

Ban on discarding dead fish threatens rare birds

Ornithologists warn that endangered bonxie will suffer when food supply disappears

Julia Horton
Environment Correspondent

SOME of the world's rarest seabirds could be under renewed threat in Scotland following the controversial decision to ban fishing fleets from dumping unwanted fish.

European Union countries voted last week to outlaw the discarding of millions of tonnes of dead or dying fish which are thrown back into the sea because they have been caught in excess of strict quotas.

But while the move should help safeguard fish stocks in the long term, experts fear the change will seriously reduce populations of birds such as great skuas, which have come to rely on discards as a key source of food.

Most of the world's 16,000 remaining great skuas are in Scotland, where they are known as bonxies. They have eaten discards for decades since overfishing reduced levels of sandeels, their natural prey.

Ornithologists warn that

phasing out discards also poses a threat to other endangered seabirds. Previous moves to limit wasted catches in the North Sea led to an increase in great skuas switching to killing smaller seabirds for food, particularly the black-legged kittiwake.

Environmental groups now want the Scottish Government to formally designate a network of marine protected areas around the coastline to protect sandeel stocks and provide more natural food for species such as the skua.

RSPB Scotland, which has commissioned research into the impact of the ban, stressed that while it supports the decision it is concerned about the potential effects in the short term.

Kara Brydson, RSPB Scotland senior marine policy officer, said: "The RSPB still completely supports the ban but the knock-on effects are complicated."

"It won't be like turning off a tap [because the ban is being phased in] but there will be some areas where some spe-



Seabirds dive-bomb a bulging net for food in the wake of a fishing vessel

cies may find it difficult for a while.

"Great skuas are generalist feeders so they may switch to feeding on other seabirds, which is a real concern at a time when other species are already under threat. Kittiwakes are an iconic bird that has already suffered massive declines."

The RSPB said the issue highlighted the need for designated marine protected areas, which are currently under consultation, to safeguard sea-

birds and the valuable wildlife tourism sector which they support.

Brydson added: "Seabirds are such an important revenue-earner when you think about where people go to see these birds, like the Northern Isles. The ban is absolutely essential to the long-term stability of the ecosystem but we also have to make sure that seabirds are properly protected."

The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) echoed calls for improved safeguarding of Scotland's seas and better fishing practice to restore natural food sources such as the sandeel to help birds survive.

Alex Kinninmonth, SWT marine policy officer, said: "We have to welcome the agreement that will bring about an end to the wasteful practice of discards. But rather than mourn the loss of this unreliable food source for scavenging seabirds such as the great skua, we must now look at improving fisheries manage-

ment to ensure that other prey are available and a natural balance is restored.

"Marine protected areas that safeguard sandeel are also vital if we are going to recover the health of our seas and retain iconic species."

Earlier studies have shown that large numbers of great skuas, which mainly live in Shetland and Orkney, have stopped breeding in recent years because of a lack of food.

Good breeding years for the birds have also been found to coincide with a fall in survival rates of black-legged kittiwakes in Shetland.

Last year, the RSPB warned that kittiwakes were declining at an alarming rate: numbers have more than halved since the mid-1980s across the UK.

Some of the steepest declines were in the far north of Scotland, particularly in Orkney and Shetland where around a fifth of the UK population return to breed each year.

The ban agreed last week by European fisheries ministers at a key meeting in Brussels will end the waste of an estimated million tonnes of unwanted fish each year.

Fish are thrown back because they do not meet quota restrictions on the size, amount and type of fish allowed to be caught and sold.

The new ban, which still has to be formally approved, will see a gradual reduction of discards over the next six years until the practice is completely outlawed in European waters from 2019.

