

News and notices

BOOK REVIEWS

MITCHELL, I.P., NEWTON, S.F., RATCLIFFE, N. & DUNN, T.E. 2004. *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland*. T. & A.D. Poyser, London., Hardback, ISBN 0-7136-6901-2. 511 pages, 71 figures, 91 tables, numerous photographs and drawings. £35,= (c. €46,=)

The first counts of British and Irish seabirds were made in the 19th century, and the first international census, for the Gannet *Morus bassanus*, was published by the greatest British ornithological historian, J.H. Gurney jr, in 1913. This census was repeated and British Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* added between the wars, and these censuses for Britain were converted on to a regular basis by James Fisher, and the Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* added, afterwards. My contribution was to suggest that this was a waste of observer time, and that all our seabirds should be counted together (*Bird Study* 12: 46-47, 1965). This was accepted enthusiastically by James, so when we formed the Seabird Group the next year we made him Chairman of a Census Committee to organise the first complete British and Irish seabird census in 1969-1970, which he named "Operation Seafarer" after the first Anglo-Saxon list of our seabirds.

This first census was carried out under difficulties not emphasised at the time. It was conducted in haste to provide a baseline against which to measure the impact of imminent petroleum developments, with limited resources. It was directed by James, and organised, and many of the observations made, by its only member of staff, David Saunders. It was largely complete and the resulting book, *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*, planned when James was killed in a road accident in 1970, leaving David isolated in west Wales and me in northern Scotland. At this point Stanley Cramp, who had not previously been much involved apart from raising support but had an office in London, stepped in. He was in a hurry since he had other commitments, and behaved rather arbitrarily (for example, my dedication to James explaining his role got left out of the first edition, and was abbreviated in the second), but we were too relieved to get it done by 1974 to complain.

It is noticeable that those involved in organising these censuses do not volunteer to carry out another. The Nature Conservancy Council took over and provided modern data-processing facilities for a permanent Seabird Colony Register (SCR) during the next census in 1985-1987, largely organised by Clare Lloyd. The resulting report, *The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland* (1991), was a bit larger, and the report on the third census, Seabird 2000, which

is the main subject of this review, is twice as big, beautifully produced, and the only major howlers I have detected are the promotion of the fairly well-known island of Eynhallow from Orkney to Shetland on p.88, the use of a "less than" symbol at the start of the key to all the maps of changes, and no explanation of the different colours of symbols on the European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* map on p. 87.

It differs from the previous surveys mainly by including inland colonies, and the greater attention given to the nocturnal underground-nesting petrels, counted by plotting their response to recorded calls. It starts with discussions of census methods, current status and trends, causes of change, and the international context, followed by species accounts written by a variety of well-qualified people, with tables of results for counties, maps of distribution and changes, tables of international totals, and finally discussions of causes of seabird population change and the international importance of our seabirds (expressed as confusing possible ranges of population size; this was the place for the nice clear figures in Appendix IV. The counting instructions and recording forms, techniques for counting petrels by playing recorded calls, scientific names and recorded totals are given in appendices.

Among various points, while Fulmars are still increasing in the south-west, there has been a decline in the north, possibly due to long-lining. It is not mentioned that caution is needed over old reports of Manx Shearwaters *Puffinus puffinus* and Atlantic Puffins *Fratercula arctica* which, as suggested by their names, were sometimes confused. There is a great increase in the totals of Leach's Storm-petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* at sites all located near deep water (it is not mentioned that this is not found in North America), and no mention of gull, as well as skua, predation on St Kilda, which was already prominent in 1960. There has been a decrease of northern Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, with an increase to the south and inland, where they have been joined by the inland continental race *sinensis*; this could involve breeding in the winter quarters following protection there.

There has been a decline of Arctic Skuas *Stercorarius parasiticus* possibly due to competition with and predation by the increasing Great Skuas *S. skua*, which have turned on birds following a lack of fish, and a dramatic decline of Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus*, though their numbers are now becoming stabilised, possibly due in part to changed availability of garbage and fish and in part to botulism due to eating rotten food. The Greater Black-backs *L. marinus* have declined less dramatically, whereas the Lesser Black-backs *L. fuscus*, have increased. The Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla*, which were still increasing in the 1980s, are down by a quarter, perhaps partly due to a failure of their fishy food-supply, and partly because this has also led to more predation from Great Skuas. Sandwich, Common and Little Terns *Sterna sandvicensis*, *S.*

hirundo and *S. albifrons* had declined slightly, possibly from a variety of causes including trapping of the first two in the winter.

