

Today's profile of sea birds living and breeding on the scenic cliffs of Runde Island differ vastly from that in 1971 when **Morten Strange** first visited. Populations of many species have crashed. Find out what happened and the commendable efforts taken to mitigate the situation.

Birdlife of Runde Island, Norway

THEN & NOW

BY **MORTEN STRANGE**

PHOTOS BY **MORTEN STRANGE & BEE CHOO STRANGE**

Runde Island's bird cliffs are a majestic sight to behold. Shown here is Stakkeneset, a stronghold for the Atlantic Puffin.



I graduated from high school in Denmark in the summer of 1971 when I was 18 years old. I was crazy about taking photographs of birds at that time, especially in wild and remote places. In June that year, I chose the island of Runde off the Norwegian west coast for my photographic expedition. Runde Island is the southernmost point for sea bird cliffs in Norway. Here, one could find large colonies of nesting sea birds, a spectacular phenomenon that I was keen to experience and photograph.

I took a ferry over and stayed with the Vallands, a local fishing family. They rented out bed and breakfast style rooms to visitors like me. I was lucky to meet the brilliant Dr Einar Brun (1936-1976) from the University of Tromsø as he was staying in the same house. Dr Brun was the Norwegian expert in marine biology then. He was conducting a survey of all the area's sea bird colonies using a rubber dingy that he carried on the roof of his car. These bird cliffs only had a handful of visitors, mainly day-trippers from nearby Ålesund sailing around the island.

The birds were truly magnificent in the week I spent there. Breeding on the steep cliffs facing south-west towards the North Sea were some 300,000 pairs of Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), according to Dr Brun.

In addition, there were 40,000 pairs of Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), 8,000 pairs of Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), 5,000 pairs of Razorbill (*Alca torda*), 2,000 pairs of Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), 480 pairs of Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and 385 pairs of Northern Gannet (*Sula bassana*). Along the sheltered coastlines to the north-east were Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grille*), Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) and Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*).

Photographing the Atlantic bird cliffs became one of my greatest wildlife experiences. I took mostly black and white photos on my Hasselblad 500C that I could process myself. Occasionally, I indulged in using colour transparency film.

My trip was also a commercial success. I sold many of my photographs and several articles about these birds after I got home. To capitalise on demand for bird photos, the next year in 1972, I travelled to Foula in Shetland, Scotland. In the same vein, I visited Grimsey off Iceland in 1973 and St Lawrence Island, Alaska in 1974 to photograph the Bering Sea mix of bird cliffs.

Fast forward to 2022, I took my wife Bee Choo Strange out to see the same North Atlantic bird cliffs. In my view, this is something every wildlife enthusiast should experience. We spent three days on Runde Island, from 10 to 13 June 2022. Today, the island is



In 1971, the bird cliffs were covered in Alcids such as Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins. My old photo shows the Guillemot dominating a sizeable portion of the cliffs. Contrast that to our 2022 trip – we could not get decent photos of the Guillemot or even a record shot of the Black Guillemot.



There were good numbers of Atlantic Puffins in 1971. Thankfully, their population size is still fairly healthy today.

