University of Sheffield

Skomer Guillemots

Update for Supporters

October 2025

By Tim Birkhead

Guillemot in flight (Photo: Klaus Nigge)

As the Skomer warden, Leighton Newman, discovered soon after arriving back on the island in March, **the ten-year old Amos hide had collapsed over winter**.

My field assistant was due to arrive soon after, so there was a lot of scurrying around to get a replacement.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of a comfortable hide for the guillemot study. Luckily, another Skomer researcher, Matt Wood, had an unused gull hide on the island and in return for a donation to the South and West Wales Wildlife Trust, we were able to acquire it.

The (intact) hide on a particular chilly summer day in July 2023 (photo: Klaus Nigge)

It was perfect and I am hugely grateful to everyone — the warden Leighton Newman and his assistants — who helped to carry it to the Amos location: a herculean task, but well worth it and just in time for my assistant's arrival and the start of guillemot observations.

I was fortunate this year to be able to employ Pete Richards, the son of one of my former undergraduates from twenty-odd years ago, as field assistant.

Efficient, enthusiastic and bubbling over with interesting questions about Skomer's guillemots, Pete was an excellent assistant. I visited Skomer in May and June, to see how the guillemots and Pete were getting on.

The season was — fortunately — undistinguished in many ways: breeding occurred at the usual time (the median laying date was the first week of May) and breeding success was much as I expected. That is, 0.73 chicks/pair, slightly lower than in the pre-bird-flu years, and due partly to the young, inexperienced birds that moved in 2024 to take the place of those that died during the 2023 outbreak.

Official reports of bird flu in the UK continued, with an increasing number of species recorded as having died from the virus, but with no details of how many individuals. I suspect that the virus may still be around on Skomer: we saw two dead adult guillemots on the sea near our Amos study colony. Prior to the 2023 bird flu outbreak, it was almost unheard of to see a dead adult guillemot during the breeding season. **However, this year, we did not detect any further deaths so if there was still bird flu around, it did not have a big impact — thank goodness.**

Here is the Amos, in case you'd forgotten what it looked like – taken early in the season when many of the ledges were still relatively quiet.

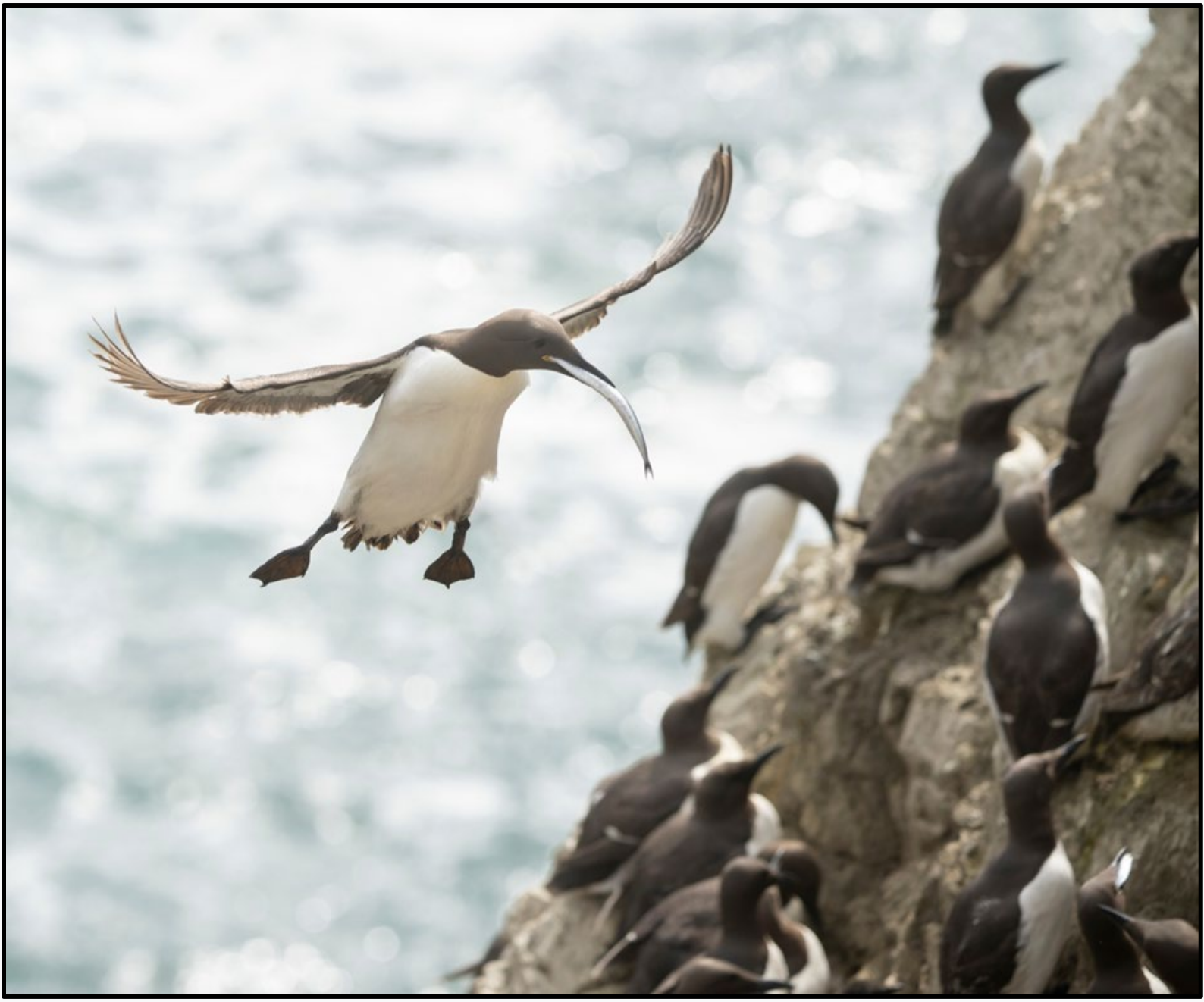
Climate change continues to be a concern for Skomer's guillemots, as well as wildlife elsewhere.

