DESCRIPTON
The ringing clamour of this delicate gull, so characteristic of many of Scotland’s seabird cliffs, gave the kittiwake its name. Its nests, built of seaweed, cling to impossibly small ledges on some of the steepest sections of the cliffs. The total breeding population in Scotland was estimated to number 282,000 pairs in 2000. The largest colonies are on the east coast, from St Abbs Head to Shetland. They eat a variety of small fish but sandeels form the bulk of the diet in the east, with sprats being more important in the west. Detailed studies on the Isle of May have shown that breeding productivity is closely linked to sandeel abundance, itself a feature of low sea temperatures. Steadily rising sea temperatures are believed to be contributing to breeding failure. Controls on commercial sandeel fisheries in Shetland and off eastern Scotland have helped to slow this decline.

On the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern (2009 update), the Kittiwake has declined more rapidly than almost any other species of seabird, recording a 66% decline in Scotland between 1986 and 2011. On some colonies, such as St Kilda, the decline has approached 90%.

THREATS
Sea surface temperatures in parts of the North Sea and the Minch have risen by nearly 2°C since the 1980s. This has had a demonstrable effect on sandeels which in turn impact kittiwake breeding success. Plankton communities in the North Atlantic have shifted northwards by over 1000km during the same period. Climate change, exacerbated by commercial sandeel fishery, is having a devastating effect on Kittiwakes.

ACTIONS REQUIRED
1. Ensure that important sandeel habitats, notably the Firth of Forth Banks, are declared as Marine Protected Areas.
2. Support measures to manage sandeel fisheries sustainably.
3. Support measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change

FURTHER READING

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