

FULMARS IN BUTE — A REVIEW OF THE COLONIES

Bernard Zonfrillo

Introduction

The Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* is one of the best documented species of seabird in the British Isles, having received the attentions of natural historians for a period now spanning over one hundred years. St Kilda was the only British breeding station of the Fulmar until 1878, when the Shetland island of Foula was colonised, not by the small-billed St Kilda birds but by the larger more robust Icelandic population. From then on the spread was dramatic. In 1952 the late James Fisher produced his New Naturalist monograph on the Fulmar (2), and in 1966 the same author reviewed the relentless colonisation of the British coastline up till 1959 (3). In the 1980s the Fulmar was still showing nationally an annual rate of increase of around 7% (7), and new colonies continue to be established.

Previous Seabird Surveys

The seabird colonies of Britain and Ireland were previously nationally surveyed during 'Operation Seafarer', carried out during 1969 and 1970 (1), while the seabirds of the Clyde area itself have been intensively studied since the early 1950s by Dr J.A. Gibson, whose pioneering work has appeared in a valuable series of comprehensive papers published in the Buteshire Society's *Transactions* (4).

Current Work

With an ever-increasing interest in the conservation and welfare of our country's seabirds, a move to survey all the British and Irish seabird colonies, instigated by the Seabird Group and the Nature Conservancy Council, began in 1986 and spanned a two-year period. The aims of this new survey were simply to locate and count on a standardised and systematic basis, all the seabird breeding sites in the British Isles, providing a database which can be regularly updated in future years. It is now generally recognised that seabird numbers can be utilised as indicators of the well-being of the marine environment on a nationwide scale.

The islands of Bute and Inchmarnock, along with every other coastal and island seabird station in the Clyde sea area, were counted during the period of the Seabird Colony Register, as the new database is known. The results of this survey will be published in book form in late 1990 or early 1991. In this paper I review the current known Fulmar colonies of Bute and Inchmarnock.

Prospecting Birds

Fulmars frequently visit certain sites regularly for several years before actual breeding takes place. These 'prospecting' birds are usually, but not always, non-breeding birds of around six to ten years old, the age when Fulmars usually settle into a colony and commence breeding. From fledging to six years old Fulmars are usually highly nomadic, wandering the oceanic and coastal habitats of the northern North Atlantic Ocean, occasionally visiting suitable nesting sites in established or new colonies, but by no means returning to the natal area or colony. After this period serious investigation of suitable breeding sites begins.

Clyde Fulmar History

The Fulmar was first recorded ashore in the Clyde area in south Ayrshire around 1887 with three more found dead up to 14 July 1897 and the recorder, Charles Berry, the Lendalfoot naturalist, caught one in a field near his home on 3 February 1908 (8). The area in question adjoins the present Fulmar colony at Bennane Head and circumstances suggest that these birds may have been prospecting this area many years before breeding was proved. The Fulmar began the colonisation of the Clyde-Kintyre area in earnest from around the late 1920s (9, 2, 5), and after some years of prospecting, breeding was proved on Sanda in 1938 (5). Breeding was proved on Ailsa Craig in 1939 (5) and eventually on Bennane Head, Ayrshire in 1941 (5). It was not until much later that Fulmars found their way to the upper, and deeper, reaches of the Firth of Clyde (2, 5), and Arran was prospected by the mid-1940s, with breeding proved at Drumadoon in 1948 (5).

Bute was first prospected in 1946 (2), when one bird was seen flying close to the cliffs at Garroch Head, an eminently suitable area of cliffy habitat and grassy ledges. This location remained the only area on the island of Bute to interest Fulmars for some thirty years (6), but it has never become a breeding site, although several, seemingly less suitable, sites have now been established. Garroch Head is still, at time of writing, prospected by wandering Fulmars.

In 1965 one pair of Fulmars was reported to have nested on Inchmarnock (5), and in 1972 this was confirmed and a subsequent increase has been recorded (6). On Bute, Fulmars were proved breeding at Straad in 1979 by Mr Ian Hopkins and this seemed to have set off a period of colonisation at other coastal sites on Bute. My survey notes on the Inchmarnock and Bute colonies are given below.

The Clyde Fulmar population has shown a slower annual rate of increase in recent years and was calculated at around 3% for the period between 1969 and 1979 having been at 8% during the period between 1951 and 1969 (7).

THE BUTE COLONIES

Inchmarnock

In 1965 one pair was reported to have nested on Inchmarnock (5), and this was confirmed in 1972 when about a dozen birds were seen on the island and one egg was examined (6).

From then on there was a gradual increase with twelve pairs breeding in 1980 (6) and some twenty-four occupied sites counted in 1986 at two cliffy areas on the west-central and south sides of the island. As one of the primary seabird colonies of the Clyde area (7), Inchmarnock should have been upgraded to Nature Reserve status many years ago, as a safeguard from development or disturbance.

