

THE OCCURRENCE OF LITTLE AUKS *ALLE ALLE*
AT BLÅVANDSHUK, DENMARK,
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE 1995-INFLUX
HET VOORKOMEN VAN KLEINE ALKEN
BIJ BLÅVANDSHUK, DENEMARKEN

BENT JAKOBSEN

Blåvand Fuglestation, Fyrvej 81, 6857 Blåvand, Denmark

ABSTRACT

Little Auks Alle alle were very rarely recorded during the first 21 years (1963-83) of seawatching at Blåvandshuk, the westernmost point at the Danish coast. A total of only 85 birds was seen in those years. From 1984 onward, the species suddenly became much more common and yearly totals of over 100 birds were now normal. After a general decrease in numbers from nearly 700 in 1990 to virtually nil in 1994, numbers peaked again in autumn 1995, when almost 2000 individuals were registered at this seawatching post. Even higher numbers were seen further north along the Jutland coast. Passage was most marked off Hanstholm, northwest Jutland. During the peak-day of the Little Auk movements, 28 October, 2300 birds passed here, while only 1628 were seen at Blåvandshuk. High numbers also passed SW Sweden that day. These observations suggest the Skagerrak was the source area for the birds seen along the west coast of Jutland. Should the birds have originated from the central North Sea, then the Jutland coast would have led more birds towards Blåvandshuk and numbers here should have been higher, not lower than off Hanstholm.

Blåvandshuk is the most westerly point at the coast of Jutland, Denmark. As such, it offers excellent possibilities for seawatching. A bird observatory was established here in 1963 and the passage of seabirds has been recorded nearly every year since, particularly in autumn. From Blåvandshuk, the coastline runs almost straight to the north, spanning some 200 kilometers to the entrance to the Skagerrak. This coastline acts as a barrier for seabirds moving in easterly directions, concentrating them and leading them past Blåvandshuk in large numbers during autumn migration. As a result, Blåvandshuk is normally the best seawatching site in Denmark, especially during westerlies.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Observations at Blåvandshuk start daily at 15 min before sunrise and usually last for 3 hours. The observation site is situated in the dunes or on an old

bunker, 5-6 m above sea-level. If seabird passage is good, observations may last longer, until migration ceases. A grand total of over 17 000 hours of observation has been achieved since 1963. Passing birds are noted as flying north or south, staging birds are noted separately.

RESULTS

Little Auks used to be very rare along the Danish west coast. Until 1973 all observations were subject to scrutiny by the Danish rarities committee. From 1963 to 1984 a total of only 85 birds was seen at Blåvandshuk. Two clusters of years with observations occurred in this period. Small numbers were seen from 1969 to 1971 and a second peak occurred in 1975, when 39 birds were seen. Numbers dropped to nil or very few per year until 1984 marked the beginning of another period, with much larger yearly numbers (figure 1). After 127 birds were seen in 1984, numbers increased to 265 in 1985 and 440 in 1986, after which numbers dropped again. Another peak was reached in 1990 with 682 birds, after which numbers again dropped to a low level, 5 in 1994.

BLÅVANDSHUK 1995 In 1995 the record total number of 1927 Little Auks was seen at Blåvandshuk. Of these, the vast majority (1825) was seen flying south, 67 birds flew north and only 35 remained in the vicinity of the station for a while. The latter birds were mainly seen on 1 November and came flying in from the north (Table 1). The total for 1995 makes a large contribution to the grand total for the whole observation period (1963-95), which now numbers 4186 Little Auks.

LITTLE AUKS SEEN AT OTHER LOCATIONS ON 28 OCTOBER 1995 The influx of 1995 that peaked on 28 October was seen at several places along the Jutland coast. At Hanstholm, the northwestern tip of Jutland, 2300 birds passed, at Vejby Klit (between Hanstholm and Blåvandshuk) 1978 were seen (Christensen 1996). At Skagen only 3 birds were seen this day. Although it is tempting to put the total of birds seen that day in Denmark at 5906, the similarity of the figures at all three stations rather suggests that a minimum of 2300 birds passed the Danish westcoast that day. In Sweden numbers of Little Auks also peaked on 28 October. On that day, a total of 908 was counted at Hönö, along the Swedish westcoast (Gustafsson & Øhman 1995).

