The Treshnish Isles: Annual seabird survey

In June 2010, a dedicated group of enthusiastic volunteers, the Treshnish Isles Auk Ringing Group (TIARG), were met with severe winds and rain, as they made their way to the Isle of Lunga to carry out the 32nd annual seabird survey on the Treshnish Isles. This year’s survey also marked the 10th anniversary of The Hebridean Trust owning and managing the islands.

Since 1971, TIARG has been monitoring the breeding seabird populations of the Treshnish Isles. The data they collect is submitted into two national monitoring programmes, the Seabird Colony Register (J.N.C.C.) and the National Ringing Database (British Trust for Ornithology).

By conducting a full seabird census and systematic ringing of the seabird colonies, the group
provides the Trust with a detailed picture of the breeding success of the many species of seabird that return to the Isles yearly to produce offspring. The work also highlights the potential threats, such as the impacts of tourism on nesting seabirds, activities in the local marine environment and the introduction of alien species, to the numbers and future success of many species.

The TIARG group consisted this year of eight volunteers; some professional ornithologists and others trained amateurs. Tim Dixon, an ornithologist by training has been taking part in the surveys since 2004. He manages the logistics of the survey, ensuring the safety of the group and that they have all of the essential equipment and supplies they require to remain self-sufficient on the Isles for seven days.

“When I was asked to join TIARG, I jumped at the chance to put my skills and training to good use” says Tim. “The annual survey is one the UK’s longest established seabird surveys. The year-on-year data we collect is essential to the conservation of many bird species on the Treshnish Isles, a designated ‘Special Protection Area’ because of the breeding colonies they support”

Undaunted by the weather, the group set up a base in the abandoned village on the northern side of Lunga, where one of the more upstanding buildings is used as a lab and central hub for all of the work carried out during the week. Each day of the expedition is planned carefully to make the best use of the long hours of daylight. Starting late in the morning the group carries out a count of seabirds on the whole of Lunga and Sgeir a’ Chaisteil. In periods of better weather they utilise an inflatable boat to visit neighbouring islands, successfully censusing seabird populations as far north as Fladda.

By early evening the important work of ringing begins, including this year’s fifth consecutive Shag retrap adult survival study (RAS). Other species include the iconic Puffins, Guillemots and Razorbills to name only a few. Ringing adults with their birds.
A recently ringed Shag chick
Lesser Black-backed Gull chick

unique engraved metal and colour rings allows field-workers to re-identify them in future years to monitor their movements and survival rates.

The ancient Icelandic tradition of fleyging is used to safely capture many species of seabirds for ringing. Originally it was a technique adopted to hunt Puffins in large numbers during and after their breeding seasons.

A hand-wielded ‘Fleygingarstong’ – imagine a fisherman’s landing net at the end of a very long pole – is used to actively catch the birds in mid-flight. This process is carried out on the edge of cliff-tops so the fleyger has to wear a harness and be tied off to large rocks, as an over zealous lunge could be catastrophic!

By nightfall long mist nets are set up to capture Storm Petrels. These tiny seabirds fly inland under the cover of darkness to change over incubation duties at their nests. In a matter of hours hundreds of birds can be caught and ringed. This can keep the group busy until dawn.

The data from the 2010 TIARG survey is currently being analysed but early indications show improved productivity among some seabird species, such as the Shag. Some species showing poorer productivity were simply returning to the level of the long-term mean after a couple of good years.

The baseline information provided by the annual survey allows the Trust to make management judgements about the threats to the seabird populations of the Isles. The full survey report will be available to download on the Trust’s website www.hebrideantrust.org. Previous years reports (2004-2009) are published on the website.

Fundraising has now begun for the 2011 survey, if you would like to support this work please call 01865 311468 or email info@hebrideantrust.org.

The Trust has recently been successful in its application to be entered in the Big Give Christmas Challenge 2010. Supporters of the Seabird Survey have until 5th November to make pledges towards the Fund Target or can make online donations in December at www.thebiggive.org.uk to enable the Trust to access further funding.
Since 2000 The Hebridean Trust has owned and managed the Treshnish Isles. In this time the Trust has worked tirelessly to ensure the conservation of the wildlife that live and breed on the Isles. Although the Isles were already classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area under the EC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds, this work has seen the Treshnish Isles being formally designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) by Scottish Ministers. This is in recognition of the role the Isles have supporting a large breeding colony of Grey Seals and for the widely distributed rocky reefs that fringe 90% of the coastline of the Treshnish Isles, providing habitats for an array of marine life.

A programme of site condition monitoring was launched, when an extensive video survey was commissioned around the Treshnish Isles, to study the sublittoral reef biotopes (different habitats with their recurring characteristic species communities). The data that was collected will become the baseline for future monitoring research.

In light of the SAC classification of the Treshnish Isles, the Trust has also extended its research outlets, working with the Sea Mammal Research Unit, part of the University of St Andrews, on the Seal Diet Scotland project.

