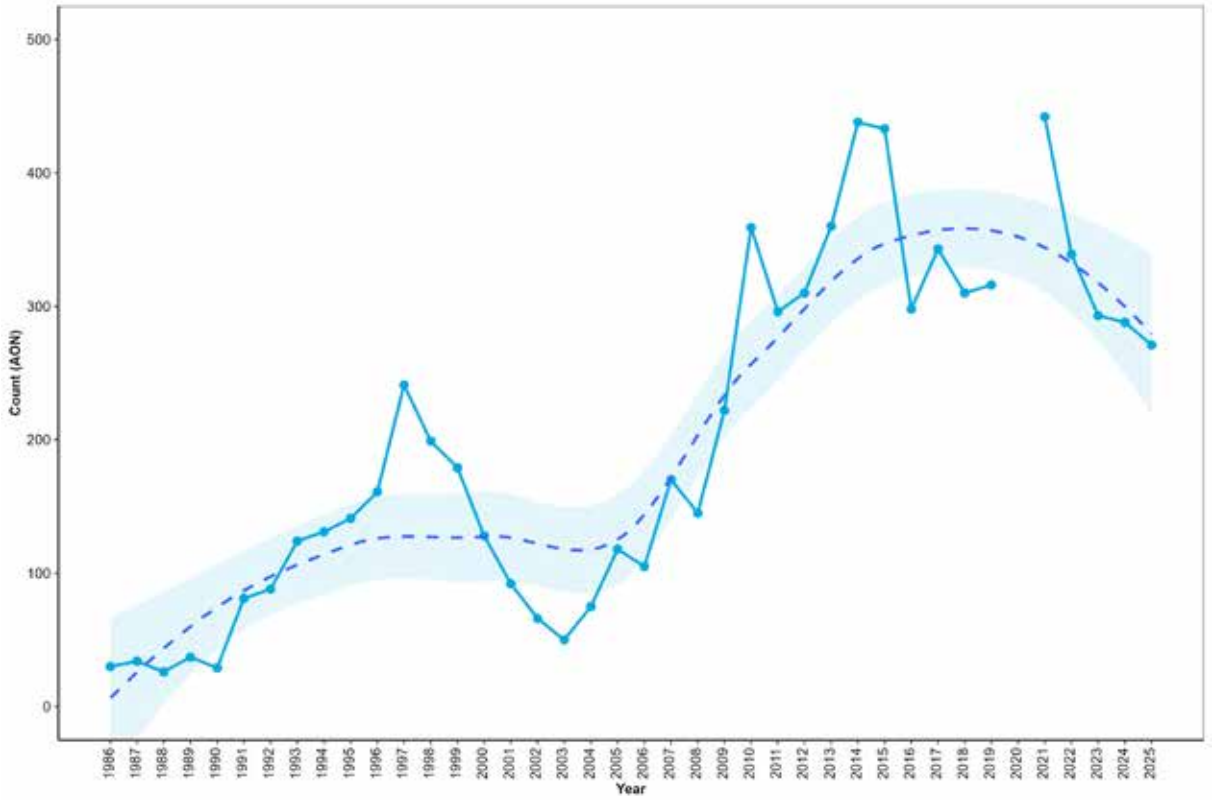
A volunteer team led by the Copeland Bird Observatory has surveyed large gulls on Lighthouse Island in all years since 2018 (apart from 2020). The count in 2025 was 651 AON, which is an increase on the 448 AON counted in 2024. An additional 108 AON were counted on Mew Island in 2024, but no count was undertaken in 2025. Big Copeland remains uncounted. On Muck Island, 104 AON were counted in 2025, a considerable increase on the 12 AON recorded in 2024.

True numbers of urban-nesting gulls remain difficult to quantify, however in 2018 and 2019 NIEA-funded surveys of central Belfast recorded a peak of 221 AON (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022b). While much higher than the last record made during the Seabird 2000 census (63 AON), this is still likely to be an underestimate due to the complexity of the roofscape in the survey area. Urban nesting appears to be increasing in Northern Ireland, and records of roof nesters from volunteers would be welcome.

Breeding success in 2025

No colonies were monitored for breeding success in 2025.

Figure 18: Lesser Black-backed Gull counts (AON) in Strangford Lough, 1986–2025. No data were collected in 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Herring Gull

Larus argentatus

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026); Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Herring Gulls, by Gary Burrows

Overview

Synopsis: The Herring Gull is slightly larger than the Lesser Black-backed Gull. It was historically widespread in Britain and Ireland and is largely resident (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). It nests in a range of habitats, from rocky coastlines to rooftops, but is less widespread inland compared to the Lesser Black-backed Gull. Although quite commonly nesting on roofs now, this behaviour was first observed in the 1920s in the south-west of England.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Herring Gulls suffered a steep decline in the late 1980s, largely due to botulism (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, Herring Gulls declined by 43% and declined a further 13% by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002), to 130,230 AON (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). However, with the species' spread to urban sites, it is likely that some colonies remained uncounted. The Seabirds Count census (2015–2021) utilised a new methodology to count urban-nesting Herring Gulls to improve the accuracy of the population estimate. The combined UK population of natural and urban nesters was estimated to be 237,573 AON (95% CI: 251,735–269,520), indicating an increase since Seabird 2000, driven by a large increase in urban nesting gulls (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, caution is advised with this total as the survey methods used during Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count differed. There is a high uncertainty in the methods and results from the urban surveys for Seabirds Count. The SMP report does not produce a combined urban- and natural-nesting abundance index for Herring Gull due to the low sample from urban sites, but the natural-nesting SMP abundance index for the UK in 2023 was 50% below the 1986 baseline (Harris *et al.* 2024). Based on existing UK demographic parameters (for example, survival and clutch size) Cook & Robinson (2010) predicted a 60% decrease in the national population over 25 years. During the winter, visitors from Scandinavia swell the Herring Gull population to around 740,000 individuals (710,000–780,000) (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

Productivity has been variable during the SMP reporting period, with the most recent UK SMP productivity estimate of 0.50 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The population in Northern Ireland declined by 96% between the 1985–1988 and 1998–2002 censuses to just 709 AON (Cramp *et al.* 1974, Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Concentrations of Herring Gulls occur on the Copeland Islands and at Strangford Lough. Smaller colonies are on Rathlin Island, Burial Island, Muck Island and The Skerries. The population on Rathlin Island declined from 4,037 AOT in 1985 to just 19 AOT in 1999 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004), but has since recovered to 83 AON during Seabirds Count 2015–2021 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). A similar decline occurred on the Copeland Islands, from approximately 7,000 AOT in 1985 to 225 AOT in 2004. The figures for Strangford Lough mirror this trend, with a large and rapid decline in the mid 1980s, with numbers reaching a low point just after the turn of the century. Since 2007, numbers of AOT at Copeland and Strangford have shown sustained growth. This is reflected in Seabirds Count with the Northern Ireland natural-nesting population now at 2,177 AON, a 210% increase since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Herring Gull has been downgraded from Red-listed to Amber-listed in the latest BoCCI due to less severe declines in recent years (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). As many as 10,000 Herring Gulls may occur in Northern Ireland in the winter (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

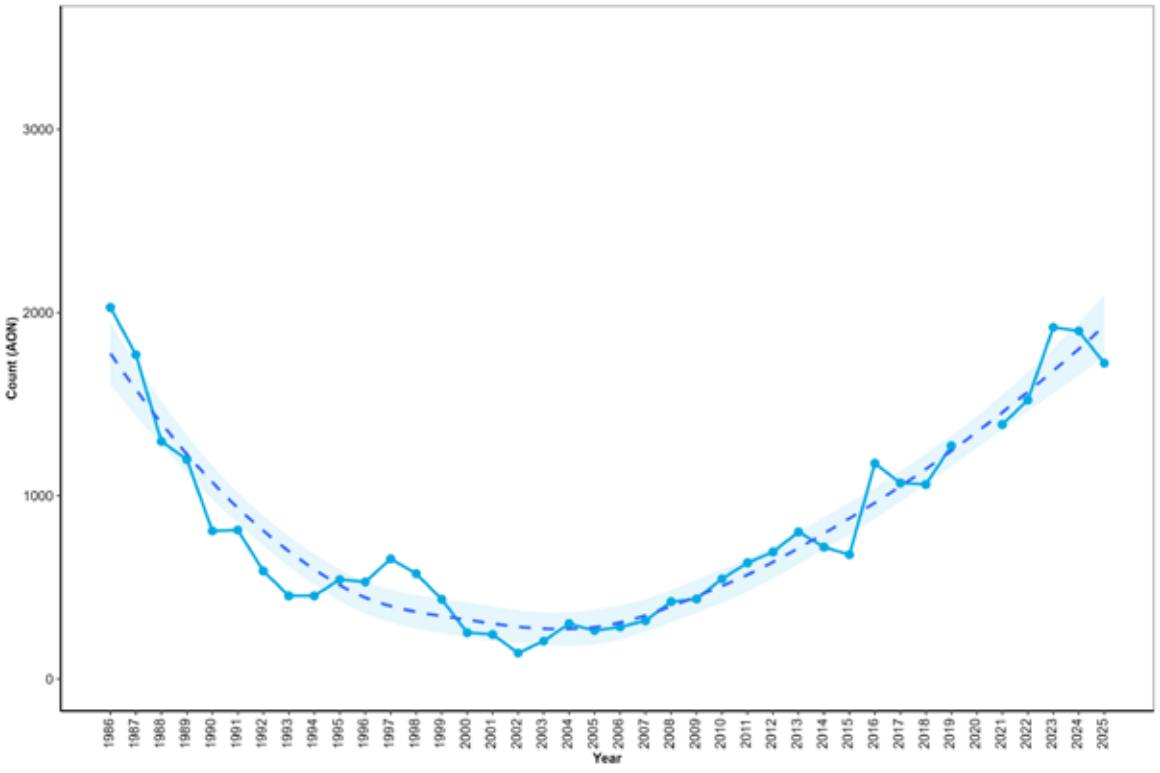
The primary population of Herring Gulls in Northern Ireland is found in Strangford Lough, where numbers have been steadily increasing after a decline in the late 1980s and 1990s (Figure 19). The 2025 count of 1,724 AON is down on both the 2024 count of 1,900 AON and the 2023 count of 1,920 AON, which was the largest count there since 1986 (2,825 AON). A breakdown of counts across different islands can be found in the Strangford report on page 92. Three AON were also counted on Green Island, Portavogie on the Outer Ards in 2025.

The other major colony, which spans the three Copeland Islands, has not been completely surveyed since 2012. However, volunteers from Copeland Bird Observatory have conducted a full survey of Lighthouse Island annually since 2018 (apart from 2020), with 831 AON counted in 2024 and 709 AON in 2025. A further 250 AON were counted on Mew Island in 2024 but this was not counted in 2025. Herring Gulls were counted annually on Muck Island between 2000 and 2010. In 2022, the small population there increased to 25 AON, although this is an 86% reduction on the highest count (184 AON) made on the island, back in 1995. A total of 154 AON was counted on Muck in 2025, which is a considerable increase on 2024 when 74 AON were counted. On The Maidens nearby, one or two pairs were suspected to have nested in 2025 (David Galbraith, pers. comm.). At Carlingford Lough, there were three AON on Green Island in 2024 and 2025, compared to 15 AON in 2023.

Coastal colonies on the north coast are less well recorded, but addressing part of this gap, the MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island found that Herring Gulls increased on the island by 493% to 83 AON since the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census, while between Runkerry and Murlough, they increased by 645% to 82 AOT/AON. The RSPB LIFE Raft project counted 254 AON in 2025 on Rathlin, which was up from 205 AON in 2024. This was the highest recorded count since 1985, which was the last count before a major population crash for this species on the island. A volunteer-led survey of The Skerries in 2020 revealed that it hosted an estimated 229 AON. A drone survey of The Skerries was undertaken in 2025 (data are currently being analysed). In 2025, four AON were counted at Ballintoy Harbour, four AON at Sheep Island and six AON at Carrick-a-Rede.

It is likely that urban-nesting Herring Gulls are on the rise around Northern Ireland, but little data exist outside of central Belfast. An NIEA-funded vantage-point survey from two of the tallest buildings in Belfast found that the very small population of eight AON recorded in the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census had increased to 39 in 2019 (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022b). Due to the complexity of the roof-scape and the limited number of vantage points, observed Herring Gull AON are likely to be an underestimate of the total number present in central Belfast. Small numbers have bred inland at Lower Lough Erne since records began in 2000, but only three AON were recorded in 2022 and four AON in 2025 (Table 6, Appendix).

Figure 19: Herring Gull numbers (AON) at Strangford Lough, 1986–2025. No data were collected in 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Herring Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

No productivity data were collected for Herring Gull in Northern Ireland during 2022–2024, but in 2021, RSPB monitored 12 AON in Carlingford Lough, which fledged six chicks (0.50 chicks/nest) and again in 2025, when 1.67 chicks fledged per nest from 3 AON.

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

Conservation status: Green-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Great Black-backed Gull, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: The Great Black-backed Gull is the largest of the gulls, with an average wing length of around 470 mm and average weight of 1.5 kg (BTO 2023). The species has an extensive breeding range across the North Atlantic. Great Black-backed Gulls are mostly found in open shore habitats during the breeding season (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: During the 20th century their range and numbers grew on both sides of the Atlantic, rebounding from a period of decline that rendered the species virtually extinct as a breeder in Britain towards the end of the previous century (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The Outer and Inner Hebrides and the Northern Isles of Scotland are currently the main strongholds for Great Black-backed Gulls in Britain and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK population has been relatively stable across census periods, and during Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) it was estimated to be 16,735 AON. However, the most recent Seabird Count census (2015–2021) shows that the UK population of Great Black-backed Gulls has decreased by 52% to only 8,021 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK SMP abundance index was also 42% below the 1986 baseline in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024). During the winter, numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls increase to 77,000 individuals (72,000–82,000) (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

There was an overall decline in UK productivity until 2005, after which it increased. Based on SMP data, UK productivity has varied between 0.70 and 1.70 chicks per AON since 1986, with the most recent estimate being 1.13 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The population of Great Black-backed Gulls in Northern Ireland declined by 74% from 240 AON to 71 AON between the 1969–1970 and 1998–2002 censuses (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). However, the Northern Irish population appeared to have more than doubled since then and numbers have also increased in the Republic of Ireland (JNCC 2021), resulting in a downgrading from Amber-listed to Green-listed in the latest BoCCI (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). Seabirds Count reported 449 AON in Northern Ireland, which was a five-fold increase since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The most important site in Northern Ireland is on Great Minnis's Island, Strangford Lough. Approximately 1,000 Great Black-backed Gulls occur in Northern Ireland during the winter (Burton *et al.* 2013, Woodward *et al.* 2020).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

The biggest colony of Great Black-backed Gulls occurs on Strangford Lough, and 149 AON were counted in 2025, slightly below the 155 AON in 2024, which was the highest count since 1972. (Figure 20). A breakdown of counts across different islands can be found in the Strangford report on page 92. On Muck Island, nine AON were recorded in 2025, up from the four AON present during 2022–2024 and closer to the record high of 11 AON in 2021 (Table 6, Appendix). On The Maidens nearby, 12 breeding pairs were estimated in 2025 (David Galbraith, pers. comm.). One AON was recorded between Maggy's Leap and Newcastle in 2025, the same figure as in 2024. A further five AON were counted on Mew Island (Copeland Islands) in 2024, but the island was not counted in 2025. Inland, four individuals were counted on Lough Neagh in 2025 (compared to two individuals in 2024) and three AON were present on Lower Lough Erne in 2025 (compared to only one AON in 2024).

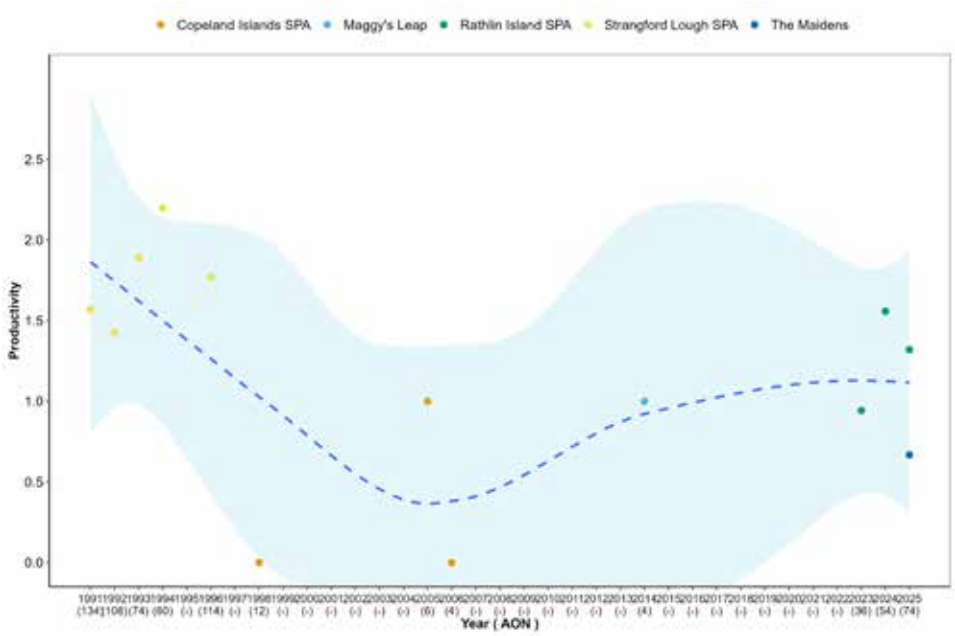
The MarPAMM census of Rathlin Island in 2021 found that Great Black-backed Gulls had increased on the island by 300% to 12 AON since the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census, while between Runkerry and Murlough, they increased by 17% to seven AOT/AON. The RSPB LIFE Raft project counted 25 AON on Rathlin Island in 2025, slightly down on the record number of 27 AON in 2024.

Figure 20: Great Black-backed Gull counts (AON) at Strangford Lough, 1986–2025. No data were collected in 2020. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Great Black-backed Gull numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

Breeding success in 2024

Breeding productivity on Rathlin Island in 2025 was 1.32 chicks fledged per AON from 25 nests, which was slightly lower than the 1.56 chicks fledged per AON in 2024 (Else et al. 2025). The one pair between Maggy's Leap and Newcastle fledged three chicks. Figure 21 shows that productivity has recovered since 2005, but it is still below the early 1990's.

Figure 21: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Great Black-backed Gull 1991–2025 across four sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 1995, 1997, 1999 to 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011 to 2013, or 2019 to 2022. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Great Black-backed Gull productivity between 1991 and 2025 include: Rathlin Island, Copeland Islands, Strangford Lough, and Maggy's Leap. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Little Tern

Sternula albifrons

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – listed in Annex 1 and as a migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Little Tern, by Philip Croft / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Little Terns are the UK's smallest breeding tern species. They are exclusively coastal, usually nesting on beaches where their eggs are so well camouflaged they are almost invisible.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: N

Numbers of Little Tern in the UK declined by 23% between the 1985–1988 census and the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census, and again by 25% between Seabird 2000 and Seabird Count (2015–2021) (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Although the population of 1,927 AON was higher during Seabird 2000 than during the first census of 1969–1970, recent estimates suggest the population size has reduced to 1,403 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The long-term SMP abundance trend (1986–2023) shows a 26% decline (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Productivity for all regions has been below the figure of 0.70 chicks fledged per pair thought to be needed to maintain population stability (Cook & Robinson 2010) for much of the SMP monitoring period. The most recent SMP data for 2023 was 0.64 chicks fledged per AON in the UK (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Little Tern is a rare breeding species on the island of Ireland (Burke *et al.* 2020), with main breeding concentrations on the east coast. In Northern Ireland they have always been an infrequent breeding species and prior to 2024 had not been reported as definitely nesting since 1996.

Abundance in 2025

A pair was present during the breeding season on the Outer Ards in 2022 and 2023, but there was no proof of breeding. A pair nested on the Outer Ards in 2024, but unfortunately failed. There was no repeat of breeding in 2025 (Hugh Thurgate, pers. comm.).

Sandwich Tern

Thalasseus sandvicensis

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – Annex 1 and migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List (IUCN 2023).

Sandwich Tern, by Philip Croft / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: The Sandwich Tern is the largest species of tern breeding in Northern Ireland. It is known for its extremely variable population trends and distribution, caused by the tendency for large numbers of individuals to move between colonies (JNCC 2021). Sandwich Terns almost always nest in shared colonies with Black-headed Gulls, potentially benefiting from the gulls' aggressive nest defence in response to predators (Smith 1975).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The UK holds approximately 9% of the world population of Sandwich Terns (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Census data indicate that the UK population increased by 33% between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, but that numbers then declined by 15% by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Seabirds Count (2015–2021) found that the UK population of Sandwich Terns is stable at 12,980 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, birds have recently been impacted by HPAI outbreak and the UK population is estimated to have declined by 35% between Seabirds Count and 2023 (Tremlett *et al.* 2025). Annual SMP data indicates that the UK breeding abundance is 14% below the 1986 baseline (Harris *et al.* 2024).

UK productivity has averaged 0.66 chicks fledged per AON since 1986 (JNCC 2021). The most recent SMP productivity estimate is 0.16 chicks fledged per AON in the UK during 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: During Seabird 2000, the population size of Sandwich Tern in Northern Ireland was 1,954 AON, an 11% decline since the previous census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). There were 1,944 AON recorded during Seabirds Count, a similar number to Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). In Northern Ireland most Sandwich Terns breed in a few large colonies at Strangford Lough, Larne Lough, Lower Lough Erne and Cockle Island, Groomsport. Sandwich Tern has the most complete and consistent monitoring record, over the longest period, of any seabird species in Northern Ireland.

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited, but between 1990 and 2019 the mean breeding success based on SMP data was 0.31 chicks per pair per year (JNCC 2021). SMP productivity estimates for all-Ireland are available intermittently up to 2019 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

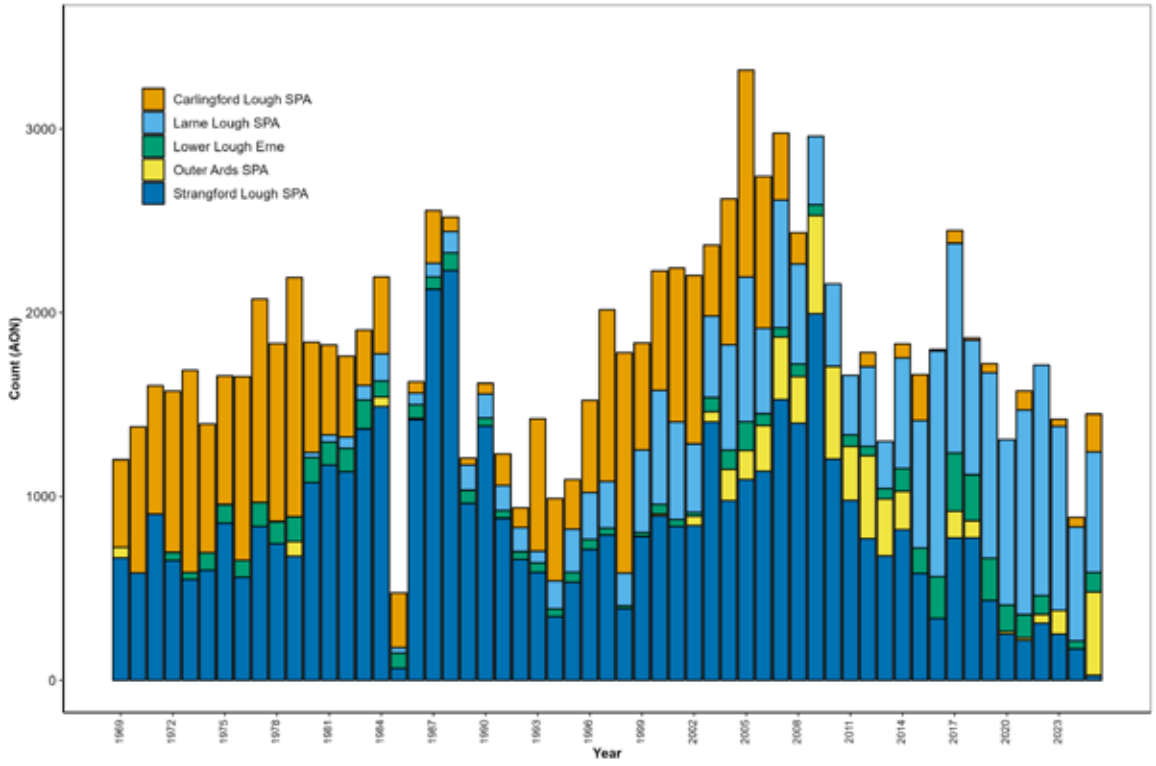
Presenting the total populations for the main coastal colonies together (Figure 22) is advantageous as terns may move colonies from year to year and it allows an overall appraisal of the Northern Ireland population.

