

2019 Seabird Summary

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

Alderney's fulmars occupy the sea cliffs at the western end of the island, the south-west coast and on Coque Lihou. Birds were also seen prospecting the coastline between Corblet's point and Cat's bay at the north-east end of the island. To establish the number breeding we undertook periodic shore based counts from the cliff-tops and two round-island boat surveys on 17th May and 19th June.

Most, if not all the breeding birds, occupied the cliffs between Hanaine bay and the bay of Trois Vaux and it was from here that an assessment of productivity was made. Productivity was calculated as the number of fledged chicks divided by the number of apparently occupied sites (AOS).

As observations were made from afar and fulmars often sit for prolonged periods at preferred 'perch points' on the cliffs it is difficult to determine whether a sitting bird is incubating an egg or not. To determine which sites were being used as nest sites we therefore made four repeat counts between 25th May and 14th June when all the nesting birds would have laid. Sites that had birds consistently present and sitting from within this period were deemed to be nesting and were designated as an AOS. Thereafter observations were made every 10 days until the last chicks had fledged.

Fifty-one 'perch points' were regularly used by Fulmars on the cliffs between Hanaine bay and Trois Vaux. Of these 31 were identified as nest sites (AOS). Sixteen sites failed to hatch their eggs or lost a chick soon after hatching. One site lost its chick later, probably in strong winds or through predation. The last fulmar chick to fledge went to sea between 2nd and 9th September.

During the first boat based counts an additional four likely AOS were also seen. Two of these were on the south cliffs of the mainland and two on Coque Lihou. However, the breeding status of these sites was uncertain as no birds were seen at them on the second boat survey. If we assume nesting did not occur at these sites, then the total breeding population was 31 AOS with a productivity of 0.45 chicks per nest. This level of productivity was an improvement on the last two years although it lay below that seen prior to 2014. Nevertheless, the number of fulmars breeding on Alderney has remained stable since at least 2012.

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*

On 3rd February about 100 gannets were seen gathered on the sea in the Swinge between Les Etacs and Ortac. More birds arrived in the following days and by 9th February +1,000 Gannets were circling Les Etacs with a smaller number over Ortac. On 10th February the first had settled on the rocks and the breeding season had begun.

The number of gannets breeding on Les Etacs and Ortac are censused once every 5 years and were not counted in 2019. The next census is due in 2020. Productivity, however, is assessed annually and this year was estimated from a sample of nests on Les Etacs that were easy to watch from mainland Alderney. These were observed throughout the breeding season (3rd February to 2nd November) to record their outcome and the number of chicks raised to fledging. Their productivity was calculated as the number of nests that successfully fledged a chick divided by the number of nests under observation and this figure was used as a likely proxy for the overall breeding success of the colony.

Of 330 nests sampled from various points around the colony, 173 successfully fledged a chick, giving a productivity of 0.52. This value sat within the range recorded since 2013. However, it's likely these figures were all under-estimates as none took into account the number of gannets that do not lay each year and this proportion can be as high as 20%.

To assess productivity more accurately we attempted to establish the number of non-layers in our sample. We did this by starting our observations earlier so that we could monitor nest attendance behaviour more closely during incubation. Birds were deemed non-layers if they did not show consistent presence at the nest or brooding behaviour over the six-week period required for incubation. Using this method, we deduced that 36 of our 330 sampled nests were likely not laid in. Assuming all the other nests in the sample had eggs the adjusted productivity improved to become 0.59 and probably matched the real value more closely.

Of the 121 nests that likely laid but did not fledge, just 27 lost a chick between its 3rd and final week before fledging. The remainder of unsuccessful nests were either unable to hatch their eggs or lost them or their recent-hatched chicks (less than 3 weeks old) for unknown reasons. Ravens, crows and sometimes larger gulls were occasionally seen patrolling the colony and may have predated some. Other eggs or young chicks may have been lost through starvation, exposure or parental incompetence.

