

1. Introduction

SOS Puffin is a volunteer project sponsored by the Scottish Seabird Centre (SSC) which started in 2007. It aims to bring under control the invasive plant tree mallow (TM) which has taken over the islands of Craigleith, Fidra and The Lamb near North Berwick and threatens the important populations of nesting puffins and other seabirds.

A progress report is sent to all the volunteers every six months and the last went out in June 2019. This report summarises what has happened since then - any comments or queries are very welcome.

2. Island Visits and Volunteers

A programme of 14 work parties was arranged for the period mid-August to mid-October. Wind and swell conditions caused half of these to be cancelled and one extra trip was organised in October. More would have been arranged but unfortunately the SSC RIB (inflatable) was not available after October 12th.

In addition the RSPB organised five other work parties to Fidra in the period September to December all of which were supported by SOS Puffin volunteers.

Two small corporate groups (each limited to 6 in number) came on work parties to Craigleith in September from Enterprise Car Hire and Cirrus Logic (Audio firm).



19 kayakers from the Lothian Sea Kayak Club leaving for the Lamb in mid-November.

The support from volunteers continued to be tremendous with all the work parties oversubscribed, which meant that volunteers had to be limited as to the number of trips they could be offered. New volunteers continue to come forward with over 440 people now on the volunteer data base. Many thanks to all those who volunteered for a work party and especially to those who were disappointed because the trip was either cancelled or oversubscribed.

The number of volunteers coming on each SOS Puffin work party varied from 10 to 13 with a mean of 12. This is a good figure since sometimes volunteers have to drop out at the last minute and achieving a full boat load is often not possible.

Thanks to Allison Leonard who organises and leads the RSPB trips to Fidra and to David Ross who helps the project in various ways.

The following tables show the number of work parties to Craigleith and Fidra each month (with the number of man/woman days shown in brackets) since the project started:

To Craigleith:

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2007	0	1(12)	1(7)	3(57)	2(19)	3(28)	5(50)	0	1(8)	16(181)
2008	0	5(59)	1(8)	3(24)	9(86)	4(40)	3(23)	2(18)	1(21)	28(279)
2009	2(14)	2(18)	6(60)	4(48)	6(81)	8(82)	2(25)	2(17)	3(28)	35(373)
2010	0	2(20)	5(40)	2(34)	5(54)	4(52)	5(53)	0	0	23(253)
2011	4(37)	0	1(18)	1(12)	3(34)	2(19)	3(34)	1(5)	0	15(159)
2012	0	0	3(34)	1(11)	4(35)	4(47)	2(20)	0	0	14(147)
2013	0	0	0	1(13)	2(25)	3(33)	1(9)	0	0	7(80)
2014	0	0	1(13)	1(11)	1(8)	3(25)	1(10)	0	0	7(67)
2015	0	0	1(11)	0	2(24)	4(47)	3(31)	0	0	10(113)
2016	1(9)	1(9)	5(57)	2(24)	6(74)	3(34)	2(25)	0	0	20(232)
2017	0	0	3(36)	2(21)	4(44)	3(29)	1(13)	0	0	13(143)
2018	0	0	2(23)	2(24)	1(12)	2(26)	3(78)	0	0	10(123)
2019	0	0	1(13)	0	1(13)	4(46)	0	0	0	6(72)

As can be seen, the number of work parties each year has varied considerably over the life of the project. This is because so much tree mallow needed to be cut in the early years and then fluctuations in the rabbit population also influenced the amount that needed to be cut.

To Fidra:

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2007	0	0	1(10)	0	0	0	0	1(7)	2(16)	4(33)
2008	1(10)	0	0	0	2(17)	1(7)	3(39)	0	0	7(73)
2009	0	0	2(14)	4(54)	4(44)	1(12)	3(20)	1(9)	0	15(153)
2010	0	0	4(60)	3(44)	2(22)	0	2(25)	2(20)	0	13(171)
2011	0	0	4(51)	2(22)	0	1(12)	0	0	0	7(85)
2012	0	0	2(24)	0	1(10)	2(18)	0	1(9)*	0	6(61)
2013	0	1(7)*	0	0	3(33)	2(19)*	1(8)	1(6)	0	8(73)
2014	0	0	1(10)*	1(13)	2(20)	2(21)	0	0	1(10)*	7(74)
2015	1(4)*	0	2(18)*	1(11)	1(11)	1(8)*	0	1(7)*	0	7(59)
2016	1(10)	1(7)	5(31)*	0	0	3(27)*	1(10)*	1(10)*	1(11)*	13(106)
2017	0	0	3(21)*	0	0	2(22)*	0	3(31)*	0	8(74)
2018	1(9)*	1(10)*	0	1(10)	0	1(10)	2(20)*	0	1(4)*	7(63)
2019	0	0	1(10)*	2(21)*	0	3(27)*	3(35)*	0	2(22)*	11(115)

Note: The trips during the months starred above were mostly organised by the RSPB though many also involved volunteers from SOS Puffin.

