

The UK Beached Bird Survey 2019

Annual report by Sabine Schmitt

- **2019 survey finds the second lowest density of beached seabirds since 1991**
- **Oiling rate was the second lowest recorded in 29 years**

The 29th UK Beached Bird Survey took place on and around the weekend of the 23rd and 24th of February 2019. Around 550 volunteers walked 1,771 km of UK coastline (Figure 1), counting dead and sick birds washed up on the beaches and recording oiling on the birds' plumage. This survey, which was relaunched in its current form in 1991, is one of the UK's longest-running Citizens Science projects and was established to monitor chronic oil pollution in the North Sea.

February 2019 was the second sunniest since 1929⁽¹⁾ and many volunteers were able to carry

out the survey in benign weather - in contrast to the conditions during the 'Beast from the East' that had gripped the UK around that time the previous year. Throughout the winter of 2018/2019 stormy periods were brief and less intense than the previous winter, thus providing reasonable conditions for wintering seabirds. However, a severe storm in the southern North Sea at the beginning of January is likely to have contributed to a Guillemot 'wreck' (mass mortality event) along the Dutch coast (see below: 'Other Incidents').



Whitsand Bay, Cornwall (photo by Angus Holland)

UK Results

The volunteer surveyors recorded 240 dead seabirds (this count includes seaducks, divers and grebes and incomplete corpses, but not 'wings only') along the 1,771 km of coastline walked. This is the second lowest number of dead seabirds found since 1991.

The resulting density of 0.13 dead seabirds found per kilometre surveyed is less than a fifth of the long-term average of 0.72 and is the second lowest density recorded in 29 years (range: 0.08 to 3.8). Single or pairs of wings of

a further 196 seabirds were also noted and recorded as 'wings only'.

A Gannet, one Herring Gull and an unidentified bird were found entangled in netting, and four sick but unoiled seabirds were also recorded. A new website has recently been launched by the University of the Highlands and Islands where you can upload instances of entanglement and nest incorporation: <https://www.birdsanddebris.com/>

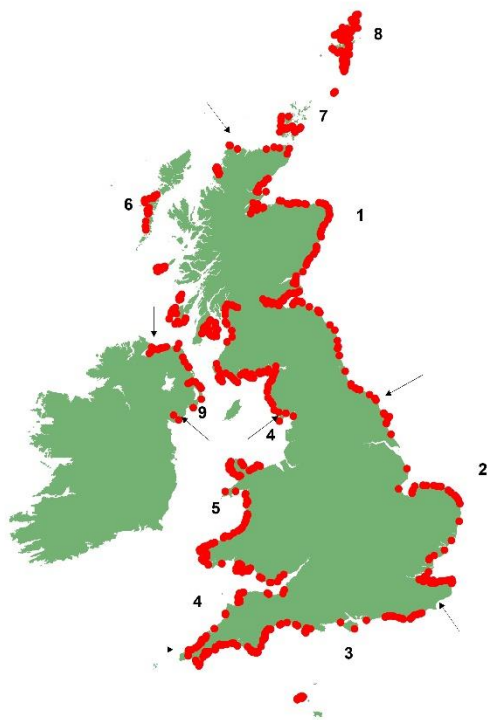


Gannet entangled in netting – Chesil Beach (photo by Karen and Alan Hocking)

Besides oiling on plumage, volunteers also record the conditions of beaches. Slight oiling was only noted at one beach in Cumbria and no beaches were heavily oiled. In many areas, particularly in the South and South East, beaches are being cleaned, but equally many

beaches were found littered with plastics and debris from the fishing industry.

