Ringed Plover Conservation Project Report 2025

Written by: Sarita Whitehead *Conservation Officer*

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Summary

The Ringed Plover Conservation Project by the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust has continued for a second year, with match-funding from the Isles of Scilly National Landscape Partnership following the cessation of funding from the RSPB England Beach-nesting Bird Programme. Financial support was also raised from the Protect our Plovers appeal launched in July 2025, which will also be used to support the project into 2026. This project continues to focus on improving the breeding success of Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) in the Isles of Scilly as population declines continue to be observed across the UK. Scilly remains the only place Southwest of Dorset where Ringed Plover are breeding.

Building on the achievements of last year's efforts, this project has continued to gather information on the challenges facing Ringed Plover on Scilly and implement strategies to mitigate and manage these challenges. This included continuous monitoring of nests through the use of trail cameras and regular beach surveys to identify nests and breeding adults. It became apparent after last year's efforts that public engagement was key to increasing awareness and ensuring the long-term success of the project and subsequently our Ringed Plover population.

This year has, overall, been another success with a total of 17 nests recorded across the season. This does not necessarily indicate an increase in individuals breeding on Scilly, it is too early in the project to draw any conclusions on the status of our Ringed Plover population. However, out of the 17 nests recorded and monitored this year, 8 hatched, 5 failed and there were a remaining 4 nests where it was unclear what the outcome had been.

The continuation for this project has provided further insight it to the potential causes of the visible decline in breeding pairs across the islands as well as creating a solid basis for ongoing community engagement surrounding behaviour changes. This report also includes narrative on the lessons learnt this year and recommendations for future work to protect Ringed Plovers on Scilly.

Introduction

The Isles of Scilly comprise around 200 islands and significant rocks. All of Scilly is designated as a National Landscape (previously known as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). Over 450 species of bird have been recorded on the Isles of Scilly, but only around 50 of those species breed on the islands.

The Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) is a small wader. Ringed Plovers are now a red-listed UK bird of conservation concern due to declines in breeding populations. They are being adversely affected by predation and recreational disturbance, with coastal change and climate change also likely to be factors. Breeding in England is now largely confined to the least disturbed beaches and areas where conservation management is in place. Scilly's breeding population is a key geographical outlier with the next closest breeding population being on Chesil Beach in Dorset.

Despite increasing pressure from people and dogs on their beach-nesting grounds in Scilly, the beaches on the isles tend to be significantly less disturbed than most other beaches on the English coast. The Isles of Scilly also has a more limited range of nest and chick predators than mainland Britain. Mammalian predators are limited to domestic and feral cats (which may be present on all the inhabited islands), rats and hedgehogs (St Mary's), with foxes and mustelids being absent. The islands also have a small resident peregrine population (one to three pairs), carrion crows, and a

range of large gull species, although Scilly lacks magpies, and kestrels are generally only present in passage periods.

Aims

The focus for this year's efforts was to continue building our understanding of breeding sites, productivity and factors affecting breeding success. Our objectives were:

1. Improve understanding of Scilly's Ringed Plover population and their pressures.
    a. Repeatedly survey islands to identify all nests and record development stages.
    b. Monitor Ringed Plover nests to understand the impacts of disturbance and predation using trail cameras.
    c. Increase foundational data to improve baseline understanding.
2. Continue to protect vulnerable nests using cordoning and interpretation.
3. Recruit volunteers to enable a broader assessment of monitoring success across the season.
4. Raise awareness within the community (both locals and tourists) of Ringed Plover decline through the use of social media.

Methodology

Surveys for Ringed Plover nests were conducted from mid-April to the end of July, focusing on locations with appropriate habitat and locations where nests have been previously reported. Two approaches were used in conjunction to identify nest sites:

1. Systematically walking along the beach
    a. If working in a team, having one person at the top of the beach and another walking along the high tide mark scanning for eggs.
    b. When working alone a zig-zag pattern was adopted along the distance between the high tide mark and the top of the beach scanning for eggs.

2. Monitoring Adult Behaviour
    a. Checking for nesting behaviour from adults (i.e. alarm calling, circling over an area, or running to and from a particular area), waiting roughly 5-10 minutes for adults to return to the nest to accurately locate eggs.

These approaches were also applied when conducting productivity/chick checks. In addition to this, vantage points were selected and observations were taken for a period of 30 minutes to ensure chicks could be accurately counted. Once the nests/chicks were located, they were immediately logged on the monitoring app.