Of the 27 chicks lost after their 3rd week, 17 died for unknown reasons. Of the other 10 chicks, one died because it became entangled in filament netting and was unable to be fed. The other nine perished following periods of stormy weather (with winds up to Beaufort 7). All these chicks were around 5-6 weeks old and near their maximum weight. At this age, gannet chicks are especially vulnerable to chilling as their down is not waterproof and they're too large to be brooded by a parent. Their size and ungainliness also makes them vulnerable to high winds and being blown from the nest particularly if it's located close to a ledge. Indeed, the earliest hatched chick from our sample perished in this way following a storm in June. We also found mean productivity of nests located at an 'edge' was lower than for nests separated from an 'edge' by at least one other nest. How nest location affects breeding success on Les Etacs warrants further investigation a productivity within our sampled plots varied across the colony from 0.41-0.75.

At monitored colonies around the U.K. productivity has changed little since the mid-1980s and generally varies between 0.6-0.9 chicks per breeding pair. Since 2013 productivity figures from Les Etacs have laid at the lower end or just below these figures. Nevertheless, the numbers of gannets nesting on Les Etacs and throughout the UK has increased over the same period so current productivity appears not to have a detrimental impact on the population although immigration from birds bred elsewhere may be important. More data on adult and immature survival would help elucidate future trends in abundance.

In 2019 peak fledging occurred in early September with corresponding peak laying and hatching occurring in late April and mid-June, respectively. The earliest chicks would have likely hatched in the 1st week of May and been laid in the 3rd week March but these perished following stormy weather in June.

The main departure from the colony occurred on 14th October with 20 chicks still left to fledge. Fortunately, these late chicks were not abandoned although they were attended much less than normal. This was because none of the late chicks' parents lingered at the colony to defend their nest or chick as usual and always left soon after provisioning was over. Despite this predicament, all but one of the late chicks eventually fledged by 31st October. The unlucky one died entangled in netting.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Between 5-10 pairs of cormorant normally nest in a small colony on Little Burhou each year. These cormorants nest early in the spring and an accurate assessment of the breeding population is usually made in April during an expedition to ring the chicks. However, in 2019 the need to count this population was thought too low when considered against the need to reduce disturbance to other species nesting on Burhou at that time of the year. As a consequence, no expedition was made and, unfortunately thereafter, the number of cormorants could only be assessed during the second 'round island' boat trip in June long after the last cormorant chicks would have fledged their young. An accurate assessment of their population was therefore not obtained although 12 birds were seen on Little Burhou.

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Shags nest throughout the archipelago except along the northern coastline of the mainland. The highest count was obtained during the June boat trip when 119 apparently occupied nests (AON) were counted around Alderney's south coast cliffs and islets. An additional 20 nests were counted on Burhou and Little Burhou. The highest concentrations of nests occurred around the south-western end of the mainland between Hanaine bay and Telegraph bay and on Coque Lihou. Too few data are available from previous years to determine any trends in numbers but this year's counts compare favourably with last year's round-island survey count of 100 shag AONs.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

In 2019 four pairs of ringed plover bred around Alderney's coast. Nesting occurred in Saye bay, Clonque bay and on Platte saline beach.

Pair 1, the earliest nesting pair, made two nesting attempts at the western end of Platte Saline before moving into Clonque Bay to try a third time. Their first clutch was found with 4 eggs on 19th April but lost an egg to predation (probably rats or hedgehog) and was abandoned by 26th April. Their second attempt, a clutch of 3 eggs survived until 6th June when another egg was lost from the clutch (again likely due to predation) and was also abandoned. The pair then re-located to Clonque bay and laid a 3rd clutch with 4 eggs in the first week of June. These hatched on 22nd June and all four chicks fledged successfully in late July.

Pair 2 nested on the north-eastern side of Saye Bay and made two nesting attempts. Their first clutch of 4 eggs was laid at the beginning of May. Three chicks hatched on 22nd May but were all likely predated by 11th June. By 22nd June the pair had laid a replacement clutch of 4 eggs. This nest survived to hatch on 15th July but by 17th July the chicks had gone and the pair abandoned the site soon after.

Pairs 3 and 4 nested in Clonque bay. Pair 3 nested at the eastern end of the bay near Fort Tourgis, pair 4 further to the west, closer to the Fort Clonque. Both pairs were later joined by Pair 1 (see above) which nested in between them in the middle of the bay.

