The UK Beached Bird Survey 2017

Annual report by Sabine Schmitt

- **2017 survey finds fifth lowest density of beached seabirds since 1991**
- **Oiling rate was the third lowest in 27 years**

The UK Beached Bird Survey was carried out on or around the weekend of the 25th and 26th of February. Over 550 volunteers walked 2081 km of UK coastline (Fig. 1) and found 318 dead seabirds (including seaducks, divers and grebes, but not 'wings only' or incomplete corpses). This equates to a density of 0.16 dead seabirds per km surveyed, the fifth lowest density recorded since 1991 (range: 0.08 to 3.8).

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The winter of 2016/2017 was rather dry and mild and any unsettled periods were relatively brief until the middle of February. Although storm Doris brought damaging winds (my greenhouse!) accompanied by heavy snowfall in Scotland and disruptions to the country around the 23rd of February, there was no noticeable impact on the seabirds. Densities were almost identical for surveys carried out before and after the 23rd and no increased numbers of beached seabirds were reported subsequently.

Seven sick seabirds were also recorded, but none of these were oiled.

The wing remains of a Fulmar were entangled in netting but no other birds were found entangled. However, as in recent years, a large range of plastic, including fishing nets, ropes and fishing line, and other man-made litter,

often in large quantities, were found on many of the beaches surveyed, reiterating the extent of the plastic pollution of our marine environment that was so graphically demonstrated by the BBC's Blue Planet II programme.

On eight stretches of beach in four of the Beached Bird Survey regions (Northern Ireland, North East, South/Channel Islands, South West) slight oiling was found, mostly only small patches.

1 **North East**: the tip of Cape Wrath (NC256750) to the border between N Yorkshire and Humberside (TA168750).

2 **South East**: the border between N Yorkshire and Humberside (TA168750) to the border between Kent and East Sussex (TR007177).

3 **South**: the border between Kent and East Sussex (TR007177) to Land's End (SW342254). This region includes the Scilly Isles and the Channel Islands.

4 **South West**: Land's End (SW342254) to the border between Lancashire and Cumbria (SD454757). This region does not include Wales.

5 **Wales**

6 **North West**: the border between Lancashire and Cumbria (SD454757) to the tip of Cape Wrath (NC256750). This region includes the Outer Hebrides.

7 **Orkney**

8 **Shetland**

9 **Northern Ireland**: Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland border (Lough Foyle C474245) to Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland border (Carlingford Lough (J133185).

Figure 1: *Stretches of beaches walked during the 2017 UK Beached Bird Survey. The dots mark the start point of each stretch.*

As in almost all of the previous survey years, Auks were the most numerous species group recorded, followed by gulls and cormorants/shags (Table 1). Terns are amongst the rarer seabird species recorded during the Beached Bird Survey as they spend their winter mostly in the southern hemisphere. Often, the few corpses that are being found have been long dead. Unusually, the Sandwich Tern found in Aberdeenshire had wintered in Peterhead.

Table 1: *Numbers, density and % oiled for different groups of seabird species found during the 2017 UK Beached Bird Survey (excluding 'wings only' and 'incomplete corpses')*

Species Group[1]	Number found	Density (no./km)	% Oiled
Auks	148	0.07	2.0
Gulls	81	0.04	2.5
Cormorant & Shag	40	0.02	2.1
Fulmar	8	<0.01	0.0
Gannet	21	0.01	0.0
Kittiwake	4	<0.01	0.0
Seaducks	6	<0.01	0.0
Divers	0	0	N/A
Grebes	1	<0.01	0
Terns	2	<0.01	0
Skuas	0	0	N/A
Petrels	0	0	N/A

[1]Auks: Guillemot, Black Guillemot, Razorbill, Puffin, Little Auk, auk sp. Gulls: Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Iceland, Common, Black-headed, gull sp. Seaducks: Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter, seaduck sp. Divers: Red-throated. Grebes: Great Crested. Terns: Sandwich, tern sp. Skuas: Great.

Densities of all species groups were well below the long-term average. Figure 2 illustrates the fluctuations in densities (birds/km surveyed) of the three main species groups (auks, gulls, cormorants/shags) since 1991, clearly marking the major mass mortality events of 1994, 1996 and 2014. It also reflects the declining trend in overall seabird densities found per kilometre surveyed during this period. This decline is particularly obvious for the last ten years, where, with the exception of 2014, densities have been below 0.4 birds/km. This is less than half the average (0.95 birds per km) recorded between 1991 and 2007.

