

VSAS Survey report: Ullapool - Stornoway, July 13th 2019

Volunteer Seabirds At Sea (VSAS) surveys were carried out from the forward viewing platform of the Ullapool to Stornoway ferry on scheduled return crossings on 13th July 2019. Data were collected to European Seabirds At Sea (ESAS) standard, by trained volunteers, using the JNCC VSAS app to digitally record data in real time.

Environmental conditions were suitable for surveying, with visibility recorded as moderate to excellent throughout. Both Beaufort wind force and seastate ranged between two and four, and swell heights were generally around one metre.

A total of 284 observations were made of 16 species of seabirds (and a further four 'species groups' where identification could not be made to species level) during the dedicated survey effort. Three species of marine mammals was observed. Numbers of observations and total numbers of birds and mammals recorded are presented below in Table 1.

Species	Number of observations	Total birds observed
Arctic Skua	4	4
Common gull	3	5
Common tern	2	2
Fulmar	13	14
Gannet	23	37
Great black-backed gull	1	1
Great Skua	4	6
Guillemot	139	424
Herring gull	5	24
Kittiwake	14	20
Manx Shearwater	4	11
Puffin	15	20
Razorbill	6	11
Red-throated diver	1	1
Shag	5	9
Black guillemot	2	2
Auk spp	29	70
gull spp	2	2
Skua spp	1	1
tern spp	1	6
Com dolphin	7	30
Grey seal	1	1
Minke whale	2	1

Table 1. Numbers of observations and totals recorded per species

Species accounts

See figures 1 - 8 for maps of observations

Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

13 observations totalling 14 birds, with all records coming from more open areas of the Minch.

Manx shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*)

Four records comprising 11 individuals, with all birds observed from more open areas of the Minch.

Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

A total of 23 records comprising 37 individuals. Many records came from areas of more open water, but there was also a cluster of observations from the western end of Loch Broom, in the eastern Minch. Almost all of the birds assigned an age were adults.

Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

5 observations totalling 9 individuals. One record was mid-channel, with the rest clustered around Priest Island and the southern Summer Isles.

Red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*)

A single bird of a lone bird flying west was made, south of the Summer Isles.

Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Four observations of individual birds, with records from the Loch Broom/Summer isles area, and the western Minch.

Great skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

Four records totalling six individual birds. Great skuas were observed near Priest Island, and mid-channel.

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

20 individuals were noted in 14 observations. Small numbers were noted mid channel, but the highest densities were observed south of the summer isles.

Common gull (*Larus canus*)

Three observations totalling five birds, with observations from Loch Broom and mid-channel.

Herring gull (*Larus argentatus*)

Five observations totalling 24 birds, with observations from Loch Broom and mid-channel. All of the birds assigned an age were adults.

Great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*)

A single adult was recorded flying NE in outer Loch Broom

Common tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

Two common terns were observed in flight, south of the Summer Isles.

Guillemot (*Uria aalge*)

By far the most numerous bird recorded, with 139 observations accounting for 424 individuals. They were encountered throughout the survey area, with the highest densities in the eastern Minch, and a notable aggregation at the mouth of Loch Broom. Three juveniles were noted.

Razorbill (*Alca torda*)

Very small numbers were present, compared to those recorded for guillemot. Just six observations of 11 individuals, with most birds being seen mid-channel.

Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)

Small numbers were seen throughout the survey area, with 15 records totalling 20 individuals.

Black guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*)

Two individuals noted to the south of Priest Island.

Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)

A single individual was noted mid-channel.

Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)

Seven groups were reported mid-channel, totalling 30 individual animals.

Minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

Two separate individuals observed, with one mid-channel, and one south of the Summer Isles.

Distribution maps

Figures 1 - 8 show the distributions of all seabird and marine mammal species recorded during the survey.