In the last decade there has been a substantial decline in Harbour Seal populations throughout the UK. The project aims to carry out a study on the diet of Harbour Seals and potential competition with Grey Seals across the whole of Scotland.

PhD candidate, Lindsay Wilson, who has been working on the project since it began in March 2010 commented, “The Hebridean Trust has provided us with essential information about the seal populations around the Treshnish Isles, assisting in our work monitoring distribution and numbers around the Isles throughout the year.”

The Trust actively works alongside a number of research-based projects as part of its management of the islands. The Trust has recently received the very positive news from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) that the maritime cliff feature of the SSSI, that failed a monitoring assessment prior to the Trust acquiring the islands, is this year in favourable condition. SNH advises that this positive result for the Treshnish Isles reflects the good management of the site.
The Hynish Centre enters its final stage of redevelopment

The Hynish Centre is the largest visitor facility on the Isle of Tiree, offering quality accommodation for large groups, many of which are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and small family parties alike. It also provides a hub for the local community to gather. The Sunday afternoon teas and superb home baking can bring over three hundred visitors during the summer months.

Since the Centre was officially opened in 1991 by HRH the Princess Royal, the Hebridean Trust, which owns and runs the Centre, has continued to subsidise visiting groups of disadvantaged young people from across the UK, offering them the opportunity to escape their day to day lives and experience the heritage and peaceful beauty of the Hebrides.

The Hynish Centre not only provides homely catered accommodation, but also enables young groups to participate in community environment projects and activities.

One such group from Inveralmond Community High School made their now regular annual trip to the Isle of Tiree in June 2010. Twenty-four students aged 12-13 and four teachers disembarked the ferry from Oban with only their bicycles as transport for a weeklong stay on the Island.

Peter West, the teacher that leads the annual trip explained, “The children that come to Tiree live in densely urban environments, so when they arrive on the
Island they are gob smacked by its beauty and seclusion” he goes on to say “the trip helps to build the children’s sense of independence, while giving them the opportunity to experience a calmer, yet more active way of life.”

During their stay on Tiree, the group spend a day at the windsurfing school, an afternoon at the local fire station learning about fire safety, they visit the Skerryvore Lighthouse Exhibition and carry out a litter pick, cleaning up the beach at Happy Valley, about a kilometer from Hynish.

This year, while cleaning the beach Beth Rocca, a 12 year-old student from Inveralmond, found a message in a bottle. Although much of the message was faded, she was able to make out contact details and some information, which revealed that the bottle had been launched from Newfoundland, Canada in June 2009. The story made the local news, capturing the imaginations of all of the children who took part in the trip.

The Hynish Centre is run by a small team consisting of Monica Smith and Lesley McLean. Monica, the Centre manager, has been working at the Centre since it opened, she also bakes the legendary Sunday afternoon cakes. Lesley has worked with Monica for the last three years. Together the pair run the day-to-day operation, manage the up-keep of the accommodation and of course, at all times, ensure the enjoyment and wellbeing of all the guests that stay at the Centre.

After 19 years of success, the accommodation at the Centre needed to be reconfigured and updated. This formed part of an ambitious plan that would increase occupancy substantially. In response, the Trust made it one of their priorities to raise the funds required to refurbish and modernise the Centre. Their fundraising efforts were completed with a formal offer of a European Structural Funds grant from the European Regional Development Fund and a substantial donation from an anonymous supporter.
Pupils proudly sporting their team t-shirts outside the Hynish Centre.

Monica Smith (left) and Lesley McLean (right) at the Hynish Centre

The Trust worked with architects and construction experts to redesign the first floor of the Centre, re-configuring the bedrooms to include en-suite bath and shower facilities, making the accommodation more flexible and versatile, appealing to a wider range of visitors. The plans also included the installation of a lift, furthering the accessibility of the Centre to those with disabilities.

The Trust is seeking further funding towards equipment. If you would like to find out more about how you can support this or help the Trust subsidise groups of disadvantaged young people at the Hynish Centre, please call 01865 311468 or email info@hebrideantrust.org.

The Hebridean Trust continues to let and maintain properties on the Isle of Tiree, offering low cost housing solutions to families, couples and individuals living on the island.

Recently, repair works were required to eliminate water penetration at The Barracks, part of the Lighthouse Establishment at Hynish. The Lighthouse Establishment was built mainly between 1837 and 1843 by Alan Stevenson as a base for construction and servicing/maintenance of Skerryvore Lighthouse. The Barracks were restored by the Trust in 1994.

The property provides accommodation to a number of tenants, including Vicky and Richard Goodier. Vicky and her husband, Richard, moved to Tiree in 2009 from Cheshire to start a new life together. Vicky commented, “This has been the best move we ever made” and went on to say, “by providing excellent low cost housing, The Hebridean Trust made it possible for us to relocate to Tiree, becoming part of the community and finding employment on the island very quickly.”

