

# Great Skua



Great Skua on nest.  
Photo: Andy Hays (rspb-images.com)

**Steve Newton** profiles a dramatic and unexpected addition to Ireland's breeding avifauna.

In the last 15-20 years only a single bird species has been definitely lost to the Irish breeding avifauna – the Corn Bunting. The last resort of this somewhat inconspicuous “LBJ” (little brown job) was the Mullet peninsula, County Mayo, and, in one of those coincidences, another species, a BBJ (you can guess what the ‘B’ stands for), appeared on the islands of southwest Mayo and north Connemara at about the same time – Great Skua.

The Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*) is about the same size as a Great Black-backed Gull, mottled and streaky brown with noticeable white patches on the wings when seen in flight, and with black legs and a dark, powerful bill.

Members of the skua family are renowned for being kleptoparasites – they obtain a significant proportion of their food requirements through piracy, stealing fish from other seabirds. They do also scavenge discarded fish and offal thrown from fishing boats, and some are known to prey on other seabirds, such as the much smaller petrels.

Breeding Great Skuas are restricted to the North Atlantic, with most of the population breeding in the Shetland and Orkney Islands of Scotland, in Iceland and in the Faeroe Islands.

The largest known colonies are found on the small island of Foula, west of Shetland, where 2,300 pairs nested during the Seabird 2000 Census, and on Hoy (Orkney), which held just short of 2,000 pairs.

## First arrivals

In the years prior to these counts, several new small colonies appeared in the Western Isles and Inner Hebrides of Scotland, and the appearance of the first two pairs in the west of Ireland in the year 2000 was probably related to this expansion.

These colonisers were found on two uninhabited islands situated approximately 20 kilometres apart, off the west coast of Ireland.

Skuas tend to be very aggressive when they have eggs or small chicks and are adept at striking human intruders with the back of their feet if they come near their nests or chicks. Their preferred nesting habitat is coastal heath or grassland, but this can be on both steep and fairly flat islands.

Since Great Skuas started to breed here, a small number of dedicated sea-kayakers and seabird enthusiasts have attempted to track their fortunes, and their spread around the Irish coast, reporting their findings to the **Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel** [see box].

Breeding was first reported in Northern Ireland in 2010, on Rathlin Island. During the 2008-11 Bird Atlas survey, breeding was confirmed in counties Galway, Mayo, Donegal and Antrim.

The majority of the Irish breeding birds are still found on islands, mostly off the coast of Mayo, though an occasional pair nests on the top of substantial coastal mountain cliffs. Birds or pairs are also being seen in Donegal, for example at Horn Head, and in Connemara. One pair has successfully reared chicks in four years, including 2015.

We now believe that a minimum of 15 pairs breeds in Ireland and, given that it is impossible to check all the islands every year, a maximum could be around 25 pairs.

## Why did they spread?

The discovery of Great Skuas breeding in Ireland was greeted with surprise, for while the bird is seen regularly on spring and autumn passage, it was imagined that, if anything, its range would contract northwards in response to climate change, and here it was spreading south.

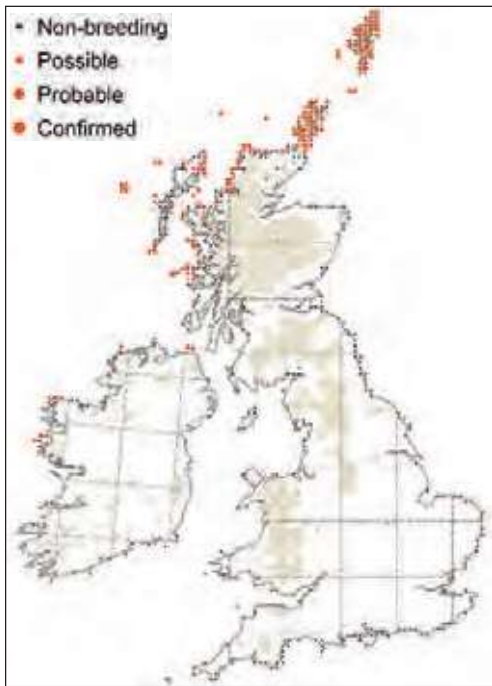
The Scottish population increased through the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps on the back of a wasteful fishing industry which produced plenty of discards. Likewise, it is thought that discards helped fuel the big increase in Gannet numbers in recent decades.