Pair 3 made two nesting attempts. They began nesting late and did not lay their first clutch of 3 eggs until mid-May. This clutch was abandoned in early June probably following disturbance by recreational fishermen. Their replacement clutch of 4 eggs fared better and hatched on 17th or 18th July. At least two of these chicks survived until 31st July but both of these disappeared and were assumed predated by 4th August (probably by crows/gulls or birds of prey).

Pair 4 were not detected until late in the season when they already had two chicks more than two weeks old. These were in a difficult part of the bay to observe but were assumed to have fledged as full grown juveniles were seen in their vicinity later in early August.

Overall productivity expressed as the number of chicks fledged per nesting attempt or per egg were higher than in the previous two years but productivity per pair was the same as 2018 and only a little higher than 2017. Clutch survival (the likelihood a clutch will hatch) in 2019 was better though but this was probably because most pairs eventually nested in Clonque Bay where survival rates were highest.

Great Black-Backed Gull *Larus marinus*

This large gull breeds in small numbers throughout the archipelago. Eleven nests were found around Alderney and the south coast islets, with an additional six on Burhou. Nests were well spaced around the islands but 2-3 pairs nested in close proximity on Fort Les Houmeaux Florains and Houmet de Pies. Since 2005 the numbers of great black-backed gulls reported breeding each year has varied markedly ranging from one in 2013 to 23 in 2010 and 2011.

Lesser Black-Backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

The majority of Alderney's lesser black-backed gulls nest within the Ramsar site in a large colony on Burhou but 34 nests were also found around Alderney's coastline and offshore islets. The number of likely pairs nesting on Burhou was unable to be assessed this year.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Nesting herring gulls are widespread around the coast of mainland Alderney with smaller numbers also occupying the south coast islets and Burhou. Most are widely dispersed around the island but higher concentrations of nests are found on the sea cliffs in Hanaine Bay and in Godfreys Bay. A total of 81 nests were counted around Alderney and the south islets. This figure was much lower than the previous counts of 285 and 315 nests reported in 2000 and 2014 respectively. Although the decline has been rapid over the last five years the drop in numbers reflects the on-going decline of this species and may reflect changes in refuse management locally and in France.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

A small colony of common terns has nested on Houmet de Pies, on the west side of Saye Bay, for several years. However, this year the site was abandoned and although 20 birds were seen prospecting the site on 6th June none settled to nest. Instead five pairs relocated to the rocky promontory on the east side of Saye bay where at least one pair was seen sitting on eggs on 21st June. Unfortunately, these were predated soon after and no birds were present from 23rd June onwards. Nevertheless, over the same period a lone pair had also settled on the headland north of Fort Corblets and was found sitting on three eggs on 19th June. Two of these later hatched around 30th June and both chicks successfully fledged on 21st July.

The abandonment of Houmet de Pies this year was a disappointment given the successful implementation of rat control in 2018 and the continuation of this programme in 2019. Nevertheless, it was not entirely unexpected given the nature of this species' nest site selection behaviour and there's every chance the site could be used again in the future.

Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*

The puffins *Fratercula arctica* began gathering on the sea around Burhou from 20th March when 140 birds were seen rafting near shore. First landfall occurred a little while later on 6th April and monitoring began.

Estimating the size of a puffin breeding population and monitoring its productivity is not straight forward as the birds nest out of sight underground in burrows. At larger colonies elsewhere population size and productivity are generally assessed by counting occupied burrows and examining their contents. However, because the small puffin population on Alderney is more vulnerable to disturbance the AWT use a different approach that employs indirect observation. Here, the puffin population size is assessed in two ways, i) by regular boat-based counts of the number of birds rafting on the sea close to the main colony and ii), a post-breeding onshore count of likely occupied burrows.

In 2019 the counts of puffins rafting on the sea were carried out between the 20th March and 29th July. The highest number of birds recorded was 191 puffins but these were seen late in the season on 11th July and likely included many prospecting non-breeders. Counts from earlier in the season probably better represented the number of birds that likely bred on Burhou and these peaked on April 18th when 150 birds were seen.

The onshore count of burrows was carried out soon after the breeding season was over and the puffins had gone. It was undertaken over four parts of the island that have been traditionally occupied by the birds. The aim was to count all the burrows likely used by checking each for evidence of occupation such as droppings, feathers, fish, egg shells and smell. Overall, 182 burrows were thought likely occupied with the majority of these (132) located at the south-east end of the island and just four at the far western end. However, there was considerable uncertainty in these figures as much of the evidence of occupation had been washed away by recent heavy rain and some of the burrows counted were also likely occupied by storm-petrels or rabbits.

