

Darwin Initiative/Darwin Plus Projects Half Year Report (due 31st October 2021)

Project reference	DPLUS164
Project title	Conservation Actions for Seabirds on the Turks and Caicos Cays
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Turks and Caicos Islands
Lead organisation	University of Liverpool, UK
Partner(s)	Turks and Caicos National Trust (TCNT) RSPB Turks and Caicos Reef Fund (TCRF) BirdLife International SAERI Falklands Ltd (SFL) Collaborators – Turks and Caicos Islands Government (TCIG) Department of Coastal Resources (DECR)
Project leader	<i>Dr Rhiannon Austin</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR1</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>www.caribbeanseabirds.weebly.com</i>

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end September).

Considerable progress has been made since the beginning of the project, despite some initial challenges to running the first field season following the short period between award notification and the project start date. We outline progress with respect to the project implementation timetable below:

Output 1. Population surveys and estimates

The size, distribution and health of breeding seabird populations identified on the cays and main islands of the TCI archipelago.

Between May - August, 35 sites were surveyed over the cays and main islands of the Caicos and Turks Banks (Appendix Figs 1.1 & 1.2, Table 1.1). Visual (either boat and/or land-based), aerial (UAV) and acoustic survey methodologies were developed and used to targeted 15 resident species (13 of which have breeding seasons that overlap with the survey period; Appendix Table 1.2). Some cays and mainland island sites were visited multiple times to undertake methods development, training, and repeat surveys, as well as collect some initial breeding success data to inform survey design for 2023 (Appendix Table 1.1).

It was not possible to deploy the acoustic array of time-lapse cameras during the beginning of the project during to time constraints on equipment purchasing and processes for importing these devices into the TCIs. However, a trail camera and two song meters obtained through collaboration were deployed for a month on Six Hills Cays, where Audubon's shearwater

nests were found, to test use of these remote visual and acoustic monitoring tools for species detection. Suitable sites for future deployment of this monitoring equipment were also identified during site visits.

Biosecurity tools were deployed and collected on French Cay to access presence of predators. With the short period available in which to plan extensive surveys, biosecurity work was reduced in this first field season. However, priority areas for 2023 were identified and any potential signs of concern were recorded. To obtain aerial estimates for a range of species at multiple sites, drones surveys were trialled over a 5-day period in July 2022 (example imagery in Appendix Figs 1.3 & 1.4). Project staff began processing this wealth of count, acoustic and image data in September and October. Survey work for winter-breeding species (Pelicans, Neotropical Cormorants, possibly Brown Boobies) will begin in December 2022, with further surveys planned for the spring.

Output 2. Capacity building for population monitoring

Local NGOs, Government and community partners develop skills, knowledge and capacity to operate self-sustaining seabird monitoring programmes

During the survey period, 2x TCNT officers, 2x RSPB officers, 4x TCI Government DECR officers, 12x local boat captains / operators, 1x UoL field assistant and 2x members of the general public were involved in the surveys, and gained varying levels of training in seabird ID, seabird survey methods, GPS data handling and mapping. Training and involvement of local staff in data handling, data processing, report writing and production of educational materials began in Q2, and will continue in Q3 and Q4 with available staff. TCNT and DECR field staff attended webinars hosted by the BirdsCaribbean Seabird Working Group between June and August, focused on Seabird ID, and Seabird Monitoring Methods, which were reinforced with bespoke tailored Seabird ID training in the field. A population database and associated 'coding leaflets and guidelines' are in production.

Output 3. Seabird threat assessment

Knowledge of the main threats to key seabird populations is greatly improved, allowing identification of appropriate conservation strategies

This output will largely be worked on in Y2, following completion of the next field season. However, any threats identified from this first season will be collated in field reports and fed to local partners before end of Y1.

Output 4. IBA network identification

IBAs identified and delineated for seabird breeding sites on the cays and islands of TCI

This output will largely be worked on in Y2 and Y3, following completion of the next field season. Data summaries will be discussed with BirdLife International in Q3 of Y1, during a focused meeting. Map layers of breeding and roosting sites are being generated from the first 2022 field season for this purpose.

Output 5. Species and site management planning

Development of a 'seabird cays policy' that will inform development of 'site management plans'

This output will largely be achieved during Y3.

