Bird flu causing "catastrophic" falls in UK seabird numbers, conservationists warn

The UK has lost more than three-quarters of its great skuas on surveyed sites since bird flu struck, according to a report that found the virus had caused a 21% decline in the UK population of roseate terns and a 25% decline in the population we have international responsibility for.

Scientists confirmed that seabird populations take longer to recover from an epidemic such as bird flu and that the age of extinction is about five years. They found that many species had already been in decline before bird flu, making it harder to pin declines to the virus.

"This new study shows that bird flu can be added to the long list of invasive mammal species, climate change, overfishing, over-harvesting, declining habitat conditions and pollution that are threatening global biodiversity," said Duggan, the RSPB's director of conservation.

Under the protection of the Protection of Birds Act, "many of these species" are the "keystone" species across the UK and continental Europe, the report warned. "We had the census and now we have this. We need to act now; it's about building resilience."

"For the gannets and great skuas, we knew it was bad, but it's worse than we thought," said Duggan.

Conservationists monitored seabirds for this latest report from May to July. They found that 30% of northern gannets and roseate terns had antibodies. About half of shags also had immunity to avian flu. They took blood samples of northern gannets and guillemots and kittiwakes particularly badly hit.

"For the gannets and great skuas, we knew it was bad, but it's worse than we thought," said Duggan.

"Globally, it's very significant and has a knock-on effect for populations across the globe," she said. "And 75% of the great skua population and a 25% decline in the UK population of roseate terns... we don't have a lot of buffer for these species."

"To have that level of loss in a species that we are the international custodians for... that's catastrophic," she said.

The age of extinction is about five years. They generally only have a few chicks, so they are about five years old. They are long-lived animals that do not reach breeding age until they are about five years old. They are not very good at coping with stressors, so they are particularly vulnerable to the spread of disease.

"This is a very serious threat... the collapse in the number of great skuas in the UK has a knock-on effect globally," the RSPB says.

Population of 

"In total, nine of the 13 species covered in the report had decreased by more than 10%, but many were already in decline before bird flu so it is not clear to what extent it is due to the virus... but it is clear that populations are more robust and better able to cope with H5N1. Duggan said: "This new study shows that bird flu can be added to the long list of invasive mammal species, climate change, overfishing, over-harvesting, declining habitat conditions and pollution that are threatening global biodiversity.""

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