Results

With the pilot year under our belt, we are confident that the data collected during the 2025 season is more representative of the status of the breeding Ringed Plover population on the Isles of Scilly. Data was collected both throughout the 2024 breeding season and by the IoSWT annual seabird monitoring surveys.

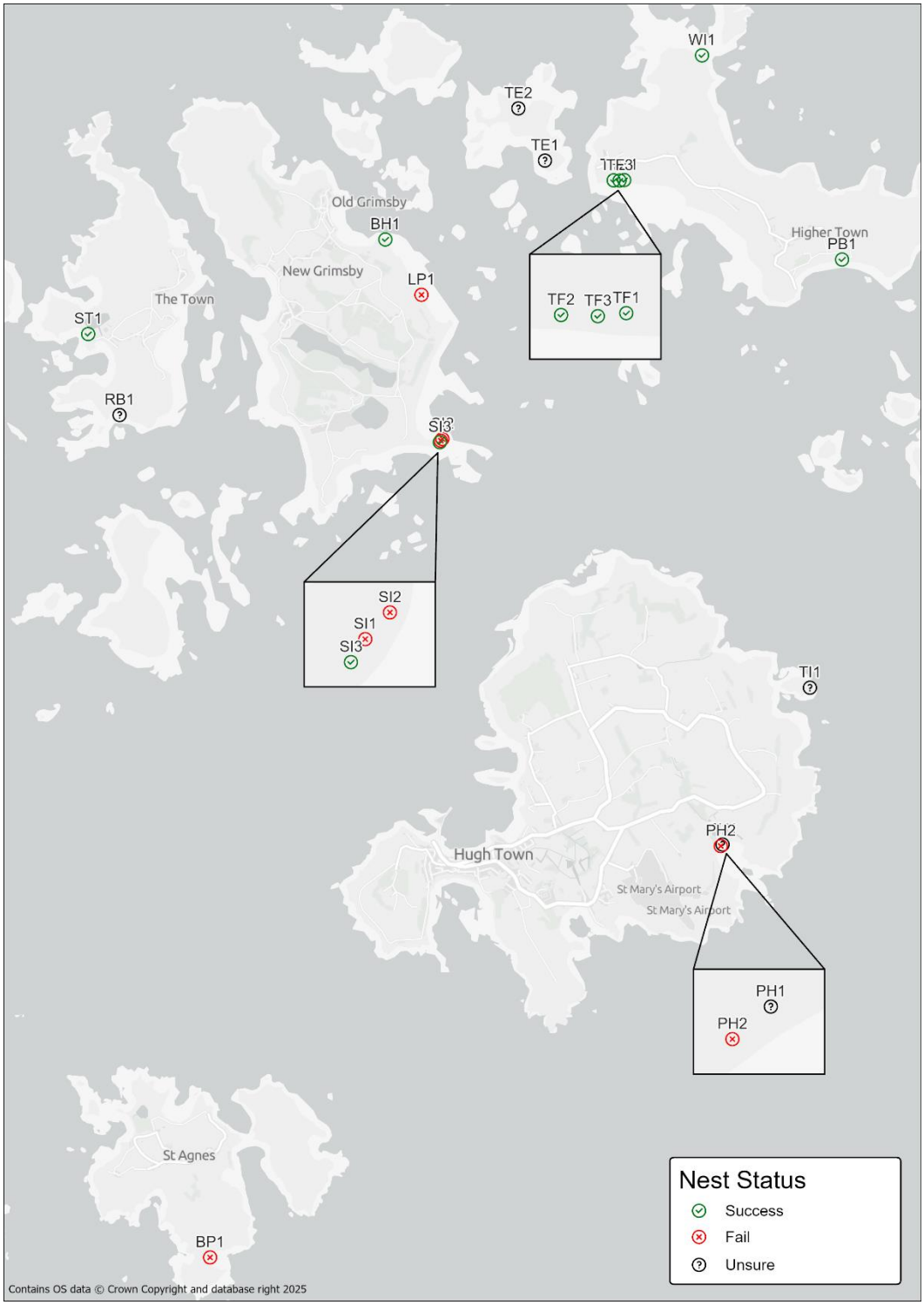

Figure 1. Map of the total number and distribution of Ringed Plover nests observed this year and their respective outcomes.

Figure 1. shows the number of nests recorded between April and August during the 2025 season. A total of 18 nests were observed. It is estimated that these 18 nests equate to roughly 14 breeding pairs in total.

