

# Seabirds

## Shetland's summer spectacular



- Please take care near cliffs, especially in wet weather and strong winds
- Park sensibly and observe the Country Code at all times, closing gates after you
- Please do not enter tern or gull colonies under any circumstances as this may result in breeding failure
- More than 10% of Britain and Ireland's seabirds nest in Shetland
- Shetland has no less than seven internationally important seabird colonies, which have been designated as Special Protection Areas

### Some Useful Information

Scottish Natural Heritage: Stewart Building, Alexandra Wharf Lerwick, Shetland  
Tel: 01595 693345

RSPB Warden Fetlar: Tel: 01957 733246

Accommodation: VisitShetland, Lerwick  
Tel: 08701 999440

Scottish Natural Heritage along with various other organisations, such as the RSPB and SOTEAG\* monitor seabird numbers and breeding success in Shetland. Seabirds serve as good indicators of the health of the sea and this monitoring can act as an early warning system if the fine balance required for a healthy marine ecosystem is upset.

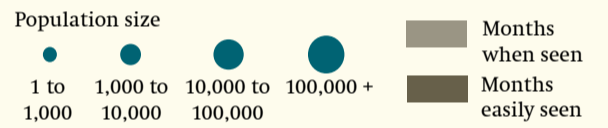
\* Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group.



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### Seabird When to see them

Seabird	When to see them
Fulmar Maalie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Manx Shearwater Leerie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Storm Petrel Alamootie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Leach's Petrel Muckle Mootie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Gannet Solan	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Cormorant Loren or Muckle Skarf	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Shag Skarf	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Arctic Skua Skootie Alan	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Great Skua Bonxie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Black-headed Gull Hoodie Maa	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Common Gull Peerie Maa	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Lesser Black-backed Gull Peerie Swaabie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Herring Gull Herring Maa	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Great Black-backed Gull Swaabie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Kittiwake Rippeke Maa or Weeg	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Common Tern Tirrick	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Arctic Tern Tirrick	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Guillemot Loom or Longwi	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Razorbill Sea Craa or Wylkie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Black Guillemot Tystie	J F M A M J J A S O N D
Puffin Tammie Norie	J F M A M J J A S O N D



### Why Shetland?

Over a million seabirds return to Shetland every summer to breed but why are the islands so popular? Simply because they provide the basic necessities – a safe home and plenty of food.

Cool North Sea waters and the warmer Atlantic Ocean currents mix around Shetland bringing a rich supply of nutrients to the surface layers of the sea. This, coupled with long hours of summer sunshine, produces an abundance of tiny green plants known as phytoplankton. These are food for tiny animals called zooplankton which in turn are eaten by fish such as sandeels.

### Diversity of seabirds

Twenty one seabird species breed in Shetland. These range from the tiny Storm Petrel, which is smaller than a Starling, to the Gannet with its wingspan of almost six feet. Seabirds come in shades of black, white, brown and grey and the sexes appear similar. You will notice that colourful features tend to be confined to the bill and feet. If you get the chance, look closely at a Gannet's feet!

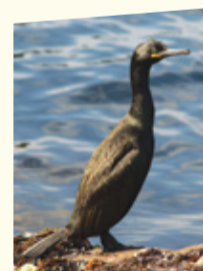
Three species of large gull breed in Shetland. All have yellow bills with a red spot near the tip. This is a Herring Gull. Lesser Black-backed Gulls are darker grey on the upper parts and have bright yellow legs. Greater Black-backed Gulls are larger, have black backs and pink legs.



Fulmars are equally at home soaring along the cliff tops or feeding in the harbour.

### Choosing a home

Breeding sites need to be safe from potential predators and close to food supplies. Different species choose different sites. Puffins, petrels and shearwaters nest in burrows. Puffins have very sharp claws for digging but given the chance will steal Rabbit burrows. Shags, Razorbills and Black Guillemots favour boulder beaches while Fulmars, Gannets, Kittiwakes and Guillemots like open ledges. At large colonies only the sheerest cliffs are unoccupied.



Shags are a feature of many rocky coastlines.

Skuas, gulls and terns nest inland. Preferences seem to vary when it comes to home comforts. Shags go to great lengths, including thieving from neighbours, to construct massive nests of seaweed. Guillemots, however, lay their eggs straight onto cliff ledges.