The count of Sandwich Terns at Strangford Lough is the longest running population count of seabirds in Northern Ireland, and celebrated its 50th year in 2018 (Hugh Thurgate, pers. comm., Figure 23). In 2025, the population continued to decline, with a historic low of only 26 AON present, compared to 170 AON in 2024 (see page 92 for Strangford Lough report). Cockle Island was deserted in 2025, after only one AON was present in 2024, which was a substantial reduction from the 128 AON counted in 2023. This was probably a result of desertion following total failure in 2023 and also possibly from the impacts of HPAI (Hugh Thurgate, pers comm.). However, 454 AON bred on Green Island, Outer Ards in 2025, which is only the second ever recorded breeding at this site following the previous record in 2017. The largest colony of Sandwich Terns in Northern Ireland currently nests in Larne Lough, where 655 AON were counted in 2025, slightly up on 621 AON in 2024, which was the lowest count at this site since 2014. This represents a 38% decline compared to

2023 when 1,002 AON were recorded. Numbers of Sandwich Terns have been relatively low in Carlingford Lough in recent years (Table 6, Appendix). However, 103 AON were recorded in 2025, up from the 52 AON counted in 2024 and 39 AON recorded in 2023. This colony was suspected as impacted by HPAI in 2025, with one adult and 10 juveniles found dead, although no carcasses were tested for avian influenza (RSPB report to DAERA, 2025 / RSPB data in Epicollect Wild Bird Mortality Non-systematic survey of mortality in wild birds England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2025). Sandwich Terns were recorded nesting at Belfast Lough for the first time in 2025, with 55 AON present (Donnell Black, pers. comm.).

Sandwich Terns can also be found inland at Lower Lough Erne. One hundred and seven AON were counted in 2025, up from 42 AON in 2024. This is similar to the 102 AON present in 2022 but below the peak count of 316 AON in 2017.

Figure 22: Cumulative Sandwich Tern counts (AON) at Carlingford Lough SPA, Outer Ards SPA, Larne Lough SPA, Lower Lough Erne and Strangford Lough SPA, 1969–2025. Sandwich Terns were not counted in Carlingford Lough and were an estimate at Larne Lough in 2020. The total bar height represents the number of Sandwich Tern pairs per year, and the colour represents the number in each site.



Breeding success in 2025

Sandwich Tern productivity has been measured intermittently at four colonies: Lower Lough Erne (RSPB), Carlingford Lough (RSPB), Larne Lough (RSPB), and Strangford Lough (National Trust) (Figure 24). After the total breeding failure witnessed in 2023, which was possibly linked to HPAI, there was a slight improvement in breeding productivity during 2024. On Larne Lough, productivity from 655 nests was 0.92 chicks fledged per AON in 2025 (an improvement compared to 0.33 in 2024 and zero in 2023). Breeding success on Strangford Lough was 0.31 chicks fledged per AON from a relatively small sample of 26 nests (compared with 0.02 in 2024 and zero in 2023). For more details, refer to the Strangford Lough seabird report on page 92). Breeding success on Lower Lough Erne was 1.00 chick per AON (n=6 AON), although this figure was calculated from a small sample and involved limited visits. This compares with 0.25 chicks per AON in 2024. Productivity improved at Carlingford Lough, with 0.56 chicks fledged per AON from 103 nests, compared to 0.33 in 2024 and total breeding failure in 2023. Despite improving breeding success at Carlingford Lough from 2011–2015 due to an intensified programme of monitoring and conservation, productivity has been consistently low in recent years, caused by the suspected predation of eggs and young by Otter (Matthew Tickner, RSPB, pers. comm).

The new colony at Belfast Lough fledged 0.60 chicks per AON from 55 nests (RSPB). At Green Island, Portavogie off the Outer Ards, 0.35 chicks fledged per AON from 454 nests. The only other breeding record at this site in 2017 resulted in a complete failure (Hugh Thurgate, pers. comm.).

Figure 23: Sandwich Tern counts (AON) at Strangford Lough, 1969–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Sandwich Tern numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

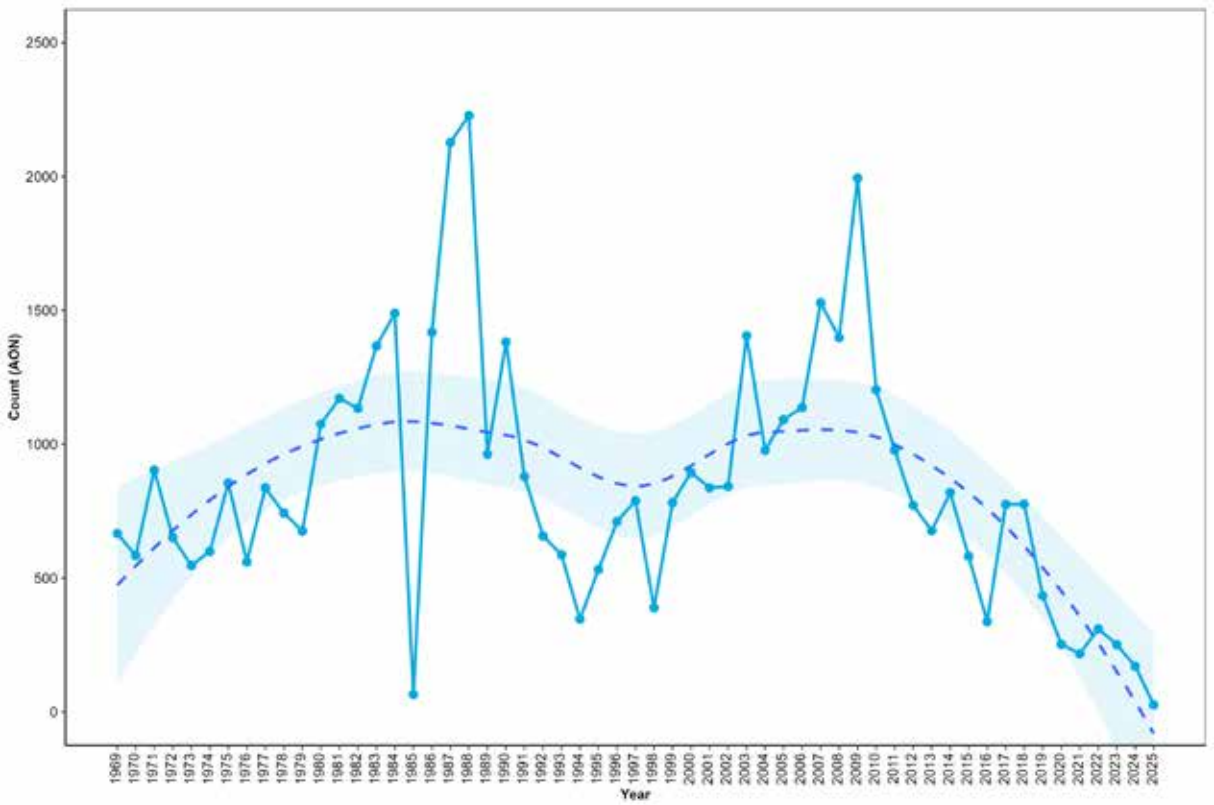
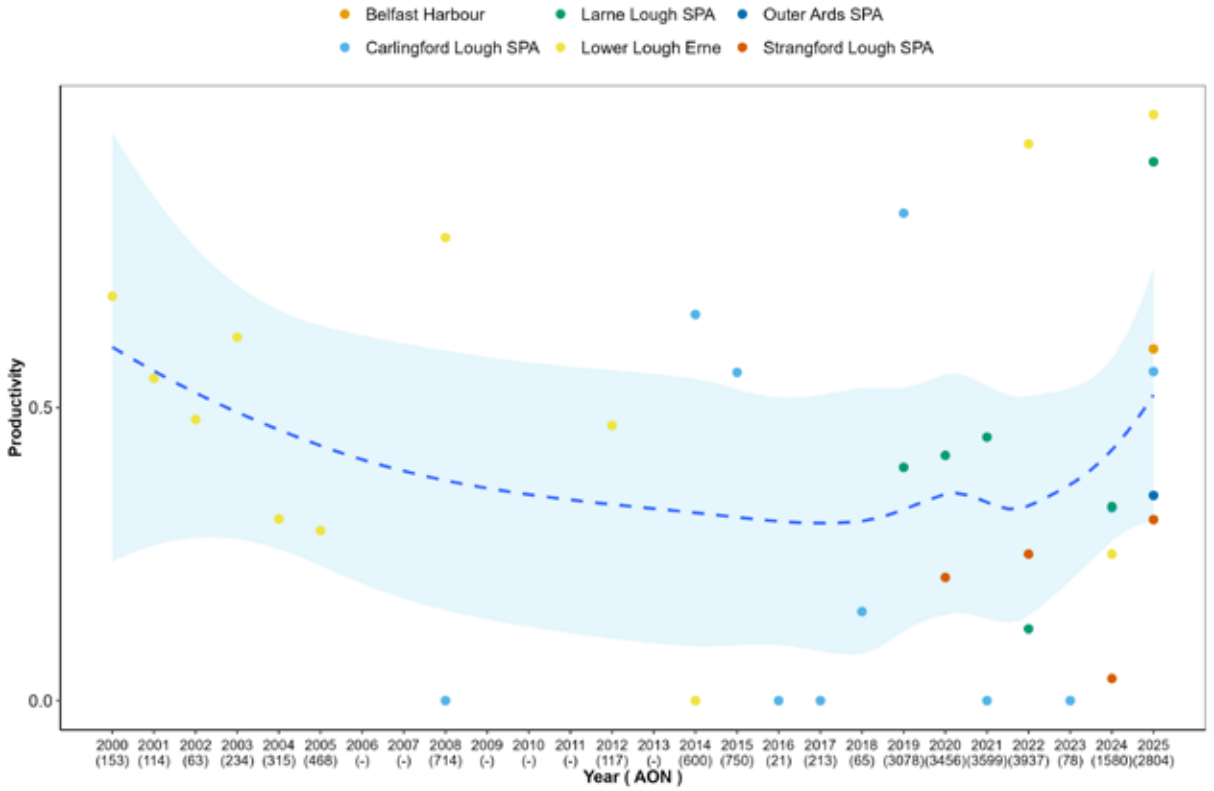


Figure 24: Productivity (chicks/AON) for Sandwich Tern 2000–2025 across four sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 1995 to 1998, 2006, 2007, 2009 to 2011, or 2013. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Sandwich Tern productivity between 2000 and 2025 include: Larne Lough, Carlingford Lough, Strangford Lough, and Lower Lough Erne. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – listed in Annex 1 and as a migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Common Tern, by Sam Langlois / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Despite the name, the Common Tern is not the most abundant UK tern species, but it is probably the most familiar because its breeding range extends around much of the coastline and inland to lakes and loughs across most of the UK (JNCC 2021).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Although the UK population increased slightly between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, numbers fell to 11,838 AON by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002), a similar number as recorded in the first census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The most recent Seabirds Count census (2015–2021) shows that the UK Common Tern population has remained stable at 12,219 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). However, analysis of annual SMP abundance data indicates that the population has declined by 45% between 1986 and 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024). This discrepancy is likely due to Common Terns being hit by HPAI during the 2022 outbreak, which particularly impacted several Common Tern colonies in England (Tremlett *et al.* 2025).

Productivity fluctuates between years as it is heavily influenced by weather conditions, predation and foraging success. Based on SMP data, between 1986 and 2023, UK breeding success varied between approximately 0.30 and 0.80 chicks per pair per year, and most recently was 0.46 chicks per AON in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Common Terns are the most widespread breeding tern species in Northern Ireland with coastal and inland populations. Historical data for the main Northern Ireland colonies are incomplete. In the late 1980s, there was a sudden increase in Common Terns to over 1,000 AON and by Seabird 2000 there were 1,708 AON. The population has increased since then and Seabirds Count recorded 1,820 AON, an 7% increase from Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Significant numbers breed at several sites on Lough Neagh but these are patchily monitored. The main coastal sites are Strangford Lough, Larne Lough, Belfast Lough and Carlingford Lough.

SMP productivity data for Common Terns in Northern Ireland show they had an average fledging rate of 0.65 chicks per pair per year between 1999 and 2019 (JNCC 2021).

Abundance in 2025

Total numbers of Common Terns at key sites in Northern Ireland in 2025 increased by 25% to 544 AON compared to 408 in 2024 (Figure 25). This is partially due to the number of AON at the main colony on Lough Neagh being counted in 2025 (but not counted in 2024). Numbers remain relatively low overall due to the impacts of HPAI on colonies during 2023. Furthermore, in 2020, the total coastal Northern Irish population (including Belfast Lough RSPB, Carlingford Lough, Cockle Island, Larne Lough and Strangford Lough) more than halved from 2019 levels due to losses at Larne and Belfast Loughs (Table 6, Appendix). This decline was thought to be genuine rather than due to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on surveys since tern monitoring was not affected.

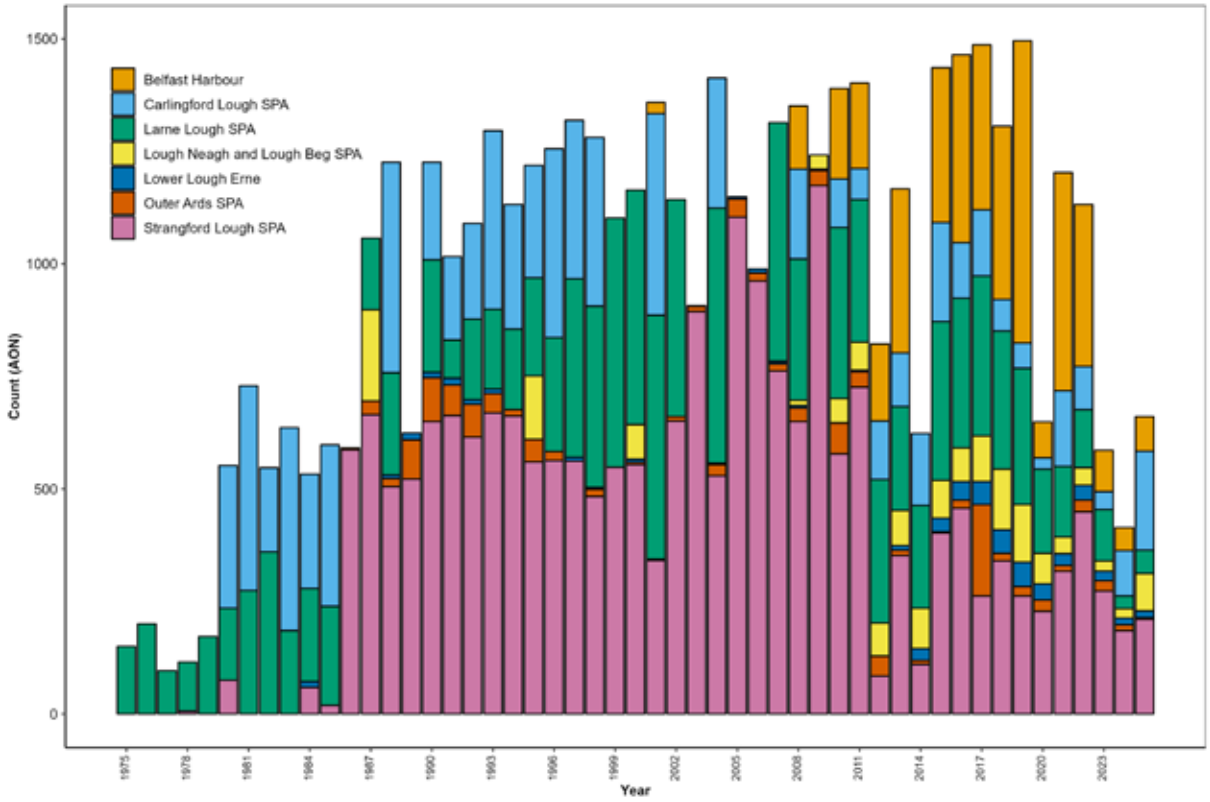
At Belfast Lough, 77 AON were present in 2025, up from the 51 AON counted in 2024. There has been a substantial reduction at Belfast Lough since numbers peaked at 672 AON in 2019. At Larne Lough, the colony nearly doubled to 52 AON, compared to the 28 AON in 2024 although still well below the 114 AON in 2023.

Numbers on Strangford Lough were down, with 197 AON present in 2025 and a further 13 Common Tern AON at Castle Espie in 2025 (compared to six AON in 2024). Adults and chicks were noted dying during the breeding

season on Strangford Lough in 2025 (particularly Ogilby Island) and HPAI was suspected, although the birds were not tested (Hugh Thurgate, Kerry Leonard both pers. comm.). Overall counts on Strangford Lough were 179 AON plus an additional 81 'Commic' Tern AON in 2024 and 273 AON in 2023. On Cockle Island, there were only four AON in 2025, compared to 13 AON in 2024 and 23 AON in 2023. This colony was badly affected by HPAI in 2023. One hundred and 10 AON were counted on Green Island in Carlingford Lough in 2025, slightly up on the 101 AON present in 2024. This colony was suspected as impacted by HPAI, with six adults and 13 juveniles found dead, although no carcasses were tested for avian influenza (RSPB report to DAERA, 2025 / RSPB data in Epicollect Wild Bird Mortality Non-systematic survey of mortality in wild birds England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2025).

Common Terns can also be found breeding inland, and 16 AON were recorded at Portmore Lough RSPB reserve in 2025, down on the 21 AON counted in 2024. At Lower Lough Erne, 21 AON were recorded in 2025, up on the 15 AON in 2024. At Moorlough Lake, Co. Fermanagh, six AON were counted in 2025, the same figure as in 2024. On Lough Neagh, 67 AON were present in 2025. A total of 128 individuals was present, compared to 186 individuals in 2024.

Figure 25: Cumulative Common Tern numbers (AON) at the coastal colonies of Belfast Harbour, Carlingford Lough SPA (count of 'Commic' terns not included for 2022), Larne Lough SPA, Lough Neagh and Beg SPA, Lower Lough Erne, Outer Ards SPA, and Strangford Lough SPA, 1975-2025. The total bar height represents the number of Common Tern pairs per year, and the colour represents the number in each site.



Breeding success in 2025

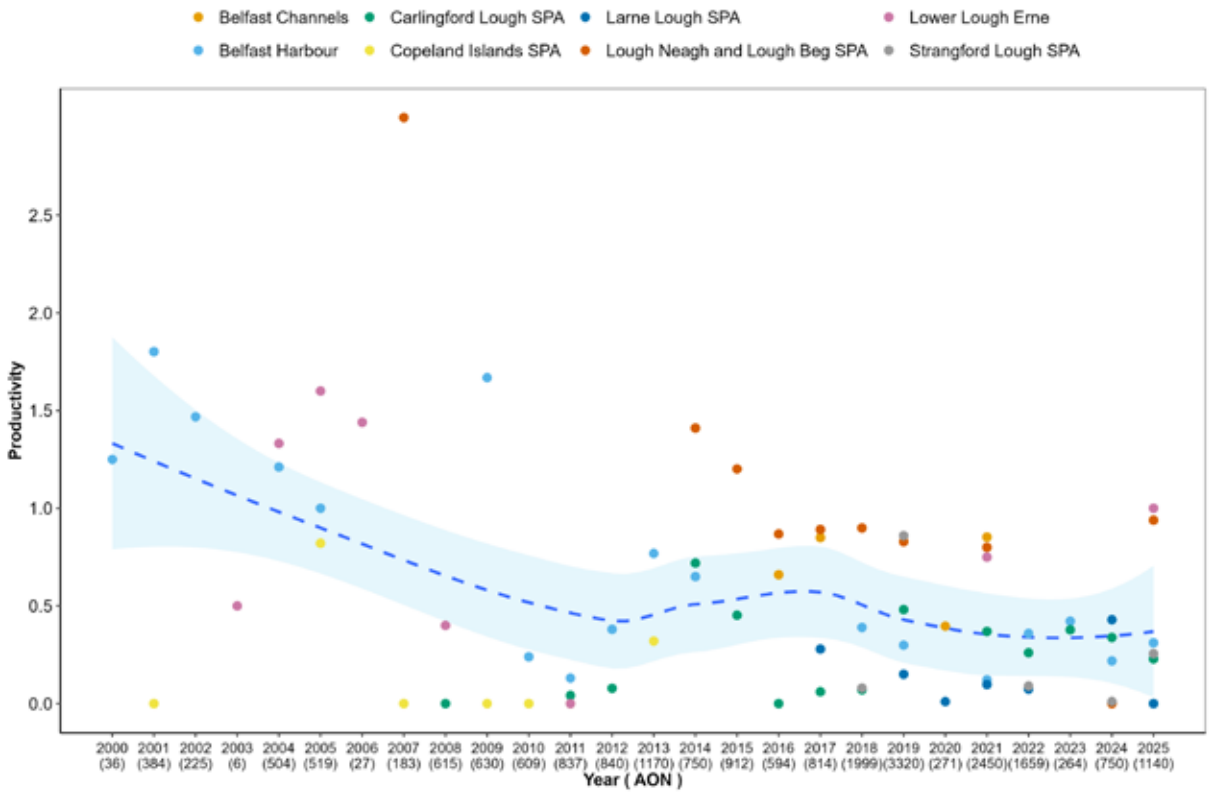
While not all sites are surveyed every year, 10 sites have received some monitoring effort since 1999, and the overall picture is of a low and declining breeding success (Figure 26). Eight sites were monitored for breeding success in 2025, with an average of 0.34 chicks fledged per AON, which was higher than in 2024 (0.22) and 2023 (0.27 chicks/AON), but lower than the average between 2000 and 2022 across all sites (0.58 chicks/AON, 95% CI: 0.42-0.74).

In 2025, colonies at Belfast Lough RSPB continued to have a low productivity of only 0.30 chicks fledged per AON (n=77 AON). This is a slight improvement on the 0.22 chicks fledged per AON recorded in 2024. Low productivity in 2025 was due to predation by Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Aoife de Bhál, pers comm.). Strangford Lough had its best breeding season for many years with 0.51 chicks fledged per AON (n=186 AON), compared to only 0.01 chicks fledged per AON in 2024 (n=179 AON). For more details, refer to the Strangford Lough seabird report on page 92. At Castle Espie, no tern chicks fledged in 2025 (Maurice Turley, pers comm.),

compared to an average of one chick fledged per AON from six AON's in 2024. At Cockle Island, four AON fledged two or three chicks (Hugh Thurgate, pers comm.)

At Larne Lough, no fledglings were observed in 2025 compared to 0.52 chicks fledged per AON in 2024 (n=23 AON). At Portmore Lough, 0.94 chicks fledged from 16 AON, compared with zero productivity in 2024 from 21 AON due to the Tern raft fencing being breached by mink at the start of July, and the rafts abandoned a couple of days later (Laura Smith, pers. comm.). Green Island in Carlingford Lough had a productivity of 0.23 chicks fledged per AON in 2025, down from 0.34 chicks fledged per AON in 2024. On Lower Lough Erne, productivity was one chick fledged per pair, although the sample size was small (n=6 AON).

Figure 26: Common Tern productivity (chicks/AON) 2000–2025 across eight sites in Northern Ireland. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Common Tern productivity between 2000 and 2025 include: Larne Lough, Copeland Islands, Lower Lough Erne, Strangford Lough, and Portmore Lough, among others. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Roseate Tern

Sterna dougallii

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – listed in Annex 1 and as a migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Roseate Tern, by Sam Langlois / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Roseate Terns are whiter than the Common Tern and sometimes have a pinkish tinge, likely obtained from the carotenoid Astaxanthin found in their diet (Hays *et al.* 2006). Roseate Terns were nearly hunted to extinction for the millinery trade in the 19th century, and although they did recover in numbers during the 20th century, they are now the most range-restricted tern species in the UK with breeding occurring at only a few colonies (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census only 56 AON were recorded across the UK, a decline of 83% from the previous 1985–1988 census (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). However, the population is now showing some early signs of recovery and in 2018 there were 120 AON reported (Eaton *et al.* 2020). The Seabirds Count (2015–2021) census showed that the Britain and Ireland population of Roseate Tern has increased by 152% since Seabird 2000 to 1,989 AON. The stronghold for the species within Britain and Ireland is now in the east of the Republic of Ireland at Rockabill Island and Lady's Island Lake (Burnell *et al.* 2023). In Scotland, the main colony at the Firth of Forth appears to have been largely extirpated, partly due to competition for nesting sites with gulls, and now only single pairs appear periodically in mixed tern colonies in Scotland (JNCC 2021). The only colony in England, on Coquet Island, has had greater success, increasing during the last decade from under 40 AON to over 100 AON (Harris *et al.* 2024). It may have benefited from emigration from other sites, as well as the provision of nest sites and protection from predators (JNCC 2021). However, this colony has recently been impacted by HPAI outbreak and this led to an overall reduction in the UK population by 21% between Seabirds Count and 2023 (Tremlett *et al.* 2025). Declines in Roseate Terns in Wales may have been due to emigration to more suitable breeding sites in the Republic of Ireland, and only a single pair were recorded to have nested in 2022 (Eaton *et al.* 2024). The SMP long-term breeding abundance index shows a 63% decline in the UK between 1986 and 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024)

The UK productivity estimates for Roseate Tern have fluctuated across the SMP monitoring period, but with a gradual overall increase until recent years, partly due to effective conservation management. Since 2000, the UK SMP productivity estimates have varied between approximately 0.40 and 0.80 chicks per pair per year (Harris *et al.* 2024). However, 2022 saw a decline in productivity to a value of 0.30 chicks fledged per pair due to HPAI on Coquet Island, which caused high mortality of chicks and adults. HPAI was also present in the colony in 2023, therefore no productivity data were submitted to the SMP (Harris *et al.* 2024)

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Historically Mew Island in the Copeland Islands was one of the major sites for Roseate Tern in Ireland (Thompson 1851). However, the species ceased to breed in Northern Ireland around 1880 before apparently re-colonising in the first quarter of the 20th century (Deane 1954). Good numbers were again breeding on Mew by 1941 (Williamson *et al.* 1941) before rapidly decreasing to extinction on the island in the 1950s. Carlingford Lough formerly held a population of up to 40 AON in 1987 and there was also a breeding colony on Strangford Lough up until the 1980s (Bob Brown, pers. comm). Numbers of Roseate Terns also peaked in the late 1980s on Larne Lough, and it has clung on as a breeding species there since, albeit in very small numbers. Between the 1985–1988 and the Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) censuses, the number of Roseate Terns in Northern Ireland declined by 94% from 62 to four AON (Mitchell *et al.* 2004).

