

## Isles of Scilly SPA Seabird Survey 2023 – Interim Report

The summer of 2023 saw the first comprehensive breeding survey of all the seabirds breeding in Scilly since 2015. The full Special Protection Areas Survey (SPA), coordinated by the IOSWT, covered over 60 rocks and islands. In total 6,821 territories of 13 species of seabird were recorded, with the survey achieving complete coverage of the archipelago.

The survey found that the overall number of seabirds breeding within the Isles of Scilly has decreased by 18% in the last 8 years. This comes on top of previous declines in overall numbers since 1987.

This represents a **drop of 28%** since 1999/2000 survey, at the point of the SPA designation, when 9,161 pairs were recorded, and a **44% decrease** since SSSI designation in 1983 when 12,063 breeding pairs of seabird were recorded (see Table 1 below).

The fieldwork for the survey was carried out by IoSWT with help from staff and volunteers from RSPB, Natural England, the Isles of Scilly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It was undertaken from March to September 2023. It was principally funded by Natural England and the Isles of Scilly AONB Partnership, with match-funding being provided by the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust and the RSPB.

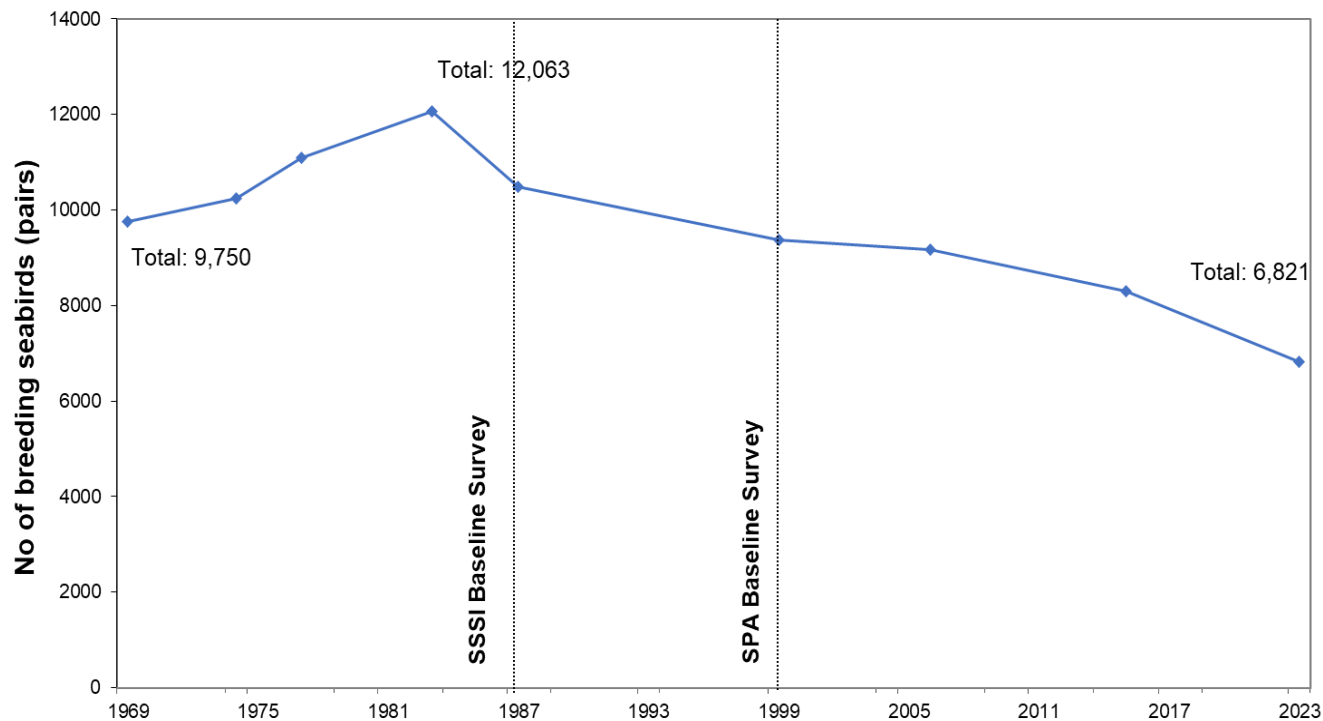
### ***Headline findings***

- 6821 breeding seabird pairs recorded across 51 islands.
- One of only two sites in England where Manx shearwaters and storm petrels breed in nationally and internationally important numbers respectively.
- 18% decrease in numbers since 2015; 28% decrease since SPA designation.
- A 44% decrease in overall numbers in 40 years (see below).
- Only 5 of 13 seabird species increasing – guillemot, razorbill, puffin, Manx shearwaters and storm petrels.
- Common terns lost as an annual breeder, with kittiwakes likely to follow soon.
- Big losses of gulls (58% of LBBGs; 40% HGs; 38% GBBGs) and shags (36%).
- The presence of 105 pairs oystercatcher & 24 pairs ringed plover underlines importance of Scilly as a very significant wader stronghold in the south west of England.