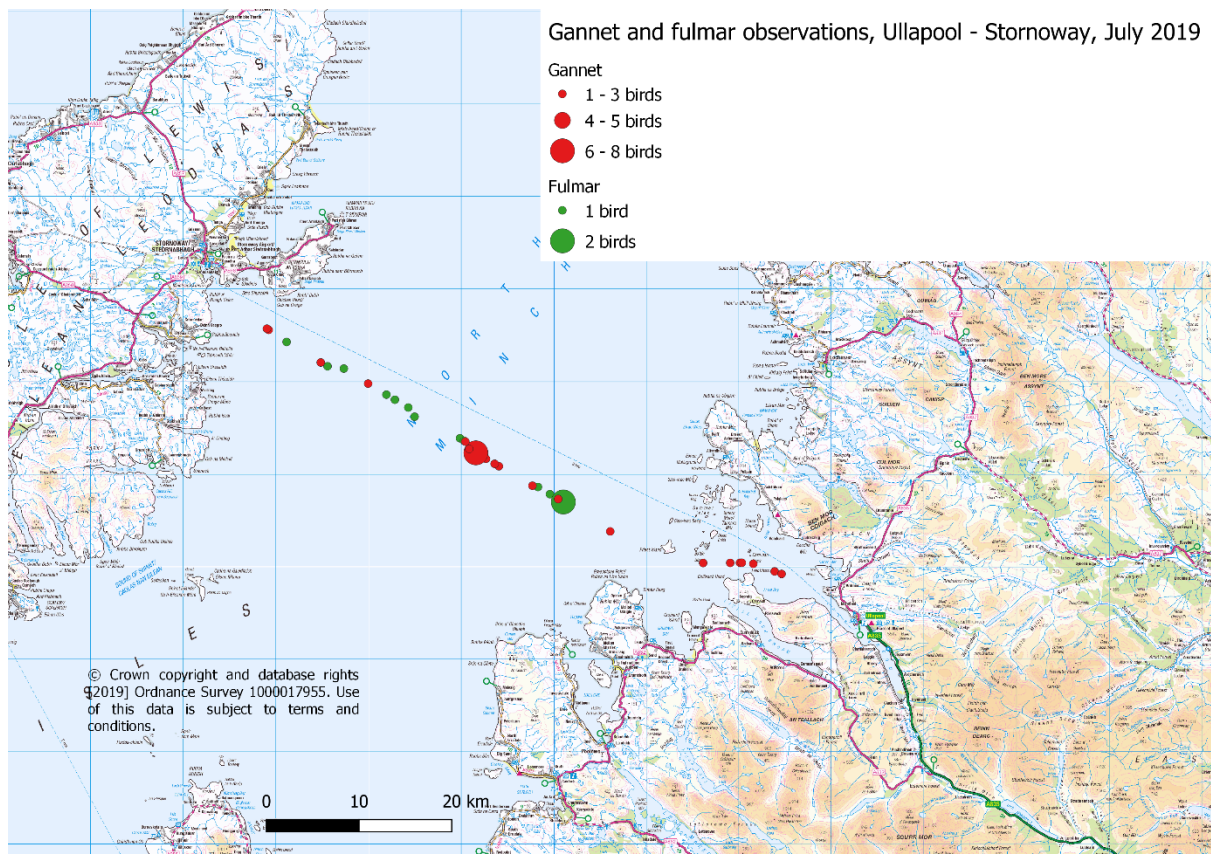


Figure 1. Observations of gannet and fulmar, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