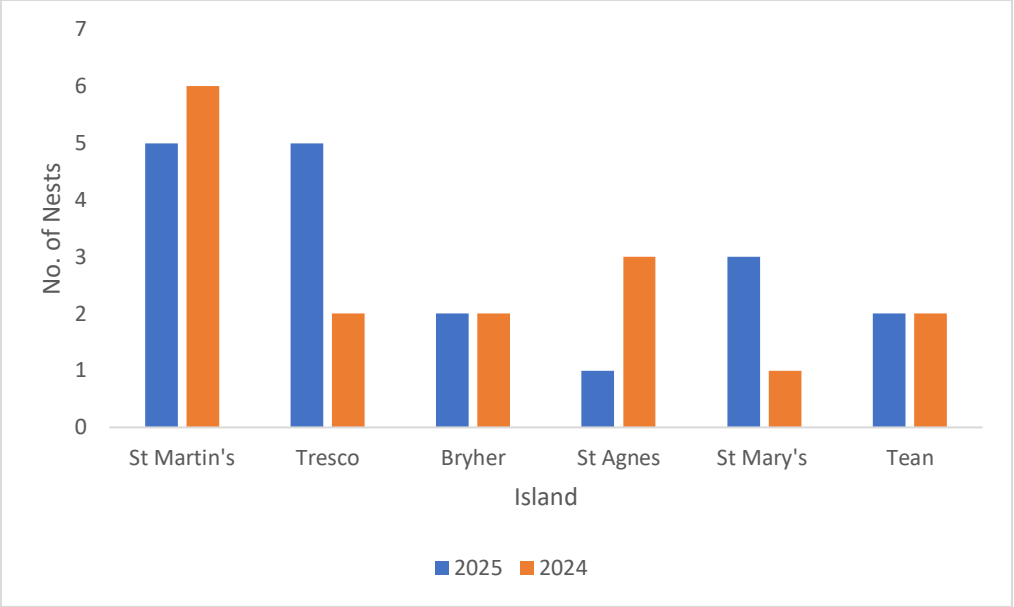

Figure 2. Graph showing the distribution of Ringed Plover nests across the islands during the 2025 season compared to 2024. This graph is not representative of the total number of Breeding Pairs; it only provides a visual representation of the number of nests monitored between April to August.

St Martin's remains the preferred nesting site for breeding Ringed Plover this year. Whilst Tresco hosted 5 nests this year, in reality this only represents 3 breeding pairs.

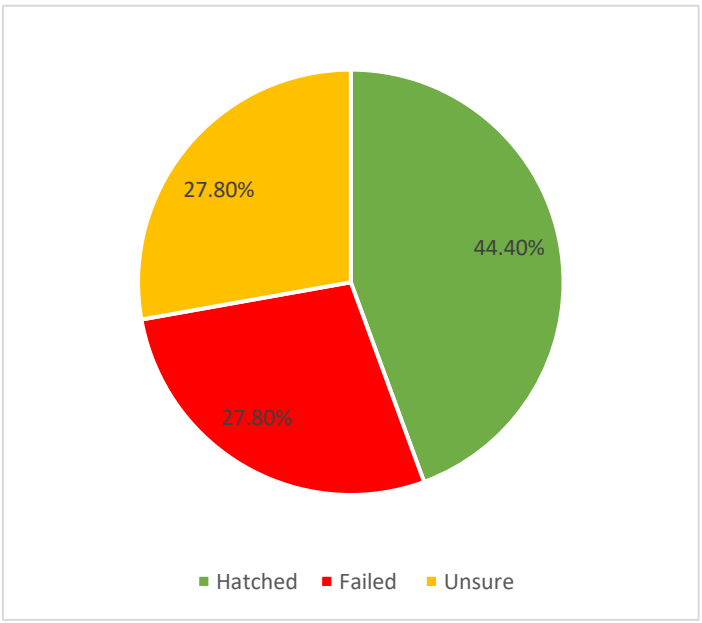

Figure 3. Pie chart showing the total percentage of success (hatched), failure and unsure recordings across all nests this year.

The addition of 'unsure' as a category for final nest status this year was to account for instances where trail cameras failed, or nests were missed due to human error. This slightly changes the way data was recorded from the 2024 season. However, this change should make the data for hatched and failed nests more reliable and representative going forwards.