PHENOLOGY AND WEATHER Little Auks are mainly seen in autumn at Blåvandshuk, with a narrow peak around the 1st of November (figure 2). The

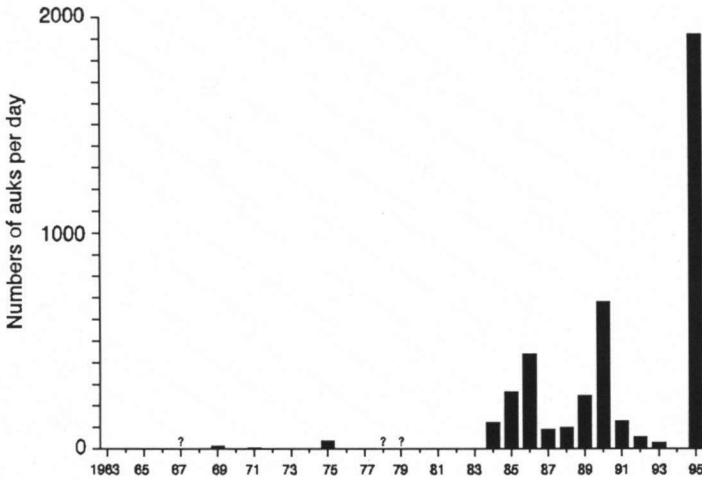


Figure 1. The occurrence of Little Auks at Blåvandshuk 1963-95.
 Figuur 1. Het voorkomen van Kleine Alken bij Blåvandshuk, 1963-95.

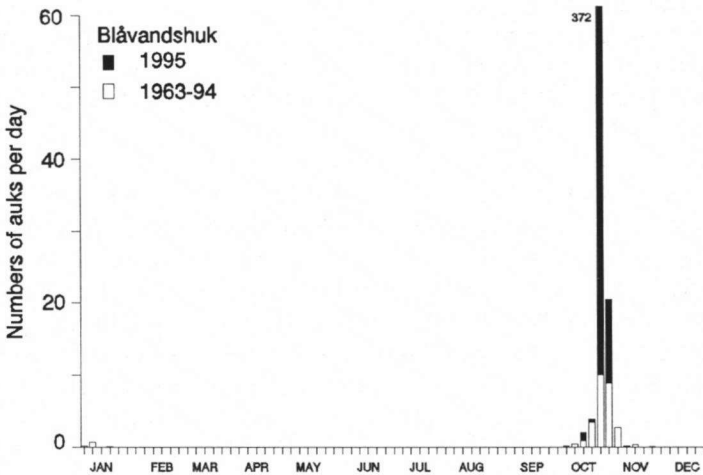


Figure 2. Phenology of Little Auk passage at Blåvandshuk 1963-95. Data of 1995-influx in black.
 Figuur 2. Fenologie van de Kleine Alk bij Blåvandshuk, 1963-95. De waarnemingen van de influx van 1995 in zwart.

*Table 1. The daily occurrence of Little Auks at Blåvandshuk in autumn 1995.
Tabel 1. Aantal Kleine Alken per dag bij Blåvandshuk, herfst 1995.*

Month <i>Maand</i>	Day <i>Dag</i>	→ S → Z	→ N → N	on the spot <i>ter plaatse</i>	Total <i>Totaal</i>
October	18	4			4
	19		1		1
	20		1		1
	21				0
	22				0
	23				0
	24				0
	25				0
	26			2	2
	27				0
	28	1626	2		1628
	29				0
	30	3			3
31	1	15	1	17	
November	1	180		33	213
	2	7	39		46
	3	4	4	1	9
	4		3		3
Total		1825	67	35	1927

earliest bird was seen in 1992, on 2 September in a westerly gale. Normally, the first birds appear in the first half of October, while the last are seen in the second half of November. December records are rare, but there is a small secondary peak in January. Large numbers are typically seen on days with light to moderate westerly winds. For instance, 306 Little Auks were seen flying south on 24 October 1986 with a WNW-wind of 12 m/s (6 B) and 603 birds passed to the south on 2 November 1990 with a NW wind of 3 m/s (2 B). Also in 1995, the best days had westerlies: 28 October, which was the best day, yielded 1628 birds (table 1) at W 10 m/s (5 B) and 213 Little Auks were seen on the 1st of November with a westerly wind of 5 m/s (3 B).

DISCUSSION

The influx of Little Auks in autumn 1995, as recorded at Blåvandshuk was unprecedented, in that such numbers have never been observed since the recording of seabird passage began in 1963. The influx was not just a local

phenomenon at Blåvandshuk. Much higher numbers than normal were observed in the southeastern North Sea (Flore *et al.* 1996, Offringa & Meire 1996, Winter *et al.* 1996) and high numbers were recorded along the British east coast (Pollock *et al.* 1996). In SW Sweden, large numbers were seen from coastal sites on the same days as in Denmark (Andersen *et al.* 1996). This, and the fact that higher numbers were seen north of Blåvandshuk as compared to the numbers seen here, may hint at the source area of the Little Auks. Because numbers increased to the north, the coastline had not led birds in ever increasing numbers towards Blåvandshuk. Therefore, the birds probably did not come from somewhere in the central North Sea, but rather from the Skagerrak. In early November, large numbers of Little Auks apparently move from a sea-area off SW Norway towards their wintering area off southern Norway, in the Skagerrak (Skov *et al.* 1995). Coinciding with this movement, some birds apparently go astray and start moving along the Danish westcoast. This would explain the narrow temporal peak in the passage. Numbers of passing Little Auks noted at Blåvandshuk have been generally high since the mid-1980s, suggesting a more dominant role of the wintering area in the Skagerrak, as compared to the situation twenty years before.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the observers of Blåvand Bird observatory for the observations in the autumn 1995.

