

FAQs for the Seabird Recovery Project

Why do Seabirds need our help?

The Isles of Scilly are a nationally and internationally important location for seabirds, particularly Manx Shearwater, European Storm Petrel and Black-backed Gull. Both Manx shearwaters and European storm petrels are amber listed under the United Kingdom Birds of Conservation Concern. There is a pressing need to conserve and protect our vulnerable seabird populations, alongside the need to protect and improve our wider natural environment.

What are benefits for the islands?

The eradication of invasive species from islands is one of the most important tools in conservation. The removal of rats is a recognised requirement for the restoration of many seabird colonies on islands, with rodents successfully eradicated from over 700 islands around the world, including on at least 10 UK islands. Breeding of Manx shearwaters has increased over 3500% in England between 2000-2023 thanks to removal of invasive rats from islands such as Lundy and St Agnes and Gugh. To maximise the resilience of the existing seabird population, we are looking at ways to reduce the impact of rat predation upon Scilly's seabirds, following the successful removal of rats from St Agnes and Gugh in 2013/14.

The removal of rats won't only improve the population of seabirds but will also benefit other Scilly flagship species such as the Scilly Shrew.

The increase of iconic seabird populations will have socio-economic benefits to the islands such as an increase birdwatching and wildlife tourism, financial savings to locals from savings in rat control and replacement of damaged goods and reducing risk of diseases carried by rats. It is hoped that this project will also provide lasting benefits through the improvement of waste management and biosecurity.

What does the Seabird Recovery Project entail?

Following on from the success of St Agnes and Gugh, the Seabird Recovery Projects will now focus on the removal of rats from Bryher, Tresco and St Martin's, as well as surrounding uninhabited islands from Samson to the Eastern Isles. All these islands need to be done simultaneously as they are all within the 0.5-mile swimming distance of a brown rat!

A feasibility study was carried out in 2023/2024 and determined that the project was feasible.

What is the project timeline?

With the feasibility study complete, we are now in the development stage, the eradication stage could begin as early as October 2027. After which biosecurity measures will be in place to keep our islands rat free for the next 25 years.

How can you get involved?

In 2013/14, the role of the St Agnes community in decision-making and the long-term management of their rat free status was key to its success. The Seabird recovery project will continue to engage with each island community through a community co-design process. The project will provide an abundance of volunteering opportunities to get involved with the project. Please contact us at hello@ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk for further information regarding volunteering opportunities with the subject "Volunteering Seabird Recovery".

How do we future proof this project?

Inter-island and mainland boat traffic poses a risk to biosecurity. The vigilance and co-operation of boat users and operators has been key to the success of keeping St Agnes and Gugh rat free. This cooperation will be essential for the Seabird Recovery Project to keep all off islands rat free.

A comprehensive biosecurity plan will be available which will include biosecurity information, guides and support for boating, the community and visitors.

When visiting rat free islands please check your vessels and equipment for indication of rats before landing.

There are new biosecurity tools available in the UK, including the use of biosecurity dogs. Dog handlers and their specially trained dogs can detect stowaways and their use in ongoing biosecurity on Scilly is highly likely.

What about St Mary's?

As it stands, the removal of brown rats from St Mary's is not feasible with current techniques but we will monitor the situation in case this changes and continue to work with people on St Mary's to improve the feasibility of a future project there.

However, St Mary's residences will also reap the benefits of the Seabird Recovery Project. The Wildlife Trust is working in partnership with Community Venture CIC to improve waste management on Scilly, including piloting a composting scheme on St Mary's. Rat control efforts will also be increased on St Mary's to improve biosecurity to the off islands.

Who is involved with the project?

The project will be a partnership between The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Natural England, Duchy of Cornwall, The Council of the Isles of Scilly, The Isles of Scilly National Landscape (AONB), Trinity House, Isles of Scilly Bird Group, Isles of Scilly Farmers and Growers Initiative and representatives from Bryher, St Martin's and Tresco Island Limited.

Will the rat removal affect other species?

Rabbit populations will be monitored in case of increase after rat removal. Rabbit control advice will be sought throughout the project to relieve any concerns.

Experience from other projects has shaped the design of rat bait stations to exclude key non-target species such as birds and rabbits that are found through-out the Isles of Scilly, as well as humans, cats, dogs and domestic stock, thus sharply reducing the risks of 'primary' non-target poisoning (where animals eat the bait directly).

There will be an educational programme including resources and advice to ensure protection of domestic animals.

What are the benefits to the island communities and visitors?

There are a considerable number of benefits to both the island communities and visitors ranging from cost savings on rodent control and rodent damage, to an increased interest in seabirds and connection to the island's environment as well as improvements to waste management infrastructure and biosecurity.