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# News & comment - August 2024

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## HPAI Seabird Survey Report

A new collaborative report on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), the *HPAI Seabird Report* ([www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/seabird-surveys-project-report](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/seabird-surveys-project-report)), has revealed the devastating impact of the virus on bird populations. In response to the number of reported mortalities thought to be caused by HPAI in 2022, the RSPB led a nationwide programme of additional

seabird population counts in 2023. The project counted 14 species, including Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*, Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*, Great Skua *Stercorarius skua* and Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*.

The results indicate that nine species for which count data were available have declined by over 10% across the sites studied. For three of these species, these declines have reversed previously positive population trends.

For example, 11,000 Gannets were reported to have died from HPAI during the 2022 breeding season in Scotland, while 5,000 deaths were reported on RSPB Grassholm, Pembrokeshire, alone. Britain supports over half the world's population of Gannets, and therefore the 25% decline in breeding numbers of this species across surveyed sites in 2023 has big implications for the global population.

At least 2,500 Great Skuas were reported dead in Scotland, where 60% of the global population of this species breeds. Results from the survey indicate that the breeding population of Great Skuas in Scotland has declined by a staggering 76% due to HPAI, with reductions of over 80% at some surveyed sites.



301. Great Skuas *Stercorarius skua* and a dead Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* Noss, Shetland, May 2022.

At RSPB Coquet Island, 21% of breeding Roseate Terns have been lost since the outbreak of HPAI; this is the only site where this species regularly breeds in Britain.

The results from the surveys demonstrate the need to take HPAI into account as a new and major threat to internationally important seabird populations, which are facing numerous other challenges.

## Red Grouse to be split

In a June 2024 diary update, the IOC ([www.worldbirdnames.org](http://www.worldbirdnames.org)) has announced its acceptance of a split of Red Grouse *Lagopus (lagopus) scotica* from Willow Grouse *L. lagopus*. The news follows the publication of a paper in January 2022 (*Brit. Birds* 115: 28–38), which put forward the case

for Red Grouse being treated as a full species.

The taxonomic status of Red Grouse, which is limited in its distribution to Britain and Ireland, has a chequered past. Historically, it was considered a species in its own right and, at that time, was considered Britain and Ireland's only endemic species – hence its adoption as the logo for *British Birds* in 1907. Then, in the 1970s, it was lumped with Willow Grouse and that position has been widely followed since.

Red Grouse in flight

David Tipling

302. Red Grouse *Lagopus (lagopus) scotica*,  
Northumberland, April 2023.

Since 1980, the Scottish Crossbill *Loxia scotica* has been recognised as being Britain's only endemic species of bird. However, elevation of Red Grouse to species level will double the number of endemic bird species in Britain and Ireland.

Massive numbers of Red Grouse are shot for sport each year, and the taxon is

declining. It remains to be seen if the change in status will give the birds additional protection, or if the species will continue to be bagged on an industrial scale.

## ... and Red-rumped Swallow complex shaken up

Also of relevance to European birders, the Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica* complex has undergone some taxonomic readjustments. In another June diary entry, IOC accepted the recognition of European *C. (d.) rufula*, African *C. (d.) melanocrissus* and Asian *C. d. daurica* Red-rumped Swallows as three separate species.

'Asian Red-rumped Swallow' has been recorded twice in Britain, on Orkney and later in Highland in 2011, and at sea off Caithness in 2018. 'European Red-rumped Swallow' is an annual visitor to Britain and a rare visitor to Ireland.

However, it is not all gains; with the reorganisation of the complex, Striated Swallow *C. striolata* has been subsumed into Asian Red-rumped Swallow, while West African Swallow *C. domicella* is now considered a subspecies of African Red-rumped Swallow.

## Another new species on the British List

BOURC has announced the acceptance of Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza*

*bruniceps* onto Category A of the British List (<https://bou.org.uk/british-list/changes-to-the-british-list-18-june-2024>). The bird, a 1CY male on Out Skerries, Shetland, in October 2010, was originally assessed and accepted by BBRC as a Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala*. However, a review of Black-headed/Red-headed Buntings in Britain, undertaken by BBRC following input on the Out Skerries bird from Tor Olsen and the Norwegian Rarities Committee, found it to be acceptable as a Red-headed Bunting.

The species was formerly placed in Category D, but BOURC felt that the Out Skerries individual fulfilled all of the criteria for acceptance as a wild individual.

A number of subsequent records of Red-headed Bunting in Britain are currently under review by BBRC.

The acceptance of Red-headed Bunting into Category A takes the British List to 635 species.

## Blackbirds in rapid decline

Concerns over a decrease in the number of Blackbirds *Turdus merula* in Greater London have been raised, with an apparently greater rate of decline in the area since 2020 (<https://bit.ly/4ePI7hQ>). The decline has been linked to the recent appearance of a mosquito-borne virus, which is affecting the species in England.

First detected in Britain in London in summer 2020, Usutu virus has proved potentially fatal to Blackbirds and concerns are now growing as the virus appears to be spreading across southeast England. First identified in South

Africa, Usutu has been present in mainland Europe for three decades, with its spread linked to climate change. Now, scientists are trying to better understand the extent and spread of Usutu virus in England and the potential impacts on Britain's Blackbirds.