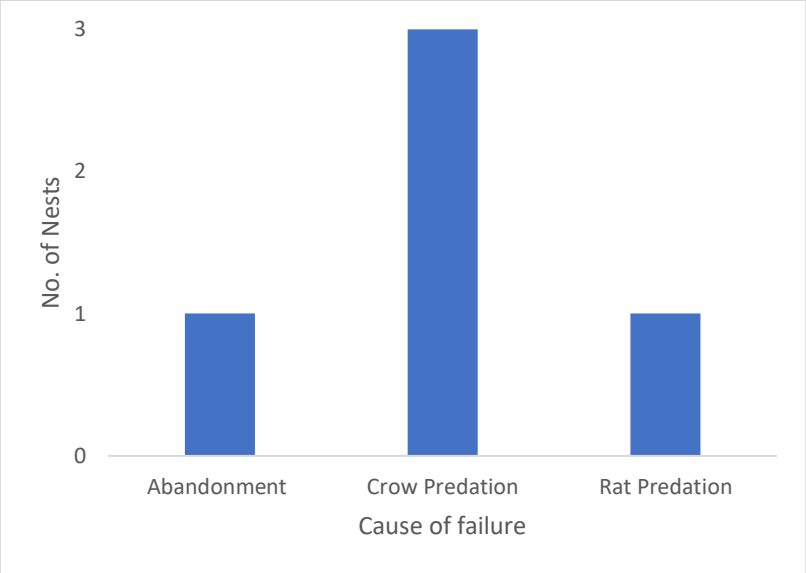

Figure 4. Bar graph showing the causes of nest failures during the 2025 season.

Unlike last year, there were no instances where nests were washed out or in any immediate danger of being washed out, so no nests had to be moved. Compared to last year there were less failures overall, however there were more instances of predation this year. For the first time evidence of rats predating Ringed Plover eggs was captured, which was long suspected. Confirmation was also obtained from trail cameras that not only are crows predating eggs, but that they are also taking newly hatched chicks, which was long suspected. Despite these challenges we had 4 separate sightings of breeding pairs raising 'adult' chicks, these are chicks that can fly and have survived to around 22 to 25 days post hatching.

Analysis of trail camera footage

This year a volunteer was able to extract data from trail camera videos, saving significant staff time. At this moment in time there has not been the capacity to conduct any in depth statistical analysis of this data. However, it is hoped that a masters student may be able to assist with data analysis during the 2026 season. The data collected so far from trail cameras has helped improve our understanding of the problems and threats our breeding Ringed Plover population face. This includes capturing rat predation of Ringed Plover eggs and the predation of chicks by crows, along with several egg predation events by crows. This has informed our planning for next year and provided insight into how we can improve out conservation strategies for Ringed Plover.

Discussion

The second year of this project has continued to prove the importance of monitoring our Ringed Plover population. We have built upon successes from last year, and whilst there remains room for improvement, there are many positive outcomes from this year:

1. The continued engagement of the local community and visitors in the efforts of protecting breeding Ringed Plovers.

2. The success of the 'Protect Our Plovers' appeal in the efforts to raise funds to continue this project into its 3rd year.

3. The recruitment of volunteers throughout the breeding season to assist with beach surveys to allow for more consistent monitoring of breeding pairs.

Interpretation

During winter 24/25 we partnered with the St Martin's Island Group (SMIG) - a group of islanders from St Martin's who represent the interests of the local community - to produce some interpretation to help address the issues of recreational disturbance across the island. SMIG has been diligently protecting and restoring the sand dune systems across the island over the last few years and wanted to improve messaging for visitors about the importance of sticking to paths. This complimented the need for further signage to raise awareness about beach nesting birds and the vulnerable Ringed Plover nests found on St Martin's during the summer.

SMIG expressed an interest for a new sign to go in the waiting room at Higher Town Quay, to this effect a map was designed of the island which highlighted sensitive areas for both sand dunes and Ringed Plovers. It was important this map was still functional as a guide for visitors exploring the island for the first time to increase the exposure of our message (Figure 5). The community also mentioned that the signs we were previously using to indicate Ringed Plover nests were not noticeable enough, so we produced a set of 4 timber A-frame boards for the key Ringed Plover beaches (Figure 6). To ensure that this new signage was in keeping with messaging that was already established across the island by the

Figure 5. Interpretation board created in partnership with SMIG for the waiting room at Higher Town Quay.

Figure 6. A-Frame board indicating visitors are entering Ringed Plover nesting sites.

local community we chose to work with the same graphic designer. This work was funded by the Isles of Scilly National Landscape.