DANSK RESUMÉ

De første 21 år (1963-83) med havfugleobservationer ved Blåvandshuk, Danmarks vestligste punkt sås Søkongen meget sjældent. I disse år observeredes kun 85 fugle. Efter 1984 er arten blevet mere almindelig og flere år er der iagttaget over 100 fugle. Efter en nedgang fra næsten 700 i 1990 til kun 5 i 1994, steg antallet igen i 1995, hvor ikke mindre end 1927 sås. Det var ikke kun ved Blåvand men langs hele den jyske vestkyst, der iagttogs mange Søkonger i 1995. Flest ved Hanstholm. På rekorddagen d. 28. oktober sås her 2300 mod 1628 ved Blåvand samme dag. Store antal passerede også den svenske vestkyst. Observationerne tyder på at fuglene kom fra Skagerrak, hvor mange overvintrer. Hvis fuglene skulle stamme fra Nordsøen ville antallet ved Blåvand nok have været større end antallet ved Hanstholm.

SAMENVATTING

Gedurende de eerste 21 jaren van zeevogeltelling (1963-83) op Blåvandshuk, aan de westkust van Denemarken, werd de Kleine Alk maar weinig gezien. Tot in 1973 moesten de schaarse waarnemingen zelfs worden voorgelegd aan een beoordelingscommissie. In totaal werden in deze periode slechts 85 exemplaren geregistreerd en alleen in de jaren 1969-71 en 1975 (39) ging het daarbij om meer dan een enkeling. Van 1984 tot en met 1986 werden jaarlijks echter meer dan 100 Kleine Alken geteld (127 in 1984, 265 in 1985 en 440 in 1986), maar daarna ging het weer steeds om kleine aantallen. Een nieuwe opleving volgde in 1990, toen liefst 682 Kleine Alken werden geteld. Hoe variabel het aantal langsvliegende Kleine Alken bij Blåvandshuk was bleek echter wel uit het totaal van slechts vijf vogels in 1994. In 1995 werd een record aantal van

1927 Kleine Alken geregistreerd bij Blåvandshuk (1825 →Z, 67 →N, 35 ter plaatse). De meeste ter plaatse zwemmende vogels kwamen uit het noorden aanvliegen en werden op 1 november gezien. Op 28 oktober werden ook op andere plaatsen langs de kust van Jutland veel Kleine Alken gezien. Bij Hanstholm (NW Jutland) vlogen 2300 exemplaren voorbij, bij Vejby Klit (tussen Hanstholm en Blåvandshuk) werden 1978 Kleine Alken gezien. Opmerkelijk genoeg werden bij Skagen (Deense noordpunt) slechts 3 Kleine Alken gezien. Ook langs de Zweedse westkust (Hönd) werden op 28 oktober veel (908) Kleine Alken geteld. Omdat de aantallen van zuid naar noord toenamen langs de Deense westkust lijkt het redelijk te veronderstellen dat de vogels niet afkomstig waren van de overwinteringsgebieden in het midden van de Noordzee, rond de Doggersbank, maar van de concentraties in het Skagerrak. De opmerkelijke toename van het aantal Kleine Alken bij Blåvandshuk sinds het midden van de jaren tachtig suggereert dat de aantallen overwinteraars in de Noordelijke Noordzee groter zijn dan in de twintig jaren daarvoor.

REFERENCES

- Andersen G.S., Börjesson H., Isaksen K. & Camphuysen C.J. 1996. Little Auks *Alle alle* in southern Scandinavia with emphasis on the 1996 influx. *Sula* 10: 251-256.
- Christensen R. 1996. Sidst Sidst, oktober - december 1996. *DOF-Nyt* 1996(1): 21-23.
- Flore B.O., S. Garthe & A. Degen 1996. Past and present occurrence of Little Auks *Alle alle* in Germany. *Sula* 10: 183-192.
- Gustafsson D. & Øhman E. 1995. Aktuelle observationer. *Vår Fågelvärld* 54(8): 46-48.
- Offringa H. & P. Meire 1996. The Little Auk *Alle alle* in Belgium. *Sula* 10: 211-218.
- Pollock C., Reid J.B. & White R. 1996. The occurrence of Little Auks *Alle alle* off the east coast of Britain. *Sula* 10: 239-246.
- Skov H., Durinck J., Leopold M.F. & Tasker M.L. 1995. Important bird areas in the North Sea, including the Channel and the Kattegat. BirdLife International, Cambridge.
- Winter C.J.N., L. Stegeman & G.O. Keijl 1996. Het voorkomen van de Kleine Alk *Alle alle* in Nederland. *Sula* 10: 199-210. □