A local contractor, Bernard D Smith & Son, was employed to carry out the works as part of the Trust’s ongoing commitment to maintain the local economy on Tiree.

Housing repairs at The Barracks

The Barracks

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The redevelopment work to convert the Category A Listed Old Cowsheds on the Isle of Tiree in order to house a state of the art exhibition centre has now been completed. The Hebridean Trust successfully raised the funds to develop the Treshnish Isles Natural History Interpretative Facility, located in the village of Hynish. The new facility will offer the opportunity to experience the Treshnish Isles through film footage, exhibitions and interactive exhibits. Locating the facility on Tiree protects an environment sensitive to disturbance, in an aim to protect the many seabird colonies that rely on the Isles as an annual breeding ground, while at the same time capitalizing on one of the best vantage points of the islands.

Local contractors Kevan Brown Ltd. were employed to carry out the redevelopment work and commented, “It has been fantastic to work with The Hebridean Trust to restore the Island’s old buildings”. The works began in November last year and went to plan with completion in the spring.

Kevan Brown went on to say, “Living on the Island, the Trust’s work to secure funding for projects like the Interpretative Facility is essential for sustaining the community and economy on Tiree.”

The new facility is entering its final stage of development. This will include work created by children from Tiree School, who enjoyed an educational trip to the Treshnish Isles as part of their curriculum work. The Trust continues to financially support these educational excursions.
In 2006, The Hebridean Trust commissioned a team of four archaeologists from the Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) to spend a week carrying out fieldwork on the remote island of Cairn na Burgh More, one of the most northerly islands that make up the Treshnish Isles. Their tasks included a topographic survey of the whole island, as well as standing building surveys of the medieval chapel, an 18th century Hanovarian barracks block and the impressive sections of defensive curtain wall.

Heather James, the project manager at GUARD who took part in the fieldwork back in 2006, presented the project to a wider audience when she attended the Hebridean Archaeological Forum Conference in South Uist in September 2010. The full report from the archaeology surveys is available to download in PDF format from www.hebrideantrust.org
Richard Hayes becomes an Honorary Life Friend

Richard Hayes, an expert in the construction industry, has, for the past eight years, been a source of expert advice, assisting in the maintenance of many of the Trust’s buildings on the Isle of Tiree. His extensive career in construction saw him positioned as Managing Director of a construction firm, before taking his present post as Estates Bursar for a school which, in parallel to the Trust, owns and manages several listed buildings.

On his most recent visit to Tiree, Richard surveyed Alan Stevenson House, part of the Hynish Centre, in preparation for the redevelopment work. From his survey, he was able to assist in the drawing of architectural plans and produce accurate maintenance schedules, saving the Trust thousands of pounds.

“I love the way of life on Tiree and to see the Trust providing and building a future for so many people on the Island is superb” Richard says “I am delighted to become an Honorary Life Friend and look forward to continuing to work with The Hebridean Trust in the future.”

The Trust hugely values the support it receives from volunteers who provide their expertise to help build, develop and sustain the lives, heritage and wildlife that make the Hebrides the exceptionally unique place it is.

Providing Equal Opportunities

The Hebridean Trust wholeheartedly supports the principle of equal opportunities in the workplace and when providing its extensive services. In order to formalise the policy of equal opportunities under which the Trust operates on a day-to-day basis, a written policy has been introduced which is available on the Trust’s website www.hebrideantrust.org.

Charity Status in Scotland

Already a registered charity in England and Wales, The Hebridean Trust is also now a Charity Registered in Scotland. The Trust was entered on the Scottish Charity Register with the charity number SC038956, in addition to Charity Commission registration, registered charity number 285629.
A unique piece of industrial archaeology

The next phase of projects to be undertaken by the Trust majors on Hynish Harbour and Flushing System on the Isle of Tiree. When the Lighthouse Establishment was built it provided an all-year-round berth for the lighthouse tender. The marine facilities include a pier and a dock. Originally the dock could be enclosed using stop booms to keep out storm conditions. Sand accumulation within the dock was recognised as a problem and the dock was provided with a gravity fed flushing system. The Trust is seeking to conserve the historic structures and to restore the hydraulic flushing system to its original condition, with a view to returning the harbour and dock to use, and to provide visitors with an understanding of this fascinating piece of industrial archaeology. The outcome of discussions with statutory funders has been positive.

Hynish Harbour and Flushing System (the harbour is pictured on page 5)
Making a donation

I would like to make a donation to The Hebridean Trust of £ ________________

A regular gift, by Direct Debit would be especially valuable in helping us to plan ahead with confidence. Please request details by emailing info@hebrideantrust.org

Please complete your address details and return your donation to the address below.

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The Hebridean Trust was founded in 1982

Trustees:
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