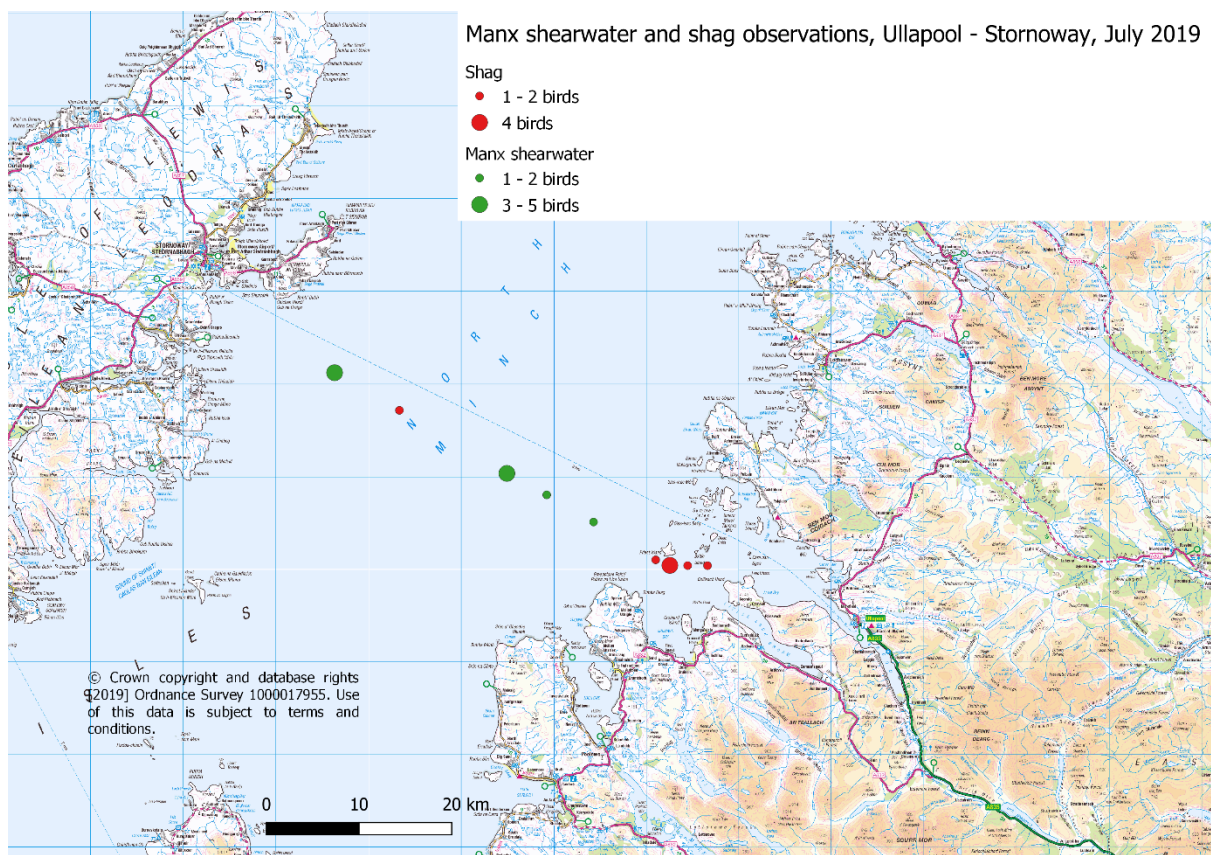


Figure 2. Observations of Manx shearwater and shag, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