Many seabird species nest in dense colonies. Advantages include safeguarding against predators, acting as a meeting place for potential mates and accelerating and synchronising the onset of breeding through social stimulation. There are disadvantages too though – notably the spreading of disease and potential in fighting between densely packed individuals.

Notice how Gannet nests are almost geometrically spaced. Each pair is just out of reach of the dagger-like (and painful) bill of its neighbour.



In the late nineteenth century the Great Skua had almost become extinct in Shetland. The population now numbers about 6,000 pairs – half the world population. Great Skuas can fish for themselves, scavenge discards and kleptoparasitise other species. In recent years they have also become voracious predators of adult and young seabirds.

### Finding Food


Most of Shetland's seabirds rely on sandeels to feed their chicks. Gannets also exploit other shoaling fish like Herring and Mackerel and join gulls, Fulmars and Great Skuas in scavenging offal and waste dumped from fishing boats.

The tiny Storm Petrel patters along the surface of the sea looking for plankton. The Arctic Skua does not fish itself but prefers to harass other seabirds – notably terns, Kittiwakes and auks – forcing them to disgorge their latest meal. This is called kleptoparasitism.

Gannets with their large wingspan can feed up to 100 miles from the colony whereas smaller species, like the Arctic Tern and Kittiwake can only forage a few miles from home and are the first to suffer when food is in short supply.

The Kittiwake, the smallest gull breeding in Shetland, builds its nest on the narrowest ledges. Listen for its onomatopoeic call. Broods of two or three chicks were common until the mid 1980s when breeding success crashed due to the reduction in the availability of sandeels – their staple diet during summer.

# An explorer's guide to Shetland's sea birds



**1 Hermaness**  
**Attractions:** a National Nature Reserve managed by SNH. A visitor centre nearby. Over 25,000 Puffins, Shetland's largest Gannetry and the third largest colony of Great Skuas in the world. **Access:** car park at the reserve entrance. A one hour walk to the seabird cliffs.

**2 Eshaness**  
**Attractions:** Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Shags among superb coastal scenery. **Access:** park near lighthouse and walk north. Easy coastal walk.

**3 Papa Stour**  
**Attractions:** spectacular coastal scenery. Kittiwakes, auks terns and skuas. **Access:** by ferry - check departure times with VisitShetland. Requires a full day.

**4 Foula**  
**Attractions:** superb seabird colonies with a wide variety of species. The ferry crossing can be good for petrels and shearwaters in late summer. **Access:** although some day trips are available most visits will require an overnight stay. Contact VisitShetland for information on ferry times and accommodation.

**5 Silwick to Westerwick**  
**Attractions:** excellent coastal scenery. Black Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Shags. Cormorants breed offshore at Clett Stack. **Access:** park sensibly and walk along cliffs. Allow several hours.

**6 Head of Whiteness Voe**  
**Attractions:** breeding Black-headed and Common Gulls. **Access:** view from public road.

**7 Tingwall Loch**  
**Attractions:** breeding Black-headed and Common Gulls on the holm. **Access:** view from pull-ins along the road.

**8 Kettlaness**  
**Attractions:** skuas and terns. **Access:** park sensibly and walk from the end of the public road.

**9 Fair Isle**  
**Attractions:** superb seabird colonies with a wide variety of species. The ferry crossing can be good for petrels and shearwaters in late summer. **Access:** requires an overnight stay. Contact VisitShetland for information on ferry times and accommodation.

**10 Sumburgh Head**  
**Attractions:** an easily accessible RSPB reserve with Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags and Kittiwakes. Whales, dolphins and Porpoises are sometimes seen offshore during the summer months. **Access:** car parking 100m below the lighthouse.

**11 Pool of Virkie**  
**Attractions:** mudflats exposed at low tide, with gulls, terns and waders. **Access:** view from pull-offs along the public road.

**12 Noness**  
**Attractions:** Shags, skuas, terns and auks. **Access:** two to three hour walk over rough terrain.

**13 Mousa**  
**Attractions:** a small offshore island with terns, skuas and Black Guillemots. Storm Petrels breed in the famous broch. Seals and Porpoises are usually seen on the crossing. **Access:** by boat from Leebittin (Sandwick). Check details with VisitShetland. Special night trips are organised to see petrels.