3. Boats

From August until October we were able to use the Seabird Centre's large inflatable and our thanks to Colin Aston and his skippers (Brian, young Colin and Robin) for taking us out. Unfortunately the boat was not available after October 12th which meant that some badly needed extra trips could not be fitted in. This boat came out of the water in November and will not be available again until March.

Local boatman Dougie Ferguson conveyed the RSPB work parties to Fidra in his launch Braveheart. He is not willing to land work parties on Craigleith because of the risk of damage to his boat and, as there is no other boat available, this means it is not possible to do any mallow control on Craigleith during the winter.

4. What has happened on Craigleith?

During the summer the extent of tree mallow appeared to be very limited but the relatively wet weather in mid and late summer encouraged vigorous growth of mallow and nettles. The first work party after the breeding season was not until August 28th and by that time TM had developed considerably with plants up to 1.3 metres high on the south side of the island though not at high density. There was much less in the northern half of the island except for some in and around the cormorant colony in the north east corner. Nettles noticeably increased on the previous year.

Five work parties made good progress with the last one taking place on September 22nd. By that time all the island had been cut with the exception of:

- Small patches on the slopes above the landing place
- Steep ground above the east cliffs and in the Cormorant nesting area

There was also some regrowth in the south west corner of the island. At least one further work party was needed but by then Fidra was the main priority and remaining work parties went there instead.



*Scattered TM plants on Craigleith up to 1.3 metres high in the south-east corner of the island
28/08/19*

Rabbits have increased once again after a period of some five years when their population was very low due to disease. However their impact on tree mallow during 2019 was negligible.

At the request of the RSPB six rat monitoring boxes were set up on Craigleith in September and baited with coconut flavoured wax. These were kindly provided by RSPB along with a further six boxes which have yet to be installed. Only limited checks have been possible to date but no evidence of rats has yet been found. This is being done as a sensible precaution in case rats ever reach the island which is not impossible as they could swim that far.



A wet lunch on Craigleith, 4th September 2019. The sun doesn't always shine on work parties!

5. What has happened on Fidra?

By the time work parties restarted in September there were extensive areas of tree mallow (TM) over 2 metres high and quite a lot had flowered and produced seed. Some plants were impressive specimens the like of which we have not seen for some years. In places TM was also surprisingly dense and threatening to shade out the grasses which were becoming established. The failure to get on top of the seedlings in the Spring combined with a good growing season for TM meant there was a big task to get the plant under control again. Priority was accordingly given to Fidra and eight work parties managed to get out in the period up to the end of the year. This enabled most of the TM to be cut though a significant amount remains.

A particular problem on Fidra has been that some volunteers have not been cutting TM plants close enough to the ground. As a result the plant is not killed and is likely to regrow when it can produce multiple stems with a very thick base and be difficult and time consuming to deal with. The life of the plant may also be extended beyond two years. See photo below.

There is a significant amount of TM on the cliffs that cannot be reached by volunteers which unfortunately flowers and produces seed. The sections of cliff around and the arch and those to the south of the lighthouse are the greatest concern as seed will fall from these onto other parts of the island. It needs climbers with ropes to deal with these plants.



Impressive growth of tree mallow on Fidra, 28th September 2019

6. What has happened on the Lamb?

The party from the Lothian Sea Kayak Club cleared most of the tree mallow on the island during their visit on 17th November – as on the other islands, TM had grown vigorously during the summer. The kayakers were lucky to have great weather but there was a considerable swell running so that landing and disembarking proved quite challenging though that seemed to make it all the more enjoyable for them! Conditions would have ruled out any landing from a conventional boat.

Sally Anderson who is an SOS Puffin volunteer and a professional photographer went out with the party in a double kayak and obtained some great photos (see one below). See the blog on her website: www.sallyanderson.co.uk for her write up of the visit and more photos.

Many thanks to David Simpson who organises and leads the kayaker work parties which have now been clearing TM on the Lamb since February 2016.



7. Wildlife on the Islands

The counts of nesting seabirds on the three islands which are carried out each year by the Forth Seabird Group were given in the last progress report. In general it seems to have been a reasonably good breeding season for most seabirds though puffins were not counted in 2019.

