

England's treasured island seabird populations to be protected with new government funding

The UK government has today announced £156,000 to protect England's much-loved island seabird populations against the threat of invasive predators.

This is one of the first instances globally of a central government providing funding to protect seabird islands against these specific threats, setting the UK as a global leader for seabird island biosecurity.

The UK's islands such as Coquet Island and the Isles of Scilly are internationally important for millions of seabirds, with Coquet Island being the only breeding place in the UK for Roseate terns which are a red listed species. However, some key breeding populations are in decline due to multiple threats including invasive mammals such as stoats and mice.

The eggs and chicks of ground-nesting seabirds including puffins, razorbills, gannets, terns and European storm-petrels are particularly vulnerable, and their populations can quickly be decimated by invasive mammals.

The funding will be delivered through the AfterLIFE plan from July 2023. It will ensure existing biosecurity measures across England's seabird islands are maintained and enhanced so we can continue to protect the recovery and secure the future of important seabirds.

It will also fund new measures including:

- The employment of a full time Biosecurity Officer
- A conservation detection dog team that will train dogs to search for and indicate the presence of brown rats
- Information campaigns targeting island visitors
- Training of volunteers to support biosecurity implementation across England's seabird island Special Protection Areas
- Frequent surveillance checks

These measures will build on the Biosecurity for LIFE project, which Defra has supported since 2018 and has implemented key biosecurity measures such as surveillance checks and volunteering programmes on seabird island Special Protected Areas.

Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs Lord Benyon said:

"British seabirds are part of what make our coastlines so beautiful, and it's vitally important we continue to do all we can to protect each unique species and allow them to recover and thrive.

"Defra's contribution to the AfterLIFE Plan will ensure important measures continue to safeguard our treasured seabirds against invasive mammals that

have the potential to obliterate entire populations.”

RSPB’s Seabird Recovery Officer and Biosecurity for LIFE project executive Laura Bambini said:

“The Biosecurity for LIFE project has worked with a diverse range of organisations, communities and individuals to set up critical biosecurity measures in place on England’s internationally important seabird islands. Having worked with Defra, Natural England and key stakeholders in other UK nations to secure the maintenance of these measures in the long term, we are pleased now to see the development of national island biosecurity programmes underway across the UK. This is important for building resilience in our seabird populations which are in a precarious situation due to the pressures they face at sea.”

“This announcement is significant, ahead of the UN’s CBD COP in Montreal, as it sets the UK Government as leaders in island biosecurity, in one of the very few instances globally of a government using core funds to protect seabird islands from the threat of invasive non-native mammalian predators.”

RSPB’s Principal Marine Policy Officer Kirsten Carter said:

“The islands of the UK are amazing, their relative isolation has allowed seabirds and other wildlife to thrive. But these wild and sometimes rugged places are delicate, protecting them requires constant vigilance as the precarious balance that has allowed wildlife to flourish can be easily disrupted with catastrophic consequences.”

“We have seen how even just a single inadvertently introduced predator can have a devastating effect on an island where the native species have no natural defences. This is why today’s announcement to fund the Biosecurity AfterLIFE is so important, it enables the protection of these inspiring places for future generations.”

In light of the ongoing outbreak of bird flu, conservation efforts such as AfterLIFE are vital for boosting the resilience of our vulnerable seabird populations. This work aligns with Defra’s development of an English Seabird Conservation and Recovery Plan which will assess the vulnerability of and threats to England’s seabirds and propose actions to address them, due to be published in Spring 2023.