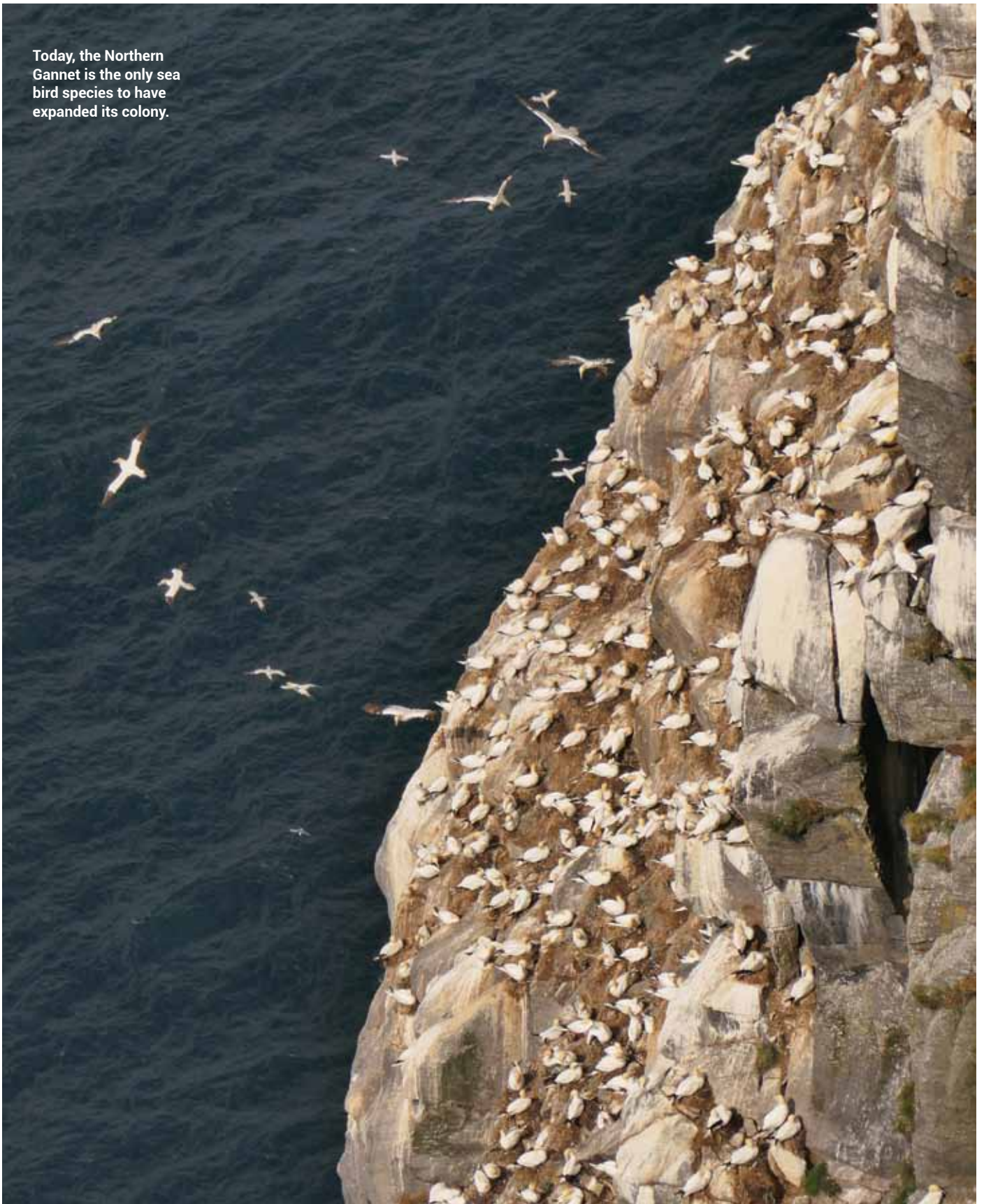


Flashback to June 1971 when I was 18 years old, I climbed all the way down to the bottom of the bird cliffs of Runde Island where I took this selfie with auto-release.



An estimated 5,000 pairs of Razorbills were present in 1971, compared to just 'a few' existing today.

Today, the Northern Gannet is the only sea bird species to have expanded its colony.



Since my 1971 visit, there has been a dramatic decline in most bird species. The reasons are not fully understood, but they boil down to a lack of food. Human overfishing has emptied out the oceans, while global warming has increased the water temperature by 1.5°C, forcing remaining fish to go further north. Essentially, the sea birds are starving and not reproducing enough.



Disturbingly, instead of just seaweed, the Northern Gannets also use nylon ropes, fishing nets and other marine debris to build their nests.



