

Lundy Seabird Recovery Project

Lundy Island receives national recognition and legal protection for the variety of wildlife it supports. The main seabird conservation priority is the Manx shearwater, a bird with a highly restricted global breeding range. Three quarters of the world population breeds on islands around the UK and only a small number of islands support significant numbers. Therefore, the UK has an international responsibility for this species. Surveys show that Lundy is supporting only around 10% of the Manx shearwater that it used to. Surveys that started over 60 years ago also show that puffins have declined almost to the point of extinction on the island.

Research into the possible causes of the plight of these two seabirds looked at the wide range of possibilities including environmental factors such as climate change, food supply and disease. Other islands close enough to Lundy for the birds to interact socially and share feeding grounds have healthy populations of Manx shearwater and puffins. Skomer, only 64 kilometres from Lundy, has 100,000 pairs of both Manx shearwater. Therefore there is another significant and particular factor affecting the birds on Lundy.

The significant difference between Lundy and the other islands is its population of rats. Lundy supports both brown and black rats, neither of which have protection in law and are not included in any of the widely accepted expressions of conservation concern. This reflects their global abundance and the fact that neither species is native to the UK, owing their presence here to unintentional introductions by man. Rats are known to eat the eggs and chicks of ground- and burrow-nesting birds like Manx shearwater and puffin. Where rats have been eradicated from other islands to protect seabirds, the seabird population has recovered. We have evidence of the decline of puffins from the last 60 years, but rats will have eaten the chicks and eggs as soon as they discovered the breeding colonies. This may not have occurred on Lundy for many years. Seabirds are long-lived. Once fledged, they do not return to breed for several years. For these reasons the damaging effects of rat predation on seabird populations may be slow and not obvious for decades after rats arrived on the island. By the same token, because their breeding productivity is low it may take many years for the populations of puffin and Manx shearwater to recover once rats are removed. With this background knowledge, a feasibility study to see if rats could be eliminated from Lundy was undertaken and concluded that it was possible.

The Seabird Recovery Group consisting of English Nature, The National Trust, The Landmark Trust and the RSPB was formed to find the best way to eradicate the rats from Lundy. A detailed plan for the eradication has been designed. This document is not in the public domain as it contains confidential information such as budgets and commercial confidences.

Special attention has been paid to the safety of islanders, visitors and the other wildlife on the island. The plan is now being implemented by specialist and highly skilled contractors. The bait is as humane as possible and does not cause illness to the rat until just before death. Once removed, every effort will be made to stop rats getting back on to Lundy.

The decision to safeguard some wildlife by controlling others is never taken lightly. Being signatories to a number of international conventions, the UK is committed to protecting threatened species of plants and animals. These obligations and the overwhelming weight of scientific evidence have led to the establishment of the Seabird Recovery Project.

Bibliography

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Links to the Lundy Seabird Recovery Project partners are available by visiting <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/links/default.asp?category=Wildlife>.

To visit Lundy, see <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/placestovisit/>.