After a difficult year in 2018, gannets on the Bass Rock appear to have had a more normal breeding season though it was not possible to estimate the overall breeding success as the cameras in the Seabird Centre were out of action at the critical time.

Good numbers of Bottle-nosed Dolphins are now seen frequently in the Forth and sightings were enjoyed by two of the work parties to Fidra.

This year it was possible to land on Craigleith to get a good count of the breeding grey seals. A record 65 pups were recorded – see photo. Grey seal numbers have been increasing in the Forth area in recent years.



Grey seals with pups at the foot of the “Glen” on Craigleith in mid November.



A TM plant in the middle of the main puffin colony on Fidra which was not cut close to the ground and then regrew to become too large for cutting with loppers. A saw was needed for this and other plants.

8. Puffins and Great Black-back Gulls

For the third year running a student from Aberdeen University investigated the issue of predation of Puffins by Great Black-back Gulls (GBBs) on Craigleith. In 2017 over 130 dead puffins were found at the end of the breeding season, while more than 160 were found in 2018. In 2019 Aaron Nugent continued this work and for the first time set up a number of video camera traps by GBB nests to find out more about their behaviour. Some 90 dead puffins were found which is a significant drop on the previous two years. Of these, five were probably killed by Peregrines which are resident on the island (their kills have distinctive notches in the breastbone). The cameras showed a very small number of incidents of Puffins being brought back to GBB territories before being killed and eaten. Young Herring Gulls were also killed and there was one recording of an unsuccessful attack on an adult Eider Duck. Aaron's report on this work has yet to be finalised.

9. Other Matters

The annual meeting of the Craigleith Management Group took place in November. Points of interest relating to Craigleith were:

- Monitoring shows that the gradual reduction of tree mallow continues satisfactorily with it now largely limited to the southern half of the island.
- Stinging Nettles are increasing again with limited evidence of any residual impact from the trial spraying which was carried out in 2015 and 2016. It was agreed that some further control should be undertaken in 2020 and a detailed proposal will be prepared.
- Rabbits have increased though densities are less than in 2014 before numbers crashed due to disease.
- High definition photographs of the island were taken by a drone for Aberdeen University on two flights in May and August. These were of such quality that it was possible to identify individual birds, nests and TM plants. In future one flight in August would be sufficient to monitor vegetation extent and changes though this would need to be ground proofed by a site visit.

Rene van der Wal who has carried out the ecological monitoring on Craigleith since before the start of the SOS Puffin project has moved to Sweden with his family. Happily he is continuing to be involved though a colleague at Aberdeen University, Helen Anderson, is now taking a greater part in the monitoring work.

JH attended a "Pathfinder Meeting" in September organised by RSPB as part of the preparation of a new management plan for the islands of Fidra and Inchmickery. As far as Fidra was concerned it was agreed that Stinging Nettles (which have been spreading to the extent that they now pose a threat to young puffins and eiders) should be controlled, and that the current restriction on work parties in August should be modified to allow them during the second half of August. RSPB also agreed to investigate whether it might be possible to allow volunteer climbers to cut tree mallow on the cliffs.



Emily Burton in action on the advanced mallow bashing course on Fidra, 26th October 2019.

The Scottish Seabird Centre has appointed Emily Burton to a new post of Volunteer Co-ordinator as part of the “Edinburgh Shoreline – The Wildline” project. She is working closely with existing organisations seeking to attract more volunteers to help with conservation work along the coast and on the islands of the Firth of Forth. Anyone wishing to become involved in additional voluntary work of this kind should contact her on: volunteercoordinator@seabird.org.

10. Looking Forward

As usual our aim at this time of year is to ensure that when puffins return to breed in April tree mallow is well under control. Allison Leonard of RSPB is organising a small number of work parties to Fidra in January and February and SOS Puffin volunteers will help with these. A programme of work parties for March and April will go out to all the volunteers in February.

It is intended to carry out a puffin burrow count on all three islands this year and also to do some limited nettle control on Craigleith.

The management plan for Craigleith will be updated shortly and anyone is welcome to have a copy by email.

11. Finally

2019 has been quite a challenging year for a number of reasons but, thanks to the wonderful support of our volunteers, we have just about managed to keep on top of the tree mallow even though it staged quite a comeback on Fidra. Very many thanks to everyone who has helped and I look forward to seeing many of you during the course of 2020.

With best wishes

John

(John Hunt, for the Craigleith Management Group)