**14 Noss**  
**Attractions:** a National Nature Reserve managed by SNH, with a small visitor centre. Gannets and Puffins at close quarters. **Access:** inflatable boat from Bressay. Boat trips depart from Lerwick daily in summer. Contact VisitShetland for further information.

**15 Clickimin Loch**  
**Attractions:** breeding Herring Gulls. **Access:** on the outskirts of Lerwick. View from the public road on the south side of the loch.

**16 Tresta, Fetlar**  
**Attractions:** Fetlar is an RSPB Reserve, contact the warden for more information. **Access:** Fetlar is reached by an inter-island ferry from Yell.

## Pairing Up

Seabirds are loyal and providing they breed successfully, most remain with their partner for life. Many also return to nest at the same site or burrow every year. Some have elaborate courtship displays. Male terns, for example, bring fish to their mates early in the breeding season. By presenting big fish the male tries to impress the female as if saying - if I can catch fish this big then I will be good at finding food to bring up chicks.



Most seabirds mate for life. Puffins court by rubbing bills, re-establishing their pair bond after a long winter apart at sea. The Puffin's decorative bill plates are lost during the winter months.

## Incubation

Most seabirds lay between one and three eggs although Cormorants and Shags can lay as many as five. Sexual equality is very much the norm in seabird society with both males and females sharing incubation and chick-rearing duties. Fulmar shifts may last several days, while adult terns and auks may change over several times a day.



Storm Petrels feed out of sight of land. They come ashore to relieve their partners at night so as to avoid would-be predators. Feeding trips can last for up to five days! The individual left incubating the egg, or brooding the chick, is capable of lowering its metabolism so that its body enters a state of semi-torpor. This reduces energy loss. Imagine five days without food or water!

## Rearing the family

The time chicks spend at the colony depends on the species. Guillemots and Razorbills may stay for less than three weeks, Gannets for up to 12 weeks. Storm



Guillemot chicks spend less time at the colony than other seabirds. They may leave when less than three weeks old and only a quarter the size of the adult! The male parent calls its chick down to the sea and together they swim to Norway.

Puffins may take a wrong turning and end up inland, while in August, fledged Fulmars can appear in all sorts of odd places if they fly inland rather than out to sea. Once grounded it is a real job to get airborne again, but before playing the good Samaritan, remember Fulmars spit a foul smelling oil when approached.

Petrels are perhaps the most remarkable as, despite their tiny size, they take over 60 days to fledge! Skuas and terns go to great lengths to protect their families - as anyone who has walked across a Shetland moorland in June will testify. Skuas dive-bomb intruders from above, occasionally striking with their feet. Arctic Terns dive and strike with their bills - it would be unwise to stray too close to a tern colony.

Most seabird chicks are left to fledge independently, and their first few days can be a real trial. Gannets are often too fat to fly and merely glide down to the water to sit for a few days until they lose weight.



This large raft of auks contains Guillemots and Razorbills. Notice their different bill patterns, the Razorbill's blacker plumage, cleaner flanks and more pointed tails.

## From child to parent

The early years of a seabird's life are all about survival and learning. Large numbers of non-breeding and immature seabirds gather at, or near, seabird colonies during the breeding season. Most species do not breed until they are a few years old but seabirds are long-lived. Average age expectancy for a tern is seven, for a Puffin 24 or 25, while Fulmars may reach 40.

## A long winter

Many people forget that seabirds are at their breeding colonies for just three or four months of the year. Only Fulmars, Shags, Black Guillemots and gulls are seen around Shetland throughout the winter. Some species resort to warmer climes - gannets to West Africa, Arctic Skuas to South Africa - while others simply go out to sea. Perhaps the most famous traveller is the Arctic Tern. They winter in Antarctica and in a lifetime may travel the equivalent distance of flying to the moon!



Telling Arctic and Common Terns apart is one of the most difficult challenges facing birdwatchers. Arctic Terns have blood-red bills, while the bill of a Common Tern is a more orange-red with a distinct dark tip. The upperwing of Arctic Tern is also cleaner, lacking the dark wedge on the outer wing shown by Common Tern.