Output 6. Community engagement and education

Local communities and stakeholders, and more widely regional and global audiences, understand, support and engage with avian conservation actions on the TCIs

There was limited time for wide-scale community engagement activities during May – August 2022, owing to heavy field commitments and project initiation tasks. Initial community meetings and school talks have therefore not yet taken place. However, some publicity activities have started, and more are planned for Q3 and Q4 (see list below):

- Summary slide of seabird work shown at a DECR stall at a local community event on Providenciales (June 2022)
- Blog post publicised about project in the 'Big Blue Collective' newsletter (June, 2022 - <https://bigbluecollective.com/blog/project-seabird-june-2022/>)
- Project webpages created and hosted on Caribbean Seabirds website (www.caribbeanseabirds.weebly.com)
- Twitter feed created for project (twitter handle: @TCISEabirds)

- Seabird webinars run between June – Sept by the BirdsCaribbean Seabird Working Group, through which DPLUS164 survey methods development was discussed. Further webinars being hosted in Q3 and Q4 on acoustic survey methods, drone technologies, data collection and handling, as well as focal species hour discussions
- RA, TCNT and RSPB to write a press release in TCI during Q3
- Plan to publish an article on the local 'Times of the Islands' magazine in Q3
- School talks will be planned during Q3-Q4

Please also see Appendix 2 for responses to feedback in the initial award letter

2a. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months (for COVID-19 specific delays/problems, please use 2b). Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

The extremely short period between award notification and the beginning of the field season (which is constrained by bird breeding seasons) left the project team with notable challenges both in terms of planning surveys, securing boat vendors, ordering field equipment with limited to no lead time, and ensuring that local project staff were available for participation in surveys. These challenges were partially overcome by 1) considerable in-kind time that the project lead (Dr Austin) gave to the project outside of her salaried role, 2) in-kind contributions from the DECR and RSPB staff (beyond their committed time), 3) volunteer support of a field assistant (Sophie O'Herir) who joined the team between June and July, and through 4) close working relationships with local vendors who did their best to facilitate the work. Survey work did have to be flexible and was not achieved as extensively as would have been possible with more notice, with more emphasis needing to be placed on data that will be collected in 2023. However, the project was written with some field contingency built into it, so there will be opportunities in the next field period to collect data that could not be collected in 2022. The project deliverables should thus still be reached within the budget and timetable.

Limited staff capacity within some in-country partner organisations remains the largest challenge. The TCNT have experienced recent reductions in their conservation officer workforce and are undergoing associated staff recruitment and restructuring. The TCRF are also at near full capacity with boat and staff commitments under other grants for the foreseeable future. This firstly has meant some redistribution of funds between partners to allow flexibility in use of different boat vendors in Y1. The most notable impact on the project has been to the workload of the project lead. This has been unsustainable and will continue to be unless there is some change made. As such, the project leadership team at UoL and TCNT have requested that funds for this salaried role be rerouted through UoL or RSPB, to allow a trained skilled project officer to be attained. Their role will be to help with project administrative tasks, field logistics, data handling, public engagement activities, and production of outputs and reports (associated change request pending). This will mean some redistribution of funds between project years to ensure maximum use of the funds designated for this role. Similarly, the project leadership team are seeking voluntary field help, and plan to make maximum use of RSPB sabbatical staff in 2023, to ensure a base level of staff are available for surveys during the busy period. A change request relating to minor T&S redistribution for this workforce has been submitted to the Darwin Plus team and is awaiting authorisation.

Recent global events and the knock-on effect of increasing worldwide inflation rates have obviously had some impact on the project budget. This has also been exacerbated by the collapse of the British Pound over the past year and the current state of the GBP to USD exchange rate. Therefore, the project will undoubtedly have fewer funds to spend on project activities in the Caribbean where the GBP exchange rates are tied to USD than were planned initially under a different global scenario. We would like to enquire with Darwin Plus about whether there are any options for financial support to mitigate any impacts on DPLUS project budgets that will make it harder to fully achieve project objectives?

The cost of living on TCI is extremely high, and therefore T&S expenses, such as those incurred from renting vehicles for the team are notable. We have therefore requested that we use the budget available for hire cars on Providenciales to buy a vehicle, assuming one can be located. This can be used for the remainder of the project for field periods and public engagement, will be maintained by TCNT, and will remain as capital equipment, thus building longer-term capacity. This will not affect the budget or timetable of activities.

2b. Please outline any specific issues which your project has encountered as a result of COVID-19. Where you have adapted your project activities in response to the pandemic, please briefly outline how you have done so here. Explain what residual impact there may be on your project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Two staff members caught covid during the survey period and the entire project team were exposed, which resulted in cancellation of some planned surveys around Providenciales, and North, Middle and South Caicos. There are no large residual impacts from this as some capacity for changes in survey windows was built into the project. There is no notable impact on the budget nor timetable of activities, other than a lack of baseline and repeat data for some lower priority field sites in Y1. Collecting data from all sites was already going to present a challenge in Y1 owing to the short notification period of the award.

2c. Have any of these issues been discussed with LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with LTS:	Yes
Formal change request submitted:	Yes (1 pending approval)
Received confirmation of change acceptance	Yes (2 change requests accepted)

3a. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this year?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

3b. If yes, then you need to consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

4. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to Darwin's management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

NA