

FORTH ISLAND SEABIRD COUNTS 1994

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The 36th year of the counts was also the second year of the Forth Seabird Group which collates all seabird activities in the Forth area. The spring was a poor one with cold E/N winds over much of May which may well have had a bearing on the breeding seabirds' performance.

For once, the weather was kind to the counters although the Bass trip had to be postponed for a week. There was one hitch - on the fishing boat taking us out to Inchkeith in a force 6 westerly. Three-quarters of the way over the engine developed a slight problem and the skipper, concerned that it might cut out in the confined space of the small harbour there, turned back to Granton. Fortunately the Pilot-boat service was able to help, although, as it could only take four of us, they had to be the chief seabird counters! The others went over to Fife and out to Inchcolm.

As last year, the Shags were again in trouble. In February, there was a wreck of thousands of seabirds down the east coast of Britain with most of them very thin and obviously suffering from food shortage. Although the birds involved were mainly Guillemots there was a goodly number of Shags and the numbers of these breeding were down even on last year's poor totals. However, although the survivors were later than normal in starting to breed, the number of nests with three eggs and of birds sitting tight suggested that there was a chance that reasonable numbers of the young would be fledged. Overall in the Forth the numbers of this species have declined to 20% of its 1992 total. To compare this year's total of 215 nests on Craighleith, Lamb and Fidra one has to go back to 1967 when there were 222 nests which included 132 on the Lamb and none at all on Fidra. Twenty-five years of increase has been wiped out in two disastrous years.

Following on the large numbers of Guillemots found dead in February, it is interesting that these deaths were not reflected in the breeding Counts. Apparently the victims of the wreck were northern birds wintering off our shores. By and large the auks are not doing too badly. Kittiwakes were not so fortunate as they had a very late start to the season with many not even attempting to breed. On islands where some monitoring of breeding success has taken place it is reported that relatively few young fledged. On Fidra, for example, there was an average of 0.1 young per nest - or one young fledged out of every ten nests.

Cormorants, with a total of some 434 nests, have not been nearly so badly hit as their close relatives, the Shags. The Carr Craig birds have now shifted en masse to the Haystack. A cream-coloured bird in the middle of the colony was noticed by Ronnie Morris who christened it "Baileys". It did not seem to be breeding but it will be interesting to see how it fares as it "matures".

An Eider/large-gull count organised for the Forth islands by the ITE has provided some interesting comparisons with a similar count in 1987. Eider appear to have increased by about 70% which suggests that the big gulls have little impact on this species. Once again the tiny rock of Inchmickery with 313 nests is an eye-opener. Both Herring and Lesser Black-back Gulls have increased to a total of some 20,000 pairs. Lesser Black-back, which used to be a tiny proportion of the combined 'large' gull population, now constitutes more than a third of the total. The Great Black-back, an incomer to the Forth since the last war, has now gained a foothold on all the outer Forth islands. However, its recorded increase suggests that it will be a long time before it makes any impact on the visiting bird-watcher. It has not yet bred in Inner Forth.

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To end on a gloomy note. Brown Rats are now apparently on Inchkeith, almost certainly an accidental introduction during the days of the Animal Sanctuary. Time will tell just what effect they will have on the breeding birds.

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	Bass Rock	Craig- leith	Lamb	Fidra	Eyebr- oughty	Inch- keith	Carr Craig	Inch- colm	Hay- stack	Inch- mickery	Inch- garvie
Fulmar	84	165	2	243	a	473	a	177	a	25	159
Cormorant	a	108	131	0	0	58	4	0	133	0	0
Shag	13	106	36	73	0	10	0	2+	1	10	0
Gannet	?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eider	4	153	6	220	0	323	1	258	0	313	60
Great B-b Gull	1	7	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lesser B-b Gull	60pr	934	55	492	0	2607	1-2	1669	0	108	11
Herring Gull	230pr	2385	130	1149	45	4977	38	1615	16	108	210
Kittiwake	*	564	160	326	0	440	0	62	0	0	0
Common Tern	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	92	5
Arctic Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Roseate Tern											
Sandwich Tern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Razorbill	x	76	36	85	0	55	0	0	0	0	0
Guillemot	*	1940	3200	304	0	59	0	0	0	0	0
Puffin	*	550	1+	135+	0	c300	0	27-75	0	10sites	0

(* = no count, 0 = none breeding)

For most species, the number of nests was counted; for fulmars, the number of sites, not necessarily breeding; for Razorbills, the number of sites; for Guillemots, the number of birds on cliffs; for Puffins, the number of birds seen.

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.