### ***Seabird recovery and island restoration***

One of the greatest changes for seabirds in Scilly in the last decade has been the removal of rats from St Agnes and Gugh in 2013/14. This has resulted in an increase in numbers and successful breeding of Manx shearwaters and European storm petrels on these islands (see tables 2 and 3 below). Both species are amber-listed in the UK. Scilly hosts a significant proportion of the English breeding population for both species.

**Figure 1. Breeding seabird assemblage total across Scilly, 1969-2023.**



**Table 1. Overall numbers of breeding seabird pairs**

Year	Overall number of breeding pairs
1974	10240
1983	12063
1987	10488
1999	9378
2006	9161
2015	8292
2023	6821

**Table 2. Population change by species, 2015-23**

Species	2023 no. of pairs	% change since 2015	Longer-term population trends
Overall Assemblage	6821	Down 18%	Declining since peak of 12,063 pairs of breeding seabirds in 1983. Decline very much driven by falling gull numbers.
Storm petrel	1603	Up 20%	Fourth full playback survey – numbers increasing and now the most numerous species in the assemblage. 66% of total nests are on Annet.
Manx shearwater	1061	Up 101%	Increasing nationally, linked to rat removal projects (Lundy, Ramsey). St Agnes & Gugh increased from 22 pairs to 200 post eradication in 2013/14. There are 340 pairs attempting to breed at sites with rats – including 115 pairs on St Helen's.
Lesser black-backed gull	1040	Down 58%	Sustained and steep decline since peak of 4050 pairs in 1983. Since 2015 big losses from Samson (978 to 161 prs) and St Helens (448 to 30 pairs).
Shag	655	Down 36%	Relatively stable up to 2015, large declines in last 8 years in line with trends in big colonies in Scotland (Foula) and NE (Farnes). Scilly is now the biggest colony in UK.
Great black-backed gull	607	Down 38%	Increasing up to 2015, downturn in last 8 years in line with UK trends for decline since 2000. Recently added to SPA designation as >10% of assemblage.

