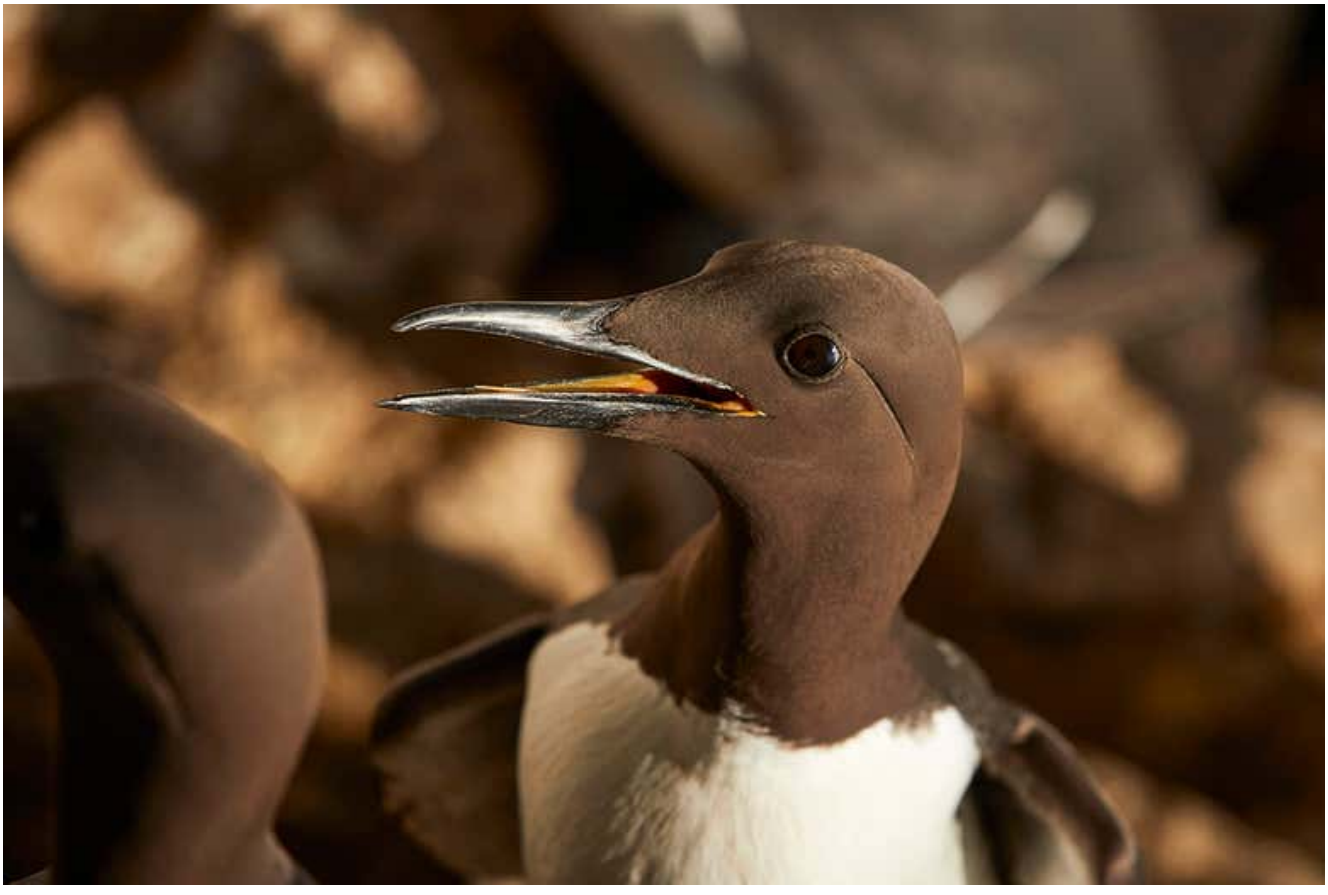
Seabirds raise fewer chicks as the pandemic keeps tourists away

Richard Sima

Environment 14 January 2021

By



The fear instilled by eagles can disturb breeding guillemots

Aron Hejdstrom

The birds were behaving strangely. Normally, the summer months would be a productive breeding season for the seabirds known as guillemots or murres living on the island of Stora Karlsö in the Baltic Sea. But, of course,

2020 wasn't a normal year.

Lockdowns in response to the coronavirus pandemic dramatically reduced human activity around the world. And, in many cases, this "anthropause" has benefited animal species.

The guillemots don't seem to be one of them.

Jonas Hentati-Sundberg at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and his colleagues say that the tourists who travel to the iconic seabird colony every summer may have been acting as unwitting "guardians" for the guillemots that live and breed there.

Without tourists around, another bird flocked in: the white-tailed eagle – numbers of them jumped sevenfold.

Although the eagles didn't prey on the guillemots, analysis of CCTV footage shows that their presence caused the guillemots to "panic" and frequently flee their cliffside perches in droves. This disrupted mating and allowed other birds, like gulls and crows, to swoop in and eat unattended eggs. Other eggs fell from the steep ledges.

"As a conservationist, it's kind of heartbreaking to see these birds suffer for the first time actually in all the years I've been there," says Sundberg.

Compared with previous years, the guillemots

successfully hatched 26 per cent fewer young than usual and had the worst breeding season ever recorded, particularly in areas the researchers visited less frequently. In one subcolony, not even one chick hatched.

For Sundberg, the story of the guillemots complicates the "general notion that people are just messing up things".

"I think this illustrates that we are so deeply embedded in ecological relationships and in ecosystems, and in many, many different ways," he says. "A much more fruitful [conservation] strategy for the future is to try and to understand what is actually our role... Because stepping back will not solve all our problems."

Journal reference: *Reference: Biological Conservation*, DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2021.108950