The *Blackbirds in Gardens* survey, organised by the BTO, aims to help better understand how Blackbirds are using different types of garden and which factors might influence the risk of disease transmission. Importantly, the survey also seeks to determine how successful the birds are in rearing young, especially at different levels of urbanisation, from rural to urban gardens.

Usutu is typically spread by bird-biting mosquitoes, which rarely bite humans. On rare occasions where humans are bitten, infections are generally asymptomatic. There have been no human cases of Usutu detected in Britain to date.

This BTO survey is part of a wider partnership project, being run in conjunction with the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA). The project, Vector-Borne RADAR, is funded by UK Research and Innovation and Defra and aims to improve understanding of the emergence and transmission of mosquito-borne viruses of wild birds in the UK, which are expected to increase as a result of a warming climate.

Hugh Hanmer, Senior Research Ecologist with the BTO, said: 'Blackbird numbers have been decreasing in Greater London for some time. However, from 2020, they started declining more strongly, which coincided with the detection of Usutu virus. There is now evidence of a wider decline in southern

England, not seen in other UK regions. The BTO survey seeks to understand why this change is happening and to identify any link to the emergence of Usutu virus. By better understanding how Blackbirds use our gardens, we hope to halt the declines.'

Arran Folly, senior scientist with APHA and Vector-Borne RADAR project lead, said: 'Outbreaks of mosquito-transmitted diseases like Usutu virus, which is now endemic in southeast England, are likely to increase in the UK especially as temperatures warm in the wake of climate change. Our Vector-Borne RADAR project is helping to develop a better picture of emerging mosquito-borne viruses and the findings from the BTO's *Blackbirds in Gardens* survey will be invaluable in building a better understanding of how the virus could be impacting our Blackbird populations. I would urge any garden owners to take part and help us keep track of this virus.'

## Winter gull survey expands to autumn

Birders across the UK are being asked to count gulls this autumn, as monitoring of Britain's species expands.

The Winter Gull Survey (WinGS; [www.bto.org/our-science/projects/winter-gull-survey](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/winter-gull-survey)) is a long-running monitoring programme, which first took place in 1953. The project's overarching aim is to provide robust information on the numbers and distribution of wintering gulls, many of which are listed as either Red or Amber in the most recent *Birds of Conservation Concern*.

Now, for the first time, the BTO is also asking volunteers to count gulls in the autumn in an attempt to fill in gaps in information regarding post-breeding



movements.

Some gull species are known to congregate in large flocks in the autumn, before dispersing more widely to their wintering areas. It's hoped that observations from volunteers can assist in identifying these locations and determine just how many gulls are using each site.

Researchers from the BTO are trying to get to grips with the causes of population declines in our breeding gulls and to monitor those that visit us from farther afield.

Dawn Balmer, BTO Head of Surveys, said: 'Many of our gull species are experiencing significant declines in their breeding populations, hence their conservation status, and we urgently need to improve our understanding of where, and in what numbers, they gather in the autumn and winter.'

## Ukraine war changes eagle migration patterns

Scientists monitoring Greater Spotted Eagles *Clanga clanga* in the Polesia region – an area spanning more than 18 million ha across Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia – have used tracking data to demonstrate how the war in Ukraine has had an impact on the bird's migration patterns ([www.endangeredlandscapes.org/project/polesia](http://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/project/polesia)).

Researchers from the Estonian University of Life Sciences, the BTO and their in-country partners began tagging Greater Spotted Eagles breeding in Belarusian Polesia, which remains a European stronghold for the species, in

2017.

Using GPS tracking and conflict data, the researchers quantified changes in the eagles' expected behaviour. In comparison to earlier years, when widespread conflict was not taking place, they found that Greater Spotted Eagles used stopover sites in Ukraine less frequently in 2022 and 2023, with some birds making large deviations from their usual migration routes to avoid areas with active conflict.

These changes to the bird's migratory behaviour delayed their arrival on the breeding grounds.

Similar negative responses have been recorded for birds residing in military training zones, but these new findings show the impact of warfare on migratory species, suggesting that the effects of disturbance can have far-reaching impacts well beyond the conflict zone itself.

## Breeding Woodcocks

Results of a 2023 survey of breeding Eurasian Woodcocks *Scolopax rusticola* in Britain has given a population estimate of 50,750 males, representing an 8% decline since the last survey, in 2013, and a 35% decline since 2003 (<https://bit.ly/3W8AT16>). Despite small population increases in Wales and England since 2013, the continuing decline was driven by a 49.5% reduction in birds in northern Scotland.

Woodcock in flight

David Tipling

304. Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*,  
Norfolk, June 2021.

The results provide important regional information that can be used to support land management and policy decisions in Britain. The Woodcock is hunted widely across Europe and approximately 140,000 individuals are shot in Britain annually. The impacts of hunting on breeding Woodcock populations are unclear, largely because the hunting season for the species runs from October to the end of January, during which time Britain's resident population is joined by large numbers of wintering individuals from elsewhere in Europe. Having robust information on the breeding population provides vital evidence on the changing fortunes of this Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern.