Only a single pair of Roseate Terns has nested in Northern Ireland in recent years, including during the most recent Seabirds Count census (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Based on SMP data, the species productivity in Northern Ireland between 1991 and 2019 was 0.68 chicks fledged per pair per year (JNCC 2021).

Abundance in 2025

It is disappointing to report that no Roseate Tern bred at Larne Lough in 2024 or 2025. There was a single pair there in 2023 (Table 6, Appendix).

Breeding success in 2025

The last successful breeding was a pair at Larne Lough in 2022 that fledged one chick (RSPB).

Arctic Tern

Sterna paradisaea

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2023), EC Birds Directive – listed in Annex 1 and as a migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Arctic Tern, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: Similar in appearance to the Common Tern, but with a longer tail and without any black on the beak, the Arctic Tern is the commonest tern species in the UK. However, due to its more northerly distribution, it is less familiar to many than the Common Tern (JNCC 2021).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The UK population has fluctuated greatly since the 1960s. There was an apparent 50% increase in numbers between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, though there is uncertainty as to the true magnitude of this change due to questions of compatibility of methods between censuses. The Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) census, estimated the UK population to be 53,380 AON, a decrease of 31% since 1985–1988 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The Seabirds Count (2015–2021) census shows that the Arctic Tern population in the UK has declined by 37% since Seabird 2000 to 30,451 AON (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Annual SMP data indicated a breeding abundance index decline of 12% below than the 1986 baseline in the UK in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Arctic Terns suffer one of the lowest breeding successes of any seabird species in the UK, remaining below 0.30 chicks per pair in most years, potentially linked to prey shortages, extreme weather, and predation (Harris *et al.* 2024). The most recent SMP productivity estimate was 0.11 chicks fledged per AON for the UK in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In Northern Ireland the species is concentrated into just a few colonies including the Copeland Islands, Strangford Lough, Belfast Harbour, Cockle Island, Outer Ards (Bird Island), and Carlingford Lough (Green Island). The population grew between the previous censuses, rising by 257% between 1969–1970 and 1985–1988, and again by 78% to 767 AON by Seabird 2000 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). There was a slight increase in numbers to 800 AON by Seabirds Count (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

Based on SMP data, between 1991 and 2019, Arctic Tern breeding success in Northern Ireland was similar to that elsewhere in the UK, producing an average of 0.30 chicks per pair per year (JNCC 2021).

Abundance in 2025

Colonies of Arctic Terns around Northern Ireland are highly variable in their size year-to-year (Figure 27). In the last 25 years, the Copeland Islands and Strangford Lough have held the majority of breeding Arctic Terns in Northern Ireland. The colony at the Copeland Islands fluctuated between 600 and 1,250 AON between 2000 and 2013, but no full survey has taken place across all three islands since 2013 and it is thought that the breeding terns of the islands have largely moved elsewhere. During rare access to Big Copeland, approximately 200 Arctic Tern AON were estimated to be present in 2020 (Gareth Platt, pers. comm.), more than the estimate for the previous year (75 AON, Table 6, Appendix). In 2019, 150 individuals were present on Lighthouse Island, Copelands, and these experienced a complete breeding failure potentially due to high levels of predation from Jackdaws *Coloeus monedula* (Chris Acheson and David Galbraith, Copeland Bird Observatory, pers. comm.). No Arctic Terns nested on Lighthouse Island in 2021 (Katherine Booth Jones, Copeland Bird Observatory, pers. obs.). In 2023, an estimated 82 AON were present on the Copeland Islands (Table 6, Appendix) and in 2024, 51 AON nested but there was a complete failure mainly due to a combination of Otter and large gull predation.

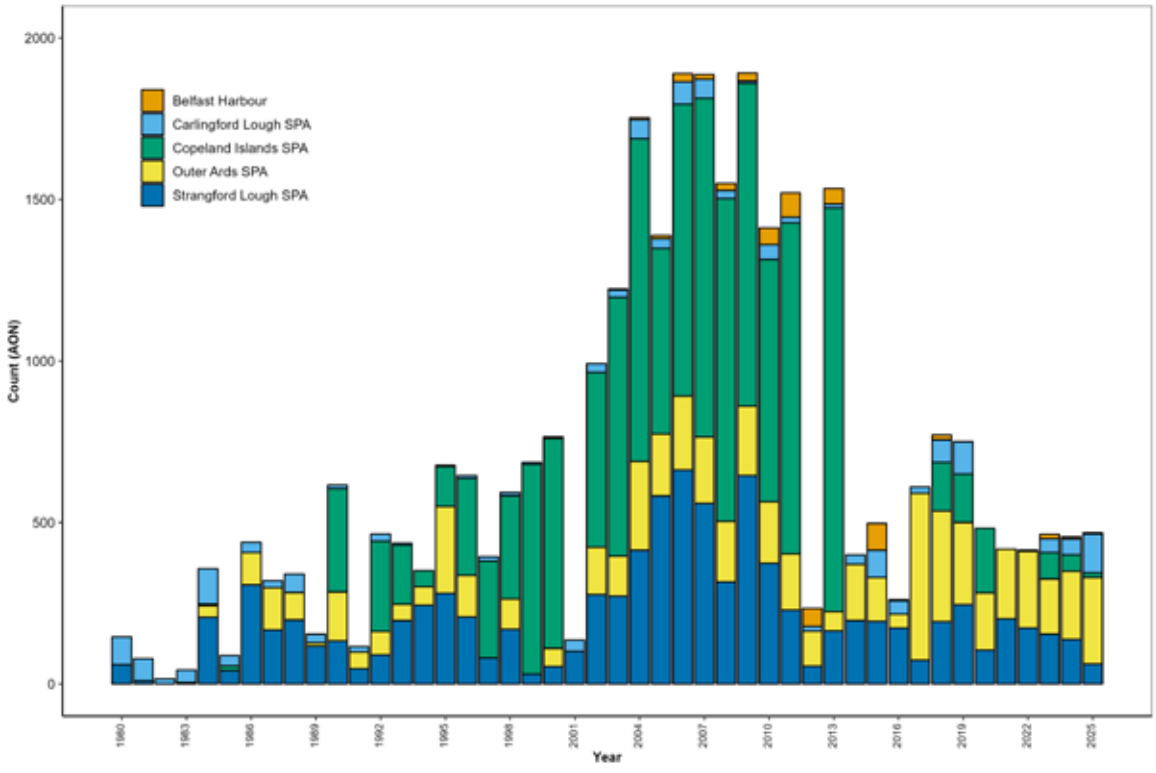
During 2025, 15 pairs were present early in the breeding season but abandoned attempts to nest (Steven Fyffe, pers comm.).

Numbers present at Strangford Lough have declined in the past decade, falling from a high of 663 AON in 2006 (Figure 27). Numbers on Strangford Lough declined further in 2025 to only 62 AON, down from 138 AON in 2024 (Table 6, Appendix).

Although numbers of Arctic Terns were between 48 and 83 AON in Belfast Lough RSPB between 2010 and 2015, they have been scarcer since, with no breeding pairs in 2020 or 2021 and only three AON in 2022. In 2023, numbers at Belfast Lough increased to 13 AON, but subsequently declined to six AON in 2024 and two AON in 2025 (Table 6, Appendix). The colony on Cockle Island, Outer Ards has been particularly variable and has decreased from 216 AON in 2021 to only 97 AON in 2025. However, elsewhere on the Outer Ards, 87 AON were counted on Bird Island and 83 AON on Green Island in 2025 (compared to 115 AON and 26 AON respectively in 2024). Both of these islands intermittently hold breeding Arctic Tern, with the peak count in the past decade being 248 AON on Green Island and 140 AON on Bird Island, both in 2017.

Sixty Arctic Tern AON were counted at Carlingford Lough in 2025, compared to 49 AON in 2024. No Arctic Tern bred on Larne Lough again in 2025, the last time breeding ocurred there was one AON in 2015.

Figure 27: Cumulative Arctic Tern counts (AON) at Belfast Harbour, Carlingford Lough SPA, the Copeland Islands SPA, Outer Ards SPA, and Strangford Lough SPA 1980–2025. Arctic Terns were not counted at Carlingford Lough in 2020 or 2021, and counts of 'Commic' terns in 2022 were also not included. The Copeland Islands consist of a group of three islands that have not been fully surveyed since 2013 and contain estimated numbers. The area filled represents the number of Arctic Tern pairs per year, and the colour represents the number in each site.



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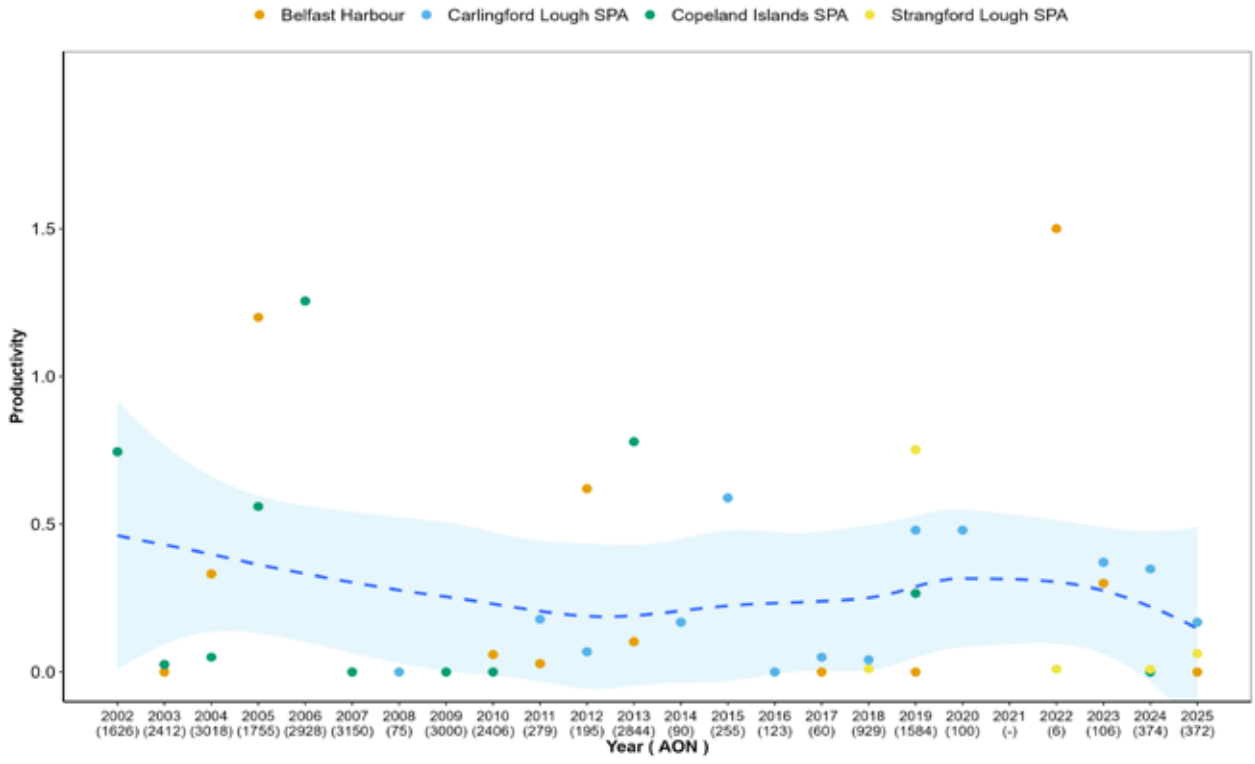
Breeding success in 2025

Eight sites have received some productivity monitoring effort since 1990, but few of these are regularly monitored. The last productivity data available for Larne Lough were collected in 1990 (zero fledged from four AON) and from Cockle Island in 1996 (50 fledged from 120 AON). In 2025, Strangford Lough, Carlingford Lough and the Belfast Lough RSPB reserve were monitored for productivity. At Belfast Lough, there was zero productivity in 2025 due to an increase in predation by Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Aoife de Bhál, pers comm.). This compares with 0.30 chicks fledged per AON in 2023 (n=13 AON). Monitoring of Arctic Tern in Strangford Lough found a near-complete breeding failure, with only approximately 0.06 chicks fledged per AON in 2025,

compared to 0.01 chicks fledged per AON in 2024. For more information, refer to the Strangford Lough seabird report on pages 92. Green Island in Carlingford Lough had a productivity of 0.17 chicks fledged per AON in 2025 (n=60 AON), down from 0.35 chicks fledged per AON in 2024.

Figure 28: Arctic Tern productivity (chicks/AON) 2002–2025 across four sites in Northern Ireland. No data were available for 2021. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Arctic Tern productivity between 2002 and 2025 include: Belfast Lough Copeland Islands, Strangford Lough, and Carlingford Lough. The total number of AON monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Guillemot

Uria aalge

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023).

Guillemot, by Allan Drewitt / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: The Guillemot is one of the most abundant seabirds in the northern hemisphere. Guillemots are extremely gregarious and colonies can contain many tens of thousands of individuals, and these very large populations occur both in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: The most recent Seabirds Count (2015–2021) census shows that the UK population of Guillemots declined by 11% to 1,265,888 individuals since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) showed a large population increase compared to the previous survey, although some of this may have been due to better coverage and survey methods (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Between the 1969–1970 and 1998–2002 censuses, the numbers of individuals recorded rose from 611,281 to 1,416,334 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Annual SMP data indicated an increase in the breeding abundance index to 23% above the 1986 baseline in 2023, although it was noted that that figure should be treated with caution as the large number of smaller colonies included in 2023 may have had a disproportionate influence on the index (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Based on SMP data, the average breeding success of Guillemots in the UK between 1986 and 2002 was approximately 0.70 chicks per pair, but subsequently declined steeply until 2007. Recent years have seen a recovery in breeding success and in 2019, UK productivity was 0.62 chicks fledged per pair (JNCC 2021). The most recent SMP productivity estimate was 0.37 chicks fledged per AON in the UK in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: In Northern Ireland the main colony is on Rathlin Island with smaller satellite colonies at The Gobbins, Muck Island and at scattered cliff faces between Ballycastle and Portrush. Between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, the numbers of Guillemots appeared to remain stable, but had more than doubled to 98,546 individuals by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) (JNCC 2021). Following a 50% decrease between 1999 and 2007, numbers of Guillemots rose by 60% to 130,445 individuals in 2011 on Rathlin Island (Allen *et al.* 2011). This made Rathlin Island the largest colony in Britain and Ireland. Seabirds Count recorded a total of 155,890 individuals in Northern Ireland, a 57% increase since Seabird 2000, and Rathlin Island remained the largest Guillemot colony in Britain and Ireland (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

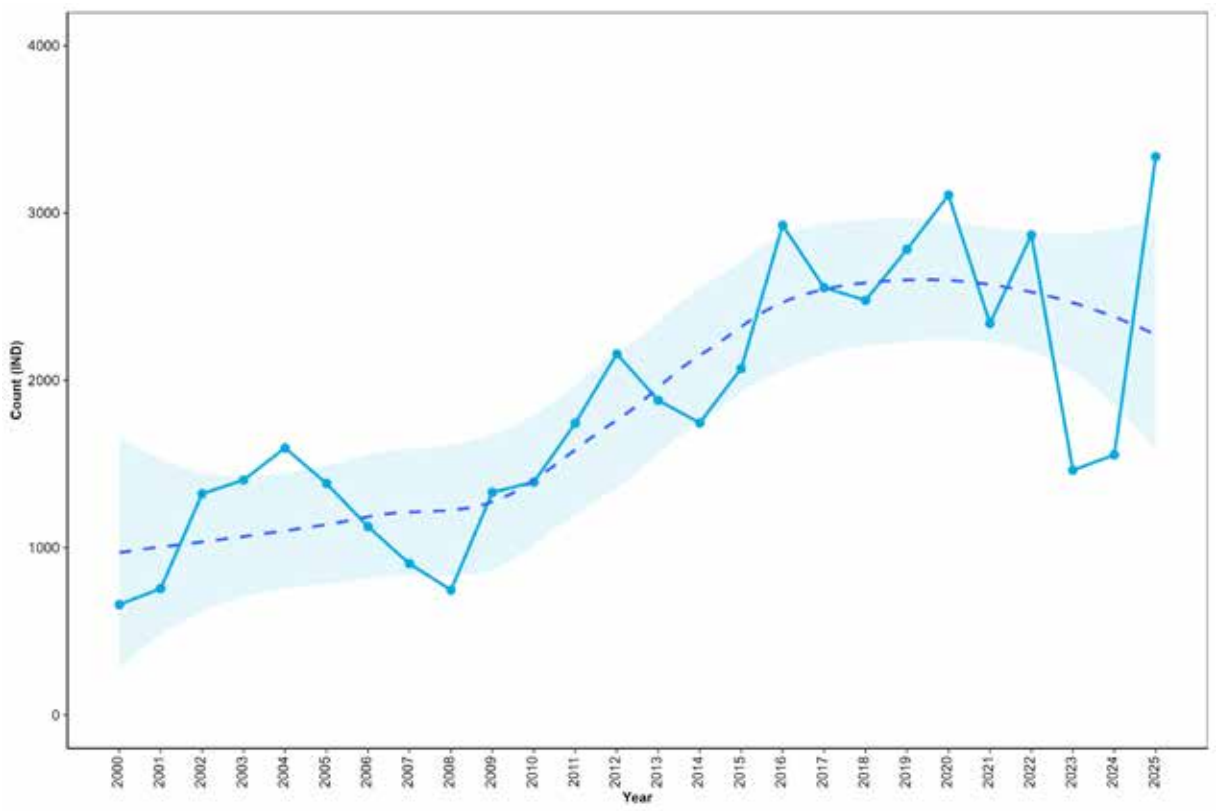
Abundance in 2025

On Rathlin Island, the RSPB carries out annual comparative counts of study plots to monitor Guillemot population levels. Six hundred and two individuals were counted in the North cliffs study plot in 2025, compared to 584 in 2024 and 630 in 2023. A full census of Rathlin Island was carried out for MarPAMM in 2021 and recorded a total of 149,510 individuals, which was an increase of 13% on the last census in 2011. A further census of Rathlin Island was undertaken by RSPB in 2023 to monitor the impact of HPAI on the colony and 110,574 individuals counted. This census also attempted to estimate 'hidden' birds and taking them into account, a total of 113,504 individuals was counted. This represents an overall decline of 19% when excluding estimates of hidden birds, and a decline of 24% when including estimates of hidden birds (Mackley *et al.* 2023). A total of 136,100 individuals was counted on Rathlin Island in 2025 (see Rathlin Island Breeding Seabird Census 2025 report on Page 78).

Along the North Antrim coast between Runkerry and Murlough, Guillemots increased by 57% to 981 individuals in 2021 compared to Seabird 2000 (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022). In 2025, 653 individuals were counted at Sheep Island and 842 individuals were counted at Carrick-a-Rede.

Numbers of Guillemots at Muck Island, which has received continuous monitoring for this species since 2000, more than doubled to a new record count of 3,337 individuals in 2025, compared to only 1,554 individuals in 2024 (Figure 29). Numbers at The Gobbins reached a new record count of 3,454 individuals in 2024, up from 3,289 individuals in 2023, although the colony was not surveyed in 2025. (Table 6, Appendix).

Figure 29: Guillemot counts (individuals) at Muck Island, 2000–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Guillemot numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

No breeding success data have been collected for Guillemots in Northern Ireland since 2019, when a sample of 29 nests was monitored on Rathlin Island near the West Light, producing 19 'jumplings' (0.66 chicks per AON; Else & Watson 2019).

Razorbill

Alca torda

Conservation status: Red-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Amber-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Razorbill, by Allan Drewitt / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: The Razorbill is an auk of the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, breeding on both sides of the Atlantic. Razorbills nest on ledges with Guillemots and Kittiwakes, but also frequently in clefts, holes and under boulders.

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Razorbill populations have shown successive increases between the national censuses. However, the UK population of 132,734 individuals recorded at the time of the first census in 1969–70 may have been underestimated because the small ledges they nest on can often be hidden from view, making them difficult to count (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). By Seabird 2000 (1998–2002), the estimated population size was 187,052 individuals, a 21% increase on the previous 1985–1988 census. The most recent Seabird Count (2015–2021) census confirms that the UK Razorbill population is still increasing and a total of 225,015 individuals was counted (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK breeding SMP abundance index was 121% above the 1986 baseline in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Based on SMP data, UK productivity was stable from 1986 to 2001 but declined to 0.38 chick/pair in 2008. Productivity had been increasing up to an average of 0.63 chicks fledged per pair in 2019, however the most recent SMP productivity estimate was 0.51 chicks fledged per pair for the UK in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, the numbers of Razorbills increased by 58%, and had more than doubled to 24,084 individuals by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Seabirds Count (2015–2021) found that the population was stable at 24,730 individuals since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). In Northern Ireland the main colony is on Rathlin Island with smaller satellite colonies at The Gobbins, Muck Island and at scattered cliff faces between Ballycastle and Portrush. The 2011 survey of Rathlin Island recorded 22,975 individuals (Allen *et al.* 2011), making it the second largest colony of Razorbills in the UK at the time (JNCC 2021). During Seabirds Count, Rathlin Island was the third largest Razorbill colony in the UK (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Razorbills have been upgraded from Amber-listed to Red-listed in the latest BoCCI due to their increased European status (Gilbert *et al.* 2021).

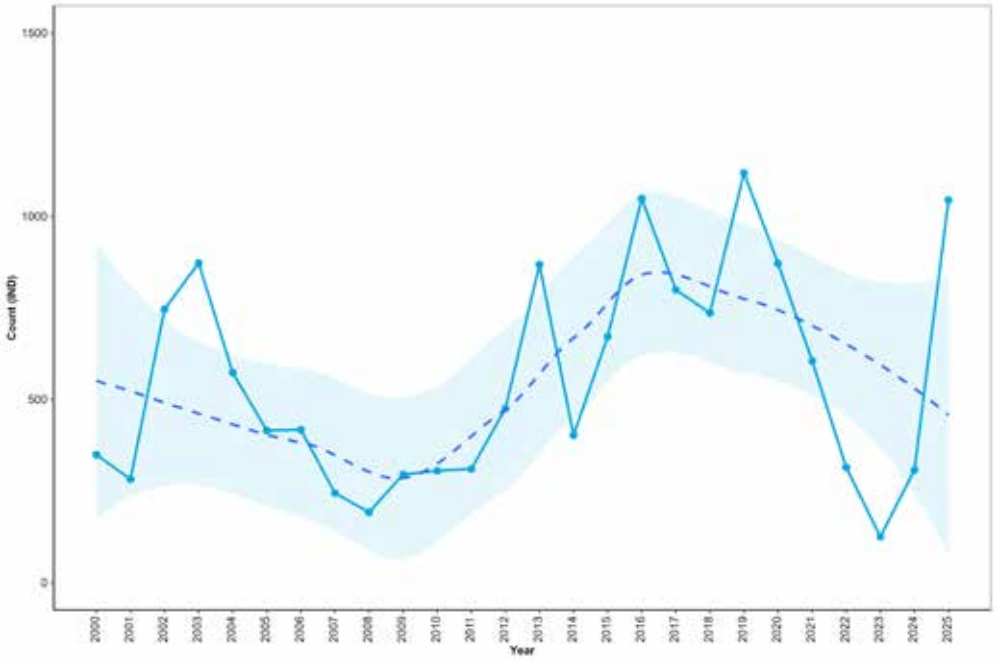
The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Abundance in 2025

In 2025, 122 individual Razorbills were recorded in the Rathlin Island RSPB reserve's north cliffs study plot, compared to 149 in 2024 and 136 in 2023. A full census of Rathlin Island and of the North Antrim coastline between Runkerry and Murlough occurred as part of the MarPAMM project in 2021 (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022). These surveys found that Razorbills increased slightly (by 7%) on Rathlin Island to 22,421 individuals since Seabird 2000, but in contrast, on the North Antrim coast stretch they declined by 70% to 582 individuals. A total of 28,158 individuals was counted on Rathlin Island in 2025 (see page78 for Rathlin Island breeding seabird census report), which is a 25% increase compared to 2021. Elsewhere along the north coast in 2025, 1,465 individuals were counted at Sheep Island, 135 individuals at Carrick-a-Rede and 18 individuals at Larrybane Bay.