If you like to get involved in beach cleans visit the Marine Conservation Society website at <https://www.mcsuk.org/>



- 1 **North East:** the tip of Cape Wrath (NC256750) to the border between N Yorkshire and Humberside (TA168750).
- 2 **South East:** the border between N Yorkshire and Humberside (TA168750) to the border between Kent and East Sussex (TR007177).
- 3 **South:** the border between Kent and East Sussex (TR007177) to Land's End (SW342254). This region includes the Scilly Isles and the Channel Islands.
- 4 **South West:** Land's End (SW342254) to the border between Lancashire and Cumbria (SD454757). This region does not include Wales.
- 5 **Wales**
- 6 **North West:** the border between Lancashire and Cumbria (SD454757) to the tip of Cape Wrath (NC256750). This region includes the Outer Hebrides.
- 7 **Orkney**
- 8 **Shetland**
- 9 **Northern Ireland:** Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland border (Lough Foyle C474245) to Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland border (Carlingford Lough (J133185).

Figure 1: Stretches of beaches walked during the 2019 UK Beached Bird Survey. The dots mark the start point of each stretch.

Over a third (37.5%) of all dead seabirds found were auks; as in almost all years this was the most numerous of all seabird groups recorded. This was followed by gulls (35.0%) and

cormorants/shags (12.1%). All species groups were found at a well below average densities. (Table 1).

Table 1: Numbers, density and % oiled for different groups of seabird species found during the 2019 UK Beached Bird Survey (excluding 'wings only')

Species Group ¹	Number found (including incomplete corpses)	Density (no./km) (including incomplete corpses)	Number found (excluding incomplete corpses)	% Oiled (excluding incomplete corpses)
Auks	90	0.05	56	0.0
Gulls	84	0.04	40	2.5
Cormorant & Shag	29	0.01	23	0.0
Fulmar	14	<0.01	5	0.0
Gannet	15	<0.01	8	12.5
Kittiwake	5	<0.01	4	0.0
Seaducks	2	<0.01	1	0.0
Divers	1	<0.01	1	0.0
Grebes	0	0	0	N/A
Terns	0	0	0	N/A
Skuas	0	0	0	N/A
Petrels	0	0	0	N/A

¹Auks: Guillemot, Razorbill, Puffin, Little Auk, auk sp. Gulls: Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Glaucous, Herring, Common, Black-headed, gull sp. Seaducks: Eider. Divers: Great Northern.

Densities for the main species groups (auks, gulls, cormorants/shags) since 1991 have been fluctuating but declining, as Figure 2 illustrates.

The peaks in 1994, 1996 and 2014 indicate mass mortality events in these years.