Extremes in temperature and rainfall take their toll. There were some extremely hot days on Skomer this summer and although the birds seemed to cope, this wasn't the case at the guillemot colony on Heligoland a few years ago, when temperatures on the cliffs reached 50°C, and resulted in the deaths of many chicks. Heavy rain on Skomer on several days during May and June 2025 was probably responsible for the deaths of several very young chicks, contributing to the lower-than-average breeding success.

Sea temperatures were at a record high in 2025, and I was concerned that there might be a concomitant shortage of food (as in 2023) during the chick-rearing period.

We checked this using a tried-and-tested method that I first used in the 1970s during my PhD, which involves recording whether zero, one or two parents were present at their breeding site during chick rearing. Normally one parent is present with the chick continuously, but if food is scarce, the chick may be temporarily left on its own — a clear sign of desperation because without a protective parent, chicks are very vulnerable to gulls. However, some lone chicks are brooded by helpful neighbours (referred to as 'alloparents'), thereby reducing the predation risk. If food is abundant however, the off-duty parent spends more time with its partner at the breeding site. Our measure of what we call 'off-duty parental attendance' showed that in 2025, off-duty parents spent very little time at their breeding site suggesting that food was relatively scarce.

The commonest fish fed to guillemot chicks this year were clupeids, probably sprats (which are indistinguishable when seen at a distance through a telescope from herring, which in previous years occurred occasionally). There were relatively few cod-like fish brought to chicks this year, but large sand eels, previously seen only rarely were relatively abundant. **Monitoring guillemot chick diet is important because it can detect changes in the marine environment.**



A parent guillemot returning to the Amos with a large sandeel.

The numbers of guillemots counted during the 2025 annual census was very similar to last year, which was probably what was expected given the consequences of the 20-30% mortality of breeding birds in 2023 from bird flu. It will be another few years before we can assess whether guillemot numbers will pick up again.

I have continued to give talks about the Skomer guillemot project, and about the great auk, resulting from my book *The Great Auk: its Extraordinary Life, Hideous Death and Mysterious Afterlife*, published by Bloomsbury in March 2025.

Talks included those at the Cheltenham Science Festival, where I was 'in conversation' with the remarkable swift campaigner, Hannah Bourne-Taylor; the Oxford Literary Festival; the Wealden Festival; the Lancaster Literary Festival where I was in conversation with the British Trust for Ornithology's Jon Carter; the Crosspool Festival; and at the renowned Wooton Village Hall, as well as several local bird clubs. I was on Radio 4's Start the Week to talk about the great auk in March.

TRB with Hannah-Bourne Taylor — swift campaigner — at Cheltenham Science Festival, with our respective books, mine of The Great Auk, and Hannah's Nature Needs You on the fight to save swifts.

In August, the guillemot study was the topic of my opening plenary talk at European Ornithologists' Union conference in Bangor. In terms of publications, I published an account of the Skomer bird flu outbreak in *British Birds* (vol 118, pages 8-19 in January 2025) and a popular account of the great auk in *British Wildlife* magazine in February. In addition, the Skomer guillemot data was used in a study entitled 'Ecosystems mediate climate impacts on northern hemisphere seabirds' to be published in *Communications Earth & Environment.* And in a paper entitled 'Long-term multi-species demographic studies reveal divergent negative impacts of winter storms on seabird survival', published in Journal of Animal Ecology (94: 139-153).

My DPhil on Skomer's guillemots was conducted in the 1970s and I was supervised by Chris Perrins, director of the Edward Grey Institute in Oxford. In May this year, I attended Chris's 90th birthday celebration in Wytham Woods, where he had undertaken years of research on blue tits and great tits.

Finally, the **short film** about the Skomer guillemot study *The Birdman of Skomer* made by Edo Dzafic will be shown at a number of film festivals in 2025 and 2026. This short film provides a useful background to the guillemot study and how I came to become involved for what is now fifty-four years! One of its main messages is that I continue to look for someone to take over the project, but I am beginning to feel that academia has changed dramatically in the last few years and while plenty of young academics are happy to use the data from long term studies like mine, sadly, few or none are prepared to take the responsibility for running such a project.

As always, I would like to thank everyone for their support that has allowed the Skomer guillemot project to continue. Thank you!

If you have any questions about the project, please contact me:

t.r.birkhead@sheffield.ac.uk

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giving@sheffield.ac.uk
0114 222 5598