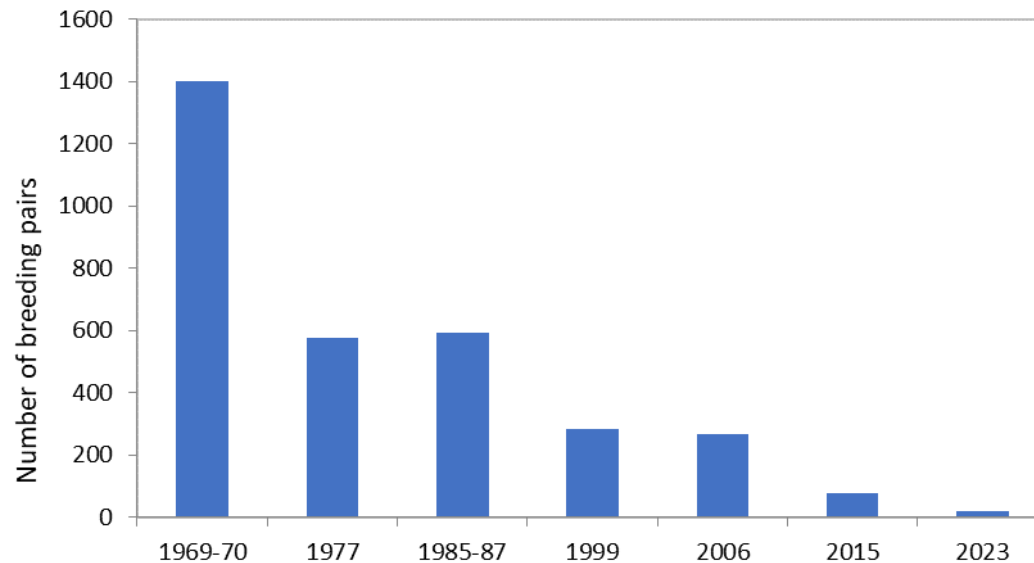
Razorbill	529	Up 12%	Massive drop after maximum count of 597 in 1969-70, continuous steady increase and expansion of sites since then up to present.
Guillemot	497	Up 71%	Sustained and more recently rapid increase in line with national trends. Gorregan in particular a stronghold (and very difficult to count!)
Herring gull	336	Down 40%	Sustained steep decline since peak of 2249 pairs in 1974. Red listed for UK-wide decline. Whilst the 20 pairs on rooftops in Hugh Town are very visible and relatively successful, over the whole of islands, the number of sites and overall numbers are contracting greatly.
Fulmar	242	Down 16%	First bred in Scilly 1951, sustained massive increase until 2015, but a downturn since then in line with national trends. Poor breeding success recorded at Menawethan & Daymark.
Puffin	187	Up 12%	Current population significantly smaller than historical records of 'puffin town' on Annet in early 1900s. Mincarolo has emerged as the most important site in recent years.
Cormorant	43	Down 19%	Scilly's small population remains at close to 50 pairs. There are just 3 breeding sites: Melledgan, White Island and Great Ganinnick.
Kittiwake	21	Down 72%	Sustained and steep decline since peak of 861 pairs in 1983. Previously 6 sub-colonies now reduced to just one site with repeated breeding failures.
Common tern	0	Loss	A regular breeder since the 1940s; numbers peaked at 210 in 1983 with steady decline since. Repeated breeding failures with no breeding attempts in 4 of the last 6 years.
Sandwich tern	0	Loss	An occasional breeder for much of the time since 1880. No breeding recorded since 2006.
Roseate tern	0	Loss	No proof of breeding since 1995.
Oystercatcher	105	Up 6%	Significant coastal breeding colony in the south west. Breeding Bird Atlas count in 2000 recorded 152 pairs, with a total population estimate of 100-200 pairs.
Ringed Plover	24	Up 50%	Highly significant for south west England, with no recent breeding in Devon or Cornwall. There has been a long-term decline. The 2000 Breeding Bird Atlas recording 39 pairs.

**Table 3. 1969-2023 numbers of breeding seabird pairs by species\***

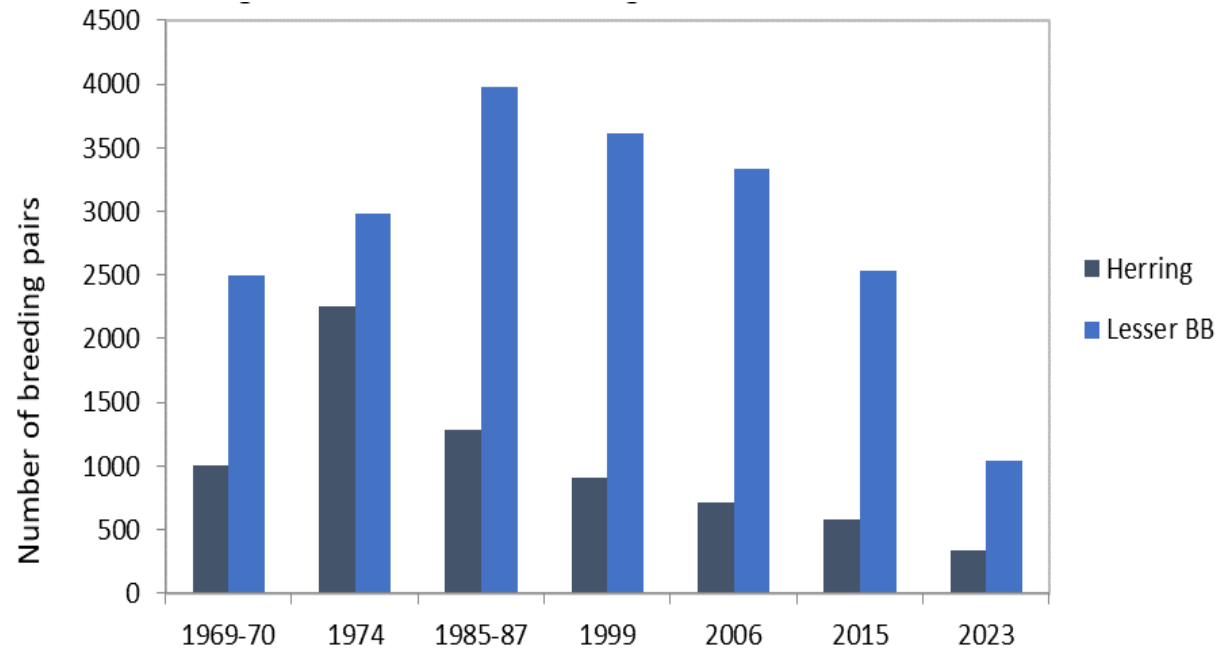
Year	Fulmar	Storm petrel	Manx Sh'water	Cormorant	Shag	Lesser BB gull	Herring gull	Great BB Gull	Kittiwake	Common tern	Guillemot	Razorbill	Puffin	Total
1969-70	17	1475	201	50	1000	2500	1000	1200	1400	150	60	597	100	<b>9750</b>
1974	14	1475	201	61	809	2980	2249	1583	497	109	36	137	89	<b>10240</b>
1983	75	1475	201	49	1225	4050	1995	1478	861	210	104	225	115	<b>12063</b>
1985-87	108	1475	201	51	1156	3981	1279	1030	593	171	99	238	106	<b>10488</b>
1999-2000	183	1475	201	56	1108	3608	903	808	281	96	196	296	167	<b>9378</b>
2006	279	1398	171	50	1296	3335	715	901	266	78	155	342	174	<b>9161</b>
2015	286	1299	523	30	1010	2531	574	1023	75	12	291	471	167	<b>8292</b>
2023	242	1603	1061	43	655	1040	336	607	21	0	497	529	187	<b>6821</b>