Monitoring app

This year the monitoring app was improved for simplicity and more efficient data collection. This was done by creating joins between data layers so that each nest on the live dashboard was automatically updated following each submitted nest check, preventing the need for a manual update as was previously required. This functionality was extended to chick checks (productivity) once eggs had hatched. GPS path tracking was added to the chick check function, to record the length of beach that was surveyed, allowing us to validate volunteer survey efforts. Data collection was expanded to include weather and tidal conditions this year as these factors can affect the outcome of productivity surveys. Overall this monitoring app was greatly improved this year meaning it is now completely automated and volunteer friendly.

Plover Lover Fridays

The social media campaign "Plover Lover Fridays" was brought back again this year running from April to September. This campaign aims to engage people with the work we are trying to do and build a sense of pride within the community around Ringed Plover in the hopes that this encourages people to take action in their day-to-day lives to help protect them. This year we decided that the content needed a stronger balance between the cute palatable footage and the harsh reality that faces the species. We chose to have more direct conversations with our audience about the challenges breeding pairs were having on each island. We did this through a mini-series "Plove Island", the idea was that off-island communities would become more involved with their local breeding pairs and potentially be more likely to follow our guidance.

Whilst there were 9 social media posts using the '#ploverloverfriday' tag between 13th February 2025 and 11th April 2025, the 'Plover Lover Friday' series officially began on the 18th of April 2025 with weekly posts continuing until 5th September 2025. This provided a total of 21 social media posts going out to Facebook and Instagram.

Plover Lover Friday Facebook posts regularly gained over 1000 views, with almost half of the posts receiving upwards of 2000 views. While the same Instagram posts received upwards of 2000 views for just over half of the posts. The likes received by posts across social media was also wide ranging but reached up to 209 likes for a single post.

This year we hosted two webinar events as an additional way of engaging with the public. These events were run to raise funds for our Protect our Plovers appeal which was live at the time. The webinars aimed to give the public a greater understanding of the work that goes on behind the scenes to protect the species. We had a great turn out at both events, with people from other beach nesting bird projects attending to ask questions about our equipment and methodology. These events did result in a few additional donations to our Appeal and were a brilliant way of engaging a broader ranger of people. It gave people the opportunity to asks questions about our work and provide clearer clarification on what people can do while they're here to protect our vulnerable wildlife.

Protect out Plovers Appeal

The Protect our Plovers Appeal was launched on the website the 4th June 2025. The original end date for the appeal was set for the 1st September 2025 to coincide with the end of Ringed Plover nesting season, however the goal was not met by that time, and donations were still consistently coming in. The decision was made to extend the appeal closing date to the 1st October 2025.

The content of the appeal webpage was designed to be informative and encouraging of donations. Throughout the length of the appeal, updates were made to the page to include a link to the project webpage, as well as a video filmed by actor Samuel West in support of our work.

The appeal was also supported by a raffle following a generous donation of a signed and framed art print by Cornish artist Dick Twinney. Raffle tickets were sold at £2 a ticket from the end of June untill the end of August and were available to buy from Quay House (Hugh Town), fete stalls, and online by email. In total the raffle raised £810 towards the Protect our Plovers Appeal. Although these raffle ticket sales could not have gift-aid claimed on them, they were donations towards the appeal that may have otherwise not been made.

Volunteers

This year we hosted 4 residential volunteers between May and July. This was to help improve survey efforts and increase data collection efforts. Overall, the additional of residential volunteers was beneficial and lead to an increased accuracy in otherwise tricky productivity checks. However, due to constraints on lone working it would have been beneficial to have a clearer, more structured timetable of work as on occasion teams were overstaffed leading to increased disturbance around nests, which could have otherwise been avoided.

Plover ambassadors remained an integral part of data collection throughout the season, with local people reporting when they saw chicks, adults and on several occasions locating nests. Having ambassadors located on each off-island also helps with the upkeep, storage and maintenance of equipment with locals often letting me know when the tide is likely to wash away cordons if not moved – and even moving it for me if I cannot be there.

The project was lucky enough to also host its first RSPB staff on sabbatical, Jane Sears, who stayed for a month from mid-May to June – the busiest part of the season.

This year we were able to host Mark Appleton from the RSPB's Solent Seascape project which was an insightful week. Having Mark over to assess our sites and set up provided invaluable information that will help develop and improve the project moving forward. Mark also generously wrote up a list of recommendations for the project and suggested equipment that would be suitable to use on Scilly to give us a head start. Being able to host trips like this is a great resource for the project and has helped share knowledge and experience between the two projects.

Recommendations for 2026

Whilst overall this year should be considered another success, especially when it comes to our productivity surveys and pressures affecting breeding success, there are several key areas to improve on to continue to have a greater impact next year.

