

## NEBBS Group Protocol - Beached Bird Surveys in Northeast England

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The main aim of beached bird surveys (BBS) in Northeast England is to record bird corpses on beaches throughout the year by use of monthly surveys.

Some of our current objectives are to:

- (a) Record bird mortality over a period of years
- (b) Record incidences of oiling on beaches and on corpses
- (c) Collect fulmar corpses for analysis as part of the 'Save the North Sea' fulmar project
- (d) Collect little auk and kittiwake corpses for further analysis
- (e) Collect ringed auks for skull ossification studies in The Netherlands
- (f) Collect other interesting (good condition) bird specimens for study / preservation.

This work is carried out by Northeast England volunteers with interests in ornithology, conservation, the marine environment and natural history.

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Ideally once a month a core survey of each surveyor's shore stretch should be performed (on a date convenient to the surveyor). This may be augmented by additional surveys, if time permits, or if many birds are being beached and more frequent surveys are merited for a while.

Beach surveys normally follow the strand line (upper shore), but on returning along the shore a lower path may be taken. Tide tables should be consulted to ensure the tide is sufficiently low to enable the survey to progress safely (a low or falling tide may be best). Let someone know where you are going and carry a mobile phone if possible along with the coordinator's phone number, be aware of the weather conditions and the need for safety and shelter. The coordinator can accompany a new surveyor initially to provide training. A simple form is generally completed after each survey – recording start and end times, date, weather, location, shore length / grid references, species found, condition, completeness, whether oiled or ringed, etc. The form is returned to the coordinator (by post or email).

During beached bird surveys we record beached seabirds in particular, but any other (bird / non-bird) species should also be recorded to show a more complete picture. One important aspect of BBS work is to check whether birds are oiled and to what extent. Partial corpses (for example just wings and bones) should also be recorded.

Fulmar corpses which are intact and have a complete abdomen should be collected for the 'Save the North Sea' fulmar project. The surveyor should inform the Northeast England coordinator so they may arrange to collect the bird for storage. In addition any ringed guillemot (or other ringed auk) corpse ought to be collected from the shore – again informing the coordinator to come and collect. For any other dead ringed birds the surveyor should record ring details, collect the specimen, and report / pass to the coordinator – who can report ringed birds to the authorities and store specimen if appropriate.

It is useful to carry a pair of scissors and snip off the tips of any beached bird corpse's wings (the tips of the outer primary feathers) once the bird has been recorded. Such corpses can be left on the shore and will then not be re-recorded on a later survey since they will be easily identifiable. Collected specimens should remain fully intact for the coordinator please (i.e. do not cut wing tips). Interesting or unusual specimens may be collected for possible preservation.

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Coordinator email address: [dan.m.turner@btinternet.com](mailto:dan.m.turner@btinternet.com)

How long has a bird lain dead on the shore?

1. Fresh: all plumage present, body generally complete (unless scavenged), may be recently washed up, the eyes may still be easily visible.
2. A day or so to a week: bird generally complete and still fresh looking.
3. One to two weeks: there may be some missing feathers, could be partly scavenged, some of the flesh and bones may be showing in places.
4. Two to three weeks and older: body may be rotting, neck may be without feathers and the body cavity may be open.
5. Three to four weeks plus: could be wings and breast bone only; possibly also head, neck and legs and some body bones.

Some birds can remain on the shore for several months – becoming more decomposed until only wings (possibly head) and body bones are left.

In warm weather birds one week and older can get maggoty – the maggots will generally be visible.

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The Northeast England Beached Bird Survey (NEBBS) Group began in 2003 and comprises several keen volunteers. Some findings have been published, with more to come.

The group has a web page at <https://www.nhsn.org.uk/north-east-beached-bird-surveys/>  
This page is on the website of the Natural History Society of Northumbria, under the section for ‘Conservation and research’.

The NEBBS group has received financial awards from:

British Airways, Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club, Natural History Soc. of Northumbria and great assistance from:

- taxidermists Eric Morton, Ralph Robson (Red Grouse Gallery) & Adrian Johnstone;
- Dove Marine Laboratory (Newcastle University); Great North Museum: Hancock;
- Dr Jan A van Franeker, Dr Susanne Kühn, Elisa Bravo Rebolledo, Andre Meijboom and the ‘Save the North Sea’ fulmar study group.

### General References

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## Further, General instructions

Important: Check tide times and weather – ensure it is safe to do a survey and you will not get cut off.

As well as birds we record fish, seals, harbour porpoise, dolphin, and other matters of interest.

Not all bird remains are complete – surveyors will find wings, wings connected to sternum (breast bone), scavenged corpses, etc. For birds, we record such information as:

- Species, if known
- Sex, if known
- Age, if known
- Completeness
- Oiling – whereabouts is the oiling on bird, what percentage of bird (or wing, etc) is covered, you could draw a diagram. Check upper and under wings, tail (above and below), body (upper and underside), head and bill.
- Type of oiling – light, medium, heavy oil
- Check legs for rings – if present record ring type (metal / plastic), colour, ringing scheme, ring number / plastic ring letters / numbers in correct order. If colour rings present – record colours and positions (one ring above another, etc, above / below ‘knee’) and any leg flags. If possible collect ringed corpses and inform the coordinator.
- Any other notes

Species we currently collect (please inform the coordinator) are:

- Fulmar (with complete abdomen)
- Kittiwake
- Little auk
- Birds with leg rings / wing tags, etc.
- Interesting / unusual specimens

If surveyor is uncertain, or for Group records – please take photographs (and/or collect the specimen) and pass to coordinator. The use of a scale next to the remains can be helpful in species identification. Photos of upper-side and under-side of [out-stretched] wings and body can help in identification and ageing.

The coordinator can provide a few items to get a new surveyor started, including:

- Paper recording forms (if required)
- Scale rule, 30 cm
- A selection of re-sealable bags
- Disposable gloves
- Hand sanitizer
- Scissors (to cut off wing-tips of birds left on shore and not for collection, identification or study)

Please let the coordinator know your findings – by completing paper recording form (or electronic version) and sending by post / email.

Useful information on forms:

- Surveyor name
- Location of shore covered, length of shore walked (metres / km)
- Date
- Survey start and end times
- Weather
- Number of people / dogs on survey shore stretch
- Tide information (high, low, rising, falling, half-tide, etc)
- Whether there is any oil on shore
- Amount of litter: light, moderate, heavy
- Any other details
- Details of shore finds
- Details of live birds observed

If you have any questions please ask the coordinator

The coordinator should be able to arrange one or two introductory walks at a fairly early stage to show you the procedure, but in the meantime you may start recording.

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