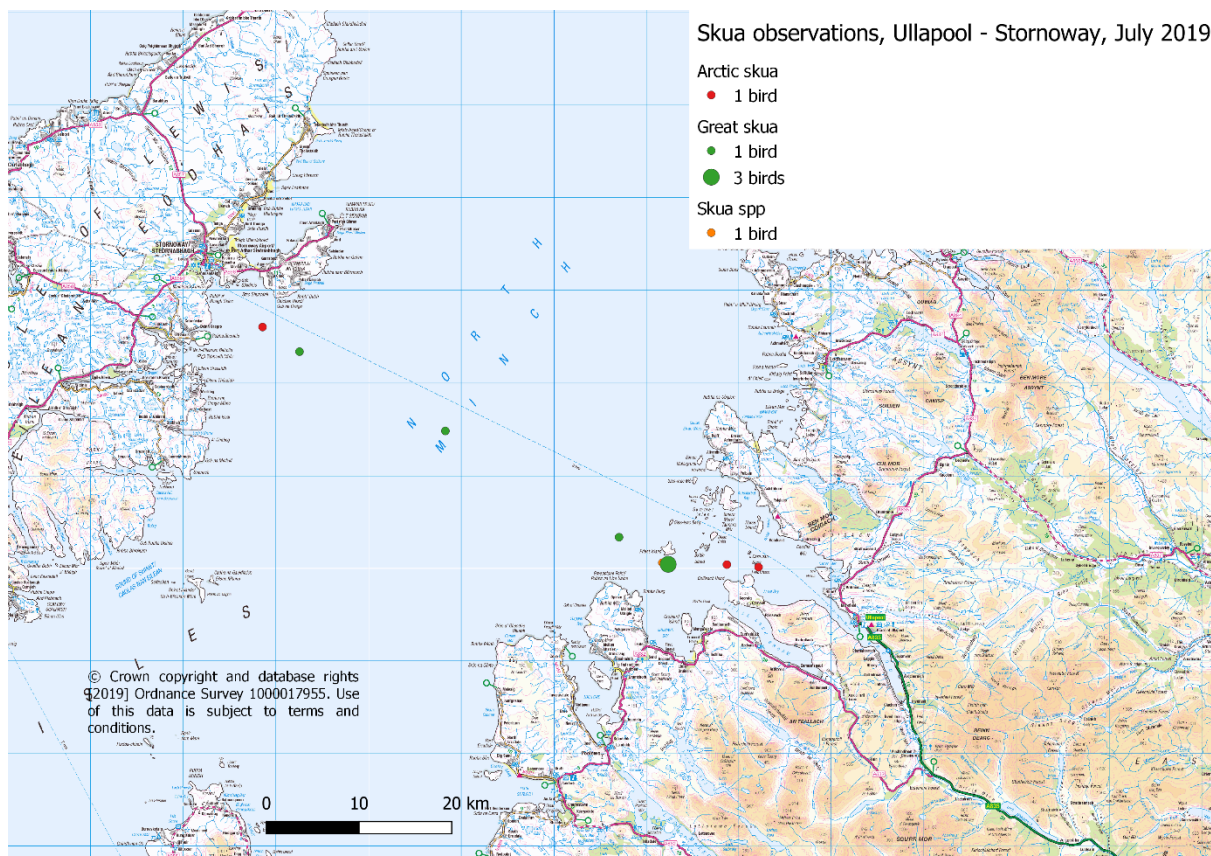


Figure 3. Observations of skuas, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