It should be noted that numbers of Razorbills in attendance at colonies can be subject to large fluctuations, as in some years, many birds may not breed. This is particularly noticeable at the Isle of Muck (Figure 30) and The Gobbins. The number of Razorbills was at the highest level ever recorded on Muck Island in 2019 at 1,118 individuals. Since then it has fallen, with only 125 individuals recorded in 2023, the lowest count on record since annual monitoring commenced in 2000. However, numbers have subsequently recovered to 307 individuals in 2024 and 1,044 individuals in 2025. Numbers at the neighbouring colony at The Gobbins decreased by 23% between 2018 and 2019, to 679 individuals. In 2023 there were only 272 individuals, but numbers recovered to 633 individuals by 2024, although the colony was not surveyed in 2025 (Table 6, Appendix).

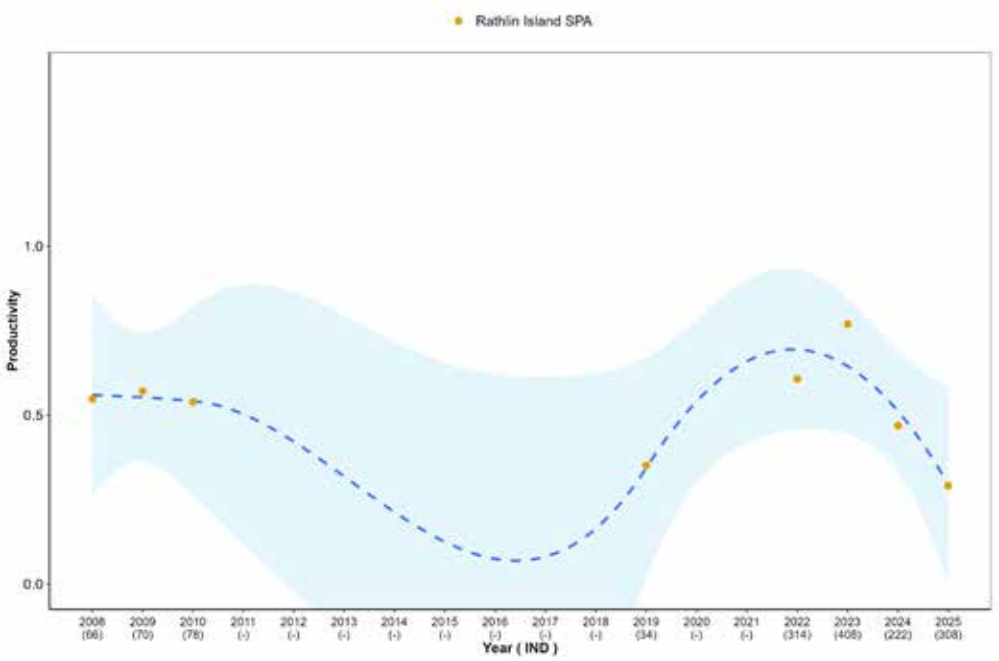
Figure 30: Razorbill counts (individuals) at Muck Island 2000–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Razorbill numbers over time at Muck Island. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

The RSPB LIFE Raft project recorded productivity of only 0.29 chicks per AOS in 2025 (n=154 AOS), which is lower than the previous three years (0.61 in 2022, 0.77 in 2023 and 0.47 in 2024; Figure 31). The cause of this is believed to be due to a lack of food at a critical point in the breeding season. One sub-site also suffered from heavy corvid predation (likely to be Hooded Crow) during the incubation stage (Else *et al.* 2025). In 2019 a sample of 17 AOS (not a formal SMP plot) were monitored on Rathlin Island near the West Light, producing six successful fledglings (0.35 chicks per AOS) (Else & Watson, 2019).

Figure 31: Productivity (chicks/AOS) for Razorbill 2008–2025 across the Rathlin Island SPA. Data were only available for 2008 to 2010, 2019, 2022 to 2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. The total number of AOS monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Black Guillemot

Cepphus grylle

Conservation status: Amber-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Green–listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), Least Concern – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Black Guillemot, by Stephen Foster

Overview

Synopsis: The striking Black Guillemot (or 'Tystie') is a circumpolar auk which in the UK has historically been a predominantly Scottish species. They can be found around rocky shores and nest in natural or artificial crevices, making records of breeding pairs difficult. When Black Guillemots carry fish in their bills the way the fish point suggest that some individuals are right-handed, whilst some are left-handed (Ewins 1988).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: There was insufficient coverage in the 1969–1970 census to create a robust population estimate for Black Guillemot. Numbers appeared to remain stable between the 1985–1988 census (37,745 individuals) and Seabird 2000 (38,714 individuals) (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The Seabirds Count (2015–2021) census shows that the UK population of Black Guillemot declined by 11% since Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) to 35,193 individuals (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The SMP abundance index for Black Guillemot shows the UK population at 21% below the 1986 baseline in 2023 (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Based on SMP data, there was no statistically significant trend in Black Guillemot productivity at study sites (restricted to Orkney and Co. Down), which was on average 1.05 chicks per pair between 1986 and 2018 (JNCC 2021). An insufficient number of Black Guillemot colonies are monitored frequently enough to allow for calculation of more recent SMP productivity values for the UK or any region (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Between the censuses in 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 Black Guillemots expanded their range in the Irish Sea, adopting the use of artificial structures such as harbour walls and jetties as nest sites. This is likely to have contributed to the 120% increase in Black Guillemots between the 1985–1988 census and Seabird 2000, to 1,174 individuals (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). Seabirds Count found that the Northern Ireland population was stable at 1,166 individuals (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

The breeding success of Black Guillemots in Northern Ireland is mostly monitored through a study colony in Bangor, Co. Down (Greenwood 2010, Leonard & Wolsey 2014). On average, between 1986 and 2018, productivity was 0.98 chicks per nest (JNCC 2021).

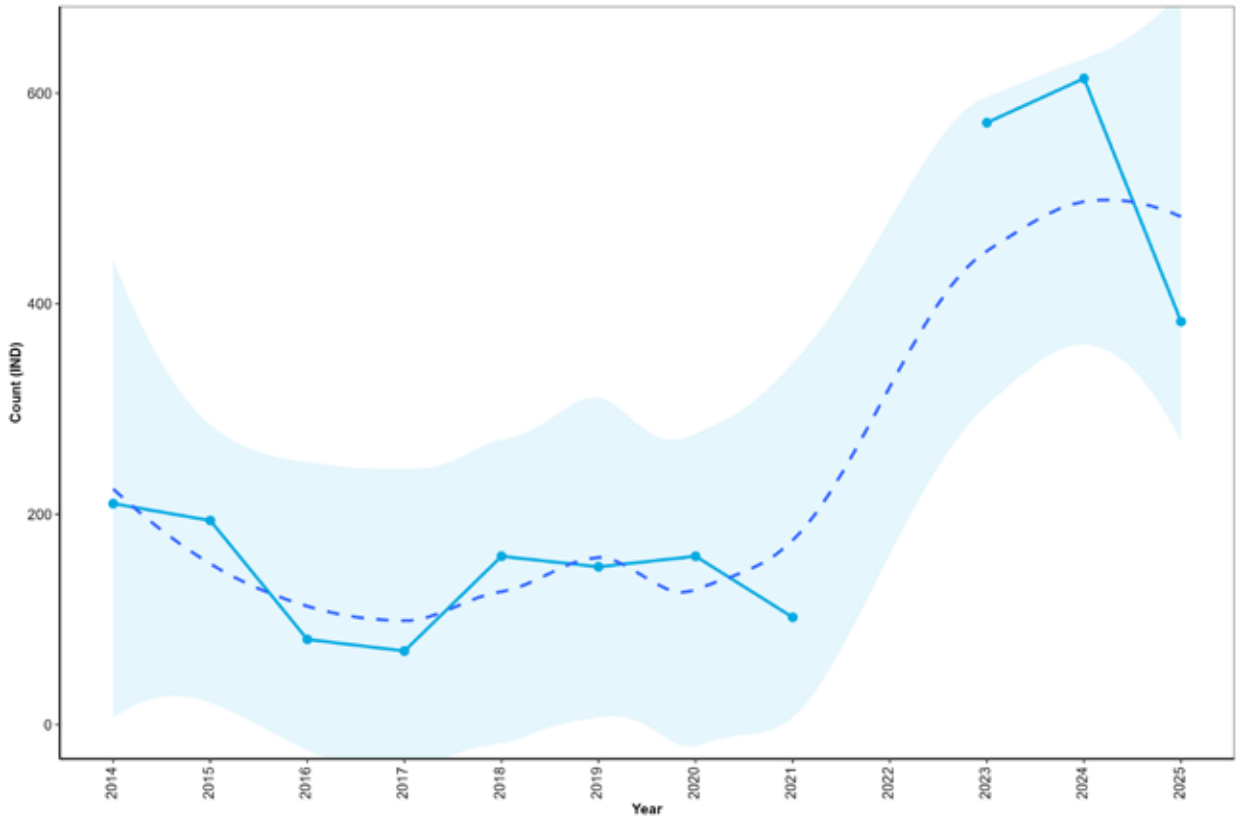
Abundance in 2025

An all-Ireland Black Guillemot survey is taking place during 2025 and 2026, coordinated by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in the Republic of Ireland and by BTO in Northern Ireland. BTO is looking for volunteers to take on vacant sections of the coastline in Northern Ireland to ensure the survey is as comprehensive as possible. For further details of vacant sites, please visit the SMP section on the BTO website: **www.bto.org/get-involved/volunteer/projects/seabird-monitoring-programme**

Monitoring effort for Black Guillemots was once again excellent in 2025 (Table 6, Appendix), with 48 sub-sites surveyed predominantly by volunteers. Some 1,323 Black Guillemots were counted around the coast in 2025, with the greatest concentrations once again found at Carrickfergus to Whitehead (197 individuals), Rathlin Island (383 individuals) and Larne Lough (114 individuals). The 2025 count for Rathlin Island was another new record count (RSPB LIFE Raft project; Figure 32), although this may be due to increased coverage (Ric Else, pers comm.). Numbers at Carrickfergus to Whitehead increased by 10% compared to 2024, whilst Larne Lough showed no change in numbers since 2024 (Table 6, Appendix).

A full survey of Belfast Harbour found 115 individuals in 2023, the second highest count since 2015. Notably, a survey of The Skerries in 2021 observed that there were 54 individuals late in the season (June). While this is too late to get a good indication of the true number of breeders, it is a colony that has not been counted for the SMP in the past. This colony requires a boat to survey, and therefore has not been monitored again since. Increases and decreases around the Northern Irish coastline do not appear to have a spatial pattern and therefore may be due to stochastic effects; overall total numbers counted between 2021 and 2025 appear to be fairly stable.

Figure 32: Black Guillemot counts (individuals) at Rathlin Island 2014–2025. No counts were made in 2022. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Black Guillemot numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.

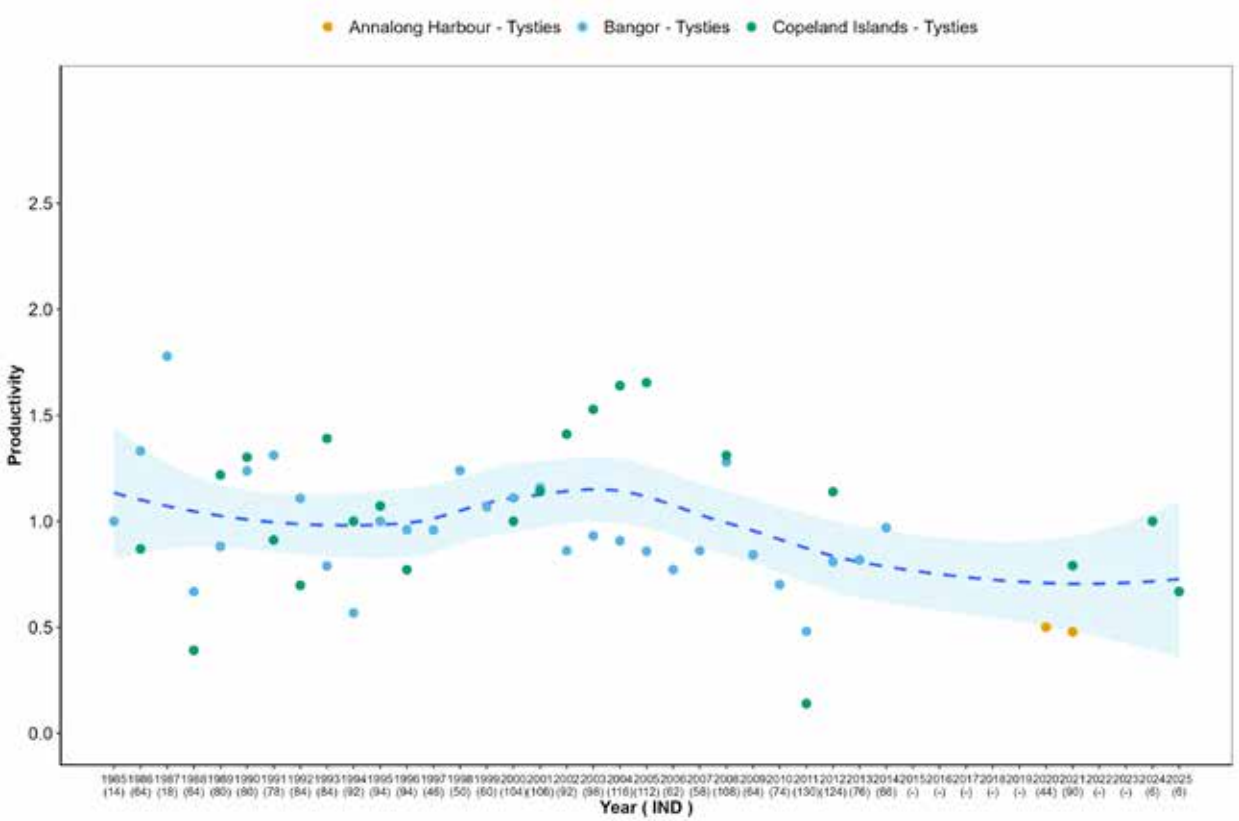


Breeding success in 2025

On Lighthouse Island, two chicks fledged from three breeding pairs in 2025 (Figure 33), compared to three chicks fledged from three breeding pairs in 2024 (Steven Fyffe, Copeland Bird Observatory). On Lighthouse Island in 2021, 24 AOS were followed to chick stage out of the total of 27 AOS. Although the ultimate fate of all of the chicks could not be monitored, 19 chicks were presumed to have fledged, giving an estimated productivity of 0.79 chicks per nest (Daniel Johnston/Katherine Booth Jones, BTO, and the Copeland Bird Observatory).

Only Annalong was monitored for breeding success in 2022, recording 10 chicks from 21 AOS (0.48 chicks per breeding pair, Marc Vinas and Jessica Koquert). The breeding success of this colony has been consistent between the years it has been monitored (2020, 0.50 chicks per breeding pair; 2021, 0.48 chicks per breeding pair), even though fewer nesting crevices were available to the colony in 2022 due to ongoing harbour works. It is likely that sensitive installation of nest boxes such as those deployed in Bangor Marina would benefit the Annalong colony and provide alternative nesting areas to crevices blocked during the development of the harbour.

Figure 33: Productivity (chicks/AOS) for Black Guillemot 1985–2025 at three sites across Northern Ireland. No data were available for 2015 to 2019, 2022, or 2023. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in productivity over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend. Sites measured for Black Guillemot productivity between 1985 and 2025 include: Annalong Harbour, the Copeland Islands, and Bangor Marina. The total number of AOS monitored per year is included in brackets under the year, with unknown numbers denoted by a hyphen (-).



Puffin

Fratercula arctica

Conservation status: Red-listed in the BoCCI4 (2020–2026), Red-listed in the BoCC5 Seabird Addendum (2024), EC Birds Directive – migratory species, Endangered – IUCN Red List Europe (IUCN 2023), Northern Ireland Priority Species (DAERA 2023).

Puffin, by Sam Langlois / BTO

Overview

Synopsis: The Puffin is arguably the most iconic and well-loved of all North Atlantic seabirds. They can be a secretive bird on land, nesting in burrows, and until recently relatively little was known about their pelagic lifestyle. Their colourful beaks have been recorded carrying up to 83 small fish in one go (Robinson 2005).

UK population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Around 8% of the global population of Puffins breeds in Britain and Ireland, where it is the second most abundant breeding seabird (Burnell *et al.* 2023). The UK population of Puffin increased by 13% between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, and by a further 19% to 580,714 AOB by Seabird 2000 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The most recent Seabirds Count census shows that the UK population has declined by 14% to 474,679 individuals since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Too few Puffin colonies are monitored in Britain and Ireland to enable the production of valid annual SMP breeding abundance trends for any region, due to the logistical and financial challenges involved in monitoring this burrow-nesting species (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Productivity values for the UK have fluctuated between years over the SMP recording period. SMP productivity estimates declined from the mid 1990s to a low in 2007, following which they increased overall until 2021. More recently, in 2023, the productivity estimate for the UK was 0.48 chicks per pair (Harris *et al.* 2024).

Northern Ireland population size, abundance and breeding success trends: Although there was an apparent increase of 86% in Puffin AOB between the 1969–1970 and 1985–1988 censuses, they declined by 40% to 1,610 AOB by Seabird 2000 (1998–2002) (Mitchell *et al.* 2004). The population was estimated to be only 574 AOB during Seabirds Count (2015–2021), which represents a 64% decline since Seabird 2000 (Burnell *et al.* 2023). Due to their increased European IUCN Red List status, Puffins have been upgraded from Amber-listed to Red-listed in the latest BoCCI report (Gilbert *et al.* 2021). The main colony in Northern Ireland is on Rathlin Island and it holds approximately 98% of the Northern Irish population. Small numbers also breed at The Gobbins and some are occasionally seen at Muck Island, with breeding confirmed in 2025. A conservation project on the Copeland Islands, using decoys and sound lures to attract birds, has resulted in a new colony there with breeding confirmed in 2015 (Wolsey & Smyth 2017). This was a tremendous achievement and hopefully the start of a viable colony, proof that the use of sound lures and decoys can work for this species without the need for translocations.

The collection of productivity data in Northern Ireland has been limited; therefore SMP productivity estimates cannot be modelled (Harris *et al.* 2024).

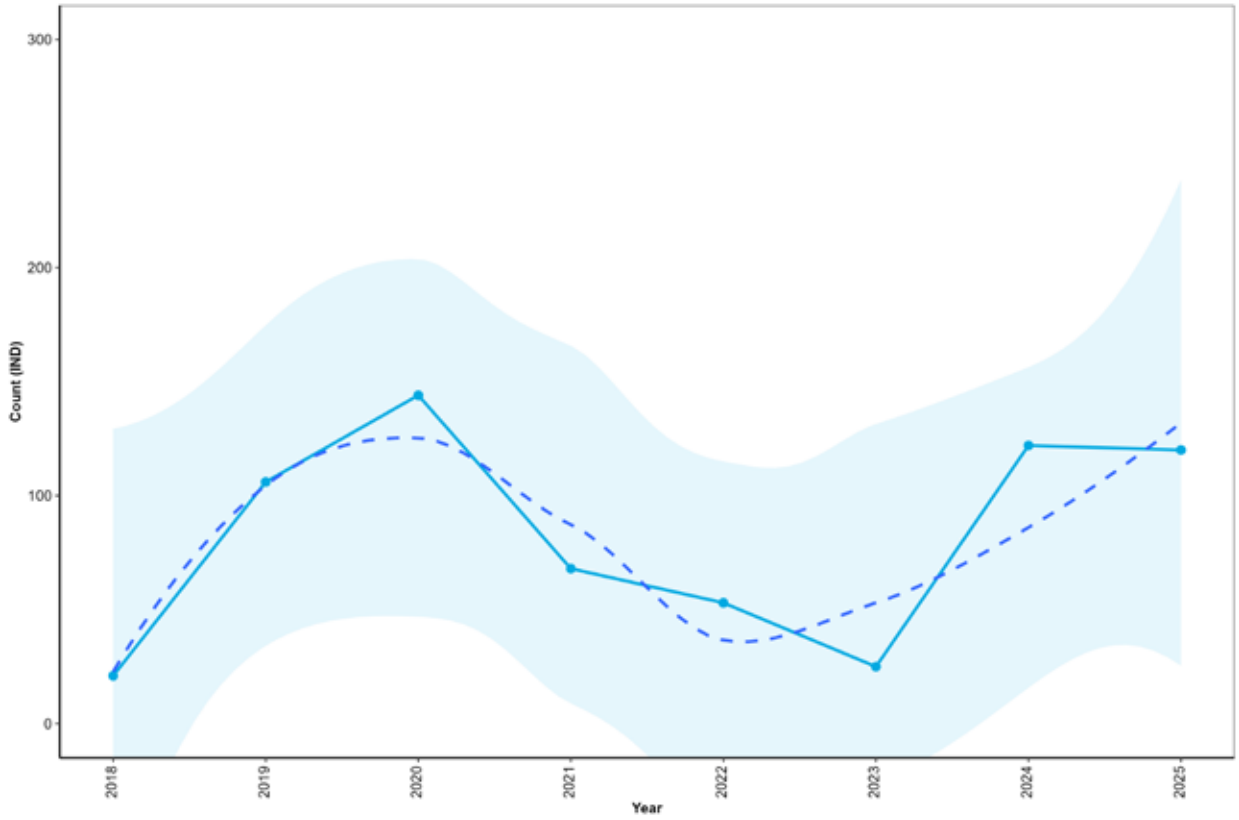
Abundance in 2025

The full census of Rathlin Island for MarPAMM in 2021 revealed a count of 407 individuals, which represented a decline of 74% since Seabird 2000. However, it must be noted that all censuses of Puffin on Rathlin Island are made later in the season than recommended (Walsh *et al.* 1995) due to the logistical difficulty of surveys, and therefore may not closely indicate the true size of the breeding population (Booth Jones *et al.* 2022). The 2025 Puffin population estimate on Rathlin Island was 1,719 individuals during mid June, compared to the previous two years when 1,172 and 1,171 individuals were counted respectively (Else *et al.* 2025), and a significant improvement on the 2021 count. The MarPAMM surveys also recorded two individuals at Sheep Island in 2021, although none were recorded there in 2025.

Puffins continued to be present in encouraging numbers at Lighthouse Island, Copeland Islands, during 2025, with a peak of 120 individuals in June, compared to 127 individuals recorded in June 2024 (Figure 34, also see Table 6, Appendix). In 2022, the area of potential AOB, while not currently monitored, appeared to have expanded outside the traditionally used area on the island (Katherine Booth Jones, Copeland Bird Observatory, pers. obs.).

In 2019, a peak count of 54 individuals was recorded at The Gobbins, in the same range as counts during 2013–2018 (Table 6, Appendix). More recently, 45 individuals were counted in 2023 and 61 individuals in 2024, the latter count being the highest count there since 2008. At the nearby Isle of Muck, two AOB were recorded in early June 2025, the first confirmed record of nesting on the island for over 25 years (Andy Crory, pers. comm.). See article on page 89 and BBC Newsline article: www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgjded7v0neo.

Figure 34: Puffin counts (individuals) at Copeland Island 2018–2025. The dashed line represents the Locally Weighted Least Squares Regression trend in Puffin numbers over time. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval around the trend.



Breeding success in 2025

In 2025, Puffin nests were monitored by the RSPB LIFE Raft project on Rathlin Island. Breeding success was 0.43 chicks fledged per AOB across 123 AOB, similar to the 0.46 chicks fledged per AOB across 85 AOB in 2024 (Else *et al.* 2025).

The Puffin colony on Lighthouse Island is not yet monitored for breeding success, but Puffins continue to be observed bringing prey back to the colony, confirming breeding (Copeland Bird Observatory, pers. comm.).

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Manx Shearwaters nesting on Rathlin Island

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Manx Shearwater, by David Tipling / birdphoto.co.uk

Small numbers of Manx Shearwaters have been suspected to be breeding on Rathlin Island for several years, but in 2025 nocturnal surveys using night-vision technology finally provided conclusive evidence of successful nesting, raising hopes for the recovery of this species on the island.

Manx Shearwaters once nested on Rathlin Island in considerable numbers. Accounts from the 19th and early 20th century indicate that they were common enough to be harvested (Saunders 1867, Watson 2011), and for their extraordinary gurgling shrieks to be a familiar nocturnal sound to the islanders (Watson 2011). Observations from as recent as the 1970s and 1980s show that they must still have been numerous in parts of the island at that time (NIBRC 1987, Watson 1980). Because they nest in underground burrows and are only active around their colonies at night, determining the size of shearwater populations is notoriously difficult (Walsh *et al.* 1995), and few estimates for the number of birds that bred on Rathlin Island exist. However, the population appears to have declined rapidly in the late 20th century, and visits to their former haunts in the 1990s and 2000s found little sign that any remained (Mitchell 2004, Watson 2011).

