DATA BANKS AND POPULATION MONITORING IN FRANCE

A contribution from the
"Groupe de Travail sur les Oiseaux Marins",
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Thanks to a limited number of pioneers French ornithology has, since the last century, contributed to the general knowledge of seabirds. Until recently however, interest in seabirds in France was almost restricted to reserve management and, for some enthusiasts, to sea-watching. Things rapidly evolved, mainly under the impulse of problems linked to the important development of Larus argentatus/cachinnans populations, sea-pollution and the dramatic decline of auks. Change in concerns became strongly evident in the mid-1970's. Research on seabirds has since spread out in many directions, including taxonomy, field-identification, reproductive biology, population dynamics, relations with fisheries, ethology.

The need soon arose for a structure to develop contacts and exchanges between seabird enthusiasts. The "Groupe de Travail sur les Oiseaux Marins" (G.T.O.M.) was thus created in 1980. It regroups all persons with an interest in seabirds, whether amateur or professional, member of an ornithology club, a society for nature protection or an independent observer, field-observation addict or searcher in a laboratory. Amongst other things, the G.T.O.M. co-ordinates enquiries on a nation-wide basis, two of which are presented here:

- the long-term monitoring of breeding populations,
- the study of bird distribution at sea.
Apart from being activities in which G.T.O.M. members are fully engaged, these enquiries share two other characteristics. First, as they are of evident interest for the conservation of our natural heritage, they benefit from the support of the Ministry of the Environment. Secondly, they both use computerized data banks. Due to its previous experience in processing this type of data (Hémery et al. 1979), the "Centre de Recherches sur la Biologie des Populations d'Oiseaux" was given the responsibility for this task. The "Statistical Analysis System" is used for processing in both studies.

1. Breeding Seabirds Censuses Data Bank

1.1. Historical Background

Although of invaluable interest, pre-1950 testimonies on French seabird colonies are rather rare, sometimes of disputable accuracy, and always concern very restricted survey areas. Modern seabird censuses started in Brittany at the end of the 1950's: the creation of an important network of seabird reserves, managed mainly by the "Société pour l'Etude et la Protection de la Nature en Bretagne" (Henry & Monnat 1980), and the building-up of regional ornithological societies were followed by increasing field-work.

Simultaneously with the "Seafarer" survey run in the British Isles (Cramp et al. 1974), the first complete breeding seabird census was completed in Brittany in 1970 (Brien 1970). Meanwhile censuses were organized in Normandy (Braillon 1960-1970). Full coverage of the Channel and Atlantic coasts was carried out in 1977 and 1978. The results were compared to all former data available by Henry & Monnat (1981), giving the first historical synthesis of breeding seabird populations from the Belgian border to southern Biscay.

On the Mediterranean side, the Camargue is regularly surveyed since 1956 (Blondel & Isenmann 1981, Isenmann 1986), but most of the other breeding sites have only been sporadically visited, until the end of the 1970's. Intensive field-work was then organized under the aegis of the "Centre de Recherches Ornithologiques de Provence" and of environmental bodies - the "Parc National de Port Cros" and the "Parc Naturel Régional de Corse". This allowed a complete census of breeding colonies on the Mediterranean coasts and Corsica. Its published form also includes historical data (Guyot et al. 1985).

The status of French breeding seabirds is thus well known for the recent period (1978-1983). In many cases, their historical and geographical evolution is fairly well understood. It soon appeared, however, that problems concerning the precise analysis of previous records and the comparison of present results with those of forthcoming works, could arise. The difficulties expected can come from different sources, for example: the great amount of data to be taken into account, their accessibility, the bias introduced by non-standard census methods or -