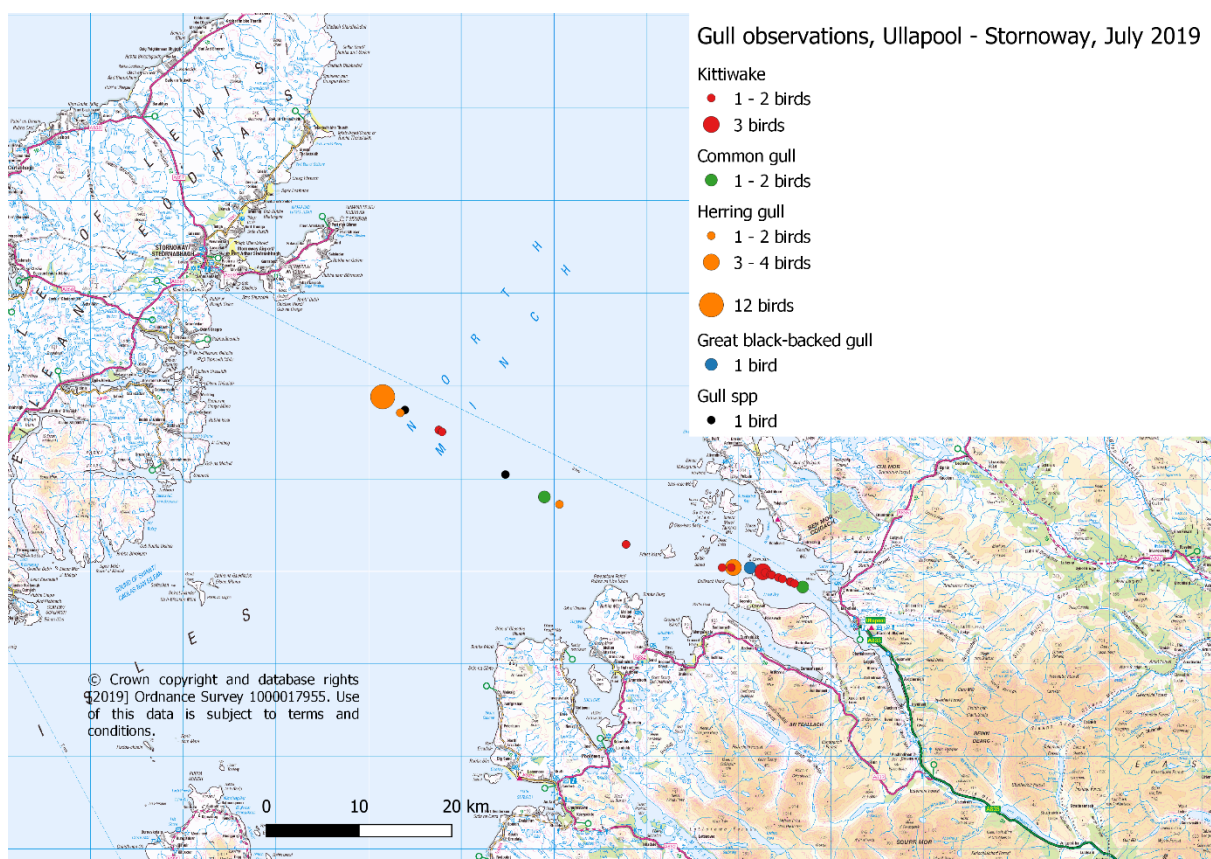


Figure 4. Observations of gulls, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