The response to the new signage on St Martin's has, overall, been positive. There is perhaps a need for more of the A-frame board as these seems to be the most effective. There have been requests from residents of other off islands for similar signage to be created for their communities and we have secured funding to undertake this in 2025/26. There is a strong need to involve local communities in these processes not only because residents have a strong connection to their islands but also because it is an opportunity to foster relationships and engage people in our efforts to protect this species.

Overall dedicating some time over the winter to organise and prepare for the 2026 season would be beneficial. As a goal, before the end of February 2026 there are several items that should be ordered and where possible, distributed across the off islands for easy access during the season:

- Lithium batteries
- Metal fence posts
- Thick rope for cordons
- Additional cameras
- 250 GB SD cards
- Signage
- Flat packed nest cages

In reference to the nest cages, these will be introduced on a site-specific basis next year. Many of the failures that are recorded across the season are pre-hatching and usually due to predation, so at locations where this has been an ongoing problem a nest cage will be trailed using the best practice methodology provided by the RSPB.

Another key aim of the project moving forward is to establish an Isles of Scilly wader ringing group, specifically to, at the very least, ring our Ringed Plover breeding pairs and if possible, set up a colour ringing project as well. Across the country similar projects have begun ringing their Ringed Plovers for several reasons; it improves the ability to estimate local population size, allows for accurate records of 2nd broods, and it can help us identify if we receive migratory individuals during the winter as well as track where our breeding pairs are spending the winter. Ringing individuals provides an opportunity for advanced data collection which will be beneficial for the future of the project overall.

Next year (2026), we intend to introduce nest cages as a conservation action. The decision to implement nest cages has been carefully considered and is informed by 2 years of observation. Nest cages and their effectiveness can vary greatly, meaning they will be used on a case-based approach. They will not be used as a blanket form of conservation and instead will only be used in locations, which over the last few years, have been inundated at the egg stage. For example, on St Agnes where the pair of Ringed Plovers were unable to successfully hatch any eggs this year due to repeated predation events. The methodology for the creation and deployment has been provided to us by Mark Appleton from the RSPB and project officer on the Solent Seascape Project where they have been

using nest cages for the last few years. The hope is that by utilising nest cages when necessary, we can help to safeguard our dwindling population of Ringed Plover.

Conclusion

Following on from the success of our pilot year in 2024, this project has continued to grow and evolve. Overall, this year should be considered another success, especially in regard to productivity surveys and community engagement. With the support of the Isles of Scilly National Landscape this year it highlights the importance of this species to Scilly and the ongoing commitment of local stakeholders to monitor and protect these vulnerable birds.

Looking towards 2026 and beyond, the most important areas to focus on is the implementation of nest cages, a more structured workplan, and updated lone working policies for residential volunteers. Community engagement and partnership remains the heart of this project because without the investment of both local people and visitors this project would not have become as popular and prominent as it is. Additionally, small improvements can be made in the short-term such as winter organisation and prep ahead of April and ensuring that equipment is distributed across off-islands for ease of use during the busy breeding season. There is no doubt that this is an important project to follow through within the coming years as the breeding ranges of these birds are rapidly decreasing in the UK. Scilly is an important stronghold for Ringed Plovers, and this project has highlighted the unique position we are in to support this species.

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the Isles of Scilly National Landscape Partnership for part-funding the project this year after previous funders could no longer continue to do so, and for believing that this project and this species is important.

Thank you to the SMBA crews for helping me carry my kit up and down the stairs at various quays and to John Peacock for running special trips to uninhabited islands on short notice. To my volunteers, thank you for bearing with me as I found my feet as a team leader and manager and for working hard and engaging with local people to increase awareness for our beach nesting birds. Not to mention a huge thanks to Tresco Island Ltd staff particularly Steve Parks for driving me and all the kit around, especially when it rained.

Thank you to my local Plover Ambassadors, who always found time to update me on their island pairs during the busy summer season or provide shelter on particularly bad weather days! Special thanks to Jane Sears and Mark Appleton for your hard work, advice and years of project knowledge.

Special thanks to Jake Carville for the countless hours spent analysing the seasons worth of trail cam footage and for troubleshooting all the various technical difficulties. I simply could not have gone through all footage alone!

Finally, thank you to all of my friends and colleagues at the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust for helping where possible to ensure this project continued this year and to all the Plover Lovers who donated to our appeal to ensure the project continues into 2026.