

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1976

RWJ Smith

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The 1976 island trips from North Berwick went smoothly in spite of a fresh SW wind that strengthened, necessitating a retreat down the sheltered east cliffs of Craigleith. At the Newhaven end, however, there was even more confusion than usual when our usual boat was sunk by vandals in the harbour a few days before the first trip. A desperate attempt by Mrs. E.M. Smith to locate another boat was successful only after two trips had had to be cancelled. The boat we obtained after the eleventh hour was the very fine yacht *Dunpelder* and we are very grateful to Harry Lindsay for taking us out. Unfortunately, the maximum allowed was 12 people and the dates of the trips also had to be altered, so not all those who booked were able to go. I can only apologise to those who booked and were disappointed.

Shags, once again, provide the main topic of interest. On the three East Lothian islands of Craigleith, Lamb and Fidra there had been a drop of nearly seven per cent in the number of nests between 1974 and 1975. This year there was a further decrease of 8.5 per cent - a total drop from 507 to 431 nests in two years (c15 per cent). This is the more unusual since it follows an almost continuous increase since 1959 which averaged about 10 per cent per annum. We hear that, on the Isle of May, there has been a much more dramatic decrease (numbers may be only one quarter of what they were a few years ago). On the Inner Forth the reverse is happening with Shags colonising the Haystack (one nest), Cow and Calves (2) and Inchmickery (6). There was an increase on Inchkeith from two to three nests and on Carr Craig from 13 to 15 nests, so that the total number of breeding pairs rose from 15 to 27.

There was another 'red-tide' on the Forth/Farnes sector of the North Sea, the second year running that this has occurred (see Journal 1975, page 28). One could speculate that Shag numbers on the East Lothian coast have perhaps reached the upper limit that the food supply could support and that there is now a 'settling down' to a relatively stable population. However, the decrease on the May is too drastic to be explained in this way. It is more likely that the May, being further out than the other islands from the sheltered Firth of Forth, has been more exposed to the effects of the red-tides. Probably the consequent 'kill' of Shags, and to a lesser extent other seabirds, has been much higher on the May. This would tend to explain the differential mortality among the various breeding colonies. The unprecedented spate of colonisations in the Inner Forth may well be because young birds are being forced out of the big East Lothian colonies, either to get away from the dangerous toxic areas, or perhaps because of a dearth of fish due to heavy mortality caused by these toxins. It seems that we always have to wait until 'next year' to provide the answers!

The auks, so vulnerable to large oil spills, do not, fortunately, seem to suffer so badly during 'red-tides'. Once again there has been a general increase in all species. Guillemot jumped another hurdle in 1976 when a young bird was recorded on Inchkeith - the first proved breeding on any of the Inner Forth Islands. The RSPB have again been good enough to supply counts for Inchmickery (for which many thanks). The highlight is the Roseate Tern count, which, at 100 pairs, is the best for many years. It looks as though the conservation measures taken during the last few years are beginning to bear fruit.

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	Inchcolm	Inchmickery	Inchkeith	Fidra	Lamb	Craigleith
Fulmar	8		446	70	2	70
Cormorant					150	
Shag		6	3	20	210	201
Greater Bl Back						1
Lesser Bl Back	c 20	c 5	x	c 20	c 5	x
Herring Gull	c400	c100	x	160	300	x
Kittiwake			351	275	94	c480
Common Tern	Pr	635		Pr		
Roseate Tern		100				
Sandwich Tern		566				
Razorbill			15	10	12	64
Guillemot			1	25	500	1700 bds
Puffin			750 bds	40 bds		1350 bds

Fulmar - occupied sites, not necessarily breeding

Craigleith Guillemot - birds on breeding cliffs

Puffin - all birds, on land and off-shore

All others - pairs or nests

x- present but not counted; c- about

Inchmickery counts by kind permission of the RSPB

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.