The month of June is peak breeding season. Baby birds are everywhere including this Common Shelduck with eight ducklings.



Only a few pairs of Black-legged Kittiwake remain today on Runde. Here, they are nesting on the steepest parts, as captured by Bee Choo's Sony RX10 IV Super-Zoom.

connected to mainland Norway by a causeway and a bridge, making access a lot easier.

To our great chagrin, the island's sea bird populations have crashed. This collapse has numerous documentations online. Accounts can be blatantly contradictory, but the most striking was from a 2014 article in the largest Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* on the 'Silent Spring in the Bird Cliffs'.

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Essentially, the sea birds are starving and not reproducing enough. The *Aftenposten* author could not help taking a swipe at the Norwegian oil industry: "The oil, Norway's national wealth, strikes back. We are about to lose a part of our national heritage because the oil we sell gets burned, and global warming accelerates."

Another source online revealed that Black-legged Kittiwakes are down to 'a few pairs'. In certain years, none breed. Some scientists claim that the White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), when it arrived in the 1980s on Runde, chased away the Kittiwake. Other experts dispute this. Interestingly, the Kittiwake has moved into coastal Norwegian towns where they build their nests on 'safe' piers and buildings. Recent records show that several resident pairs of White-tailed Eagles breed on Runde. This fabulous raptor is in the same genus as the Bald Eagle of North America and Singapore's White-bellied Sea-Eagle. Bee Choo and I even witnessed one of them grabbing a Northern Gannet in mid-flight.

Following the general trend of decline, there are just 20 pairs of Guillemots on Runde Island today. Likewise, the Razorbill, Shag, Fulmar, Black Guillemot and Arctic Tern have just 'a few' left. In contrast, certain websites including Visit Norway and Wikipedia claim much higher bird numbers. These do not tally with my personal observations. Staff from the Runde Environmental Centre also concur with me. An article in 2020 estimated the drop in total sea bird numbers to be from 800,000 birds in the 1970s to less than 100,000 individuals in modern times.

Unlike in Greenland (see *Nature Watch Oct-Dec 2019: Far and Away in Greenland*), hunting is not an issue in Norway. Like other bird cliffs in the country, Runde Island has been fully protected since 1957. However, food scarcity is a big cause for concern, as well as other factors contributing to the general sea bird decline. Staff at the Runde Environmental Centre suspect that plastic contamination of the food chain as well as invasive predators could have impacted sea bird numbers. In 2021, staff caught 20 minks on the island. These predators were escapees from Norwegian mink farms on the mainland and likely swam over to Runde.

Today, Runde Island is a nature reserve, with a fenced-off viewing area for the public near the puffin colonies. Despite the pandemic, it received 45,000 visitors in 2021. Every day during the breeding season



Runde Island received 45,000 visitors in 2021 despite the pandemic. Visitors were mainly there for the Atlantic Puffin.



In the late afternoon, Atlantic Puffins congregate in the sea below. By early evening, they fly in by the thousands to roost on the high cliffs.



A healthy population of the Great Skua breeds in the meadows of Runde's interior.



There are several resident pairs of White-tailed Eagles on Runde. We even witnessed one grabbing a Northern Gannet in mid-flight.



At the end of our boat trip to watch the sea birds, we were encouraged to feed the gulls. Here are some Herring Gulls coming in for a hand-out.