The Common Guillemots *Uria aalge*, which had been suffering badly from oil pollution among other things, have more than doubled since Operation Seafarer following good breeding seasons, and the Razorbills *Alca torda* have also done well except in the west of Ireland, possibly due to past losses in salmon nets. Better census-methods involving early counts of birds on the sea produced a much larger total for Black Guillemots *Cephus grylle*, and the total for Atlantic Puffins is also up, especially in the north-east; though their long term decline, possibly due to climatic factors, continues in the south-west.

The discussion of causes of population change omits to consider the past thoroughly. In the early 19th century there was a huge human population on the land in Britain, with a low standard of life, leading to a crisis when the potato crop failed in the west in the "hungry 1840s", and our seabirds were apparently heavily exploited, and have been recovering ever since. We used to speculate in the last century how soon their subsequent increase would reach its ceiling, and presumably we are now seeing this, with fluctuating success from place to place, from year to year and from species to species. The 19th century overkill by "sportsmen" and plumage-collectors also hit some of the weaker populations along the east and south coasts particularly hard, exterminating Great Cormorants and Black Guillemots in the north-east and auks in the inner Channel, for example, and some have still not returned.

Comparatively little attention is also paid throughout the book to another major factor, not just climatic change, but the weather. Storms (and droughts inland) may wipe out a whole season's seabird productivity, and go on to cause serious adult mortality both then and during the subsequent moult and winter (*British Birds* 97, in press). It is obvious that if seabirds live for decades but have fairly stable populations they cannot breed successfully very often, and they evidently also sometimes suffer catastrophic natural mortality of the immatures and/or adults. This may require a different type of investigation, and it is to be hoped that the regular censuses may shed more light on it.

While there is a good deal about predation, one of the more scandalous situations has never received much attention. Those who went on the 1966 Congress Cruise may remember how while the Isle of May was then a sordid gull slum, there was a sort of pink shimmer of Roseate Terns *S. dougallii* over Inchmickery in the central Firth of Forth. Soon afterwards the gulls were poisoned on the May, and for a while the Firth was full of dead bodies, while afterwards the surviving birds descended on all the other islands and roof-tops for miles around, including Inchmickery (photo, p.238), since when the Forth Roseate Terns have been reduced to a remnant on a rock. It seems time

Inchmickery was also cleaned up as well as the Isle of May, and the Roseate Terns tempted back from Ireland again.

There is also little comment on possibly one of the most serious problems, when seabird colonies are targeted by individual predators. The entire season's production of thousands of terns on the Sands of Forvie was once wiped out by two or three pairs of Herring Gulls, and that of a west coast Little Ternery by a pair of Magpies *Pica pica*. It is now accepted practice to exclude Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* by electric fences, and Clive Craik has shown that it is easy to control the Mink *Mustela vison* attacking west coast seabird colonies. Yet, when I suggested at the 8th International Seabird Conference that someone should set about the small proportion of the Shetland Great Skuas now devastating their seabird colonies with a 22 rifle, there was a gasp of horror.

In general, this report is a fine production that has involved a vast amount of work, and my main doubt is about cover. During Operation Seafarer, the Census Committee met at regular intervals to review this, while we borrowed RAF Shackleton aircraft afterwards to make sure of it. Since then I get the impression that there has been increasing concern with counting the often uncountable rather than finding everything. For example, while the maps of European Storm-petrel colonies show increasingly large, confident blobs, little seems to have been done about some of the queries, for example around Skye, which seem to have got lost, and the Irish also think they have more birds.

Some of the gull figures also seem doubtful, notably the comparisons with the BTO Atlases (p.208, 219). Are these declines real, or merely a measure of declining thoroughness? There are similar problems with the surveys of roof-nesting gulls, where the largest population, in Aberdeen, was noticed very late in the day, although there is a full-frontal view of a big colony as one walks out of the railway station. Are these figures in turn increasing totals, or merely a measure of increasing thoroughness? And where are the Ring-billed Gulls *L. delawarensis* and Little Gulls *L. minutus*, which seem likely to be breeding somewhere by now?

The real question now is where to go next. This book is already quite big enough, without putting off the young by doubling it every fifteen years with a diminishing amount that is new. The next thing we need to know is what is happening elsewhere, in case for example our Sandwich Terns are periodically taking French Leave in the Netherlands in the same way that British Roseate Terns seem to have found the Irish more hospitable. In fact what we now need to measure is not so much national totals in well-covered countries, as meta-populations throughout their range, doubtless including interesting but poorly-covered places abroad providing scope for exciting expeditions. Maybe the European Union would put up some money for this?

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