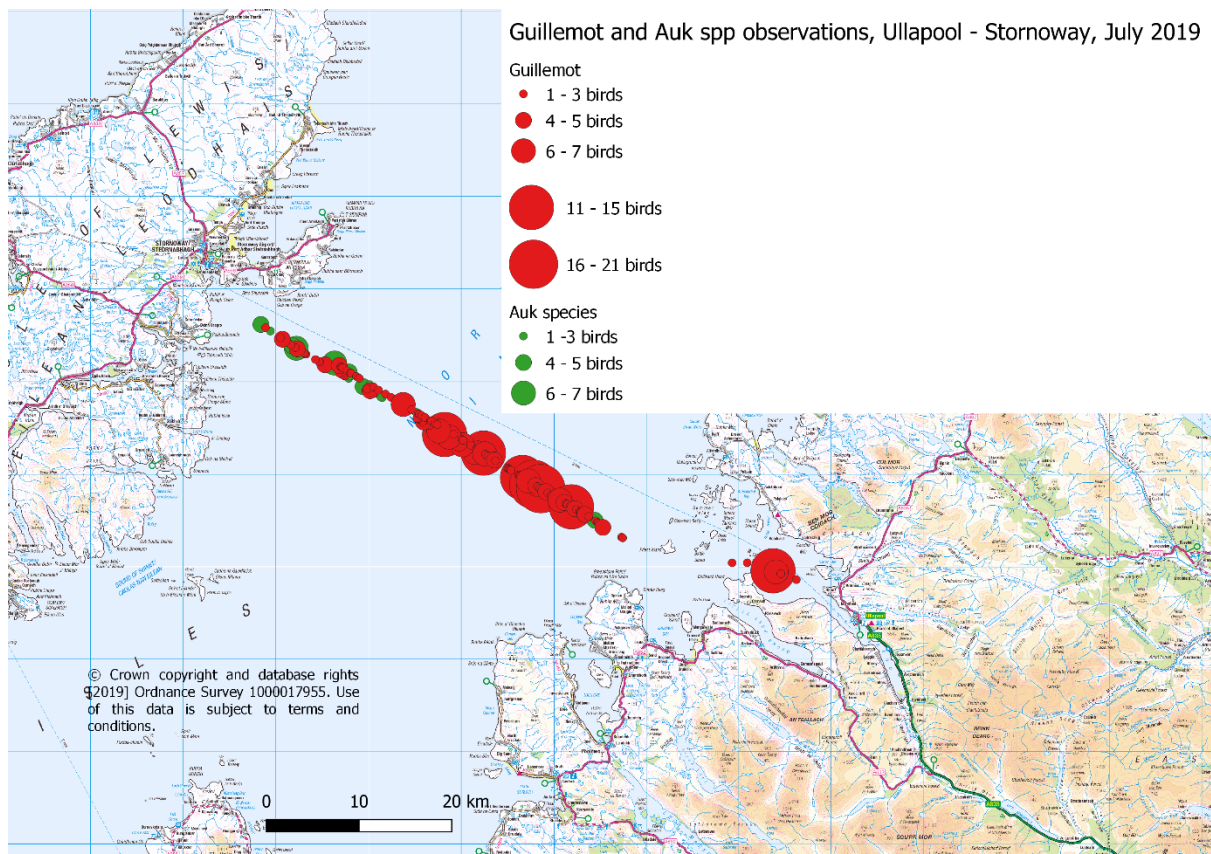


Figure 5. Observations of guillemot and auk spp, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