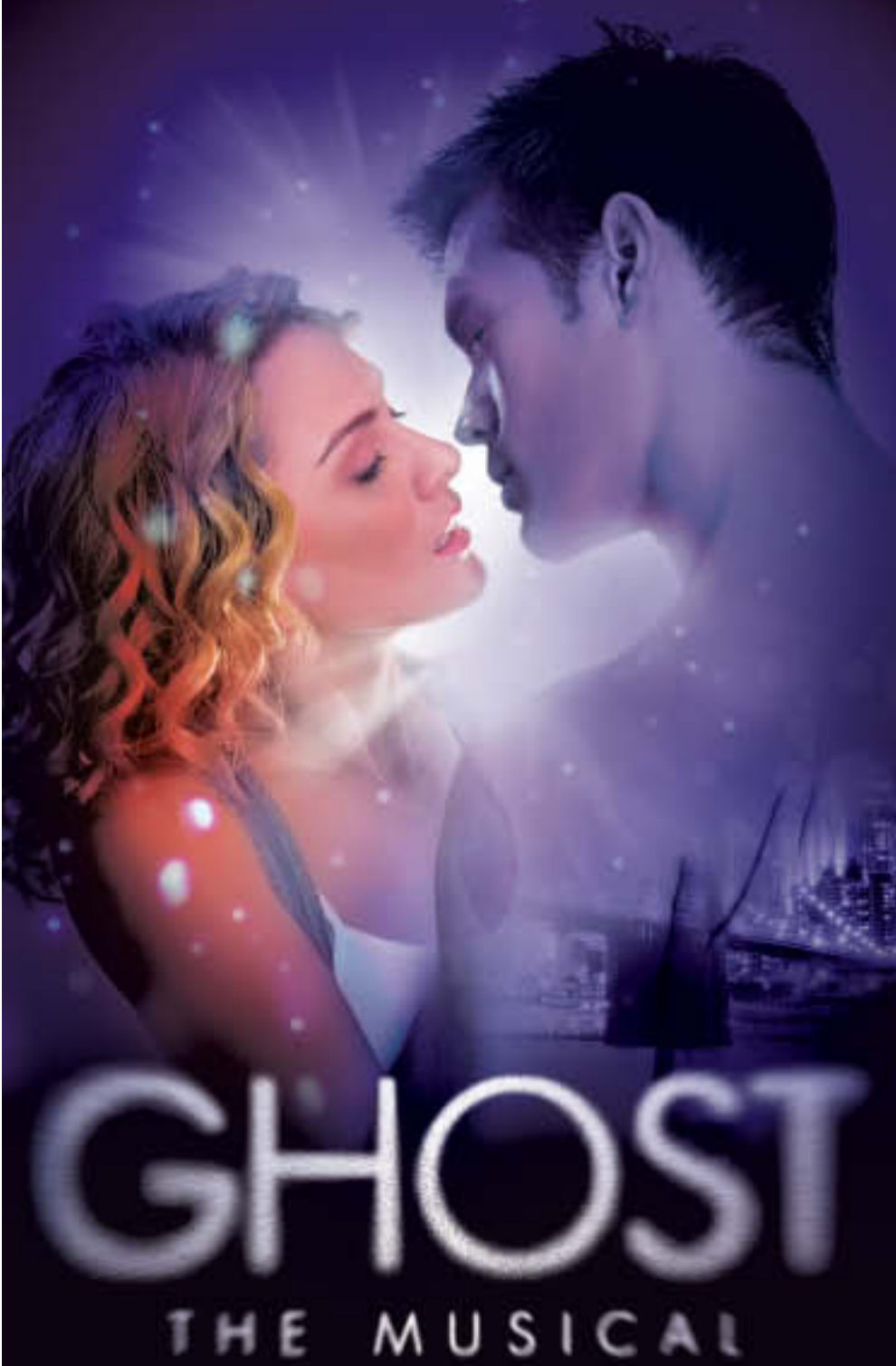
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A great skua, or bonxie as it is known in Scotland, attacks a black-legged kittiwake. Photographs: Rex Features

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Drive to make Scotland a big wheel in cycling tourism

Brian Ferguson

A BID to establish Scotland as one of the world's leading cycling destinations will be launched within months after being identified by tourism leaders as one of the industry's best prospects for growth.

The success of cycling superstars such as Sir Chris Hoy and Sir Bradley Wiggins is behind the high-profile drive to promote Scotland as a magnet both for mountain bikers and road cyclists. Scotland's wilderness areas and remote islands are set to take centre-

stage in the campaign, which aims to make cycling as much of a draw for visitors as Munro-bagging.

It also aims to capitalise on the popularity of events such as the Etape Caledonia in Perthshire and the Mountain Bike World Cup in Fort William over the past decade.

A nationwide bike hire scheme, a series of new cycle networks, a single national route from John O'Groats to Dumfries and Galloway, and the creation of new events are among the ideas under discussion. It is also hoped the cam-

campaign will make it easier for cyclists to take their bikes on to public transport, as well as help encourage Scots to explore their own country more.

Experts believe there is huge potential to grow the value of cycling to the economy from its current level of about £300 million through better promotion, new facilities and encouraging cyclists to make the most of other attractions during a biking holiday in Scotland.

The campaign - aimed at establishing Scotland as a "world-class cycle destination where the needs of the visitor

come first" - is being jointly pursued by the new National Cycle Tourism Forum, which was set up to bring cycling and public sector bodies together, and the Scottish Tourism Alliance, the main body representing the industry.

Neen Kelly, project manager of the National Cycle Tourism Forum, said: "There is no co-ordinated campaign - or even any funding - to promote cycle tourism at the moment."

"There's not been any detailed research done into the value of cycle tourism or how it could be expanded in future years, but there's been a feeling for some time that it needs properly co-ordinated."

"Mountain biking is very popular in Scotland now and is promoted pretty well, but there is huge potential for growth with road cycling, especially with the growing number of events that are now happening every year, and the fact that the Tour of Britain has been to the Borders in the last few years."

"We are now working closely

with the Scottish Tourism Alliance for the first time. There is definite room for improvement when it comes to having integrated public transport for cyclists and to make it easier to take bikes on to buses and trains, but it's also about helping to promote how easy it is to travel by ferry, as Caledonian MacBrayne already allows you to take a bike on their ferries for free."

Research will study how cycling is promoted and supported in bike-friendly countries such as Denmark and Switzerland, while also looking at which parts of Scotland have well-developed cycling campaigns, such as the Borders.

Scottish Tourism Alliance chief executive Marc Crothall said: "There is no doubt that cycling is a real growth market at the moment, particularly after the success of Bradley Wiggins and Chris Hoy last year."

"Although there are a lot of cycleways and pathways, the trick is to join everything up. We're very much hoping to be the catalyst."

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