

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1978

RWJ Smith

(Reproduced from the 1978 Journal of the Edinburgh Natural History Society)

Once again June weather proved erratic for island going. The Lamb/Fidra trip was postponed and, at the next attempt, only a few of us could land on Lamb and were ashore for only some quarter of an hour making the counts very rushed and less reliable. It is some slight consolation that this was apparently the only landing there this summer because of bad weather. The Inchkeith trip was again cancelled due to boat trouble and it has been decided not to try to go there again in, future years until a more reliable boat is available. Fortunately, a small group was able to 'hitch' a lift to the island to count the sea-birds. The RSPB have, once again, very kindly allowed us to use their Inchmickery figures.

Cormorants are still on the move. There was a further shift from Lamb to Craigmyle with 80 nests there in May although many of them were washed out by heavy June rains. Another 'splinter' colony has appeared, this time on Eyebroughty where eight nests were found by Miss Dorothy Davidson at the end of June. For many years Cormorants were mainly confined to one single compact colony on the Lamb and the reason for this scattering of new colonisations is obscure. The Cow and Calves group of Cormorants had increased to at least 18 nests on 2 June with about 60 adult birds present.

For the first year since colonisation began in Inner Forth Shag nests have not increased significantly. There were 49 nests on five islands, exactly the same total as in 1977. On Inchkeith Kittiwake nests are down again, dropping from 404 nests in 1975, 351 in 1976, 338 last year and now only 291. With only a handful of Guillemots and Razorbills on these cliffs there can be no suggestion that Kittiwakes are being crowded out so some other adverse factor is at work.

In an interesting paper, Armstrong et al (1978) compare the mass deaths of Shags on the Farnes in 1975 with the 'kill' of 1968. In both of these incidents the mortality was caused by paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) caused by a super-abundance of a protozoan *Gonyaulax tamarensis*. This latest 'red tide' (see Journal 1975, page 28) may have killed some 600 or more Shags in the Farnes area. Most of these were breeding adults of which 63 per cent died, but, of the much smaller number of immature birds killed, most apparently were from further afield including many from the Forth. In 1976 breeding numbers on the Farnes had recovered to the 1975 level including a number of birds reared in the Forth area breeding for the first time. There was no evidence that breeding Shags in the Forth had been killed by PSP in 1975 but obviously recruitment to the Forth colonies from 1976 onwards would be seriously reduced due to non-breeders either being killed or being attracted to the vacant nest-sites on the Farnes.

Armstrong et al (1978) say that PSP has been recorded every year since monitoring by MAFF (Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) started in North-East England in 1968, although the levels inshore have varied considerably. They suggest that recorded levels may be influenced directly by the frequency of onshore winds which prevent the rapidly increasing *Gonyaulax* population from dispersing into offshore regions. Significantly they say, "We also need to know whether nutrient enrichment in the Firth of Forth plays a part in causing out-breaks ..." In other words, do the enormous quantities of Edinburgh sewage dumped off Seafield contribute in any way to the occasional mass seabird deaths on the Farnes?

In 1977 there appeared to be far fewer Puffins than of late. However, this year record numbers were reported at all three colonies so all seems to be well. To continue on this happier note, Guillemots are also in very good numbers and, once again, an adult Black Guillemot has summered off Fidra. It would be nice if we could find a mate for this bird!



FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1978

Reference:

Armstrong, I.H., Coulson, J.C., Hawkey, P., and Hudson, M.J. (1978). *Further mass seabird deaths from paralytic shellfish poisoning.* British Birds 71: 58-68.

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1978

	Inchmickery/Islets	Inchkeith	Fidra	Lamb	Craigmyleth
Fulmar		410	77	1	52
Cormorant	18			129	80
Shag	12	2	3-4	23	143
Greater Bl Back				1-2	1
Lesser Bl Back	10		500+	c40	c4
Herring Gull	80	2	2400+	c450	x
Kittiwake			291	243	55
Common Tern	429				
Roseate Tern	51				
Sandwich Tern	561				
Razorbill			18	19	9+
Guillemot			4	14	c750
Puffin			1000	100	2000

Fulmar - occupied sites not necessarily breeding

Craigleath Guillemots - birds on breeding cliffs

Puffin - all birds, on land or offshore

All others - pairs or nests

x - present but not counted

c - about

Inchmickery counts by 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.