

Biodiversity Challenge Funds Projects Darwin Initiative, Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus Half Year Report

Submission Deadline: 31st October 2023

Project reference	DPLUS164
Project title	Conservation Actions for Seabirds on the Turks and Caicos Cays
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Turks and Caicos Islands
Lead partner	University of Liverpool, UK
Partner(s)	Turks and Caicos National Trust (TCNT) Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Turks and Caicos Reef Fund (TCRF) BirdLife International SAERI Falklands Ltd (SFL) Collaborators – TCIG’s Department of Coastal Resources (DECR)
Project leader	<i>Dr Rhiannon Austin</i>
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	<i>HYR2</i>
Project website/blog/social media	<i>www.caribbeanseabirds.weebly.com</i>

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).

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.

In Y2, between April and September 2023, 62 visual surveys (foot or boat/kayak based) were undertaken across 50 sites on the Cays and main islands across the Caicos and Turks Banks (see table in Annex 1). In June 2023, we also undertook 13 drone surveys across 20 sites using both visual spectrum and thermal infrared UAVs. Some sites were visited multiple times to undertake repeat surveys, collect breeding success data and deploy and collect monitoring devices. Acoustic monitoring for Audubon’s shearwaters continued in Q1 and Q2 Y2. The acoustic array of song meters remained in situ to monitoring activity at Audubon’s shearwater colonies in the Caicos Bank until devices were recovered in July 2023. In May 2023, an additional 8 audiomoths (another lightweight form of acoustic logger: <https://www.openacousticdevices.info/audiomoth>) were deployed on small cays around Providenciales in areas of high human activity to investigate the presence of shearwaters at these sites. Six of these devices were recovered in July 2023 (one device was missing and presumably stolen, and the 8th device was not retrieved due to bad weather during boat recovery trips). Biosecurity materials (wax traps) were deployed at 5 priority sites during Y2 Q1 and Q2, and 9 traps were recovered, with no signs of rats detected (see table in Annex 1).

Data processing mostly halted during this exceptionally busy field period (see change request for further details), but the project leader is now engaged with this task.

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 Q1 and Q2 Y2, 2x TCNT officers, 5x RSPB officers, 3x TCIG DECR officers, 2x TCRF staff, 6 local boat captains / crew and 5 members of the general public were involved in the seabird surveys, gaining varying levels of training in seabird ID and monitoring methods.

Additional training was provided to 2x TCNT staff members in data handling and processing. Furthermore, the project field officer successfully organised, led and managed a survey to the Turks Bank with an RSPB sabbatical helper, demonstrating the capacity built in executing seabird monitoring activities within TCNT compared to the baseline in Y1.

The population database was added to and managed by UoL and TCNT team members over the reporting period. The seabird monitoring guide was produced and circulated for editing, and will be disseminated later in Y2 to local stakeholders at training and public engagement events.

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 and its activities have been moved to Y3.

Output 4. IBA network identification

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

As survey data are being processed and analysed site by site, seabird population assessments within TCI's existing IBAs are being undertaken and compiled into a report / data package for BirdLife International partners to use in their IBA update at end of Y3 (see Annex 2). Notable progress is being made with this task, which will continue into Q3 and Q4.

Output 5. Species and site management planning

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

This output and its activities have been amended following the most recent change request and are scheduled to take place in Y3 following processing and interpretation of all survey data. However, a draft seabird code-of-conduct has been written ahead of schedule, and is with the TCIG's DECR for comments.

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

- Focused press release produced to provide update on project and disseminated to the central news service in TCI (see Annex 3)
- Project update in BirdsCaribbean Seabird Working Group newsletter – project features on cover photo! (<https://www.birdscaribbean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/seabird-wg-newsletter-3-2023-07-en-rev.pdf>)
- Article of breeding seabirds released in Turks and Caicos Sun newspaper by project collaborator DECR (see Annex 3)
- Beach clean-up article by collaborator Big Blue Collective in 'Turks and Caicos Sun' newspaper advertises project and problems of plastic pollution for seabirds on islands and Beach clean-up takes place (see Annex 3)
- Dr Austin gave a talk to students at the SFS Centre, South Caicos in July 2023.
- Project was advertised on social media during a wider research cruise run by the TCRF in August 2023, during which the project team also undertook seabird surveys (partner / collaborator twitter feeds: tcreef_fund, oceanfrontierstci, oceanyesmedia)

- Dr Austin gave a presentation to researchers, volunteers and staff on board the live aboard vessel during a research cruise in August 2023 (Annex 3)
- The project team have been working on producing two short feature films on seabirds of the TCIs that will be used for public engagement activities in late 2023. The first focuses on the Audubon Shearwater surveys that were undertaken in Y1 and Y2 (approximately 10 minutes long), while the second is a more general 2-3 minute film showing the seabirds of TCI and the surveys being undertaken, with a focus on use of drones for surveying seabird populations (see Annex 3).
- Updates have been regularly posted on the project webpage (www.caribbeanseabirds.weebly.com) and social medial feeds (twitter: @TCISeabirds)

2. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Over the last 6 months, the strain on core project a staff to meet overly ambitious tasks and deliverables, during periods of poor staff retention or availability, have continued. Therefore, following lessons learned during the first half of the project, some changes were required to refine Outputs and activities in order to rescale the project. In brief, the main changes were to:

- Replace the planned non-technical report, and many of the smaller superfluous documents and reports, with a central technical report (Seabird Management Recommendation Report) that contains a non-technical summary, thereby streamlining efforts and ensuring outputs are relevant
- Shift the production of this central report and other deliverables to later in Y3, allowing time for data processing, analysing and presentation, which had to be delayed due to ongoing heavy workloads on project staff
- Refine public engagement activities to focus efforts on appropriate targeted community events and media
- Refine management outputs to those that better align with currently activities and priorities of the local Government (TCIG). It is no longer deemed to be achievable to develop and write site management plans for large numbers of sites and species by the end of the project, given the current ongoing challenges that the TCIG's DECR have with this task, nor to undertake rounds of public consultation

The issues encountered during the project were addressed in detail in a change request that was submitted in September and approved in Oct 2023 (please see CR23-048 for further information).

One of the central themes to the issues that the project has encountered has been staff availability and retention. Should the project funds have extended far enough to employ a project manager or administrator, as some other DPLUS projects have been able to utilise, this would have allowed the project to run more smoothly, and freed up the project leader to more fully execute their role and duties of delivering on data analysis activities in the first half of Y2. At the time of writing DPLUS164, the project budget would not extend to cover a project administrator/manager due to the high costs of operations in TCI and other project requirements. However, this should be realistic in future projects given the budget ranges now offered within the DPLUS scheme.

There is scope for those with experience of Darwin Plus projects to share information, experiences and practice. It would be highly valuable to discuss joint challenges, lessons learned and ways to improve management and implementation of Darwin Plus projects. An informal event for project leaders would be one way to do this.

3. Have any of these issues been discussed with NIRAS and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with NIRAS:	Yes
Formal Change Request submitted:	Yes
Received confirmation of change acceptance	Yes
Change request reference if known: CR23-048	

4a. Please confirm your actual spend in this financial year to date (i.e. from 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023)

Actual spend: ██████████

4b. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this financial year (ending 31 March 2024)?

Yes No Estimated underspend: £

4c. 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.

5. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to BCF management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

NA