

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1991

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For the whole of May northerly winds had pounded the East Lothian coast and obviously a minor miracle was needed to enable our 1 and 2 June visits to go ahead. Alas our prayers went unanswered! Instead, on the 1st we walked over the rocks at low tide on to Eyebroughty to count the Cormorants. There were none - the first nil count since they colonised the island many years ago. On the 8th we managed to land on the south sheltered side of Craigleith but Inchkeith the following day was called off. Still the north winds persisted but only force 4, permitted a landing on Inchkeith on the next Saturday and a decrease to NW2 next day saved the 1991 counts. After mid-June seabird numbers start to diminish as young Cormorants and Shags are starting to fly and the Auks, when half grown, jump into the sea and swim off with their parents to feed and moult well away from land.

The severe weather obviously had its effect on exposed nest-sites on these offshore islands. On Fidra and Lamb, Kittiwake nests were drastically down on the north-facing cliffs but had increased on the sheltered south-facing ones. Overall, on the East Lothian Islands there was a large decrease yet, interestingly, on the more sheltered Inchkeith numbers had gone up by 56 nests although this was not nearly enough to compensate for the other losses. There had obviously been quite a "shift" of established nesting birds away from the devastating winds. Reports from the Isle of May are that Shag numbers have dropped dramatically and yet all our islands show a huge rise averaging more than 20 per cent. Did we benefit from an influx of refugees from the May or did many birds there just "skip" a breeding season because of poor feeding during the gales? Is our population still rising steeply as it has done generally for many years? Or are the "experts" correct, at long last, when they assert once again that the Forth/Fames Shag population has peaked and is now on a downward path. There is no room for doubt with the Cormorants. Their numbers this year have reached a new high. The desertion of Eyebroughty was certainly caused by the exposed nature of the site to a north wind but they merely moved to the Lamb on to the south-facing sheltered top.

The Auks are more difficult to interpret. Razorbills and Guillemots are not noticeably decreasing, although, worryingly, numbers of both were down by one third on Inchkeith. Any substantial drop in the population would have most impact on the innermost islands such as Inchkeith. Puffins, on the other hand, show no diminution with more than ever before on Fidra and Inchkeith. On the latter island one of the resident dogs was seen digging out Puffins in the soft soil and cacheing the bodies and eggs among the rocks on the shore. I suppose, in these days of competition and enterprise, some might commend him to the "Top Dogs" for his energetic work. Puffin lovers might have other ideas. However, there is a possibility that the Animal Home might some day return to the mainland which would remove this particular irritation.

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	Craig-leith	Lamb	Fidra	Eyebr-oughty	Inch-keith	Inch-mickery	Carr Craig	Inch-garvie
Fulmar	162	2	177		575			82+
Cormorant	83	207					220	
Shag	646	305	242		30		23	
Great B-b Gull	3+		1+					
Herring Gull				141			41	125
Lesser B-b Gull								5
Kittiwake	225+	106	494		612			
Razorbill	80	32	91		42			
Guillemot (bds)	107+	2,400	197		48			
Puffin (bds)	1,550	5+	600		3,000			

All counts are of nests or occupied sites except for those of Guillemot and Puffin which are of individual birds. The Inchmickery counts from the RSPB are not available.

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.