Overall we think around 100-150 pairs likely bred on Burhou. This was similar to the number estimated in 2018 but, given the potential inaccuracies in the counting methods, it should best be regarded as an indication of the colony size.

Puffin productivity was assessed with some help from an onshore remote operated camera (the AWT's pan-tilt-zoom Puffin Cam). The Puffin Cam proved useful as, although we chose not visit the colony during the breeding season to inspect the contents of active burrows, much could still be inferred by observing the birds activities above ground. For example, by watching the video stream recorded by Puffin Cam it was possible to see when the chicks started to be fed and therefore infer the dates they had begun to hatch. The likely dates the eggs were laid could then be estimated as well by simply back calculating the number of days needed to incubate them (36-43 days). This year the first puffin was seen carrying food to its nest on 17th May so laying had likely begun by at least 11th April. Some indication of breeding success was also confirmed later in the year when one young puffling was recorded leaving its burrow to fledge in the early hours of 29th July. However, overall productivity was estimated by simply comparing the number of burrows seen in use during the egg stage with the number seen in use during the chick period. This indicated that 60-88% of burrows likely raised a chick, and this figure was similar to the estimates made in previous years.

Other aspects of the puffin life ashore were recorded by Puffin Cam too including many incidences of kleptoparasitism when food was stolen from the puffins by gulls as well as three incidences of predation by Great black-backed gulls on adult puffins.

Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*

This species nests primarily on Coque Lihou but some also breed among the gannets on Les Etacs and perhaps among Razorbills on the Twin Sister stacks. The number breeding on Coque Lihou and the Twin Sisters are difficult to count as the birds' nest largely hidden from view on the southern side of the islets and/or within deep crevices and overhangs. Their numbers were therefore estimated from counts of the number of birds rafting on the sea nearby. In contrast, the nests on Les Etacs were easier to observe and were counted directly from the mainland in situ using a telescope or photography.

A peak number of 138 guillemots were seen rafting on the sea around Coque Lihou on 17th April. This likely coincided with the pre-laying period when few birds would have already settled on land and therefore likely represented a fair estimate of the colony size. The highest number of guillemots seen around the Twin Sister stacks was three on 19th June. On Les Etacs the highest count of guillemots was 69 birds seen on 12th April. Although 50-60 guillemots were regularly counted on Les Etacs between May and early June observations suggested only 20-30 birds likely bred and just one chick was subsequently seen close to fledging on 29th June.

Breeding success on Les Etacs appeared low but requires more close observation in future. Predation may have had a significant impact as crows, gulls and ravens were often seen prospecting the site and predated guillemot eggs were found on the adjacent mainland.

Razorbill *Alca torda*

The number of nesting razorbills were hard to census for the same reasons as the guillemots. Most nested out of sight among rock crevices on the Twin Sister stacks but smaller numbers occurred on Coque Lihou and Les Etacs too. Two were also seen rafting close to L'Etac de la Quoire during a boat survey on 17th May. The highest counts of birds rafting on the sea were made from shore on 17th April when 73 birds were seen around the Twin Sister stacks and 19 birds around Coque Lihou. These numbers were our best estimates of the likely colony size. On Les Etacs, the highest number of razorbills seen was three on both 10th May and 4th June. One pair were also seen allo-preening on the rocks and likely nested there

The future?

2020 will see a continuation of the monitoring reported here but with two notable additions. 1), the next Gannet census is due and the number of birds nesting on Les Etacs and Ortac will need to be counted. This will be undertaken from aerial photographs taken from above each colony via plane or drone. 2), additional boat trips will be sought to assess the feasibility of monitoring gannet productivity on Ortac with a view to doing so on an annual basis in the future. This will allow us to compare the productivity on Ortac with Les Etacs but also obtain a better overview of the two colony's population dynamics. Gaining a better understanding of how well the gannets breed on Ortac will also allow us to better predict the likely impact of summer storms there too. More frequent stormy weather in summer is forecast due to climate change and Ortacs low height and exposed position may make it especially vulnerable.