

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1975

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During the last ten years there has been a steady decrease in the numbers of Roseate Terns breeding in the British Isles - their European stronghold. The major Scottish colony, which is also the biggest on the east coast of Britain, is on Inchmickery. As part of a national effort to help conserve the species, Inchmickery was closed to all visitors from this year. The ladders have been cut and landing generally made more difficult. This was primarily to deter the many casual visitors from pleasure boats who unwittingly caused a lot of damaging disturbance. As a consequence the Island Counts there have had to be discontinued. I am grateful to the RSPB for permission to quote their counts there for 1975. Sandwich Terns increased by about 200 pairs to some 650; Common Terns were similar at 750 pairs while Roseates had decreased to 61 pairs (52 and 78 were the official counts in 1973 and 1974 respectively).

There was another 'red tide' in May of this year on the Forth/Farnes sector of the North Sea. The pattern seems, from initial reports, to have followed that of 1968. Red tides are caused by an abnormally high rate of reproduction of dino-flagellates. In 1968 the species concerned was *Gonyaulax tamarensis* which produces a paralytic toxin. When the dino-flagellates are in super-abundance this paralytic shell-fish poison permeates the food chain and ultimately affects the seabirds. A red-tide is usually confined to inshore areas and mainly affects species in this narrow feeding strip. Shags were the most badly hit species both in 1968 and this year, with preliminary reports suggesting a 50 per cent 'kill' of breeding birds on the Farnes for 1975 (compared to 80 per cent in 1968). As in 1968 the Forth population suffered less, with a reduction of about 7 per cent (35 nests) on Craigeith, Lamb and Fidra combined. Assuming that these colonies might have increased by some 10 per cent from the 1974 counts this really represents a 'kill' of perhaps 15 per cent of the 1975 nesting birds. The Inner Forth Shags were little affected and the number breeding on Carr Craig has increased to 13 nests. Several Fulmars and Gannets were found dead at Tynninghame in May - an unusual occurrence at this time of year. They too had probably died of paralytic shell-fish poisoning. The red-tide had apparently subsided by the end of May but the level of toxin in the environment would take several months to fall to a safe level.

In early June Nature dealt another blow. During May there had been partial culls of Herring Gulls on Fidra and the Isle of May; and a complete cull on Inchmickery. The substances used are quick acting and non-persistent. So it was puzzling to find Herring Gulls dead and dying at the breeding colonies and on the East Lothian shore before and during our visits to the islands. Eventually this was shown to be due to an outbreak of Botulism - a form of food-poisoning caused by a bacillus. After a cold start the weather in June became very calm and warm and these ideal conditions permitted the bacilli to flourish and the disease to become widespread. The big gulls (mainly Herring but including some Lesser Black Back) were the main victims although a few Black-headed and Common Gulls were affected later. By the beginning of July some 1,500 dead Herring Gulls had been collected in the Forth and it seems possible that perhaps 2,000 may have died before the end of the summer. There was a Forth breeding population of probably at least 12,000 pairs at the time of the outbreak (plus several immature birds) so the 'kill', though significant, would make no real impact on the numbers of this expanding and aggressive species.

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	Craigleith	Lamb	Fidra	Inchkeith
Fulmar	45		70	396
Cormorant		225		
Shag	214	233	25	2
Greater Black Back	?			
Lesser Black Back	x	10	x	c250
Herring Gull	x	350	x	4,000
Kittiwake	350	93	262	404
Razorbill	49	12	4	c14
Guillemot	1,100 bds	500	20	(2 bds off-shore)
Puffin	1,100 bds		12 bds	610 bds

Fulmars - occupied sites, not necessarily breeding

Craigleith Guillemots - birds on breeding cliffs

Puffins - all birds, on land and off-shore

All others - pairs or nests

x- present but not counted; c- about

Please note that the numbers in this table may not agree with those in the main Forth Seabird Group tables. In some years some islands were counted more than once. When this happened the Forth Seabird Group figures reflect the main count.