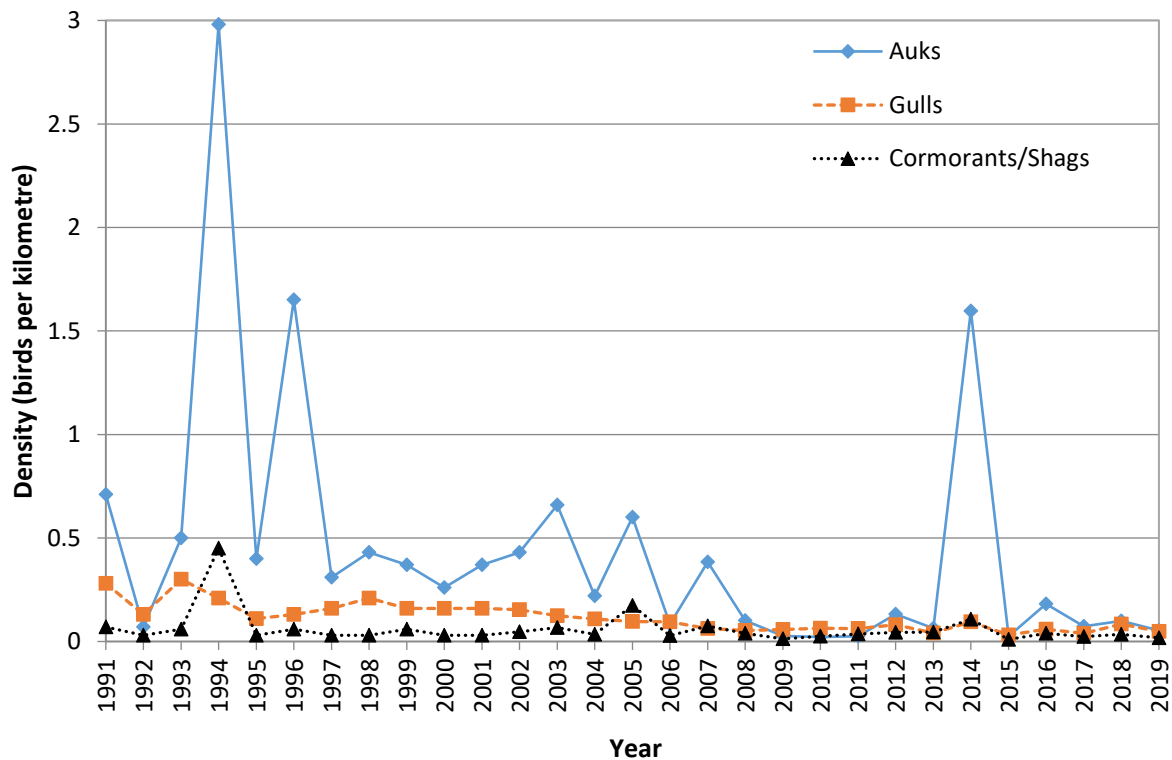


Figure 2: Trends in overall density of dead auks, gulls and cormorants/shags between 1991 and 2019

Oiled seabirds

One of the 240 dead seabirds found showed signs of slight oiling and a second one was heavily oiled. This equates to an oiling rate of 1.45% of all dead seabirds found, which is the second lowest recorded since 1991, and oiling rates for all species groups were below average (Table 1).

Oiling rates have been below 5% for each of the last eleven years (long-term average: 9.3%, range: 0.5% to 26.8%), indicating that the reduction in chronic oil pollution in the North Sea is continuing.

Regional results

The highest density of dead seabirds was recorded in Orkney (Table 2), as has been the case in 14 out of the 26 previous years, but thankfully, no oiled birds have been recorded on Orkney beaches since 2004.

The only two oiled birds found in 2019 were located in the North East and the South region.

This is the lowest number of oiled seabirds found since 1991.

Table 2: Numbers, density and %oiled for all seabirds in each region found during the 2019 UK Beached Bird Survey (N.B: South region includes Channel Islands)

Region	Distance walked (km)	Number of dead seabirds (including incomplete corpses)	Density (no. dead birds/km)	% Oiled (excluding incomplete corpses)
Shetland	31.9	13	0.41	0.0
Orkney	34.6	20	0.58	0.0
North-East	491.8	110	0.22	1.3
South-East	213.2	20	0.09	0.0
South	179.8	21	0.11	12.5
South-West	57.1	2	0.03	0.0
Wales	219.6	8	0.03	0.0
North-West	462.2	40	0.08	0.0
N. Ireland	81.1	6	0.07	0.0

Other incidents

Guillemot 'wreck'

At the beginning of February 2019 an estimated 20,000 dead and dying Guillemots washed up along the Dutch coastline and the Wadden Islands.

An investigation in the cause of the birds' death by Wageningen University & Research and Utrecht University revealed that the birds had died of starvation and not as a result of the loss of hundreds of containers from the MSC Zoe, some carrying potentially hazardous material, as first feared⁽²⁾. The birds were extremely emaciated and most of them were also quite young.

Post-breeding autumn storms may have weakened the young birds by inhibiting their ability to find food. The severe storm at the beginning of January that also caused the loss of the containers is likely to have worsened the weakened state of the Guillemots so that they finally succumbed.