The cause of the decline and possible disappearance of nesting Manx Shearwaters is not known for certain, but the species is highly vulnerable to predation by rats (Brooke 1990, Jones 2008) and it has been assumed that the presence of Brown Rats on Rathlin Island at least played a part in the decline (Watson 2011). The release of Ferrets *Mustelo furo* on the island in the 1980s (Bodey *et al.* 2010) was likely another contributing factor. These mustelids are well-adapted to accessing prey in underground burrows, and the noticeable loss of shearwater numbers occurred around the same time as the arrival of the Ferrets.

However, there continued to be sporadic hints that a few Manx Shearwaters might still breed on the island. Their unmistakable and eerie cackling calls were occasionally heard after dark (Else & Watson 2020, 2024), and a dead bird was found in a field in June 2019, having perhaps collided with power lines at night (Else & Watson 2020). Rathlin Island has many inaccessible cliff ledges and other isolated patches of potential habitat, and with no specific efforts being made to visit such areas late at night to listen for shearwaters, it remained a real possibility that small numbers of these birds might still be clinging on unnoticed in some remote corner.

The LIFE Raft project has been working to eradicate both Brown Rats and Ferrets from Rathlin Island to benefit vulnerable seabird species on the island, and recovery of the island's Manx Shearwater population is one of the hoped-for long-term outcomes of the project. Since 2022, I have been conducting seabird monitoring work for LIFE Raft, and one of our aims throughout this time has been to confirm the status of Manx Shearwaters on Rathlin, with a view to measuring if and how this changes once Brown Rats and Ferrets are gone.

Ever since this monitoring work began, we have seen very promising signs of shearwater presence. During initial surveys along the island's high north cliffs on suitably dark nights, birds were heard calling in flight in several locations. Use of thermal imaging night-vision binoculars proved a game-changer for shearwater searching, and we were able to actually see small numbers of them flying around the cliffs. Excitingly, we also saw shearwaters landing in potential nesting habitat in two separate areas, and some even appeared to enter burrows. However, with these areas located on vegetated ledges part way down high sea cliffs, we could only watch the comings and goings of their slightly fuzzy white thermal heat signatures from a distance, and whether the birds were actively nesting, or just prospecting potential nest sites, was difficult to say with certainty. Had these been in more accessible areas it would have been possible to just look or feel inside burrows to see what was going on within.

Manx Shearwater habitat on Rathlin's north cliffs. Birds were seen entering burrows on vegetated ledges part way up this sheer rock face. Photo: Ric Else / LIFE Raft.

The project to eradicate Ferrets from Rathlin Island was carried out in the 2023/2024 winter, followed by Brown Rat eradication work in 2024/2025. Although a second winter of baiting has just been undertaken to complete the rat part of the project, 2025 was presumably the first season in a long time that Rathlin Island's burrow-dwelling seabirds would have had minimal risk of impact from such predators.

Over the summer of 2025, we observed the highest level of shearwater activity we had seen yet. During a run of ideal calm and dark nights in late July, the suspected nesting areas were impressively lively. Between 30 and 50 shearwaters were estimated at one of the locations, including numerous birds going in and out of burrows. They were magnificently noisy. Sitting on the cliff in pitch darkness amid the cacophony of these birds swooping and whirling around, their heat signatures glowing bright white against the cold greys of the rocks and water, one couldn't help imagining what it would have been like to do this back when they must have numbered in the many hundreds.

Although at this point in the summer it is likely that some of the birds were immature individuals prospecting for potential future nest sites (Brooke 1990), there could be little doubt that at least some of them were actively nesting. But how could we find out if they were managing to raise their young successfully? We know that when Manx Shearwater chicks approach fledging age (around 70 days old), they are deserted by their parents, which leave and begin their migration back to the South Atlantic. This leaves the youngsters unfed for the remaining time before they fledge and head out to sea themselves. In the final couple of weeks or so before fledging, the chicks will emerge from their burrows at night to exercise their wings in preparation for departure (Brooke 1990). We thought that if we could manage to see this characteristic behaviour, we would have confirmation of successful nesting.

Luckily, in early September there was another run of good nights – an ideal chance to go and see what was happening at the shearwater sites. Soon after dark, a few birds were calling, flying around and entering burrows, just as we had seen on previous visits. Then, appearing on a distant ledge, a rapidly flickering white shape. Zooming in with the thermal imaging binoculars confirmed what it was – a Manx Shearwater vigorously beating its wings. This could only be a fully grown chick getting ready to fledge, exactly what we had hoped for! A short time later three more furiously flapping forms had appeared on the same ledge. And the next night two more were seen at another location. So assuming these big chicks did go on to fledge from the cliffs, we know a minimum of six Manx Shearwater nests were successful this season, and presumably there were more that we didn't see. While it is likely

Frames taken from thermal imaging footage of Manx Shearwaters on Rathlin in 2025. The first and third images show birds going in and out of presumed nesting burrows. Photos: Ric Else / LIFE Raft.

that the species had been at least trying to nest in these remote spots all along, thanks to night-vision technology and strategic timing of late-night surveys, we had finally been able to confirm it. Even better, we could see that the birds were managing to raise chicks successfully.

These observations are hugely promising for the future of Manx Shearwaters on Rathlin. In the years following eradication of rats from some other UK islands such as Lundy Island, Ramsey Island, and St Agnes and Gugh, the local shearwater populations have bounced back rapidly (Bell *et al.* 2019, Booker & Price 2010, 2024, Heaney *et al.* 2024). Now that we know a small breeding population is already present on Rathlin, the prospects are excellent for them to increase and spread once the island is rat free, and it will be exciting to monitor the fortunes of this fascinating species here in the years ahead.

Acknowledgements

Several other observers, particularly Marta Rabanales Scott, Hazel Watson and James Crymble, have spent numerous long nights watching and listening for Manx Shearwaters on Rathlin Island's clifftops over the last few years, and it is thanks to the efforts of all involved that we have been able to pinpoint and prove the species nesting here. Thanks also to Hazel Watson for helpful input into the writing of this article.

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Rathlin Island Breeding Seabird Census 2025

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[1]Fieldworkers employed by BTO, [2]RSPB LIFE Raft Project, [3]RSPB Rathlin staff and [4]BTO NI

Kittiwake, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

Introduction

Rathlin Island SPA is designated for its internationally important breeding populations of Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwake (EHS 1999). It also qualifies due to its breeding seabird assemblage and nationally important populations of Fulmar, Shag, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Black Guillemot and Puffin, together with a small breeding population of Manx Shearwaters (EHS 1999). Rathlin has the largest Guillemot colony, third-largest Razorbill colony and fourth-largest Kittiwake colony in Britain and Ireland.

The 2025 census was the seventh systematic survey of breeding seabirds on Rathlin Island since 1985 (with intervening counts undertaken in years 1999, 2007, 2011, 2021 and 2023) and the counts have followed the same demarcated sections since 1999. Species counted are as follows: Fulmar, Shag, Kittiwake, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin, although the 2023 count was limited to Kittiwake, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull and Guillemot (Mackley *et al.* 2023). The following breeding seabird species are not included in the full census: Manx Shearwater (colonies are inaccessible so no accurate count of breeding birds or occupied burrows is possible, so only presence/absence is recorded); Great Skua (NI's only breeding site and counted separately by RSPB reserve staff); and Black Guillemot (counted by RSPB during first three weeks of April as per SMP methodology).

The census was organised by BTO and was a project managed by Andrew Upton, with funding support through the DAERA Environment Fund. The survey team comprised Kerry Mackie and Hazel Watson who were employed as fieldworkers by BTO; and Liam McFaul of the RSPB, who skippered the boat and assisted with counts. Ric Else and Marta Rabanales Scott surveyed the gull species (except Kittiwake), Shag (at Rue West) and Puffin (additional counts in evenings) as part of their work on the LIFE Raft project (Else *et al.* 2025). New technology was again used to supplement field-based observations, as was the case with the 2023 census. Ric Else and Marta Rabanales Scott operated the aerial drone, and Hazel Watson undertook photography and follow-up analysis, for counting Guillemots.

The survey team possessed considerable previous experience of monitoring breeding seabirds, plus both Kerry Mackie and Liam McFaul were involved with the previous Rathlin census in 2021 and Hazel Watson with the 2023 census. Another benefit was that most of the survey team (Liam McFaul, Ric Else and Hazel Watson) all reside on Rathlin and are very familiar with the Island.

Methodology

Seabird counts followed standard methodology (Walsh *et al.* 1995) and were undertaken either from boat or from cliff tops as recommended/refined in the *2021 Rathlin Island Seabird Count Manual* (Leonard *et al.* 2021) and within the demarcated sections from the 1999 survey and sub-sections first introduced in 2011. The main counts of cliff-nesting seabirds were undertaken from 2–6 June and 9–11 June 2025, while many of the counts of other breeding seabirds such as the gulls (excluding Kittiwake) were undertaken outside this period, although these counts were still within the recommended survey window.

Field counts of some areas of extensive and densely packed Guillemots were facilitated using photography and counting dots on photos, while aerial drone footage was secured across a number of problematic sections to help

verify hidden seabirds and explore its utility as a future counting technique at Rathlin. The map (Figure 1) shows the main count sections on Rathlin. A summary of findings for individual species during the 2025 census are illustrated below in the form of bar charts (Figures 2–12a) and overall census total counts for 1999–2025 for comparison (Table 1).

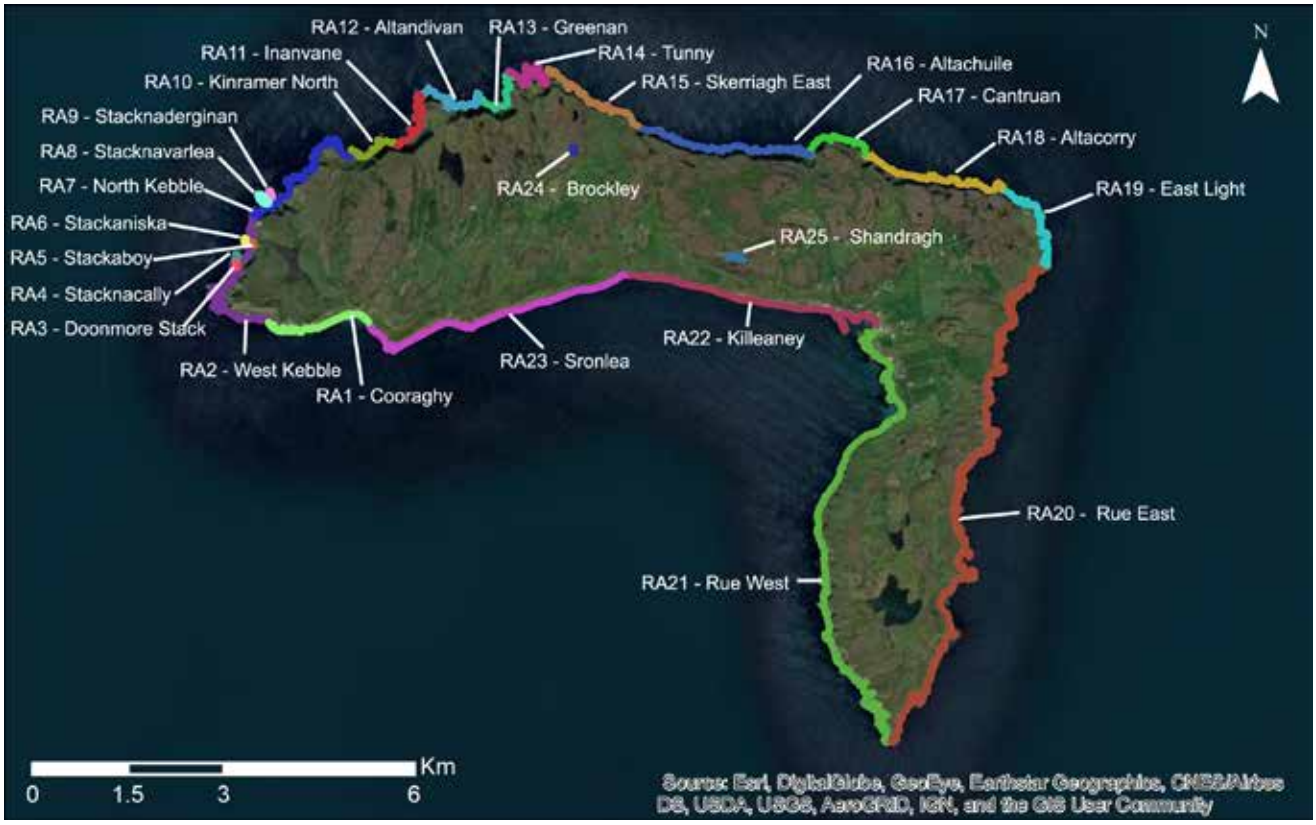

Figure 1: Map of main count sections on Rathlin Island.

Species accounts

Fulmar

The number of AOS declined by 16.7% from 2021 to only 927 AOS (Table 1) only showing an increase in two sectors; Kinramer and Skerriagh East (Figure 2).

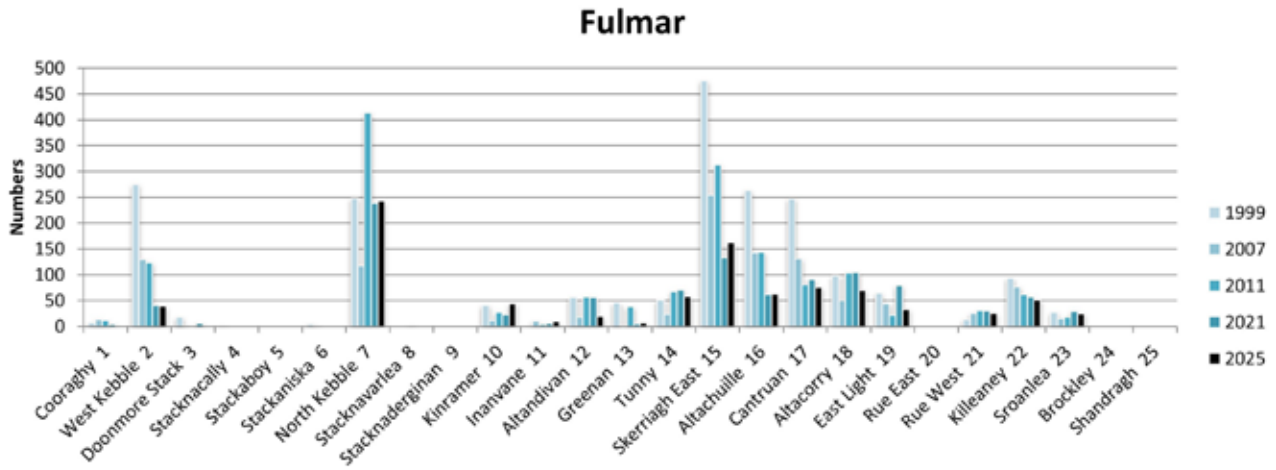

Figure 2: Fulmar AOS by section.

Shag

Shags appear to have increased compared to the count in 2021, with a minimum of 84 AON counted during the census in 2025. However, the 2025 count is an underestimate due to an unknown number of pairs breeding deep in

caves on the island, which were inaccessible during the boat surveys. Additional pairs were also located subsequently by the LIFE Raft project staff at West Kebble (one AON), North Kebble (two AON) and Cantruan (two AON) and a further five nests were estimated elsewhere in sea caves (Hazel Watson, pers comm.). Therefore, the total population was 89–94 AON. The increased numbers of nests recorded at Rue West (Figure 3) is mostly due to more intensive levels of survey effort by the RSPB LIFE Raft project team, although numbers vary from year to year.

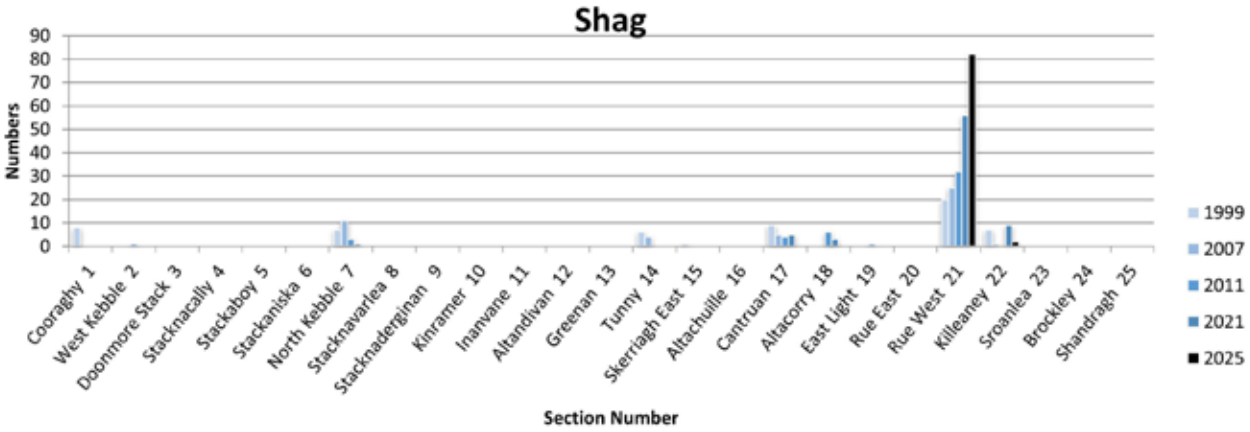

Figure 3: Shag AOS by section.

Kittiwake

Kittiwake numbers decreased by 23.3 % since the count in 2021 (Table 1) with declines across most sectors (Figure 4). RSPB also carried out a follow up census in 2023 to monitor the impact of HPAI on the colony and found that numbers had declined by 31% since 2021, with 9,629 AON counted (Mackley *et al.* 2023). There has been a slight increase in numbers since, with 10,504 AON counted in 2025.

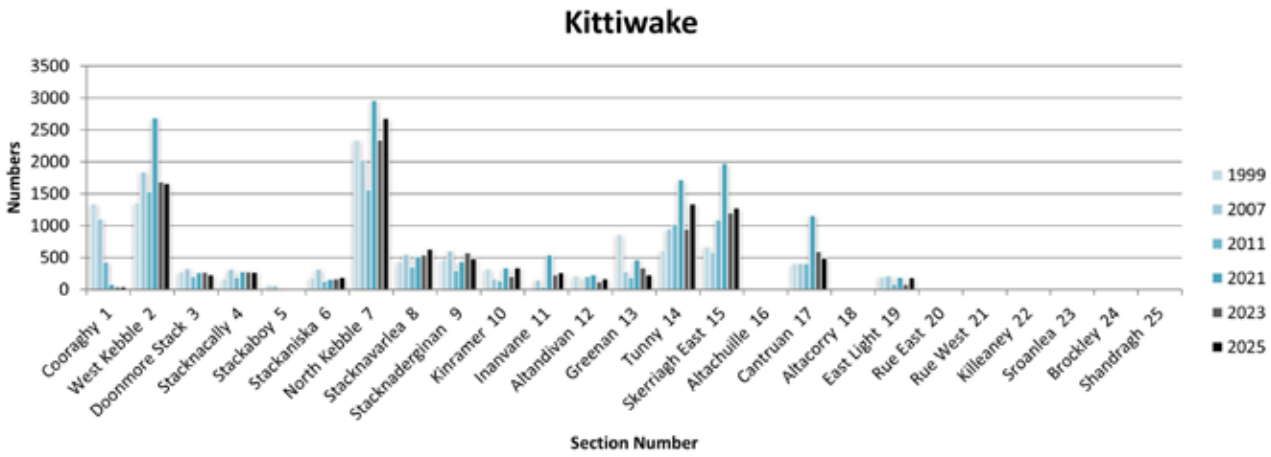

Figure 4: Kittiwake AOS by section.

Other Gulls

Black-headed Gulls have seen a recent shift in distribution of birds with what appears to be a new colony centred on a lake inland from the East Light since at least 2022 but otherwise breeding numbers remain low at 43 AON in 2025 compared to historical levels of 383 AON in 1999 (Figure 5).

Counts of Common Gulls have increased two-fold from the 2021 census from 69 to 161 in 2025, with the main colony still largely in Rue East (Figure 6). However, it is likely that the 2021 count was an underestimate and the recent increase in numbers is probably associated with increased monitoring effort associated with the LIFE Raft project. A total of 161 nests was also counted in 2023 (Else & Watson 2024).

Breeding Herring Gulls have shown a three-fold overall increase from 83 nests in 2021 to 254 nests in 2025 (Table 1) and across all previously occupied sectors (Figure 7). Counts by the RSPB LIFE Raft team in 2023 (174 nests) and 2024 (205 nests) confirm that numbers have been increasing in recent years. Lesser Black-backed Gulls have also increased from 519 nests in 2021 to 710 in 2025, although counts in the between years show that numbers have declined over the short-term with RSPB LIFE Raft counts of 825 nests in 2023 and 726 nests in 2024.

Both Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls have expanded into Altandivan since 2022. There were similar numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gull nests at Inanvane in 2025, while numbers have expanded in other sectors, which suggests density dependency (Figure 8).

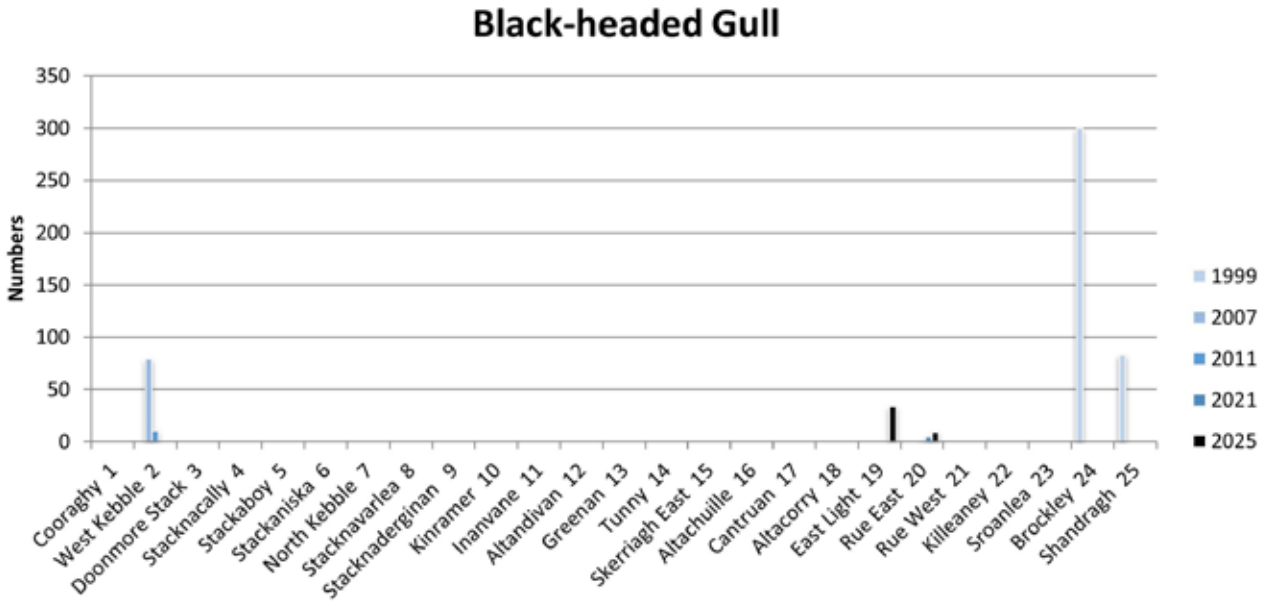

Figure 5: Black-headed Gull numbers by section.

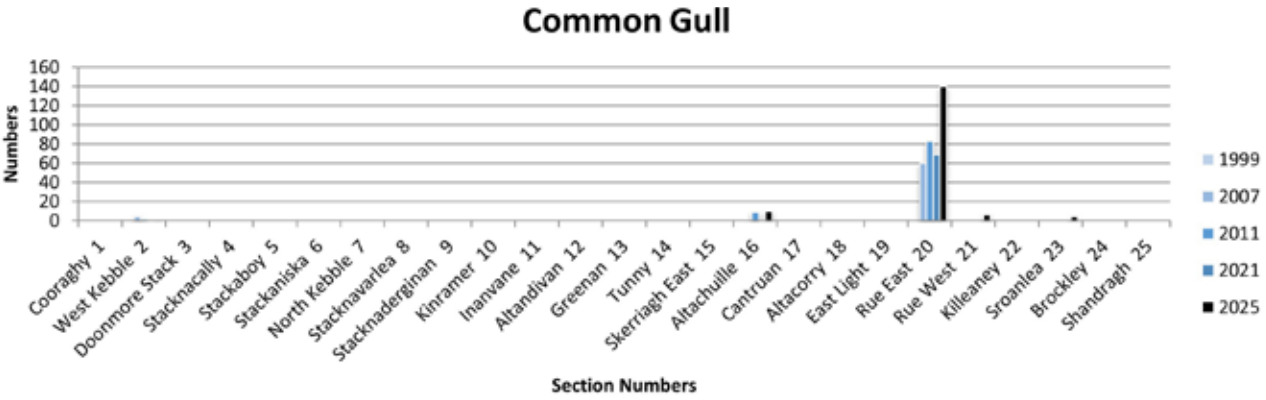

Figure 6: Common Gull numbers by section.

