

THE SEABIRDS AT SEA TEAM: 1979 - ?

In 1979 the Seabirds at Sea Team was formed by four biologists in Aberdeen, Scotland. During the three year contract they developed and carried out a survey of the distribution of seabirds in offshore waters of the North Sea. Eight years later the Team is still in existence, but the members have changed. The team of three ornithologists (Andy Webb, leader, Stuart Benn and Genevieve Leaper) and one marine biologist (to be appointed) have started another three year contract. Mark Tasker, until recently the Team Leader, has taken up a new position as Marine Ornithologist with the Nature Conservancy Council.

The aim will be to carry out distribution studies off western Scotland and in the Irish Sea and to examine special features of interest in the North Sea. The programme is a continuation from three years of survey in the North Sea and one year off north-west Scotland. Most of the work will consist of routine observations from a variety of ships: research and fishery protection vessels and ferries. However, the Team will carry out a number of special projects. These will look at this inshore waters in extra detail from the air and from land, especially around the deeply indented coastline of western Scotland.

Two major projects are taking or have taken place this year. The Team has just completed a nine-person survey of the islands of St.Kilda, 70 km west of Scotland. High numbers of seabirds such as Gannets *Sula bassana*, Leach's Petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* and Puffin *Fratercula arctica* breed there, making it one of Europe's most important colonies. One team worked on land to recount the numbers of breeding birds while the other team worked at sea to look for the most important feeding areas used by birds from the colony. Some Guillemots *Uria aalge* and Puffins were travelling up to 60 km from St.Kilda to find food for their chicks: the greatest distance observed at any British colony.

The other main project being tackled this year is part of an international effort. This autumn (July-September) there will be a great deal of activity searching the North Sea for moulting and juvenile auks *Alcidae*. This period, when Guillemots and Razorbills *Alca torda* are flightless, may be when the breeding stock is most vulnerable to damage from oil pollution. Results from ringing recoveries suggest that the majority migrated from the breeding colonies in northern Scotland across the North Sea, through oil-producing areas, to Scandinavia. Our more recent observations suggest that this migration may not be as great as first thought, but we need more evidence.

In the future we will visit St.Kilda again during the breeding season, carry out a five week survey to look for moulting auks off western Britain. Results will become available at the end of 1990. Results from the previous contract in the North Sea will be published in November this year. To contact the team: Andrew Webb, Seabirds At Sea Team, 17 Rubislaw Terrace, Aberdeen, AB1 1XE, Scotland.

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