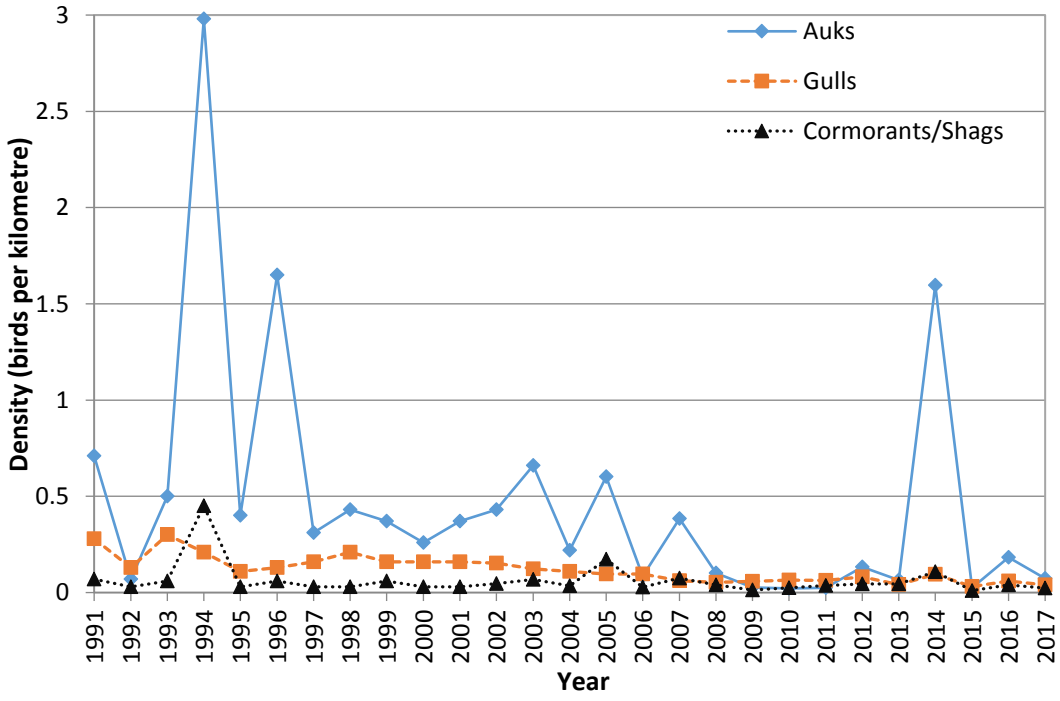

Figure 2: *Trends in overall density of auks, gulls and cormorants/shags between 1991 and 2017*

There is widespread concern for the UK's seabird populations: the UK seabird indicator[1] has shown a declining trend since the mid-1990s, and Shag, Kittiwake and Puffin joined Arctic Skuas and Herring Gulls on the Birds of Conservation Concern Red list in 2015[2]. However, we cannot simply attribute the decrease in densities found during the Beached Bird Surveys to an overall decline in seabird numbers. For example, the UK populations of the two species most frequently found during the Beached Bird Survey, Guillemots and Razorbills, have actually increased over recent decades.

Oiled seabirds

Overall, only 1.9% of all the dead seabirds recovered were oiled to any extent, the third-lowest oiling rate since 1991. Oiling rates for each of the last nine years were less than 5%, well below the long-term average of 9.8% (range 1991-2017: 0.5-26.8%).

Long-term monitoring studies of beached birds in Belgium[3] and The Netherlands[4] have also found strong declines in oiling rates. For example, when the systematic beached bird surveys along the Belgian North Sea coast began in 1962 the oiling rate of all seabirds washed ashore there was a staggering >90%, largely caused by illegal discharge during shipping operations and leakages of oil by off-shore installations. A series of legislative measures during the following decades, but also the installation of oil reception facilities in all major ports around the North Sea, led to a decline in the percentage of birds oiled to less than 20% (except for seaducks) in 2015 along the Belgium coast.

