



media release

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Cornwall hosts ten per cent of Europe's most endangered seabird

Cornish waters are becoming increasingly important to Europe's most threatened seabird, the Balearic shearwater, because of climate change.

A new survey led by scientists at the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton (NOCS) in collaboration with the RSPB, has been monitoring numbers of the birds off the coast of South West England, and has discovered that rising sea temperatures are behind the increasing numbers visiting UK waters.

Around ten per cent of the world population of Balearic shearwaters has visited UK inshore waters this summer and autumn, with more than 1,200 birds being recorded from just one watchpoint near Land's End in Cornwall.

Dr Russell Wynn, who is co-ordinating the SeaWatch SW survey, said: "Balearic shearwaters leave their Mediterranean breeding colonies in late summer and head for richer feeding grounds along north Atlantic coasts. The numbers recorded during the survey this year show how important our inshore waters are to this highly vulnerable seabird".

Research by Dr Wynn and his colleagues highlights climate change as one of the main reasons behind the upsurge in UK Balearic shearwater sightings. Their work showed how northeast Atlantic sea surface temperatures rose by 0.6 degrees Celsius in the mid-1990s, meaning prey fish species began to head north and the birds followed.

"Just 20 years ago Balearic shearwaters were scarce visitors to South West waters, but they are now regularly recorded from headlands throughout the UK. Since 2003 we've even started seeing birds staying throughout the winter off Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, which is a completely new phenomenon linked to elevated winter sea temperatures," added Dr Wynn.

Conservationists fear that birds like the Balearic shearwater could become extinct this century if they are not able to keep up with the changes forced on them by our altering climate, and if current rates of decline continue.

The RSPB's South West seabird specialist, Helen Booker, said: "The Government has recently placed Balearic shearwaters on its new 'BAP list' of priority species needing conservation action, because the birds face an extreme threat of global extinction.

"It now has a chance to demonstrate its commitment to saving the UK's wildlife is more than just a token gesture by making sure it introduces new protection for marine species."

Marine wildlife currently has little or no legal protection but the proposed Marine Bill, which the RSPB hopes will be included in this year's Queens Speech, would provide similar safeguards to those that exist for land-based wildlife.

More than 120,000 pledges of support for the Marine Bill to be included in this year's Queen's Speech will be delivered to the Prime Minister by the RSPB this Wednesday (17 October) — among them more than 5,000 signed by people from the South West.

ENDS

• **For further information or to arrange an interview, please contact: Sophie Atherton RSPB SW media officer on 01392 453 753 or 07834 147 359.**

• J-peg images of Balearic shearwaters and audio clips of their calls are available for use free of charge, provided they are only used in connection with this story, by e-mailing sophie.atherton@rspb.org.uk or contacting her on the number below. –

Editors' notes

1) Marine wildlife faces a variety of other threats in addition to climate change, but enjoys little or no legal protection in UK seas. The RSPB is part of a coalition seeking a full Marine Bill to be included in the Queen's speech in November, giving much stronger protection to marine wildlife. (The coalition comprises: the Marine Conservation Society, The Wildlife Trusts, WWF-UK and the RSPB). The draft Bill includes proposals for a new system of marine planning and licensing, modernising fisheries management and the introduction of Marine Conservation Zones.

2) The 2007 SeaWatch SW survey finished on 15th October. The project is scheduled to continue for five years. Daily sightings and photos taken from the survey watchpoint near Land's End can be found on the project website at: www.seawatch-sw.org.

3) SeaWatch SW is a collaborative project run by the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton. Project partners include the RSPB and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS). Funding and logistical support has also been received from the Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science (SAHFOS), The Seabird Group, Royal Naval Bird-watching Society, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Cornwall Bird-watching and Preservation Society, Birdguides and Southwest Optics. The survey phase of the project is based at Gwennap Head, near Land's End in Cornwall, and runs from 15 July to 15 October. Volunteer observers with a range of experience are responsible for staffing the watchpoint between dawn and dusk every day during this period, and recording all wildlife seen.

4) The Balearic Shearwater *Puffinus mauretanicus* is listed as critically endangered on the 2007 IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) Red List, and is threatened with extinction this century due to low adult survival rates. The breeding range is restricted to the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean, and predation by introduced mammals and disturbance by humans are thought to be important factors that negatively affect breeding success. Current estimates of population size are in the region of 2,000-2,400 pairs, although monitoring of breeding colonies is difficult as the species nests in caves and only comes ashore at night. Nevertheless, it is clear that the breeding range has contracted and numbers at long term monitoring sites have declined. Taking into account those birds too young to breed, the total world population is currently believed to be in the region of just 10,000 individuals.

5) Balearic shearwaters breed between February and June, and post-breeding dispersal into Atlantic waters takes place from late May onwards. Birds gradually return to the Mediterranean between September and November. During post-breeding dispersal the species visits west European inshore waters, particularly Iberia, France and (increasingly) South West UK. The species is often found in flocks in coastal embayments, with their main food source being small shoaling fish, e.g. sardines and anchovies, which they largely catch through plunge-diving.

6) Changes in fish distribution and abundance mean that many Balearic shearwaters are being forced to migrate 20% further — over 400 miles - in search of food than they did a few years ago. Experts say the effects on survival of individual birds are hard to assess, but could well be contributing to the species highly endangered status.

7) The new IUCN 2007 Red List of Threatened Species can be found at www.iucnredlist.org

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The RSPB is- the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all

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