## Effects of handling on Whimbrel chicks

Collecting empirical data is essential for understanding the ecology and biology of a species. However, if data collection procedures include direct interaction with the study species, particularly regarding repeated measures, there may be a risk of introducing biases on the collected dataset due to changes in behaviour and/or physiology of the studied individuals. It is particularly important to understand the effects of disturbance by researchers during the breeding season, where it may affect nest and chick survival, physiology, and chick body condition.

A new study looking at such effects and published in *Journal of Ornithology* (<https://bit.ly/4cHVeQs>) investigated whether varying levels of handling influenced the body condition of Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* chicks. Using data collected over two breeding seasons, from 88 individuals that were handled up to 11 times, it was found that neither the handling nor the interval between handling events affected the chicks' body condition. In other words, the levels of handling presented in this study did not affect the Whimbrel chicks' development.

It is, however, still important to acknowledge that other potential effects may arise as a result of researcher disturbance to nest sites, but when carried out responsibly and with the correct level of experience, these effects can be mitigated. The study emphasises the importance of species-specific evaluations to improve research methodologies and ethical practices.

## Perceptions of introduced species in Britain

The Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* is a non-native species in

Europe, with more than 90 established breeding populations across the continent, particularly around urban areas. Britain, and Greater London especially, is home to the largest of these European populations. A new study carried out by the BTO used an online survey to examine people's perception of this species across Britain(<https://bit.ly/3zsqt3M>).

The work, carried out in collaboration with Imperial College London, the University of Exeter and the University of Brighton, revealed that 90.2% of people surveyed were aware of Rose-ringed Parakeets and that 45.9% of these people held negative opinions about the species. Just 7.8% of opinions were positive.



Attitudes towards Rose-ringed Parakeets were more negative in rural areas (64.7%) than in urban areas (46.7%). Differences in how people viewed parakeets were linked to their interest in ecology, their age and their level of

education. Earlier studies had found that attitudes towards Rose-ringed Parakeets are more negative where respondents live in areas with a high number of the species.

Rose-ringed Parakeets can cause significant economic damage and can therefore be removed under a UK general licence. The findings of this study have implications for how potential management or mitigation measures for this species might be received by communities.

## Investigating the impact of offshore windfarms on seabirds

A study led by the BTO has used data from GPS tracking and other research to identify the likelihood of 27 species of seabird interacting with areas of sea earmarked for 41 new offshore windfarms around Britain (<https://bit.ly/45NxNTu>).

Offshore windfarms can displace birds from former marine feeding grounds, act as a barrier to movement or pose a risk of death if birds collide with them. However, the use of green energy is vital in mitigating climate change, so information on where to place turbines to minimise adverse effects on seabirds is critically important.

The results from this study, which build upon the BTO's influential review published in 2012, show that thanks to tracking data it is now understood that the foraging ranges of eight species, including Kittiwake and Puffin *Fratercula arctica*, are more than 50% larger than those calculated previously. This highlights the danger of basing screening processes for offshore

developments on limited data. With the continued expansion of tracking studies, it is important that these data are updated regularly to ensure that all decisions can be made on the basis of the best available evidence.

## Funding boost for Heaths to Sea project

A scheme to restore habitats in the Lower Otter Valley in Devon has been awarded £750,000 of government funding ([www.ova.org.uk/news/heath-seas-landscape-recovery-project](http://www.ova.org.uk/news/heath-seas-landscape-recovery-project)).

Clinton Devon Estates said that the project, Heaths to Sea: Landscape Recovery of the Lower Otter Valley, aimed to improve the area for people and wildlife. The award will fund the two-year development phase of the project, which will be assessed by the Government. If approved, work will start on planting more woodland, expanding wetland areas and improving access to the countryside.

Clinton Devon Estates said the aim was to bring environmental benefits in harmony with food production across a large area of east Devon.

Kirstie Ellis, who is leading the project, said: 'Although this scheme has a focus on nature recovery, it is not about stopping food production. We believe that nature recovery and agriculture can and indeed must coexist.'

The Lower Otter Estuary meets the sea at Budleigh Salterton. The estuary, along with the cliffs of Otterton Point, is a nationally important site for biodiversity and is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It

contains a range of intertidal habitats including saltmarsh and tidal creeks.

The estuary and marshes support a wide variety of breeding and wintering bird species, including waders and wildfowl. They form part of a network of important feeding sites which include the Axe and Exe Estuaries.

The Devon scheme is one of 34 projects across England to share £25m in the second phase of the Defra Landscape Recovery plan.

## Boobies in Britain – again

Late summer 2023 saw an unprecedented influx of tropical-water seabirds into British waters, including a Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* and multiple Brown Boobies *S. leucogaster*. In a sign of what may be the new norm – and an indication of warming seas – a Red-footed Booby and a Brown Booby were both sighted in British waters during June 2024. It remains to be seen if these two individuals will be one-offs, or if they are forerunners of yet another influx.

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