Regional results

Densities of dead seabirds found were highest in Shetland and the North-East region (Table 2). Oiled birds were only found in four out of the nine Beached Bird survey regions. It was the 18th year in a row that no oiled birds were found in Northern Ireland.

The percentage dead seabirds oiled was highest in the South-West and the South region, but it has to be noted that actual numbers involved here were very small with only one oiled bird recorded in each of these two regions.

Table 2*: Numbers, density and %oiled for all seabirds in each region found during the 2017 UK Beached Bird Survey (N.B: South region includes Channel Islands)*

Region	Distance walked (km)	Number of dead seabirds	Density (no. dead birds/km)	% Oiled
Shetland	31.9	12	0.38	0.0
Orkney	32.8	5	0.15	0.0
North-East	532.9	169	0.32	1.8
South-East	260.1	27	0.10	0.0
South	266.9	18	0.07	5.6
South-West	62.8	5	0.08	20.0
Wales	180.7	9	0.05	0.0
North-West	609.3	72	0.12	1.4
N. Ireland	104.0	2	0.02	0.0

Other species recorded

Only 49 other birds (including those unidentified) were found; 21 of these were waders. Nine cetaceans, 16 seals, eight dogfish and one otter were amongst the non-bird species recorded during the survey. Along eight stretches of beach in Aberdeenshire, covering a total of 35 km, an unusually large number of cuttlefish bones had been washed up, one recorder talking of thousands. What may have caused this event in this particular area is unclear.

You can report your marine animal findings to the UK Cetacean Strandings Investigations Programme (CSIP) at http://ukstrandings.org/how-to-report-a-stranding/ or for Scotland to the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMASS) at http://www.strandings.org/ .

Photographs

I'd love to include some more photographs in the report. So if you have taken or are going to take any pictures related to the Beached Bird Survey and are happy for me to use them in the report or in a presentation please send them to my email address: sabine.schmitt@rspb.org.uk. This could be a picture of an oiled bird, a bird entangled in netting, an unusual find, someone carrying out the survey or even just something like difficult survey conditions, i.e. foam on the beach or masses of seaweed, stormy weather, etc. You would, of course, be credited with it.

New recording form

We have recently made minor changes to the data collection. To help identify the same section of coast more easily over time, we have introduced standardised sections which can be covered across years. These are based on what has been done in the past, so it should not mean major changes, although some sections have been split up in to different subsections. *Please read the back of the new form for more details.*

Thank you!

First of all a massive thank you to Andrew Stanbury for mapping all the Beached Bird Survey sections and developing the new recording form and also to Paul Britten for helping with this. Thank you also to all the regional RSPB staff for organising the survey in their respective regions and Will George for managing the Beached Bird Survey data base. We are grateful to Martin Heubeck of the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG) for sharing the Shetland data with us.

A special thanks goes to Vic Fairbrother, who after almost 40 years is giving up the role of local co-ordinater for Cleveland, but will carry on surveying his stretch of beach. If you would like to become a local volunteer co-ordinator, please get in touch with the organiser of the survey in your regional RSPB office. And last but not least: A big thank you to all the volunteer surveyors braving the elements year after year (and of course those who have done it for the first time) to support this survey. We couldn't do it without you!

The next UK Beached Bird Survey will be held on 24th - 25th of February 2018

References

(1) Hayhow D.B. *et al.* (2017) *The state of the UK's birds 2016*. The RSPB, BTO, WWT, DAERA, JNCC, NE, NRW and SNH, Sandy, Bedfordshire.

(2) Eaton, M.A. *et al.* (2015) Birds of Conservation Concern 4: the population status of birds in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man. *British Birds*, 108, 708-746. http://britishbirds.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BoCC4.pdf

(3) Stienen, E.W.M. *et al.* (2016) Long-term-monitoring study of beached seabirds shows that chronic oil pollution in the southern North Sea has almost halted. *Marine Pollution Bulletin* (2017), Vol. 115, Issues 1-2, 194-200. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2016.12.019

(4)Camphuysen C.J. (2017) Monitoring and assessment of the proportion of oiled Common Guillemots from beached bird surveys in The Netherlands: update winter 2015/16. *NIOZ Report 2017-01, RWS Centrale Informatievoorziening BM 15.19*, Nov 2015. Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, Texel.