Why do seabirds get caught in fishing gear?

Seabirds and other marine predators forage for fish and other prey in highly productive areas of the ocean. These areas are also targeted by commercial fishing vessels. Unfortunately, much of the fishing gear being used on these vessels is lethal to marine predators such as whales and dolphins, turtles and seabirds.

Steller's Eider caught in a fishing net. Photo: Markus Vetemaa

This has created the global issue known as **'bycatch'**. Seabird bycatch occurs when birds are attracted towards fishing vessels by the bait, fish discards and the lure of an easy meal.

Fishing vessels use a range of fishing gear, which includes longlines, trawls, purse seines and gillnets. Each pose a different type of risk to seabird species.

In longliners, for example, seabirds dive for the bait attached to the hooks and subsequently get hooked themselves and dragged under the surface of the water, where they drown.

Cormorants' diving behaviour puts them at risk. Photo: Shay Connelly

In gillnets, purse seines and trawls, seabirds, particularly those that dive for their food, can become entangled or trapped within the nets. Accidental bycatch affects 41% of 40 threatened seabird species. Globally, longlines are estimated to kill an estimated 320,000 seabirds annually, while gillnets kill approximately 400,000 seabirds.

In EU waters alone, these two fishing gear types are estimated to kill more than 200,000 seabirds annually. This represents a massive toll on the populations of iconic European species and is pushing critically endangered species such as the Balearic Shearwater towards extinction.

How can we solve the seabird bycatch problem?

BirdLife has been tackling seabird bycatch for the last decade, particularly in southern Africa and South America, through the Albatross Task Force – a specialised team of bycatch observers and mitigation instructors. They provide tailored solutions, depending on the fishery, the gear and the region. In Europe, we hope the replicate this model in the form a European Bycatch Task Force to tackle seabird bycatch across the region.

Simple and inexpensive mitigation measures have been developed for longlines and trawl fisheries, which can significantly reduce the number of birds caught without reducing fish catches.

This includes setting longlines at night when some seabirds are less active, using scaring lines and adding weights to lines to make them sink rapidly. In South Africa, these methods were shown to reduce seabird bycatch by up to 85%.

For more information, click here.

Seabirds following a fishing boat. Photo: Guy Shorrock

Politically, this issue is also starting to get more exposure. In 2013, the European Commission's EU Seabird Action Plan was released, laying out the way forward for reducing seabird bycatch. The next steps will be to ensure the thorough implementation of the Action Plan.