Unusually for such a large mass mortality event it was limited to one species and concentrated along the Dutch coast with no similar reports received from the neighbouring countries or any parts of the UK coastline. The reason for that may lie in the fact that in autumn and winter, 2% (more than 130,000) of the total global Guillemot population is found in the Dutch North Sea, particularly in the area of the Frisian Front, north of the Wadden Islands. This is a very important area for Guillemots due to its richness in food and for that reason has been designated as a protected nature area in the North Sea.⁽³⁾

Oil spill

On the 19th of February an oil-based spill was noted on the Fife coastline at Limekilns and Charlestown. The beach was quickly closed off and it is not known whether any seabirds had been affected. Fife Council reported only that "Fortunately initial surveys indicate that there has been minimum impact on birds and wildlife".⁽⁴⁾

Other species recorded

Seabirds make up the majority of records we receive, however, volunteers have also noted this February 56 other bird species, from Barn Owl to Woodcock, and the same number of 'wings only' of other birds was recorded during the survey.

Six cetaceans were found in the North-West region only. Seventeen dead seals were also

recorded, eight of them along the Norfolk coast.

You may wish to report your marine animal findings to the UK Cetacean Strandings Investigations Programme (CSIP) at <http://ukstrandings.org/how-to-report-a-stranding/> or for Scotland to the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS) at <http://www.strandings.org/>.

Thank You and Good Bye!

With this, my 17th Beached Bird Survey report, I will be leaving the RSPB. I don't want to go without saying a big THANK YOU to all of you who contributed to and supported the survey in many different ways: First and foremost, of course, those of you who braved the elements and carried out the survey, many of you year after year. One such dedicated volunteer was Lynn Jenkins, who sadly passed away earlier this year. Please read about her life and volunteering below. Without you and people like Lynn, we could not run the survey. Thank you also for your patience whenever we introduced yet another change to the recording system 😊.

I am also grateful to the local volunteer coordinators and the volunteers in some of the regional RSPB offices who help to organise the survey, and, of course, the regional RSPB staff for organising the survey in their respective regions.

Thank you also to Will Miles of the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG) who kindly shared the Shetland data with us, and Paul Britten from the RSPB's Data Management Unit who produced the map in this report. Special thanks go to Andrew Stanbury for his continued support of the new recording system and who also will be taking over as the co-ordinator of the survey.

**The next UK Beached Bird Survey will be held on
22nd – 23rd of February 2020**

References

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/summaries/2019>

⁽²⁾ <https://www.wur.nl/en/newsarticle/Deaths-among-common-guillemots-caused-by-starvation.htm>

⁽³⁾ <https://www.ecomare.nl/en/in-depth/reading-material/animals/seabirds/guillemot/>

⁽⁴⁾ <https://www.fifedirect.org.uk/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.display&objectid=42CF8C90-DA47-D2D0-25405FD9086DFCF4>

In memory of Lynn Jenkins 1942–2019



We were saddened to hear that Lynn passed away on the 9th of February 2019.

Lynn was born on the 20th November 1942 in Bexleyheath. After leaving school she joined the Civil Service and worked from 1969 in Hastings until she was made redundant in the early 1990s. This gave her the freedom of enjoying her many passions, such as gardening, travelling and, of course, birds.

Her involvement with the RSPB dates back to the early 1990s when she became leader of the Battle group and she also helped the Friends group at Rye Harbour. Her volunteering record with the RSPB speaks for itself:

1980-2018 Beached bird surveyor

2011-2015 Farmland bird surveyor

1993-2010 Battle Local Group leader (and then Newsletter editor for 2 years and Indoor meetings organiser for 3 years)

2010-2017 Hastings & St Leonards Local Group committee member (including website editor 2013-2018 and pin badge volunteer)

In 2010 Lynn was presented with a limited edition framed print of an avocet to mark her retirement as group leader and over 25 years' service to the RSPB. More recently in 2015 our Hastings & St Leonards group surprised Lynn with her 35 years long service award. All so very well deserved.



Lynn was diagnosed with cancer in 2016 but continued taking part in the Beached Bird Surveys for another two years. In February 2019 Lynn would have walked her stretch of coast for the 39th year running, one of only a handful of volunteers who have been stalwarts of the survey for such a long time.

We are very grateful for her support for the survey for so many years.

She will be missed by the many she touched with her warm heart and great sense of humour.