



Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* off the Islas Frailes del Sur, the only known breeding colony in Panama. The site is currently unprotected (Ben Lascelles)

The IBA programme goes to sea

Over the last four years, BirdLife has been extending its IBA programme to the marine environment. The results will help safeguard the foraging areas the world's seabirds depend on, and make a vital contribution to creating a global network of marine protected areas.



Seabirds have deteriorated in IUCN Red List status faster than any other group of bird species. Many are suffering catastrophic declines because birds are killed as bycatch in longline or trawl fisheries, and overfishing, exacerbated by climate change, has diminished stocks of key prey species. Coastal development and other forms of human disturbance, exploitation for meat, eggs and guano, and predation by introduced species, threaten the viability of many seabird breeding colonies, and are reducing recruitment to already pressured populations.

Seabird conservation at sea presents some unique challenges, not least because many species spend the majority of their lives on the high seas, outside territorial waters and beyond the reach of current national and regional conservation legislation and conservation programmes. Even when breeding, many have to travel far from their nesting

grounds to find food for their young.

“Relatively little attention has so far been paid to the identification of the high seas sites that are important for pelagic species”, says Ben Lascelles, BirdLife’s Marine IBA Officer. “Apart from the lack of information, this also reflects the limited legal possibilities for site protection, as well as the challenges inherent in defining what constitutes a ‘site’ in such habitat and how it might be managed.”

According to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)’s 2006 *Summary report of the current status of the global marine protected area network*, just 0.65% of the global ocean is within protected area systems, and most of that lies within the first few miles of territorial seas. The CBD and the World Summit on Sustainable Development have adopted a target of establishing a

representative network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) globally by 2012. However, IUCN estimates that unless progress is accelerated, this goal will not be met until 2060, half a century late.

BirdLife’s Important Bird Area programme has a substantial record of assisting in the identification, planning and sustainable management of networks of land-based protected areas, such as Special Protection Areas in Europe. The same approach could be applied to the identification of MPAs.

“Current MPA network planning emphasises the need for representative coverage of different habitat types”, explains Ben Lascelles. “Such an approach can miss key sites, whereas the data-driven, species-based approach of IBAs ensures that marine sites of global biodiversity significance are identified systematically as priority conservation targets.”

Over the last four years BirdLife has been extending and adapting the IBA programme to the marine environment. BirdLife’s World Bird Database (WBDB) has information on over 10,000 IBAs. The main attribute that has been used to select candidate marine IBAs is the presence of one or more seabird species meeting IBA criteria thresholds. Worldwide, 2106 candidate marine IBAs have been identified for seabirds, in 158 countries and territories.

Many existing IBAs, identified on the basis of the seabird breeding colonies they support, could be protected more effectively by including some or all of the at-sea foraging area used by the breeding birds around colonies. The BirdLife Secretariat is collating species-specific data on the distances seabirds cover during foraging trips from colonies during the breeding season.

These data have many uses, such as influencing maritime

planning, and can also be used to assess the likely impact of climate change on the IBA network. “Some breeding colonies will be lost because of projected sea-level rise”, said Lascelles. “Having a comprehensive and coherent network of protected marine IBAs will give species the best opportunity to adapt.” Europe has the most complete inventory of candidate marine IBAs of any region in the world, which includes the majority of the continent’s seabird breeding sites. In all European countries and territories included in the analysis so far, 842 candidate marine IBAs have been identified.

Important projects in the Baltic and North Seas and in Spain and Portugal have worked towards the refinement of the criteria by which marine IBAs may be identified, and which address those aspects of seabird life cycles which are amenable to site-based conservation. As well as foraging areas around breeding colonies, these include coastal congregations of non-breeding seabirds, such as moulting or wintering sea ducks; migration bottlenecks; and high seas sites, such as areas associated with upwellings and sea-mounts, used for foraging by pelagic species, which may lie hundreds of kilometres away from breeding colonies.

BirdLife’s Partners in Spain and Portugal, Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO) and

Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo das Aves (SPEA) have been conducting four-year projects with EU LIFE funding to compile detailed inventories of coastal and high seas IBAs for seabirds. These include some of Europe’s rarest bird species, like the Critically Endangered Balearic Shearwater *Puffinus mauretanicus* and the Endangered Zino’s Petrel *Pterodroma madeira*. The Partners are now applying to their national governments to have the identified sites declared Special Protection Areas.

“SEO and SPEA’s work has shown that it is possible to identify at-sea sites for seabirds and have a strong case to lobby government for protection of these vital sites for seabirds”, says Asunción Ruiz Guijosa, Directora de Gestión y Control de Proyectos for SEO.

This work is leading towards a standard methodology for the identification and delimitation of IBAs at sea. This is based upon the existing IBA methodology, adapted and refined as necessary, but using the same internationally agreed, standardised, quantitative and scientifically defensible site selection criteria. Once determined, the marine IBA identification methodology and criteria information will be disseminated widely so that they can be applied in other countries around the world.

Lascelles adds that many other Partners are already making progress towards identifying further candidate marine IBAs, either as part of an existing IBA programme, or through new projects and initiatives. North American Partners, for example, have identified over 500 sites. BirdLife’s New Zealand Partner, Forest and Bird, is identifying IBAs for all 35 globally threatened seabird species that breed there. Ninety-nine candidate marine IBAs have so far been identified in the Antarctic. Provisional lists have also been compiled for many Caribbean, South American, Middle Eastern, African and Asian countries and territories.

“The increase in the number of Partners keen to participate further in this programme has been fantastic”, Lascelles says. “It goes to show that marine issues are increasingly on the agenda for many Partners around the world.”

Iván Ramírez, Coordinator of the SPEA Marine IBA project commented, “Through the experiences gained during SPEA’s prize-winning marine IBA project we have been able to assist BirdLife Partners in the Mediterranean and other areas with advice regarding tracking seabirds, and how to define national mechanisms to enable marine IBA identification.”

Lascelles expects that over the next few years, the data on marine IBAs will play an increasingly important part in BirdLife’s work. “Marine IBAs are already useful for dealing with existing threats to seabirds, and are likely to become more so, enabling us to tackle emerging threats such as sea level rise, and the siting of offshore wind farms.”

The data on high-seas marine IBAs will need to be developed and expanded, to assist in BirdLife’s work with the world’s Regional Fisheries Management Organisations to reduce bycatch of albatrosses and petrels. It will also provide important input to help with progress towards the 2012 target for Marine Protected Areas.

“The identification of candidate marine IBAs presents many challenges but ultimately will make a vital contribution to global initiatives to gain greater protection and sustainable management of the oceans”, Lascelles concludes.

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by Nick Langley

For more information on Marine IBAs visit www.birdlife.org/action/science/sites/marine_ibas/

Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua* colony on Livingstone Island, one of 78 candidate marine IBAs so far identified in Antarctica (Ben Lascelles)