\*No comparable data for storm petrel or Manx shearwater prior to 2000, so 2000 count taken as baseline.

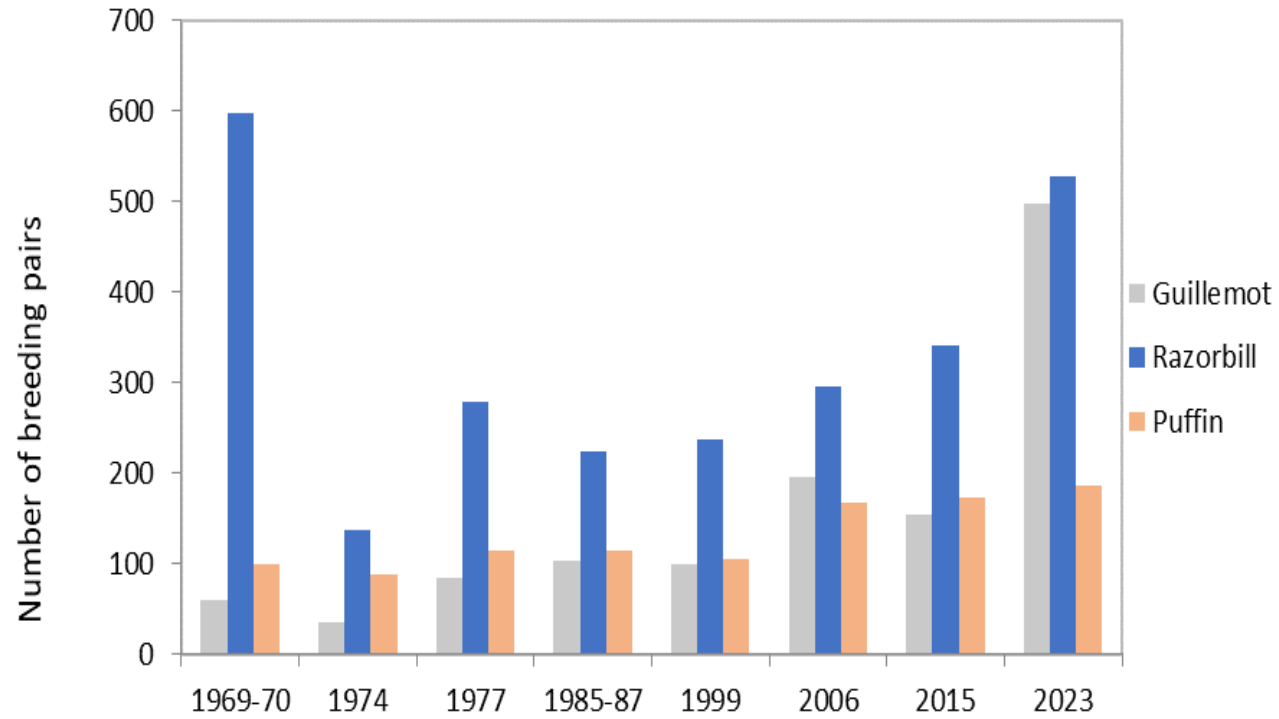
**Figure 2. Numbers of breeding kittiwake across Scilly, 1969-2023**