Straad

On Bute itself, Fulmars were proved breeding at Straad in 1979, when one pair bred (6). One pair again nested in 1980 (6). Mr Ian Hopkins ringed two young in 1979 and one in 1980. From then on there has been a slow but steady increase to eleven occupied sites in 1986 and several chicks have now been ringed over the years. This colony now appears to be well established.

Clate Point

The low, shrubby and well-wooded cliffs at this site seem a somewhat surprising locality for Fulmars. Three occupied sites were counted in 1987 and in early 1989 seven were counted with two adults caught and ringed. Some two months later, however, one ringed bird was found shot at this site along with another unringed bird, also shot. Fulmars are fully protected by law and this wanton destruction of a beautiful and harmless seabird defies all explanation. Breeding at this site requires confirmation.

Dunstrone

In 1986 up to seven occupied sites were counted at this locality, on Old Red Sandstone. Birds were again present in 1989 but no evidence of breeding has been obtained.

Largizean

This site is some two kilometres inland, on a small low cliff. There were seven occupied sites in 1987. Breeding has yet to be proved but the site seems destined to be unsuccessful unless well protected against predators and human disturbance.

Kerrytonlia Point

To date this is the only east coast site on the island of Bute. Four occupied sites were counted in 1986 and three sites noted in 1989. The site is a well-vegetated outcrop and difficult of access. Again there is as yet no proof of breeding.

Summary

Fulmars nest regularly on Inchmarnock, the largest colony, and at Straad on Bute. A further four sites, where breeding has yet to be recorded, have recently been established on Bute. Total population in 1989 was around sixty occupied sites with perhaps fewer than twenty eggs laid.

Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks are due to Mr Ian Hopkins for his help with fieldwork and data collection.

References

1. CRAMP, S., BOURNE, W.R.P. and SAUNDERS, D. (1974). *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*. London: Collins.
2. FISHER, J. (1952). *The Fulmar*. London: Collins.
3. FISHER, J. (1966). The Fulmar population of Britain and Ireland, 1959. *Bird Study*, 13: 5–76.
4. GIBSON, J.A. (1969–70–76–85–90). Population studies of Clyde seabirds. Parts 1–5. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 17: 79–95; 18: 21–30; 20: 53–67; 22: 85–105; 23: 81–107.
5. GIBSON, J.A. (1976). Population studies of Clyde seabirds. Part 3. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 20: 53–67.
6. GIBSON, J.A., HOPKINS, I. and STEPHEN, A. (1980). Notes on the birds of the Island of Bute, 1927–1980. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 21: 69–72.
7. MONAGHAN, P. and ZONFRILLO, B. (1986). Population dynamics of seabirds in the Firth of Clyde. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 90B: 363–375.
8. PATON, E.R. and PIKE, O.G. (1929). *The Birds of Ayrshire*. London: Witherby.
9. ROBERTSON, T. (1943). The Fulmar Petrel in the Clyde area. *Glasgow Naturalist*, 14: 75.

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE ISLAND OF BUTE, 1980–1990

J.A. Gibson and Ian Hopkins

Introduction

In 1980, along with our late colleague Mr Alex Stephen (Gibson, Hopkins and Stephen, 1980), we published a collected paper on changes in the status of Bute birds since 1927, the year when the Rev. J.M. McWilliam produced his book on the *Birds of the Island of Bute*. During the past ten years further changes have taken place, and in this current paper we attempt to bring the existing records up to date.

Inevitably some selection must be made, but to the best of our knowledge we have included all changes which are more important or more likely to be of interest to other observers, so we trust that the following list, restricted to fifty selected species, will be a useful addition to our knowledge of Bute birds.

As in our previous paper (1980), in the following check-list an asterisk * indicates an additional species not previously recorded for Bute, either in McWilliam's *Birds of the Island of Bute* (1927) or in our own 1980 supplementary list. The following abbreviation is used regularly throughout the text: *TBNHS* — *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*. The titles of other publications are given in full.

For ready assistance and much useful information we are very grateful, as always, to many members of the Buteshire Natural History Society and to many other colleagues who have visited the island and passed on their observations. Needless to say, we shall always be glad to receive any additional information.

Systematic List

In the following Systematic List the arrangement and nomenclature follow the *List of Recent Holarctic Bird Species* by Professor Karel H. Voous, published by the British Ornithologists' Union (1977).

RED-THROATED DIVER *Gavia stellata*

For the past ten years a pair has nested on the artificial island constructed by IH on a loch in the north of Bute, and birds are occasionally seen on other Bute lochs during early summer. On one particular loch a pair has been seen regularly since 1985, and one young bird was seen in 1986, thus proving breeding. It is hoped that regular breeding will take place at this loch, which is in a different area of the island from the established site at the north.