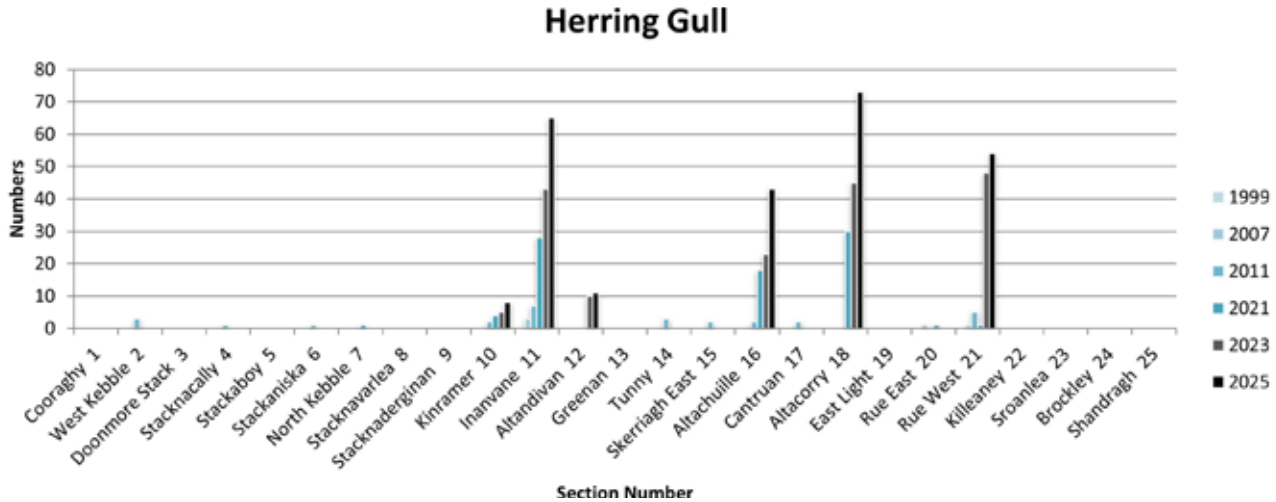

Figure 7: Herring Gull numbers by section.

Great Black-backed Gulls counts have also increased two-fold (12 to 25 nests, Table 1) with an increasing distribution (Figure 9) but which may in part reflect increasing survey effort and ability to record nests at low densities. RSPB LIFE Raft counts in 2023 (20 nests) and 2024 (27 nests – a record count) confirm that numbers have increased in recent years.

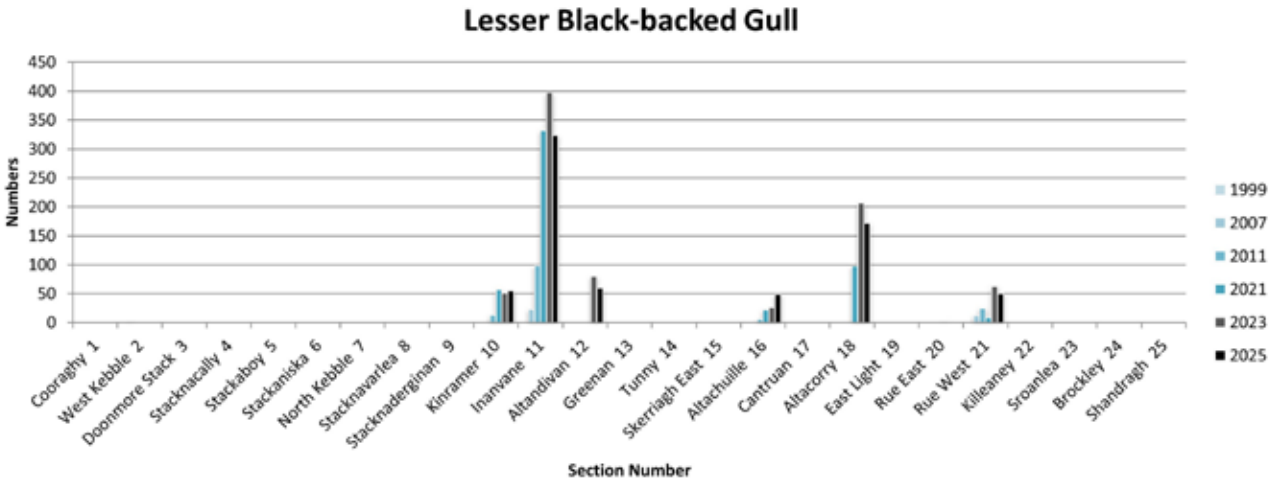

Figure 8: Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers by section.

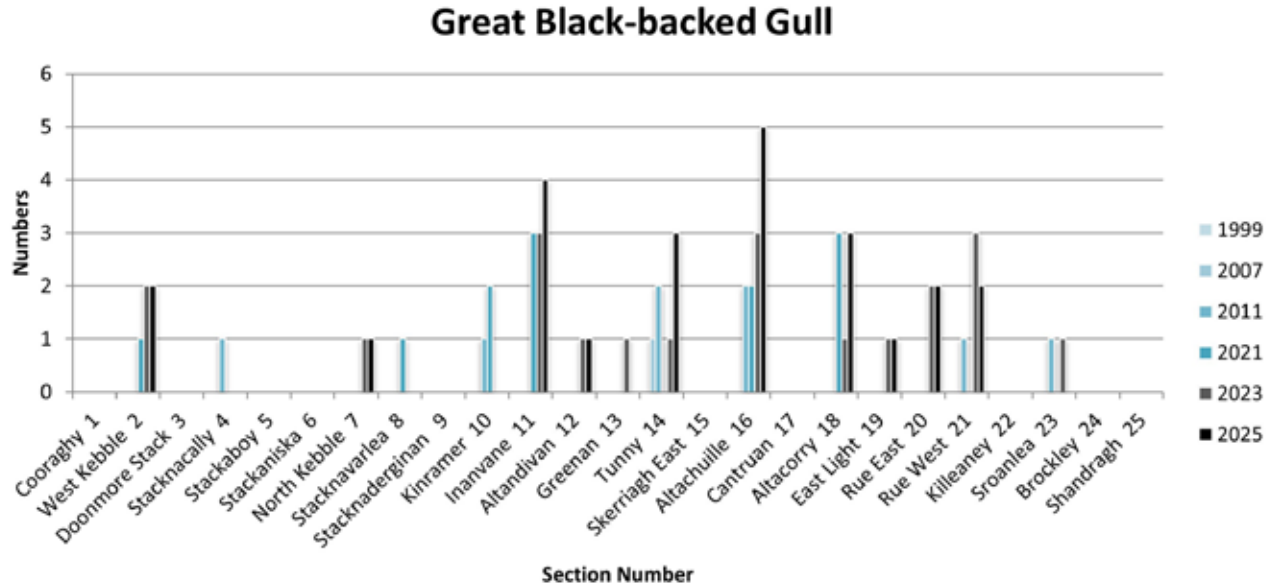

Figure 9: Great Black-backed numbers by section.

Guillemot

This is by far the most challenging breeding seabird species to count on Rathlin in terms of overall numbers and density of birds. Therefore, the numbers recorded can have a large (and unquantified, although on a scale of thousands of birds) margin of error. In addition, there are large and densely populated areas that are impossible to view from land or sea, so they have been counted from aerial photos since 2023, which has revealed large numbers of additional birds during the 2023 and 2025 census that were not previously counted. Therefore, Guillemot counts on Rathlin and changes in counts over time should be treated with caution. The total number of birds counted in 2025 was 136,100 individuals, compared to 113,504 in 2023 (following the outbreak of HPAI in the colony during 2022) and 149,100 in 2021 (Table 1).

Numbers of Guillemot recorded in 2025 were broadly similar to the 2021 census, although the 2023 survey showed a decline due to the impacts by HPAI followed by a recovery. At sector level, there were two notable exceptions to the 2021 and 2025 census being broadly similar; at RA07 North Kebble and RA14 Tunny (Figure 10a). A further drill down at sub-sector level (Figure 10b) and cross referencing with notes attached to previous surveys would indicate that disparity is related to the issues accounting for large numbers of Guillemots hidden from view due to platform depth or boulder topography specific to a number of sub-sections. For example, how estimations were arrived at for RA07G for 2011 (just over 27,500 birds) and 2021 (just over 10,000 birds) are not known but when verified by drone footage in 2025 (just over 5,000 birds) suggests this section was likely overestimated in the past.

While estimations of Guillemots in the past may have been made of birds that were visible and with levels of uncertainty imposed by sheer abundance, drone footage provided a much larger count with improved accuracy in 2025 for several sub-sections (see Figure 10b). These sub-sections include: RA15D (17,000 birds in 2025 compared to 10,000 birds in 2021); RA14E (5,000 birds in 2025 compared to 3,500 birds in 2021) and RA03A/B (8,500 birds in 2025 compared to 6,000 birds in 2021). It will have included those birds on flat hidden areas and between and behind boulders for the first time and therefore not comparable to previous counts. These specific areas are therefore problematic when making overall annual comparisons and trying to identify trends which may only be remedied in the long term by using more robust methods of counting, specific to those areas, or by leaving them out of annual comparisons.

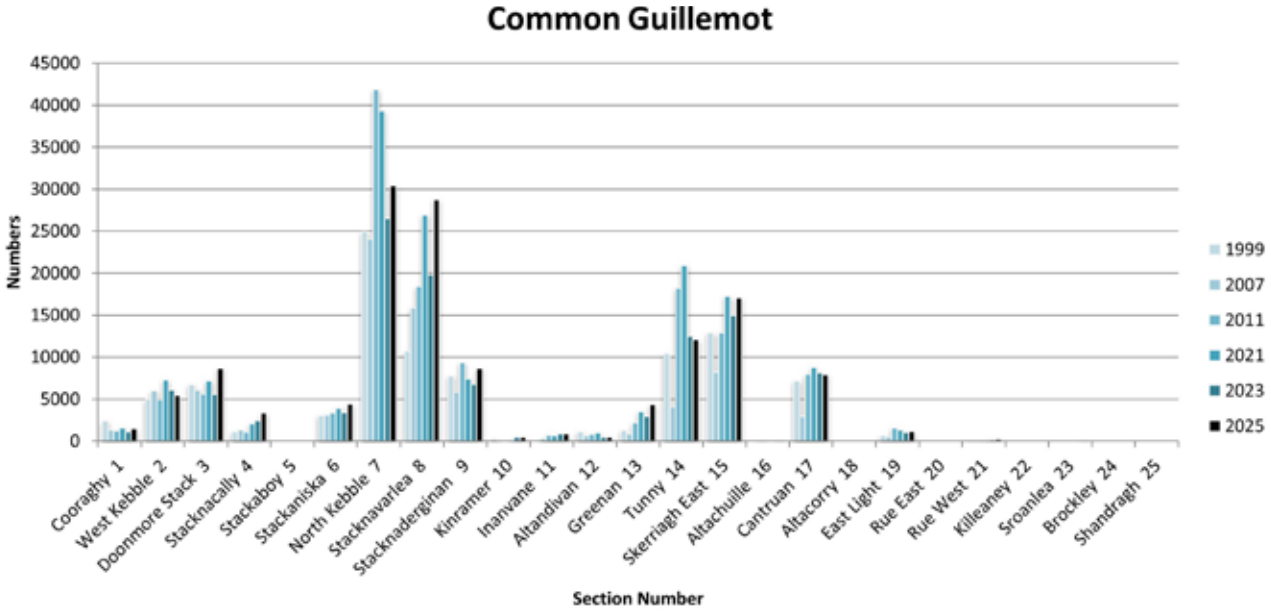

Figure 10a. Guillemot individual numbers by section.

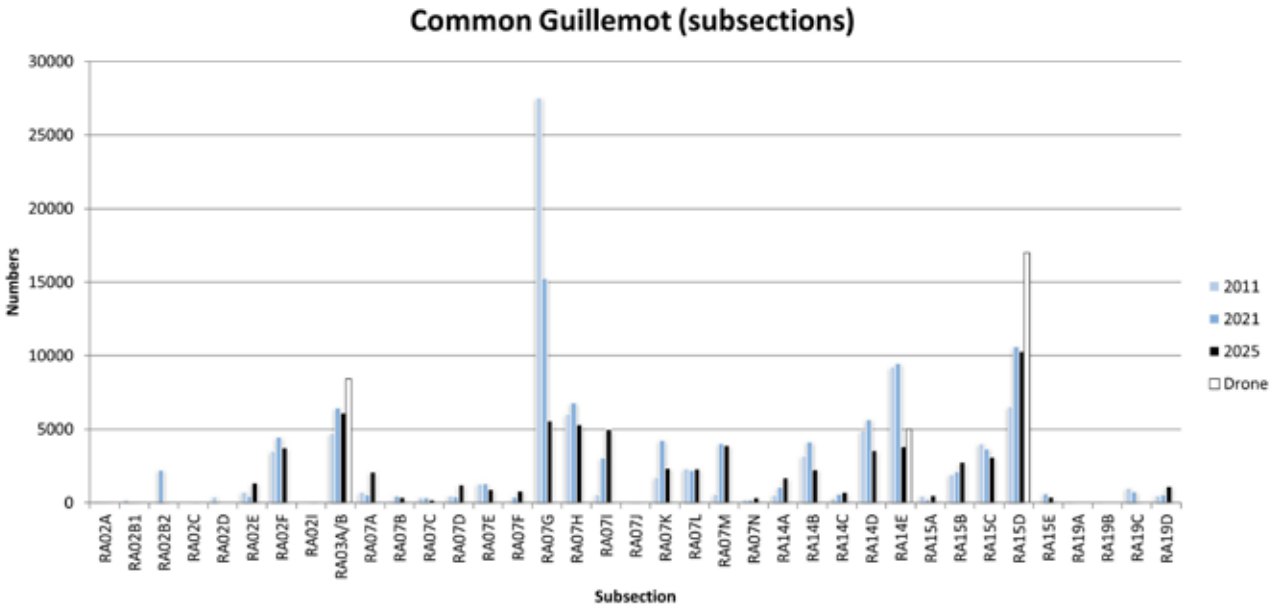

Figure 10b. Guillemot individual numbers by selected sub-section 2011, 2021 and 2025 (including drone estimates for 2025).

N.B. RA7G was also counted by aerial photo – the birds on ledges either side of the cave can only be seen from above.

Razorbill

The Razorbill count was 28,158 individuals in 2025 which was 25% higher compared to the last count in 2021 (Table 1). Although these are difficult to count accurately, a comparison at sector level shows that this increase occurred for most sections and is therefore unlikely to be a counting or recording error (Figure 11).

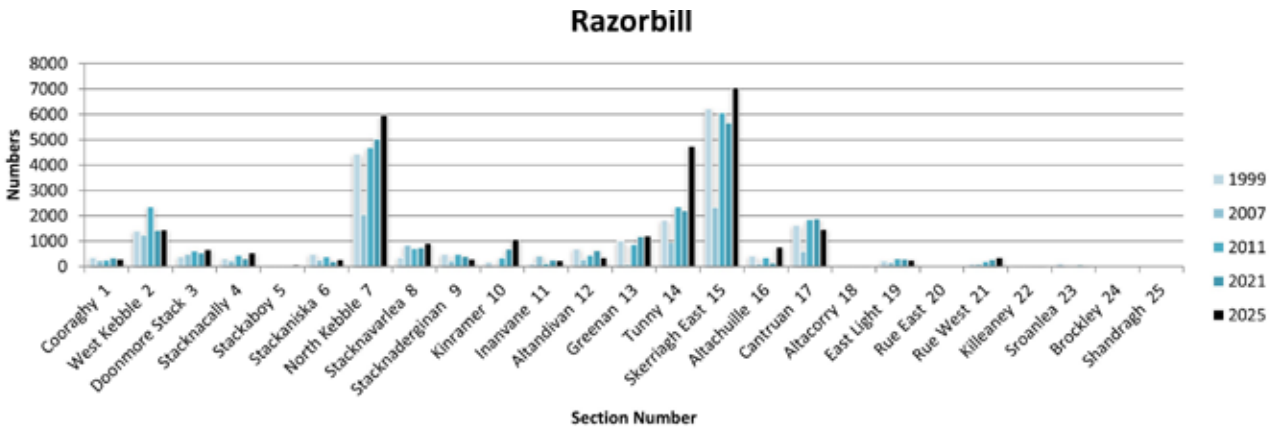

Figure 11. Razorbill individual numbers by section.

Puffin

Although day count numbers were slightly up on the previous 2021 census from 407 to 486 individuals (Table 1), they remain low compared to previous censuses. However, It should be noted that counting of Puffin numbers is complicated and another survey method (evening counts) has been undertaken on Rathlin since 2023, which has recorded much higher numbers of birds.

Puffin numbers at a sector level illustrate the longer-term decline, whether overall counts or presence/absence (Figure 12a), although there is high variation in the numbers recorded during day counts. However, a sensitivity to the time of day is clearly illustrated by the much higher Puffin numbers recorded during evening counts undertaken by the RSPB LIFE Raft team (Figure 12b) compared to day counts in the same count period. Evening counts have been undertaken during 2023 (1,171 individuals)), 2024 (1,172 individuals) and 2025 (1,719 individuals). Defining future trends in Puffin numbers will likely rely on a continuation of past methods supplemented by recent and more targeted approach of survey methods.

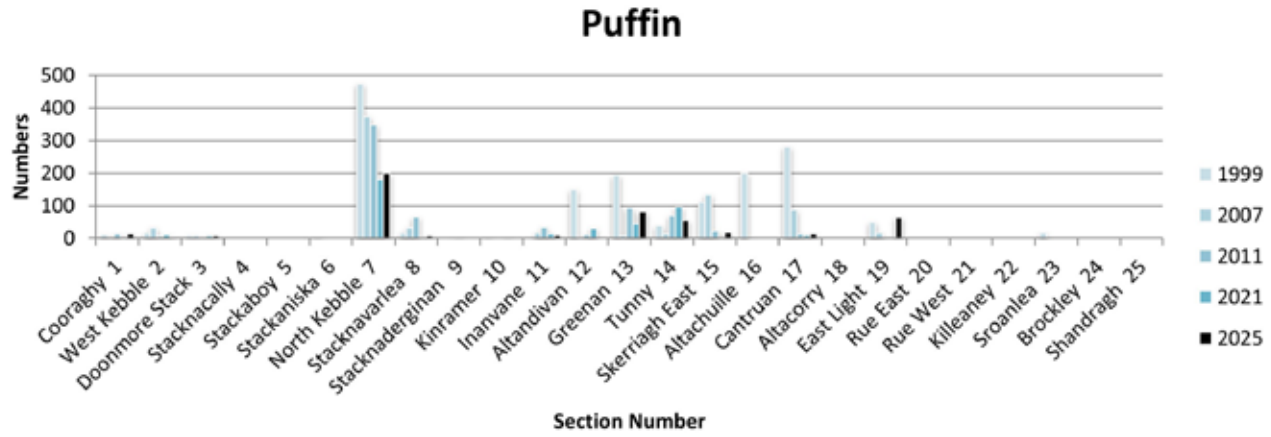

Figure 12a. Puffin numbers by section (during day counts).

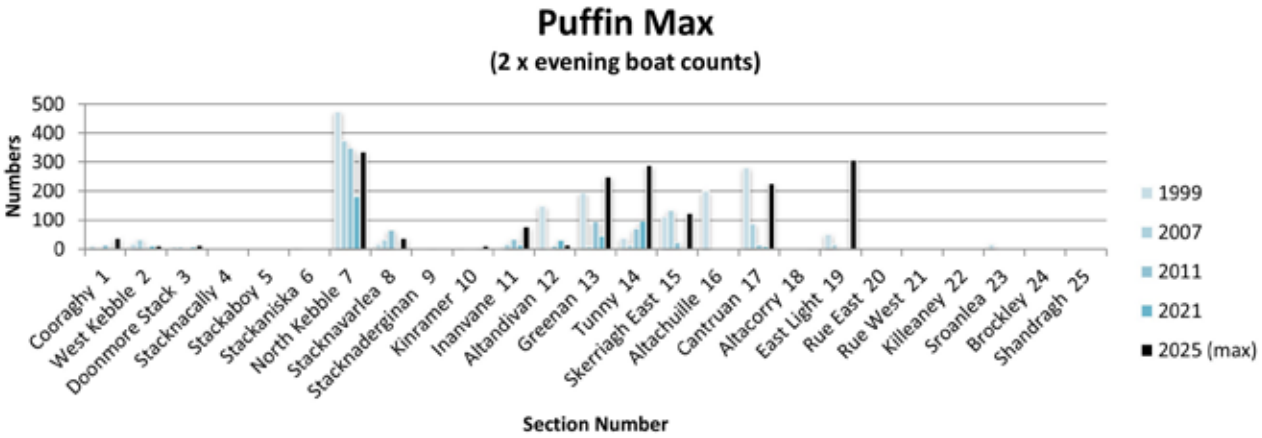

Figure 12b. Maximum Puffin numbers from two evening counts per section in 2025 (RSPB LIFE Raft team) alongside census counts (during day).

Annual comparisons

Species	1999	2007	2011	2021	2023	2025
Fulmar (AOS)	2,032	1,072	1,518	1,038	n/c	927
Shag (AON)	58	46	47	74	n/c	89+
Kittiwake (AON)	9,917	9,896	7,922	13,706	9,629	10,504
Black-headed Gull (AON)	383	79	11	5	n/c	43
Common Gull (AON)	64	64	94	69	161	161
Herring Gull (AON)	14	5	28	83	174	254
Lesser Black-backed Gull (AON)	127	36	143	519	825	710
Great Black-backed Gull (AON)	3	1	8	12	20	25
Guillemot (individuals)	95,567	81,303	130,445	149,510	113,504	136,100
Razorbill (individuals)	20,860	10,684	22,975	22,421	n/c	28,158
Puffin (individuals) – day counts	1,579	731	695	407	n/c	485
Puffin (individuals) – eve. counts	n/c	n/c	n/c	n/c	1,171	1,719

Table 1. Rathlin totals by species 1999–2025 (all sections).

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Gillian Gilbert and Donnell Black (both RSPB) for their support with the census.

We are grateful to the DAERA Environment Fund for funding the census.

Tracking Lesser Black-backed Gulls on Lough Neagh

Daniel Johnston

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Lesser Black-backed Gull fitted with a solar-powered GPS-GSM tag, by Sorrel Lyall / BTO

Introduction

Northern Ireland's virtual inland sea of Lough Neagh supports large populations of birds more commonly associated with the sea itself, including Common Terns and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, alongside thousands of breeding waterbirds. Yet in recent years the lough has been under growing environmental pressure and declining water quality. This has impacted populations of several breeding species, in addition to short-term impacts arising from HPAI. While an overall decline in bird populations within the lough has been observed, Lesser Black-backed Gull numbers rose between 2000–2016, but have since fluctuated, although survey conditions make it difficult to infer a clear trend. Lesser Black-backed Gull populations are potentially underpinned by adaptable foraging behaviour. Elsewhere, Lesser Black-backed Gulls have been shown to forage across a range of resources, including at-sea (Isaksson *et al.* 2016), agricultural land, landfills (O'Hanlon *et al.* 2025), and in urban areas (Langley *et al.* 2023). However, little is known about the foraging habits of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls breeding on Lough Neagh's islands, which may help us better understand their population dynamics.

Aims

To address this knowledge gap, we aimed to track the foraging behaviour of Lesser Black-backed Gulls breeding on Scaddy Island, in southern Lough Neagh, through the 2025 breeding season and follow them through their autumn migration to their wintering grounds.

Methods

Work for this project began in September 2024, long before the 2025 breeding season, with a search for an appropriate study site. With the support of local wildfowlers, we visited several sites within Lough Neagh looking for an island that held a robust colony of gulls, and importantly, patches of trees which we could hide under to avoid disturbing the colony whilst processing birds. Scaddy Island fitted the bill, which the Lesser Black-backed Gull colony shares with breeding Black-headed Gulls, Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus*, Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos*, Gadwall *Anas strepera*, Pochards *Aythya ferina*, Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula* and Coots *Fulica atra.*

We returned to the island during the gulls' incubation period in mid May 2025. This is the ideal breeding stage to attempt to catch nesting adults using a walk-in nest trap. Made of chicken wire, this forms a funnel around the nest which breeding adults, intent on incubating their eggs, walk into. Once caught, each bird was metal and colour ringed, weighed, and had their wing and bill measurements taken. Half of the birds caught were fitted with a solar-powered GPS-GSM tag (Ornitela OrniTrack-15; weighing 17 g) attached using a 'weak-link' harness made of Teflon straps linked at a single fail-point made of cotton. The other half were released untagged as a handled control group to compare hatching success and return rates to the colony next spring. Each nest was marked with a numbered bamboo stick, and nest contents (e.g. number of eggs and chicks) recorded at capture. Follow-up visits allowed us to compare hatching success between tagged and control nests. However, dense vegetation prevented subsequent monitoring of chick fledging.

Results

Foraging behaviour

Initial results from the 13 tracked Scaddy Island gulls showed that they made repeated journeys to a single location, an abattoir in Cookstown, several kilometres west of the lough (Figure 1). For the majority of tagged individuals, this site became their primary foraging destination throughout the breeding season. Birds also foraged around ploughed agricultural fields, presumably foraging on invertebrates turned up by machinery, and visited towns and urban greenspaces, such as playing fields, likely targeting human refuse. More work is needed to examine the specific attributes of the areas they visit, but initial results indicate that their foraging behaviour is strongly associated with human activity.