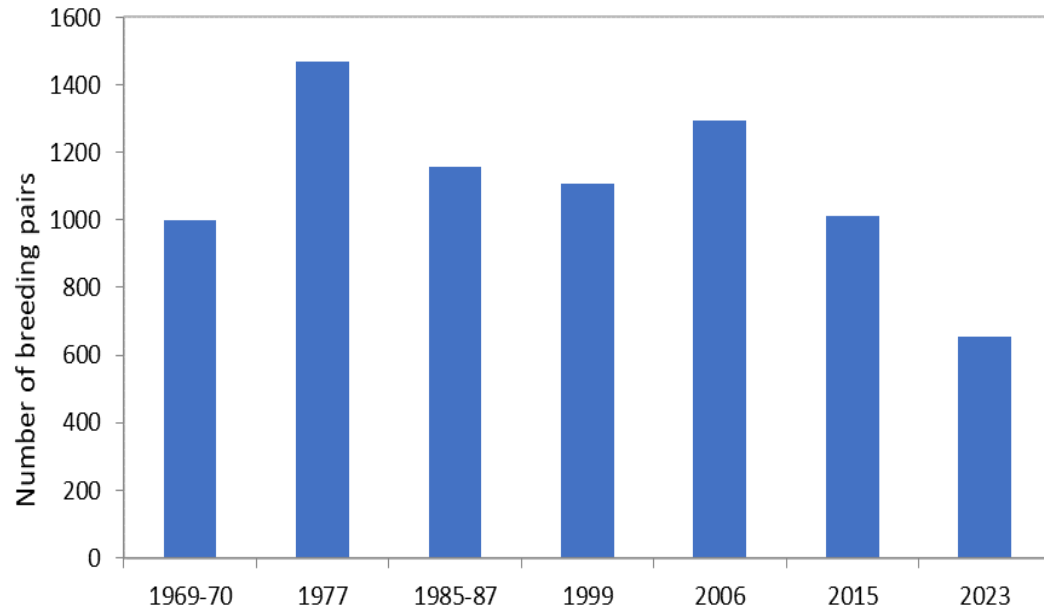
**Figure 3. Numbers of commonest gull species across Scilly, 1969-2023**



**Figure 4: Numbers of breeding auks across Scilly, 1969-2023**

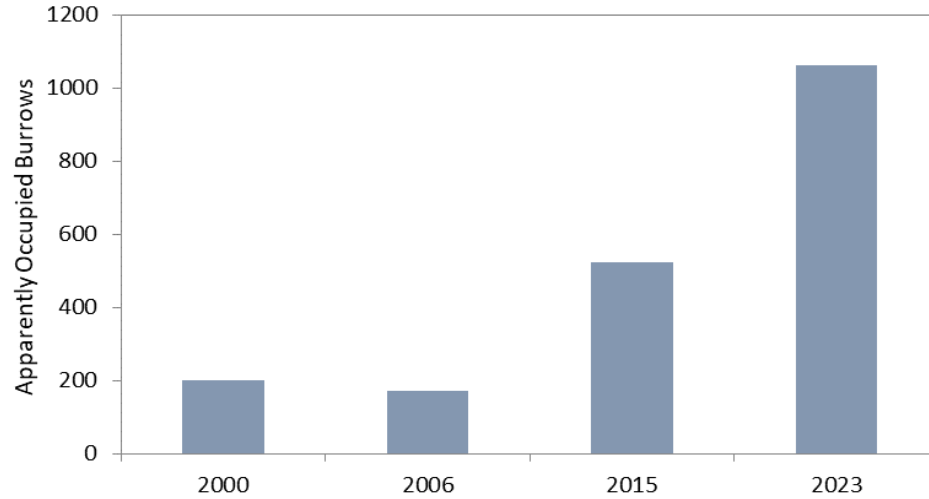


**Figure 5. Numbers of breeding shag across Scilly, 1969-2023**





**Figure 6. Numbers of breeding Manx shearwaters across Scilly, 2000-2023**



**Figure 7. Numbers of breeding Manx shearwaters, St Agnes & Gugh, 2010-2023**