TABLE 1 Resident Birds of Runde, Then and Now

Species	1971*	2021/22**
Northern Fulmar	960	0, Morten "A few flying"
Northern Gannet	770	6,000-7,000
Shag	4,000	300-400
Eider***	Several pairs	0
White-tailed eagle***	1 visitor	Several pairs
Great Skua	0	100-120
Arctic Skua***	2 pairs	0
Black-legged Kittiwake	600,000	"A few hundred", Morten "50+ pairs"
Tern, <i>Sterna</i> sp***	Many	0
Razorbill	10,000	"Quite a lot"
Guillemot	16,000	"Very few, max 2,000"
Black Guillemot***	Several pairs	Morten "2 swimming"
Atlantic Puffin	80,000	60,000

Note: The birds figures above represent individuals unless indicated as breeding pairs.
 * Estimates by Dr Einar Brun, University of Tromsø
 ** Estimates by Johannes Madsen, Runde Environmental Centre
 *** Writer Morten Strange's observation

from mid-May to mid-July each year, hundreds of people troop in, mainly to see the Atlantic Puffin. An estimated 30,000 pairs of this iconic bird breed in burrows among the boulders on the

upper slopes of the cliffs. The best time to see the Atlantic Puffin is between 7 pm and 9 pm, when flocks fly in from the sea to roost on the high cliffs.

The only bird species bucking the

GENERAL INFORMATION



Runde Island is the southernmost sea bird cliff colony in Norway. There are two larger colonies further north beyond the Arctic Circle, but they are harder to get to. Similar locations exist in other parts of the North Atlantic. These include the islands off England and Scotland as well as the Faroe Islands and Iceland. Runde is fairly easy to reach by car. Bee Choo and I travelled from Stockholm, Sweden (1,077 km). Access can also be via Oslo in Norway (585 km). The nearest town with a domestic airport is Ålesund (80 km).

Once on the island, visit the Runde Environmental Centre to get your bearings. The staff there can give expert advice on the birds. The centre serves meals and has rooms for rent. Bee Choo and I stayed nearby at Christineborg Gjestehus for NOK 1,290/night (\$\$180). The coastal road ends at Goksøy, and the entrance to the public trail leading to the bird cliffs is nearby. Goksøy offers accommodation for tourists including an RV trailer park with cabins and a camping area. However, we found the place to be too busy and noisy.

For reference, we used the field guide *Birds of Britain and Europe* by Bruun, B. et al (2004).

trend of decline is the Northern Gannet. A 2019 survey counted 3,000 pairs. These Gannets prefer the most inaccessible spots for their nests, perched on cliff edges 200 m above the sea. Upon closer look, a disturbing picture emerges. Instead of just seaweed, the Gannets have incorporated nylon ropes, fishing nets and other marine litter in their nest construction. Some Gannets even get entangled in the plastic debris within their nests and perish.

During our 2022 visit, Bee Choo and I observed gulls such as the Common Gull (*Larus canus*) and Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) breeding along the sheltered, eastern part of the coastline. Foot access to the bottom of the Runde bird cliffs is prohibited from 15 March to 31 August each year. To see these birds from the ocean, we paid NOK 300 (\$\$42) per person for a one-hour boat trip around the island.

As a former breeding resident, the Northern Fulmar has completely disappeared from Runde. Today, it is just a visitor. We saw a few of them flying around. Incredibly, over three days of birdwatching, we completely missed two species that should have been there in large numbers: the Arctic Tern and Eider.

However, we spotted a variety of other birds including the Razorbill, Rock Pipit (*Anthus petrosus*), Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), and Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). We were also pleased to see the nests of Great Skuas (*Stercorarius skua*) lining the interior meadows of Runde. Like all skuas, this bird is kleptoparasitic, stealing food mainly from the Northern Gannets.

I was happy to be back on Runde Island after having been away for 51 years. It was encouraging to meet the staff from Runde Environmental Centre. While larger issues such as global warming are beyond their control, these young naturalists in Norway are aware of the difficult ecological future facing them. They do their best with wildlife surveys, eradication of invasive species and plastic clean-up efforts to stem the decline of these precious sea bird colonies. 🌱



Morten Strange is a retired petroleum engineer, retired nature photographer, retired publisher and former Editor-in-chief of *Nature Watch*. Currently,

he is interested in financial as well as environmental matters. Learn more at mortenstrange.com. Morten serves as NSS's Assistant Honorary Secretary.