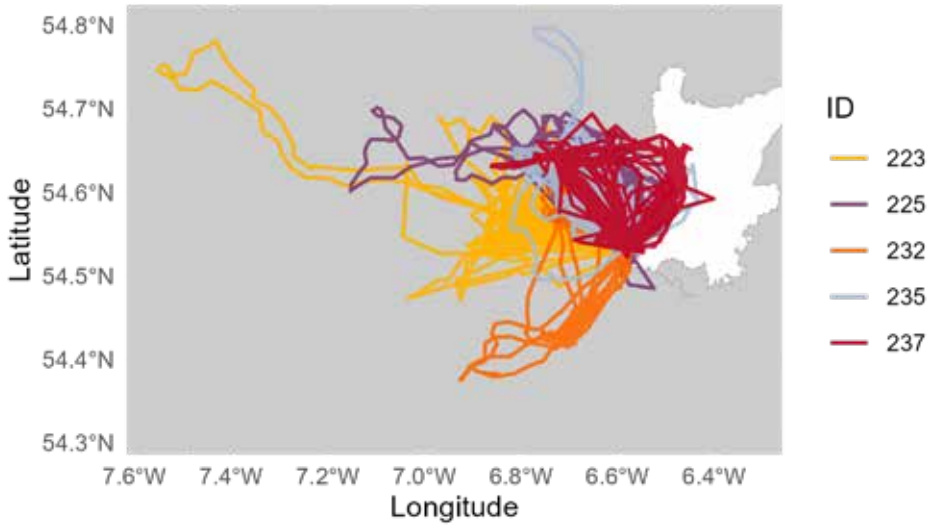

Figure 1: Breeding movements of a sub-set of Lesser Black-backed Gulls from Scaddy Island. Location of the abattoir indicated in relation to the tracks.

Post breeding movements

Lesser Black-backed Gulls are regarded as migratory, with birds from north-west Europe often heading south to the Iberian coast or north-west Africa in the winter (Shamoun-Baranes *et al.* 2017, Thaxter *et al.* 2019). At the time of writing, in December 2025, the gulls are currently visiting their winter grounds. Two individuals have remained within the Republic of Ireland while others have migrated to Portugal, Spain, Morocco, or as far afield as Mauritania, a journey of 3,900 km (Figure 2). However, there is large variation in when birds made the jump from the Republic of Ireland to cross the Celtic Sea, with the earliest crossers in mid to late August, followed by crossings in late September and October, and finally crossings as late as mid to late November.

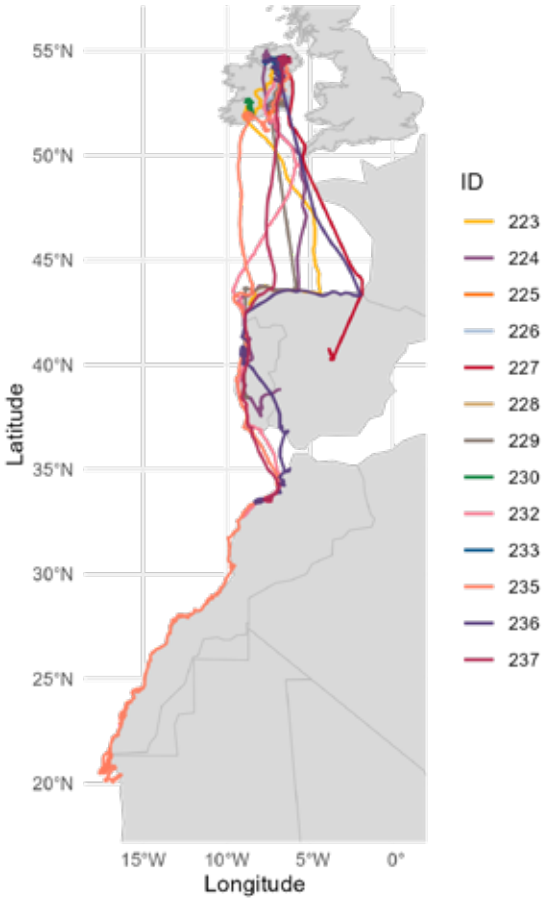

Figure 2: Post-breeding movements of Lesser Black-backed Gulls from Scaddy Island

Discussion

Overall, we found human-related resources to be more important than lough-based ones for the provisioning Lesser Black-backed Gulls nesting within Lough Neagh. Access to predictable sources of food may buffer the population from the wider degradation of the lough.

The birds displayed a high degree of variation in their post-breeding movements, with the presence of overwintering birds in the Republic of Ireland

suggesting that there is plenty of food to support year-round residency, though how consistent this behaviour is, and what conditions are driving it, will need further monitoring and research. At their core these results reflect that the Scaddy colony holds individuals with a range of migration and foraging strategies.

Further GPS deployments planned for 2026 will expand our understanding of habitat use, overwinter survival, and return rates, information that will help us understand how this population may respond to ongoing environmental change.

Acknowledgements
The project is managed by Andrew Upton of the BTO Northern Ireland. This project will be carried out on behalf of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) using an Environment Fund grant award. We are hugely thankful to the Strangford Lough Wildfowling Club and Lough Neagh Partnership for providing access to Scaddy Island. We are also thankful to the volunteers who offered their time to support the fieldwork, including Steven Fyffe, Sorrell Lyall, Ciara Laverty, and Peter Kearns.

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Puffins return to Isle of Muck

Andrew Crory

Nature Reserves Manager, Ulster Wildlife

Puffin, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

In 2017 Ulster Wildlife started a Brown Rat eradication programme on the Isle of Muck, Islandmagee, Co. Antrim. The plan was that rat removal would benefit the island's seabirds – there were rumours that Puffins had previously bred on the island but they were not the project focus.

Isle of Muck hosts a wide variety of seabirds – the cliffs and stacks have nesting Guillemots, Black Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags, Fulmars and Kittiwakes while grassy areas have Eiders *Somateria mollissima* and gulls. The combination of food (eggs, chicks and sometimes adult birds), shelter (thick, thatchy grass) made it attractive to predators such as rats. The island is also only a short distance offshore and connected to the mainland by a shingle ridge (known as a tombolo) at low tide.

Benefits to seabirds from the rat eradication programme were apparent early on – the next season Eider chicks were being seen nearby by birdwatchers and each year Black Guillemot numbers were increasing on and around the island. Nesting gull numbers, mostly Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, have increased dramatically – over 250 pairs were seen on the island in 2025.

Puffins were seen on top of the Isle of Muck in 2024 – five birds were seen during a count with Allen & Mellon Environmental Ltd. In 2025, during a visit to the island a BTO staff member saw an adult Puffin exit a burrow. And further sightings were made during subsequent visits to undertake colony counts.

The rats can come back in small numbers, but an annual programme of control is in place and seabird numbers appear to be increasing – for example, in 2025 nine pairs of Great Black-backed Gull nested, the highest total since the start of annual monitoring 25 years ago. The island is now grazed in winter with Sheep – this has reduced the vegetation cover for rats and led to a distinct change in the island's flora.

The prospect of breeding Puffins means Ulster Wildlife is looking to additional monitoring at the site in future years – this would include additional colony counts and Puffin surveys following SMP methodologies.

Outer Ards: 2025 Seabird Nesting Report

Hugh Thurgate

Strangford Lough and The Ards Peninsula Lead Ranger, National Trust

Sandwich Terns, by Philip Croft / BTO

Selected species accounts

Arctic Tern
In 2023, the combined total for this species for Cockle Island off Groomsport and Green and Bird Islands off Portavogie was 232 AON; in 2024, it was 211 AON, and in 2025 it was 267 AON. This slight rise in 2025 may have been attributable to some of the 'missing' Strangford Lough birds. Roughly equal numbers bred on Green Island (83 AON) and Bird Island (87 AON) this year, which is unusual as the vast majority are normally found on Bird Island. Ninety-seven nests were found on Cockle Island in Groomsport this year though their fledging success was not monitored. For the first time in recent years no nests were found on the shingle bar forming part of the discrete eastern section of the colony, perhaps in recognition of the fact that it is frequently over-washed by high tides.

Common Tern
A few birds appeared late in the summer; they were picked up during the Sandwich Tern ringing visits and were thought to be re-lays possibly from Strangford Lough. They actually managed to fledge two or three young in mid August.

Little Tern
Sadly, the pair that laid eggs on Bird Island in 2024 was not to be found this year. No adult Little Terns were seen on any of the monitoring visits in 2025.

Sandwich Tern
A visit to Green Island off Portavogie on the Outer Ards on 17 June revealed that a significant number of Sandwich Terns, a total in fact of 277 AON (which may have included birds 'belonging' to Strangford Lough), had settled to breed late in the season. At that stage there were no chicks present. Sandwich Terns had last chosen to nest on Green Island in 2017; it proved to be an isolated attempt, with no further nesting attempts in the next seven years and no previous records from this century. In 2017 the colony was thriving with 145 AON on a visit made to the island on 19 June. However, on the next visit, just over two weeks later, the colony was found to have totally failed. Not a single intact egg or chick was to be found, only scattered small eggshell fragments. So, although it was relief to find Sandwich Terns in numbers during 2025 after such a poor showing on Strangford Lough, the omens were not good, bearing in mind the 2017 failure and the fact that Green Island is accessible to humans on foot for an approximately three-hour window at low tide and therefore also to mammalian predators. The shore around it and Bird Island is also frequented by shellfish gatherers. It was with some trepidation that we set forth on a follow up visit on 3 July, but we needn't have worried as we were met with a clamour from the colony and a lift of close to 500 birds. A repeat count of the colony revealed a further 177 nests, bringing the total to 454 AON. There were just four hatched chicks with the oldest thought to be under 48 hours old and the youngest just out of the egg. This would give an earliest laying date of 7 June, given a maximum incubation period of 24 days (Harrison, 1975) which is a full six weeks later than normal. The next visit was made nearly three weeks later, on 23 July, expressly to colour-ring chicks (22 were ringed that day).

On 1 August, a further 42 chicks were ringed, most of the chicks had moved from the nesting area on top of the southeast corner of the island in the *Festuca rubra* tussocks to the upper shoreline on the eastern side of the island. A further visit was made on 5 August when 11 chicks were ringed, birds having moved back on top of the

island but further to the north than the original colony. On the final visit to the colony on 13 August to try and assess overall productivity just one chick was ringed. By then most adults and young, virtually the entire colony, had left the island and were roosting on the sandflats between the island and the mainland. One hundred and twenty-four juveniles were recorded within this flock. Concerned that they were about to leave and anxious to get a second count, a repeat visit was made the next day to once again count the juveniles roosting on the beach, this time 159 were counted. If this represented a minimum number of juveniles fledging from the island (as some flying young may have already left the colony by this stage) then the minimum productivity for this colony was 0.35 fledged young per pair. Albeit for a significantly higher number of birds this figure was similar to that for Strangford Lough itself this year at 0.31 young fledged per pair. Both compare favourably with a mean breeding success of 0.34 chicks per pair per year for Northern Ireland between 1990 and 2015 and a mean in England of 0.31 between 1986 and 2019 (JNCC 2019). Five out of the 76 pulli that were colour-ringed have subsequently been resighted on their first migration; one August sighting on the Isles of Scilly, two September sightings in North Wales and one at the Bann estuary in the same month and the most recent, a late November sighting of one at Kartong in the Gambia.

Figure 1: Juvenile GW 42L still begging from parent Rhos Point, Colwyn Bay, on migration, by Robin Sandham.

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Strangford Lough: 2025 Seabird Nesting Report

Herring Gull, by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

Species accounts

Cormorant 414 AON on two islands.
Productivity:

- **Bird Island camera 1** (18 nests): mean clutch size: 3.5; mean hatching success 2.6; and chicks fledged per nest 1.4.
- **Bird Island camera 2** (17 nests): mean clutch size: 3.06; mean hatching success 2.4; and chicks fledged per nest 1.9
- **Total productivity Bird island** (35 nests): chicks fledged per nest 1.6
- **West Boretree Island** (4 nests): mean clutch size 4.25; mean hatching success 3.25; and chicks fledged per nest 2.5

This year's count represented a 9.2% increase from that in 2024. The new colony established on West Boretree Island in 2023 increased from 20 AON in 2024 to 107 in 2025, a five-fold increase. The long-term colony on Bird Island dropped from 359 AON to 307 AON a fall of 52 or 14.5%, so some but not all the increase on West Boretree Island may be accounted for by a shift of some pairs from Bird Island. Of the 307 nests on Bird Island there were three discrete sub-colonies of 208 AON in the south-east, 38 in the west, and 61 in the north-west. It would be good to have a handle on Cormorant numbers on North Rock and Burial Island on the Outer Ards, last surveyed in 2009 and 2019 respectively, as any fall in numbers at these colonies could account for any increase in Strangford Lough.

Breeding productivity in terms of clutch size and fledging success was monitored at both the Lough's colonies by Daniel Johnston from BTO, using trail cameras. The Bird Island cameras were erected early in the season on 26 March and the West Boretree camera on 13 May. The clutch size of every nest at the time of the annual nest count was also recorded by NT rangers. On Bird Island on 23 May the average clutch size per nest, was 2.99 and at West Boretree Island the average clutch size on 13 May was 2.63 (three nests contained no eggs, six nests one egg, seven nests two eggs, 39 nests three eggs, 31 nests four eggs and four nests 5 eggs). A clutch size count at the Cormorant colony on Sheep Island, Co. Antrim on 20 May produced a mean of 3.4 from 79 nests in a colony of 81 AON (RSPB pers. comm.).

These means probably represent a minimum figure for egg productivity as there is a significant spread of laying dates at Cormorant colonies and at the time of the count some of the clutches may have been incomplete and there may also have been some losses due to predation. On the other hand, some of the last birds to arrive at the colony may not have even started to build their nests but might have had smaller clutches (typical of younger birds) which would bring the mean down.

Black-headed Gull 385 AON on eight islands (360 AON on Strangford Lough and 25 AON at Castle Espie).

Last year saw a dramatic downturn in numbers, almost certainly a reflection of the impact of HPAI in 2023. The virus was thought to still be impacting birds in 2024 and 2025, and this year's count of 385 AON was the lowest count on the wider Lough since 1973. Numbers dropped in Strangford Lough alone from 555 AON in 2024 to 360 AON in 2025, a fall of 35.1%. At Castle Espie the breeding colony shrank from 98 AON in 2024 to just 25

in 2025, a reduction of 74.4%. Only two colonies exceeded 50 AON on Strangford Lough in 2025 and Green Island (Killyleagh) actually increased from 2024's 125 AON to 224 AON this year. There was anecdotal evidence that outbreaks of avian flu occurred at some colonies with sick adults and fully feathered young that were close to or had in fact fledged being found at some colonies notably Ogilby Island (Leonard 2025).

Mediterranean Gull One AON on one island.

A pair of Mediterranean Gulls were found to be incubating on Green Island (Killyleagh) when the island was visited on 16 May with a third bird present in second year plumage. This pair was not thought to be successful. Four to five adult Mediterranean Gulls were observed late in the season (August) on Green Island, Portavogie, possibly reflecting a post breeding movement from Belfast or Larne Loughs.

Common Gull 258 AON on 16 islands.

This year's count of 258 AON was 8.5% down on last year's total and compares with a 10-year rolling mean to 2023 of 312 AON. This species does not seem to have been hit as hard by HPAI as for Black-headed Gulls but the small fall in numbers in successive years from 2023 and 2025 may have been caused at least in part by losses due to avian influenza. The newly established colony on Pawle Island continues to expand and remains the largest of them all at 106 AON. Roe Island was the only other colony over 50 pairs at 62 AON. Their presence on as many as 16 islands shouldn't be misconstrued as conferring reduced vulnerability to their population i.e. spreading risk, as there are just solitary pairs on six of them.

Lesser Black-backed Gull 271 AON on 10 islands.

A small drop in numbers of 7.5% from 2024. The largest colony of 121 AON continues to be on Green Island (Killyleagh) and represents almost half the total breeding population. Gabbock Island was the second largest colony with 41 AON recorded in 2025 with East Boretree Island dropping to the third largest (27 AON).

Herring Gull 1,724 AON on 23 islands.

This species is the most widespread of all the seabirds on the Lough, occupying more islands than any other species. Eight of the colonies still exceed one hundred pairs with 424 AON on Green Island (Killyleagh), still by far and away the largest.

Great Black-backed Gull 149 AON on 13 islands.

In terms of total breeding numbers, this species has remained stable for the last five years, after a long period of increase but it continues to spread and nine islands, up from last year's five, now have one pair on them. The birds breeding on West and East Boretree give cause for concern due to their proximity to the main Arctic Tern colonies on The Chanderies and Salt Rock.

Sandwich Tern 26 AON on two islands.
Productivity: (fledged young per pair=0.31 and mean clutch size=1.75).

In early spring there was growing sense around the Lough that Sandwich Terns were at very low numbers. There was a lack of activity around Swan Island, in Strangford Harbour, and the wider Lough seemed eerily quiet. Where were they? Early SMP visits to their recent breeding haunts of Swan Island, Jackdaw Island and Black Rock on 7 May revealed a complete absence of this, the Lough's iconic breeding seabird and it was only after visiting Green Island on 16 May that any breeding birds at all were found. A small enclave of 12 AON were found within a nesting concentration of Black-headed Gulls. This colony was located high up the island to the north side of the main pond, an unusual site for the Lough's Sandwich Terns, which have historically always nested close either to the edges of any islands or on the tops of very small islands still close to the mean high-water mark. The only exception to this has been where they were attracted to the top of Swan Island by the 'man-made' shell bed in 2014 (although it was a full 12 years after its creation!). They were probably attracted to this unusual location on Green Island by the presence of nesting Black-headed Gulls. A visit to the island on 6 June revealed that the original 12 pairs had been joined by another 13 pairs. A large number of sonic mammal deterrents were deployed at a high density around the colony, and a few tern boxes were also put out to give chicks a chance of shelter. On 6 June nine chicks were found, roughly between 24 hours and five days of age, indicating an earliest possible laying date, based on a 24 day incubation (Harrison 1975) of around the 8 May.

Nearly three weeks later eight chicks were reasonably 'well-on' with flight feathers developing well although still within their waxy sheaths. These eight were colour ringed. There was a ninth chick present, but it was thought to be less than 48 hours old and was left to mature before colour ringing. These eight were deemed to be sufficiently advanced to have had a good chance of fledging and were used as the basis of the productivity calculation. Indeed, two of these eight were subsequently resighted on migration, one at Rhos Point, Colwyn Bay, North Wales between 26 August and 1 September and the second at Kartong in the Gambia on 14 October. Although the number of birds involved was very low, a mean fledging success per pair of 0.31 chicks for the Lough surpassed that from 2018 (0.2), 2022 (0.25), 2023 (0.024) and 2024 (0.035). The only year when fledging success was greater was 2019 (0.64). No productivity monitoring was undertaken before 2018, and none was carried out in 2020 and 2021. The next visit to the island on 16 July revealed that the colony had been completely abandoned. There was no obvious sign of predation but there should have been plenty of chicks from the second cohort of birds, but none were to be found. No chicks were thought to fledge from the second cohort. There were low numbers of Black-headed Gull young and no sign of any of the Mediterranean Gulls that had nested within the Black-headed Gull colony that surrounded the Sandwich Terns. Apart from a solitary nest on Black Rock, observed on 6 June and 11 June, no other Sandwich Tern nested on Strangford Lough in 2025. Twenty-six AON was the lowest number of breeding pairs of Sandwich Tern on record (annual recording began in 1969). For this species to have fallen to such a low ebb on Strangford Lough is clearly a cause for grave concern.

However, if the Lough is a meta-population or only a component of a larger breeding population, one that includes the Outer Ards peninsula then the overall situation for 2025 for the Lough can be viewed differently. For details of Sandwich Tern breeding on the Outer Ards please see the separate report on page 90.

Common Tern 186 AON on five islands – productivity 0.51 chicks fledged per AON.

This species, amongst other challenges, has been affected by HPAI in recent years which may account for some of the drop off in numbers, a 17% fall from 2024 to 2025. Interestingly they nested on just five islands c.f. 10 in 2024, and three large colonies accounted for most of the birds; 65 AON on Swan Island, 63 on Ogilby Island and 46 on Dunsy Rock. The Dunsy Rock colony was slow to get going and didn't really establish until late June/ early July, with birds persisting well into August. Although there were some losses due to high tide washouts throughout the summer particularly on the low-lying stretch of shore that links the two areas of higher ground, significant predation by large gulls and Otters didn't occur and 46 Common Tern chicks managed to fledge (Leonard 2025). This was by far and away the most successful island, but 16 chicks also managed to fledge on Dunnyneill Island and another 16 on Ogilby Island despite noticeable losses of chicks and adults from presumed avian influenza on the latter. A further 15 chicks also fledged in August on Black Rock bringing the total number fledged across the Lough in 2025 to 95. So, it was a season typified by late establishment/re-lays, absence of significant storm events and absence of large gull and otter predation at key colonies. First clutches to hatch were found on Dunsy Rock on 10 June, the same first hatch date as for 2024. With an incubation of 23 days (Harrison 1975) this would put the earliest possible laying date as 17 May.

Arctic Tern 62 AON on three islands – productivity 0.065 chicks fledged per AON.

A very significant drop (61%) on the Lough to just 62 AON in 2025 compared to 158 in 2024. The number of this species breeding on the Outer Ards was almost five-fold higher at 267 AON. The combined population for Strangford Lough and the Outer Ards however went down very slightly from 369 AON in 2024 to 329 in 2025 (a 10.8% decline). Productivity for this species was again pitifully low with just four chicks appearing to fledge across the Lough's islands on a par with just one in 2024 (Leonard 2025). As for the Common Tern the total number of islands used by this species more than halved in 2025. This may in part be attributed to island avoidance where there have been significant predation issues in recent years e.g. Rat Island and Shones Island and a reflection too on loss of suitable habitat due to erosion and sea level rise. Former strongholds such as The Sheelahs are now getting regularly covered at high tide. Turley Rock, Green Island Rock and Gull Rock (near Ringhaddy) are all now unsuitable for this reason. Unfortunately, most Arctic Terns are using the Chanderies and Salt Rock in the Boretree Island complex in the northeast of the Lough. These too are becoming increasingly vulnerable to regular high tide inundation and unfortunately lie next to the second largest concentration of breeding Great Black-backed Gulls in the Lough so have an ever-present threat of predation during the breeding season. Unless habitat management and gull control is undertaken on Dunnyneill Island, their future on the Lough looks bleak.

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Figure 1: Cormorant colony on Bird Island, Strangford Lough, by Hugh Thurgate.

Forthcoming seabird research work: ACCLIMATISE project

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Fulmar, by Liz Cutting / BTO

BTO and RSPB are project partners in the ACCLIMATISE project, supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). ACCLIMATISE is led by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). ACCLIMATISE is an abbreviation for 'A Changing Climate Impact Monitoring and Assessment Toolbox for Irish Seas'.

The project officially started in October 2025 and will continue until the end of December 2028. Within this project, BTO is the lead on Work Package 2 'Transboundary Conservation Strategies and Sustainable Management of Marine Predators', which includes seabirds and cetaceans.

BTO is co-leading with RSPB on the ornithological work within the project and this specifically includes seabird tracking and diet analysis, at sea surveys, passive acoustic monitoring (PAM), and developing a transboundary seabird conservation strategy and action plans for priority threatened seabird species on the island of Ireland. BTO will be employing three members of staff, and RSPB will be employing two members of staff dedicated to delivering the project, supported by existing staff from both organisations. BTO has been awarded £1,400,000 and RSPB £400,000 to deliver the seabird work within the project.

The seabird tracking work will be focused on four key species: Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill and Fulmar. Sites will include Rathlin Island and other key seabird colonies in Co. Antrim and Co. Down, together with sites in Co. Donegal/Co. Sligo. The work in the Republic of Ireland will be undertaken as part of a tender. Diet analysis work will be undertaken opportunistically during the tagging work in partnership with Queen's University Belfast. The bioacoustics work will be focused on confirming presence/absence of Manx Shearwater and Storm Petrel on offshore islands around the coast of Northern Ireland. The at-sea surveys will be done as part of other routine surveys on board the AFBI research vessel Corystes or other potential platforms of opportunity.

There is currently a significant knowledge gap in the distribution and abundance of seabirds in marine waters around the north of Ireland (Hereward *et al.* 2025). The outputs from this seabird work will be instrumental in helping the government make informed decisions as to where developments such as offshore renewables will be best placed to minimise any negative impacts on seabirds around the coast of Northern Ireland and adjoining marine waters.