If discards did indeed help Great Skuas, then why not the other skua breeding in Scotland, the Arctic Skua? It is possible this much smaller seabird could not compete with Gannets, Great Skuas or other large seabirds for the discards.

## Preying on seabirds

When sandeels were in short supply around the Shetlands, and Great Skuas could not get enough by attacking seabirds, they took to killing Kittiwake chicks (and occasionally adults) of this and other seabird species.

We still do not know why Great Skuas colonised Ireland following their southward spread in western Scotland, but it is possible that Ireland's many seabird colonies helped



Great Skua breeding distribution as recorded in the Bird Atlas survey (2008-11). **Source:** BTO



Great Skua (showing white wing flashes). **Photo:** Andy Hays (rspb-images.com)

them to spread.

In St Kilda, Great Skuas are having a significant impact on Leach's Storm-petrels, which nest on remote sea-stacks. This means they have adopted a somewhat nocturnal habit to catch the petrels, which only fly in to their burrows during hours of darkness.

Again, Irish colonies of storm-petrels may have helped the skua expand its range, though little is known about the diet of Great Skuas in Ireland. They may fish for themselves, or kleptoparasitise other seabirds, or take one or both species of storm-petrel (European and Leach's) that breed on Mayo islands.

It seems the Irish population is still increasing, perhaps 'backfilling' the range between Mayo and the potential source population in western Scotland, possibly the St Kilda colony.

The age of first breeding in Great Skuas is around seven years, so recruitment of Irish-reared young to the population may be happening already; and this may also be fuelling the growth of the Irish population.

During the summer of 2016, we will be surveying seabirds on many of the smaller islands in Connemara and we hope to get a better picture of the status of Great Skuas there. As yet, no territories have been located in Kerry, where there is no shortage of suitable islands.

Outside the breeding season, Great Skuas are migratory and regularly pass popular seawatching headlands in both spring and autumn. Their wintering area, on the basis of satellite tracking tags, appears to be off the coast of northwest Africa.

More work is definitely needed on this fascinating species.

## Keeping track of rare breeding birds

### The work of the Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel

From Great Skuas and Great Spotted Woodpeckers to Little Egrets and Reed Warblers, the composition of Ireland's avifauna is changing at a rapid pace. It is apparent that climate change is playing a key role in the changing distribution of species, with high-latitude and high-altitude species (such as Red-necked Phalarope, Ptarmigan and Dotterel) 'retreating' northwards and temperate species from the continent and Great Britain shifting north and west.

Recording rare breeders is not just of academic interest. Take, for example, the recent colonisation of Ireland by Great Spotted Woodpeckers. The first proved breeding attempts were confirmed in 2006 and 2008, in counties Down and Wicklow respectively, and these charismatic birds are now spreading to adjacent counties and westward. This information has clear conservation interest – recently described by Dick Coombes and Faith Wilson in the 2016 issue of our journal *Irish Birds* – with forest managers able to monitor the presence of pairs and manage forest stock accordingly.

The recording of rare breeders, typically comprising 100 or fewer pairs of any species, is the main function of the **Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel**. This information is used for conservation purposes, and is very useful for the periodic reviews of our Red-listed species – the birds of greatest conservation concern in Ireland.

We would welcome your data – past and present – on rare breeding birds in Ireland, north and south. We urge birdwatchers to work within the law and if necessary seek appropriate licences to observe nests from the Licencing Section of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (in the Republic).

Northern Ireland records are shared with the UK's **Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP)**. Further information on the work of the UK panel is available on [www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk).

The Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel (IRBBP) hopes to have a website up and running later this year. – **Steve Newton**

➔ Please send your rare breeding bird records to the respective panel secretaries. Ireland: Gerry Murphy, [irbbp.secretary@gmail.com](mailto:irbbp.secretary@gmail.com); UK: Mark Holling, [secretary@rbbp.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rbbp.org.uk).



Dotterel. **Photo:** Dick Coombes