

Seabird populations stable but fluctuating

SEABIRD populations in the Falklands are stable but fluctuating, with numbers down compared to last year but up when compared to annual averages.

Falklands Conservation (FC) have run the Seabird Monitoring Programme (FISMP) since 1989, counting the populations of a variety of different species. Seabird Ecologist for FC, Amanda Kuepfer explained, "monitoring provides the information required to identify how populations are faring, and provides the cornerstone for understanding what might be driving the populations. To protect our seabirds, actions are needed to reduce threats."

There are many different threats that affect seabirds, from fisheries interaction, predation, food availability, and disease. Amanda continued, "The climate crisis is identified as the most significant and urgent overarching threat to seabirds in the Falklands, presenting threats that are difficult to mitigate." However measures such as habitat improvement and predator removal are helping.

The most recently published FISMP, looking at the 2023/24

season acknowledges a newer threat - the impact of bird flu. "We had a really bad season on Steeple Jason because the colony was quite badly affected by bird flu. On that occasion we could see that the reason why there was such poor breeding success was because of bird flu. Often it's not as clear as that because there could be so many different reasons."

Another factor for slightly lower breeding pairs and breeding success is explained by last season being an El Nino year - this phenomenon refers to the warming of the ocean or above average sea surface temperatures which in turn affects the availability of prey for seabirds, "from past events it looks like El Ninos tend to affect seabirds negatively through a lack of food availability."

The long term monitoring programme means that over time FC can see whether low breeding successes have happened in El Nino years and these trends can be linked, "with the climate predictions it seems that El Nino events might be becoming more frequent which is bad news for seabirds."

Other trends that have been picked up are that some species cycle between decline and increase naturally. Pointing to Southern rockhopper and Gentoo breeding pairs Amanda explained they are currently on a decline, which has been seen in previous years before the numbers increase again, "so far we haven't really been overly concerned but this year we're at a point where we're hoping to see an increase again." She did express concern that bird flu might see Gentoos continue to decline, "so many colonies have been hit this year. We can see the breeding adults have been affected because we swab the dead birds and we see the reason why they've died."

"There's so many different pressures on the birds and often they interact simultaneously. If there's enough food perhaps they would have been stronger against

disease."

10 species were monitored in the FISMP last season including for the first time Sooty shearwaters and White-chinned petrels. Those specific counts will be repeated every five years as these are burrowing seabirds the data gathered is modelled to create population estimates. With the inclusion of the White-chinned petrels the FISMP now encompasses all of the ACAP species, which FIG have an international obligation to monitor.

While the point of the research is to monitor populations the data can be used in further research, such as identifying conservation actions or supporting international IUCN red list assessments of species.

The FISMP is made possible with financial support from FIG through the Environmental Studies Budget.



Seabird counts take place using a variety of methods including people counting by sight in the field, and drone photographs to count birds. Pics Falklands Conservation.

Community Picnic

Saturday 18th January 2025 Noon to 2:30pm

Old Stone Corral

ALL WELCOME.

Hosted by the Falkland Islands Association.

Please bring a plate of food to share. Fun games for all the family.

Stoney road to corral suitable for 4x4 vehicles or short walk.

For more information please call Emma Brook (52454) or Ailsa Heathman (31042)