

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1989

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When we first started these bird counts in 1959 it was all a clean page. Little was known of the birds that were there and less about their status. As luck would have it we arrived when the increase in seabirds, which had begun in the early 1900s, was just beginning to 'take off'. Apart from a decade when 'red-tides' had a detrimental effect on numbers of some species there has been a spectacular population boom in most of our breeding seabirds. To illustrate this each species is summarised below.

Fulmar: Inchkeith has always been the main island haunt with just over 100 sites in 1959 rising to 600 in the mid-80s and around 500 now. Tantallon has roughly similar numbers. The total for all the other islands including May was 75 sites in 1959. 30 years later there is a ten fold increase to over 800 sites. Numbers are probably still increasing but at a reduced rate.

Cormorant: First bred in Forth in 1957 (5 nests) reaching a ceiling of around 250 pairs in a little over 10 years. After a ten year lull towards the end of which the Inner Forth was colonised, there was again a spectacular increase to about 380 nests in 1989. There are indications that numbers are levelling off but another few years' counts are required to confirm this.

Shag: In the ten years from 1963 there was a rise from 170 to 500 nests on our islands then a slow decrease, due to 'red-tides' until 1980 (see Journal 1981, p. 16). Since then numbers have trebled from 400 to 1020 nests. Although 'our' birds are still doing well there have been dramatic decreases on the Bass (200 down to 100) probably due to Gannet pressure, and even more so on the May and St. Abbs cliffs. It looks as though the Shag population has 'peaked out' although this has been (wrongly) claimed in previous years by several very knowledgeable experts, so the birds may well have the last laugh and prove us wrong yet again.

The Big Gulls: All of these have had spectacular increases in breeding numbers. Great Black-backed Gulls have spread into Forth and there are now over 10 pairs nesting in spite of quite a few being killed on the May during Herring Gull culls. Lesser Black-backed Gulls first bred on Inchkeith in 1957 and there were 500 pairs some 25 years later. This history is repeated on many of the islands. Herring Gulls are some 8-10 times as numerous as Lesser Black-backed Gulls and have increased just as prodigiously. It may be that the numbers of both species are now static or declining and we will breathe a sigh of relief if this is the case. There can be too much of a good thing with these noisy and domineering characters.

Kittiwake: The pattern of increase is similar to that of the Shag. The 400+ total in 1959 (practically all on Craighleith) peaked at 1250 in 1974 then dropped to 1050 by 1979, the year when the sewage outfall at Leith Docks was cleaned up. Since then numbers have rocketed reaching 2390 nests in 1989 (not including Bass). During our 30 years numbers have doubled on the Bass (to 2300 nests) and on Craighleith (to 800). Kittiwakes have also colonised the Lamb (now 250 nests), Inchkeith (590) and Fidra (700). This pace of increase surely cannot continue but there is little sign of a slowdown at present.

Terns: In contrast to all other seabirds this group have not done so well in Forth recently. Roseate Terns have fared worst with some 500 pairs shrinking to around 20. This decrease is affecting the whole European population. The cause is obscure and may possibly be cyclical (it recolonised Forth in the 1930s), although predation by humans in their winter quarters in East Africa is currently being blamed. Sandwich Terns too are well down at 270 pairs. This is a volatile species which used

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to average around 500-600 pairs but has peaked at 1200. The vast shoals of sprats have now vanished from the Forth but it is not known whether this has affected the terns. Common and Arctic Terns have suffered from gulls and rats in the past but numbers, though still on the low side, seem to be slowly recovering.

Auks: This is another success story. Puffins once in hundreds on Craigleith can now be seen in thousands there and on Inchkeith and are also breeding on Lamb and Fidra. Guillemots arrived on the Lamb in 1963 and now number perhaps 2500 breeding pairs. There is a seven fold increase (to 1700 birds) on Craigleith and smaller increases on Fidra and Inchkeith. The much less numerous Razorbill has also done very well. It appears that auk numbers may be levelling off which is perhaps just as well as nesting sites must now be at a premium.

Overall the Forth seabirds are in a very healthy state. The possibility of a horrendous oilspill is always on the horizon but perhaps a greater threat is that posed by the over-exploitation of fishing stocks. In several parts of the world this greed has had catastrophic effects on seabird numbers. In another 30 years the SOC will be able to provide all the answers.

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	Craigleith	Lamb	Fidra	Eye-broughy	Inch-keith	Inch-mickery	Carr Craig
Fulmar	172	4	168		476	10+	
Cormorant	131	91	52				113
Shag	544	286	124		18	29	25
Great Black-backed Gull	5	1	2				
Lesser Black-backed Gull	350	5	200		x	x	x
Herring Gull	3000	225	650	82	x	x	x
Kittiwake	840	250	705		593		
Common Tern						182	
Roseate Tern						5	
Sandwich Tern						272	
Razorbill	57	41	72		46		
Guillemot	1700	3600	145		44		
Puffin	3000	50	220		2350		

x means present but not counted

All counts are of nests or occupied sites except for those of Guillemot and Puffin which are of individual birds. Once again the RSPB has kindly provided the counts for Inchmickery.

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.