For more information, please contact either Andrew Upton **andrew.upton@bto.org** or Gillian Gilbert **gillian.gilbert@rspb.org.uk**

Reference

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Appendix: Species counts

Table 6: Cumulative counts (n) of all species of seabird within Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) 'Master Sites' in Northern Ireland between 2015 and 2025. The number of sub-sites surveyed in a Mastersite, an indication of relative survey effort between years, is included in brackets next to the count unless the sub-sites were not specified (NR = not recorded). Hyphens (-) denote that no data were collected. Seabirds are counted using recommended census units from Table 3, unless specified with the record. EST means that numbers are an estimate, based on the best available method. Asterisks (*) denote that the count was made late in the season and therefore may not be as accurate. Sample Plot counts submitted and IND counts for any species other than auks were not included to avoid duplication. For total seabird data for any specific site, please make a data request through SMP.

		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Species (Count units)	**Master Site**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	**N (sites)**	N (sites)
Fulmar	Blackhead	3 (1)*	3 (1)	29 (1)	30 (1)	31 (1)	19 (1)*	6 (1)	11 (1)	6 (1)*	7 (1)	1 (1)*
(AOS)	Downhill	135 (6)	78 (4)*	81 (4)	118 (6)	95 (5)*	–	130 (6)*	140 (6)	111 (5)	–	5 (1) EST
	East Antrim Coast	25 (14)	45 (16)	60 (11)*	32 (11)	39 (14) EST*	29 (13) EST*	39 (12)*	32 (11)*	20 (7) EST	20 (7)*	22 (10) EST
	Larne Lough to Portmuck	201 (1)*	292 (2)	322 (3)*	328 (2)*	198 (2)*	–	2 (1)	1 (1)	–	–	–
	Muck Island	52 (1)*	68 (1)	80 (1)	72 (1)	43 (1)	56 (1)*	61 (1)	69 (1)	39 (1)	72 (1)	80 (1)
	North Antrim coast	16 (5)	37 (10)	38 (10)	16 (7)	21 (6)*	4 (1)*	12 (7)	13 (7)	7 (1)	–	18 (3) EST*
	Whitehead	–	3 (1)	5 (1)	7 (1)	5 (1)*	8 (1)*	–	5 (1)	2 (1)	4 (1)	4 (1)
	Maggy's Leap	–	–	1 (1)	–	2 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	84 (1)*	165 (4)*	159 (3)*	880 (18)*	–	–	–	115 (4) EST
	Giant's Causeway Coast	–	–	–	57 (3)	134 (2)*	81 (2)*	209 (4)*	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap to Newcastle	–	–	–	–	–	2 (1)	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	–
	Binevenagh	–	–	–	–	–	–	11 (5)	7 (5)	8 (4)	–	–
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	13 (1) EST*	–	10 (1)	16 (1)	10 (1)
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	1,038 (1)	–	–	–	927 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	61 (1)	–	–	–	77 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	43 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
Cormorant	Larne Lough to Portmuck	0 (1)*	12 (1)	13 (1)	12 (1)	0 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
(AON)	Strangford Lough SPA	245 (1)*	343 (1)*	360 (1)	314 (1)	388 (1)*	167 (1)*	–	364 (1)	446 (1) EST	379 (1) EST	414 (1)*
	Sheep Island SPA	–	84 (1)	100 (1)	88 (1)	–	–	139 (1)	86 (1) EST*	–	–	81 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	160 (1)	94 (1)	137 (1)	–	82 (6) EST	193 (1) EST*	–	–	–
	North Antrim coast	–	–	–	0 (1)*	2 (1) EST	6 (2) EST*	4 (7) EST*	–	3 (1) EST*	–	5 (1) EST
	Outer Ards SPA	–	–	–	53 (1)	77 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–
Shag	Downhill	3 (2)*	0 (1)	–	–	–	–	13 (5)	13 (1)	12 (1)	–	18 (1) EST
(AON)	Larne Lough to Portmuck	20 (1)*	22 (1)*	20 (1)	25 (1)	18 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–

	Maggy's Leap	3 (1)*	3 (1)*	5 (1)	–	9 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Muck Island	17 (1)*	21 (1)	30 (1)	34 (1)	38 (1)	31 (1)*	67 (1)	71 (1)	13 (1)	23 (1)	33 (1) EST*
	Rathlin Island SPA	20 (1)	47 (1)	30 (1)	55 (1)*	20 (1)	–	74 (1)	100 (1) EST*	70 (1) EST	56 (1) EST	84 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	64 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap to Newcastle	–	3 (1)	–	–	–	15 (1)	12 (1)	10 (1) EST	8 (1)*	9 (1) EST	8 (1)
	North Antrim coast	–	1 (6)	1 (7)	2 (2)*	0 (1)	–	8 (7)	6 (2)	9 (2)	–	12 (2) EST*
	Sheep Island SPA	–	84 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	75 (1) EST
	The Maidens	–	–	–	20 (1) EST	–	–	–	–	–	–	120 (1) EST
Great Skua (AOT)	Rathlin Island SPA	1 (1)*	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)*	–	–	2 (1) EST	1 (1) EST*	1 (1) EST	1 (1) EST	1 (1) EST
Kittiwake (AON)	Downhill	92 (2)*	–	–	–	–	–	102 (6)	130 (1)	117 (1)*	–	172 (1) EST
	Larne Lough to Portmuck	835 (1)*	1,072 (1)*	1,053 (1)	683 (1)	1,145 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap	86 (1)*	78 (1)*	76 (1)	68 (1)*	91 (1)*	–	–	–	92 (1)	–	–
	Muck Island	225 (1)*	351 (1)	369 (1)	314 (1)	519 (1)	521 (1)*	603 (1)	711 (1)*	299 (1)	415 (1)	674 (1)
	North Antrim coast	207 (3)	279 (10)*	236 (10)	293 (9)*	332 (6)*	141 (1)*	423 (7)	499 (2)*	366 (2)	–	701 (3) EST
	Maggy''s Leap to Newcastle	–	–	–	513 (1)*	671 (1)*	717 (1)*	759 (1)*	–	545 (1)*	588 (1) EST	690 (1) EST
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	13,706 (1)	–	9,629 (1)	–	10,504 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	230 (1)	–	–	–	463 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	58 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
Black–headed Gull (AON)	Belfast Harbour	450 (1) EST*	386 (1)*	717 (1)	607 (1)	560 (1)	806 (1)*	720 (1)	1500 (1)	587 (1)*	402 (1)*	620 (1) EST
	Carlingford Lough SPA	1 (1)*	–	–	–	0 (1)*	–	–	–	–	1 (1)*	18 (2) EST*
	Larne Lough SPA	1,825 (1)*	3,201 (1)*	3,060 (1)*	2,895 (1)*	2,618 (1)	2,000 (1)*	2,236 (1)	2,089 (1)	2,888 (1)*	1,620 (1) EST *	1,871 (1) EST
	Lough Neagh/Lough Beg SPA	95 (1)*	179 (8)*	115 (1)*	146 (2)*	143 (1)	104 (1) EST*	121 (1)	252 (2) EST*	107 (1)*	104 (1)*	95 (1) EST
	Lough Vearty	5 (1)*	0 (1)	0 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Lower Lough Erne	1,026 (1)*	1,238 (1)*	1,218 (1)*	1,371 (1)*	1,718 (1)	–	1,416 (1)	1,255 (1)	–	–	1,245 (1)*
	Outer Ards SPA	135 (1)	67 (1)*	93 (1)	189 (2)*	239 (1)*	0 (1)*	135 (2)	29 (2)*	255 (1)*	112 (1)*	101 (2)*
	Strangford Lough SPA	1,265 (1)*	1,312 (1)*	1,271 (1)	1,267 (1)*	1,305 (1)*	–	–	1,297 (1)*	1,179 (2)*	653 (2)*	385 (2)*
	Antrim Town	–	15 (1) EST	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Moorlough Lake	–	0 (1)*	–	93 (1)*	–	–	67 (1) EST	58 (1) EST	10 (1) EST*	11 (1) EST	4 (1) EST
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1) EST*	0 (1)	–	–	–
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	5 (1)*	–	–	40 (1) EST	43 (1) EST
Mediterranean Gull (AON)	Larne Lough SPA	5 (1)*	5 (1)*	2 (1)*	5 (1)*	1 (1)	1 (1)*	3 (1)	4 (1)	5 (1)*	2 (1) EST*	3 (1) EST
	Strangford Lough SPA	1 (1)*	0 (1)	0 (1)	2 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	–	2 (1)*	2 (1) EST	3 (1)*	1 (1) EST

	Belfast Harbour	–	2 (1)*	5 (1)	7 (1)	6 (1)	–	1 (1)	4 (1)	5 (1)*	2 (1)*	4 (1)*
	Lough Neagh/Lough Beg SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1)*	–
Common Gull (AON)	Carlingford Lough SPA	1 (1)*	3 (1)*	6 (1)*	6 (1)*	18 (2)*	1 (1)	7 (2)*	–	–	8 (1)*	36 (2) EST*
	Larne Lough SPA	24 (1)*	27 (1)*	32 (1)*	37 (1)*	9 (1)	22 (1)*	28 (1)	45 (1)	47 (1)*	49 (1) EST*	52 (1) EST
	Lough Vearty	16 (1)*	–	8 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Lower Lough Erne	164 (1)*	189 (1)*	143 (1)*	262 (1)*	337 (1)	–	–	238 (1)	–	–	–
	Muck Island	20 (1)*	–	–	–	–	34 (1) EST	23 (1)	28 (1)	–	3 (1) EST	15 (1) EST
	Outer Ards SPA	0 (1)	1 (1)*	8 (1)	10 (1)	5 (1)*	0 (1)*	7 (1)	5 (1)*	7 (1)*	6 (1)*	7 (1)
	Rathlin Island SPA	22 (1)	84 (1)	52 (1)	62 (1)*	21 (1)	–	69 (1)*	42 (1)	37 (1)*	33 (1)*	161 (1) EST
	Strangford Lough SPA	229 (1)*	333 (1)*	322 (1)	293 (1)*	346 (1)*	–	–	320 (1)	329 (1) EST	282 (1)*	258 (1)*
	Antrim Town	–	15 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	15 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	6 (1)	5 (1) EST
	East Antrim Coast	–	–	–	–	0 (1)*	–	3 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	–	–	40 (1) EST*	16 (1)*	–	–	–	14 (2) EST*
Lesser Black–backed Gull (AON)	Lower Lough Erne	1,211 (1)*	1,185 (1)*	1,316 (1)*	1,622 (1)*	1,584 (1)	–	–	1,653 (1)	–	–	2,929 (1)*
	Strangford Lough SPA	433 (1)*	298 (1)*	343 (1)*	310 (1)*	316 (1)*	–	–	339 (1)*	293 (1)*	288 (1)*	271 (1)*
	Antrim Town	–	600 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Belfast Harbour	–	–	1 (1)	1 (1) EST*	1 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Belfast	–	–	–	101 (1)*	221 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	365 (1)*	547 (1)*	–	390 (1) EST*	602 (1)	683 (1) EST*	556 (2) EST	651 (1) EST
	Carlingford Lough SPA	–	–	–	–	2 (2)*	–	0 (2)*	2 (1)*	–	–	–
	Muck Island	–	–	–	–	–	13 (1) EST*	11 (1)*	19 (1)	2 (1)	12 (1) EST	104 (1) EST
	Outer Ards SPA	–	–	–	–	–	0 (1)*	–	1 (1)	–	–	–
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	–	–	–	3 (2)*	–	–	–	–
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	519 (1)	–	825 (1)	726 (1) EST	710 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	88 (1)*	–	–	–	6 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	537 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
	Gun's Island Northern Island	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	10 (1) EST	–	–	–
Herring Gull (AON)	Larne Lough to Portmuck	2 (1)*	2 (1)	1 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Lower Lough Erne	4 (1)*	5 (1)*	5 (1)*	5 (1)*	3 (1)	–	–	3 (1)	–	3 (1)*	4 (1)*
	Strangford Lough SPA	679 (1)*	1,177 (1)*	1,070 (1)*	1,062 (1)*	1,273 (1)*	–	–	1,523 (1)*	1,920 (1)*	1,900 (1)	1,724 (1)*
	Antrim Town	–	15 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Belfast	–	–	–	16 (1)*	39 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	483 (1)*	483 (1)*	–	585 (1) EST*	680 (1)*	869 (1) EST*	1,081 (2) EST	709 (1) EST *

	Outer Ards SPA	–	–	–	187 (2)*	199 (1)*	0 (2)*	4 (1)	3 (1)*	–	–	3 (1)*
	Portrush Harbour	–	–	–	2 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Carlingford Lough SPA	–	–	–	–	2 (2)*	–	24 (2)*	20 (1)*	15 (1)*	3 (1)*	6 (2) EST*
	Maggy's Leap	–	–	–	–	1 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap to Newcastle	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1)	0 (1)*	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)	–
	Muck Island	–	–	–	–	–	17 (1) EST*	18 (1)	25 (1)	–	74 (1) EST	154 (1) EST
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	–	–	–	9 (3)*	–	–	–	10 (2) EST*
	North Antrim coast	–	–	–	–	–	–	1 (7)	–	–	–	–
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	83 (1)	–	174 (1)	205 (1) EST*	254 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	55 (1)	–	–	–	4 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	229 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
	Gun's Island – Northern Is.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	5 (1) EST	–	–	–
Great Black–backed Gull (AON)	Carlingford Lough SPA	2 (1)*	2 (1)*	2 (1)*	4 (1)	0 (1)*	–	0 (2)*	–	–	–	–
	Larne Lough to Portmuck	2 (1)*	1 (1)	2 (1)	2 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Lower Lough Erne	2 (1)*	4 (1)*	4 (1)*	2 (1)*	3 (1)	–	1 (1)	2 (1)	–	1 (1)	1 (1)*
	Muck Island	1 (1)*	–	2 (1)	2 (1)	–	4 (1)*	11 (1)	4 (1)	–	4 (1) EST	9 (1)
	Strangford Lough SPA	62 (1)*	125 (1)*	114 (1)	129 (1)*	107 (1)*	–	–	127 (1)	149 (1)*	155 (1)*	149 (1)*
	Lough Neagh/Lough Beg SPA	–	–	1 (1)	1 (1)*	–	2 (2) EST*	–	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap	–	–	2 (1)	–	1 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Outer Ards SPA	–	–	–	40 (1)	42 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–
	Maggy's Leap to Newcastle	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1)	0 (1)*	2 (1) EST*	0 (1)*	1 (1) EST	1 (1)*
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	12 (1)	–	20 (1)	27 (1) EST	25 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	7 (1)	–	–	–	–
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	4 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
	The Maidens	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	5 (1) EST*	–	–	12 (1) EST
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	5 (1)	–
Little Tern (AON)	Outer Ards SPA	–	–	–	–	–	0 (1)*	–	–	–	1 (1)	–
Sandwich Tern (AON)	Carlingford Lough SPA	250 (1)*	7 (1)*	71 (1)*	13 (1)*	48 (2)*	–	52 (1)*	–	39 (1)*	52 (1)*	103 (1) EST
	Larne Lough SPA	694 (1)*	1,229 (1)*	1,141 (1)*	732 (1)*	1,010 (1)	900 (1)*	1,113 (1)	1,254 (1)	1,002 (1)*	621 (1) EST*	655 (1) EST
	Lower Lough Erne	138 (1)*	226 (1)*	316 (1)*	250 (1)*	230 (1)	143 (1) EST*	126 (1)	102 (1)	–	42 (1)*	107 (1)
	Outer Ards SPA	0 (1)	0 (1)*	145 (2)	92 (2)*	0 (1)*	14 (3)*	14 (1)	48 (1)*	128 (1)*	1 (1)	454 (1)
	Strangford Lough SPA	581 (1)	337 (1)*	775 (1)*	776 (1)*	434 (1)*	252 (1)	–	310 (1)	251 (1)*	170 (1)	26 (1)*

Common Tern (AON)	Belfast Harbour	344 (1)*	418 (1)*	367 (1)	385 (1) EST*	672 (1)	80 (1)*	485 (1)	360 (1)	92 (1)*	51 (1)*	77 (1) EST
	Carlingford Lough SPA	220 (1)*	123 (1)*	147 (1)*	70 (1)*	56 (2)*	25 (1) EST*	168 (2)*	96 (1)*	40 (1)*	101 (1)*	110 (1) EST
	Larne Lough SPA	353 (1)*	333 (1)*	355 (1)*	307 (1)*	303 (1)	187 (1)*	157 (1)	129 (1)	114 (1)*	28 (1) EST*	52 (1) EST
	Lough Neagh/Lough Beg SPA	84 (1)*	75 (12)*	102 (1)*	135 (3)*	128 (1)	68 (1) EST*	37 (1)	39 (2) EST*	23 (1)*	21 (1)*	83 (2) EST
	Lower Lough Erne	30 (1)*	41 (1)*	51 (1)*	52 (1)*	54 (1)	36 (1) EST*	26 (1)	33 (1)	21 (1)*	15 (1)	21 (2)
	Moorlough Lake	0 (1)	–	–	2 (1) EST*	–	–	9 (1) EST	12 (1) EST*	3 (1) EST	6 (1) EST*	6 (1) EST*
	Outer Ards SPA	3 (2)*	18 (1)*	203 (2)	17 (1)	21 (1)*	25 (3)*	13 (1)	26 (2)*	23 (1)*	13 (1)	4 (1)
	Strangford Lough SPA	402 (1)	457 (1)	262 (1)	340 (1)	262 (1)*	228 (1)	–	449 (1)*	273 (1)*	185 (2)*	210 (2)*
	Belfast Channels	–	12 (1)*	13 (1)*	0 (1)	17 (1)	29 (1) EST*	32 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
Roseate Tern (AON)	Larne Lough SPA	1 (1)*	1 (1)*	1 (1)*	1 (1)*	–	1 (1)*	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*
Arctic Tern (AON)	Belfast Harbour	83 (1)*	4 (1)*	–	15 (1) EST*	1 (1)	–	–	3 (1)	13 (1)*	6 (1)*	2 (1)*
	Carlingford Lough SPA	85 (1)*	41 (1)*	20 (1)*	70 (1)	100 (2)*	–	–	–	43 (1)*	49 (1)*	60 (1) EST
	Larne Lough SPA	1 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Outer Ards SPA	135 (2)*	43 (1)*	517 (3)	343 (2)*	255 (1)*	177 (3)*	216 (1)	238 (2)*	171 (1)*	211 (3)	267 (3)*
	Strangford Lough SPA	194 (1)*	173 (1)	73 (1)*	193 (1)	245 (1)	105 (1)	–	173 (1)	154 (1)*	138 (1)	62 (1)
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	150 (1) EST*	150 (1) EST*	200 (1) EST*	0 (1)*	–	82 (1) EST	51 (1) EST	15 (1) EST
Guillemot (IND)	Larne Lough to Portmuck	2,137 (1)*	2,675 (1)*	2,326 (1)	2,284 (1)	2,617 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Muck Island	2,070 (1)*	2,926 (1)	2,554 (1)	2,478 (1)	2,782 (1)	3,107 (1)*	2,340 (1)	2,868 (1)*	1462 (1)	1554 (1)	3,337 (1) EST
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	–	–	–	278 (3)*	–	–	–	842 (1) EST
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	149,510 (1)	–	110,534 (1) EST	–	136,100 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	703 (1)	–	–	–	653 (1) EST
Razorbill (IND)	Larne Lough to Portmuck	506 (1)*	858 (1)*	560 (1)	882 (1)	679 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Muck Island	671 (1)*	1048 (1)	799 (1)	736 (1)	1118 (1)	871 (1) EST*	605 (1)	314 (1)	125 (1)	307 (1)*	1,044 (1)
	Causeway Coast	–	–	–	–	–	–	361 (7)*	–	–	–	153 (2) EST
	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	20 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	22421 (1)*	–	–	–	28,158 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	221 (1)*	–	–	–	1465 (1) EST
	Skerry Islands	–	–	–	–	–	–	30 (6) EST	–	–	–	–
Black Guillemot (IND)	Rathlin Island	194 (1) EST*	81 (1)*	70 (1)*	80 (1) EST*	75 (1) EST*	80 (1) EST*	51 (1) EST*	–	286 (1) EST*	307 (1) EST*	383 (1) EST *
	Annalong Harbour	–	39 (1)	–	34 (1)*	58 (1)*	–	58 (1) EST*	–	–	52 (1)*	58 (1)*
	Ardglass	–	16 (1)*	18 (1)*	–	–	–	13 (1) EST*	10 (1)	–	12 (1)*	14 (1) EST*
	Ballycastle	–	12 (3)*	–	–	–	–	10 (2) EST*	–	–	–	–

	Ballyhalbert	–	2 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	1 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Ballywalter	–	8 (1)*	2 (1)*	–	8 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Bangor	–	56 (1)*	–	76 (1)*	57 (1)*	–	75 (1) EST*	89 (1) EST*	–	63 (1)*	45 (1) EST*
	Bangor to Groomsport	–	0 (1)	0 (1)*	10 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Belfast (Harbour)	–	113 (1)	113 (1)*	–	–	–	58 (3) EST*	133 (4)*	115 (4)*	69 (3)*	73 (4) EST*
	Belfast to Grey Point	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	7 (1)*	–	–	7 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
	Carlingford Lough	–	46 (3)*	37 (3)*	47 (3)*	42 (2)*	–	19 (3) EST*	22 (3)*	33 (4)*	26 (4)*	25 (3)*
	Carrickfergus/White Head	–	150 (2)*	198 (2)*	140 (1)*	93 (1)*	–	163 (1) EST*	156 (2) EST*	153 (2) EST*	179 (2) EST*	197 (2)*
	Donaghadee	–	8 (1)*	–	–	9 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Grey Point to Bangor	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	1 (1)*	–	4 (1) EST*	11 (1) EST*	–	–	4 (1)*
	Groomsport	–	10 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	25 (1)*	–
	Groomsport to Donaghadee	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	–	–	–	23 (1)*	21 (1)*	14 (1)*	21 (1)*
	Larne Lough Island Magee	–	195 (4)*	111 (4)*	161 (4)*	92 (2)*	16 (1) EST*	55 (1) EST*	83 (1) EST*	107 (1)*	114 (1)*	114 (1)*
	Larne Lough to Portmuck	–	38 (3)	–	32 (3)*	–	–	36 (2) EST*	44 (2) EST*	38 (1)*	27 (2)*	42 (2)*
	Larne to Torr Head	–	8 (2)*	78 (4)*	84 (4)*	9 (3)*	58 (1) EST*	70 (10) EST*	72 (4) EST*	61 (1)*	102 (8) EST*	102 (8)*
	Lough Foyle	–	6 (2)*	0 (3)*	–	–	–	20 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
	Muck Island	–	8 (1)*	–	14 (1)*	–	42 (1)*	4 (1) EST*	8 (1) EST*	9 (1)*	–	22 (1)*
	Portavogie	–	12 (1)*	2 (1)*	–	12 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Portbradden/Island Lean Quay / Carrickarede – Tysties	–	7 (1)	–	–	0 (1)*	–	16 (2) EST*	–	–	–	25 (1)*
	Strangford Lough	–	17 (2)*	30 (7)*	23 (1)*	–	0 (2)*	–	0 (1)*	8 (3)*	37 (2)*	30 (3)*
	The Barmouth (River Bann)	–	11 (1)	–	22 (1)*	26 (1)*	–	–	16 (1) EST*	15 (1)*	–	–
	Whitehead Town	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	1 (1)*	0 (1)*	–	–	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*	0 (1)*
	Ballywalter to Ballyhalbert	–	–	0 (1)*	–	–	3 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–	–
	Bloody Bridge to Newcastle	–	–	–	9 (1)*	26 (1)*	–	–	48 (1) EST*	–	30 (1) EST*	76 (1)*
	Copeland Islands	–	–	–	100 (1)*	60 (1)*	–	60 (1) EST*	64 (1) EST*	69 (2)*	94 (2)*	7 (1) EST*
	Kilkeel Harbour	–	–	–	12 (1)*	–	–	14 (1) EST*	–	–	–	–
	Mourne Coast	–	–	–	25 (1)*	11 (1)*	–	–	–	–	7 (1) EST*	–
	Ramore Head/White Rocks	–	–	–	14 (1) EST*	25 (1) EST*	–	25 (2) EST*	0 (1)	22 (1)*	10 (1)*	9 (1)*
	Bengore Head	–	–	–	–	3 (1)*	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Magilligan to Castlerock	–	–	–	–	16 (1)*	–	10 (1) EST*	15 (1) EST	–	11 (1)*	11 (1)*
	Runkerry to Benbane Head	–	–	–	–	62 (2)*	–	58 (2) EST*	8 (2) EST*	32 (2)*	29 (2)*	46 (2)*
	White Rocks/Runkerry Point	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3 (1)*	–	–	–

Puffin	Larne Lough to Portmuck	63 (1)*	52 (1)*	57 (1)	55 (1)	54 (1)	–	–	–	–	–	–
(IND)	Copeland Islands SPA	–	–	–	21 (1) EST*	106 (1)*	144 (1) EST*	68 (1) EST*	53 (1) EST	25 (1)*	–	120 (1)*
	Muck Island	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1)	–	0 (1)*	–	–	2 (1)
	Rathlin Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	407 (1)	–	1171 (1) EST	1172 (1) EST*	1719 (1) EST
	Sheep Island SPA	–	–	–	–	–	–	1 (1)*	–	–	–	–

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KATHERINE BOOTH JONES

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Apologies if we have inadvertently omitted anyone.

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