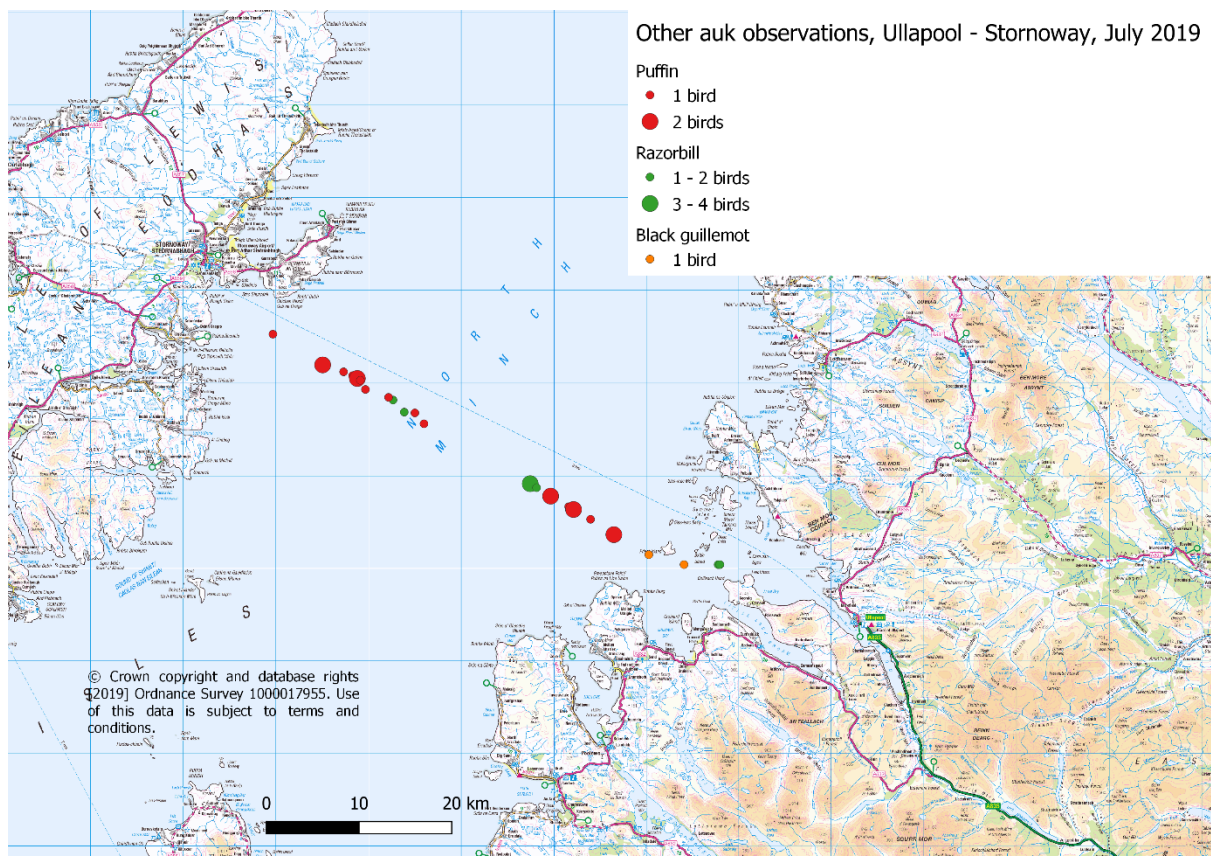


Figure 6. Observations of other auks, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

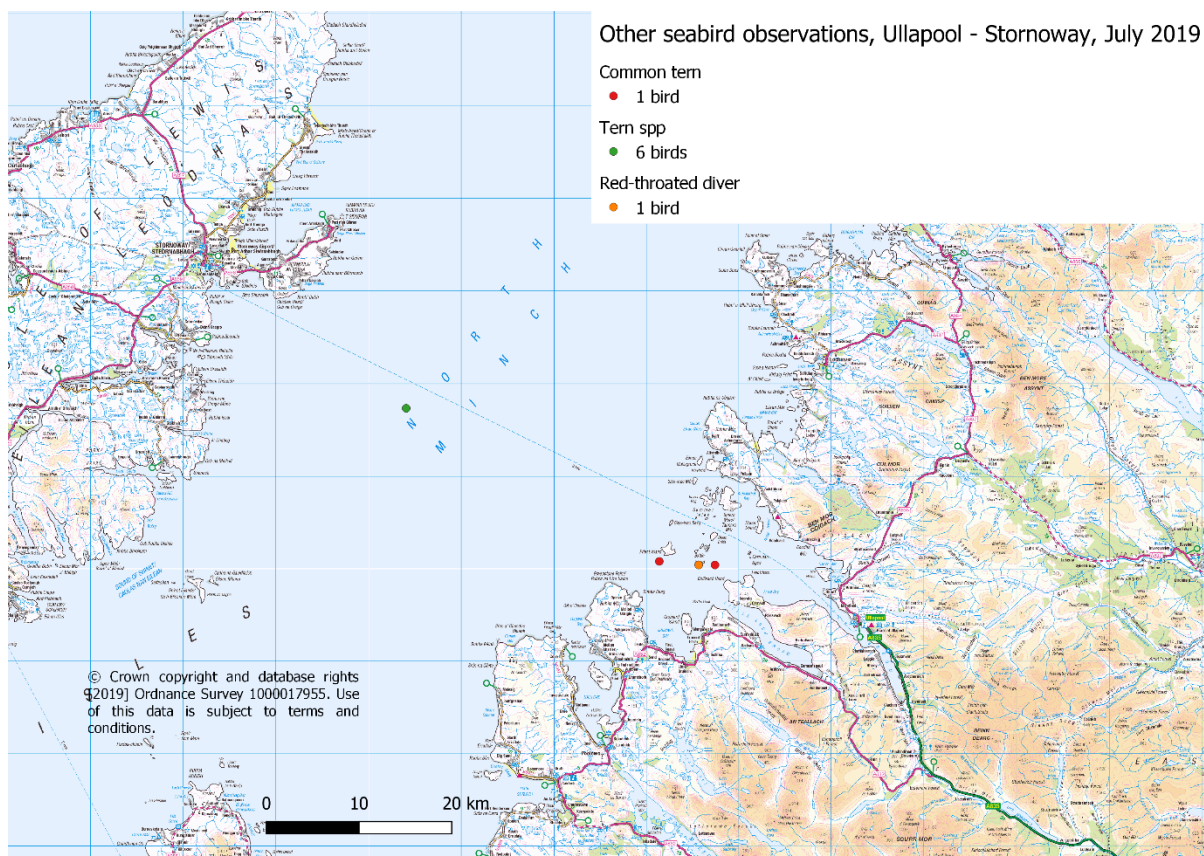


Figure 7. Observations of other seabirds, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

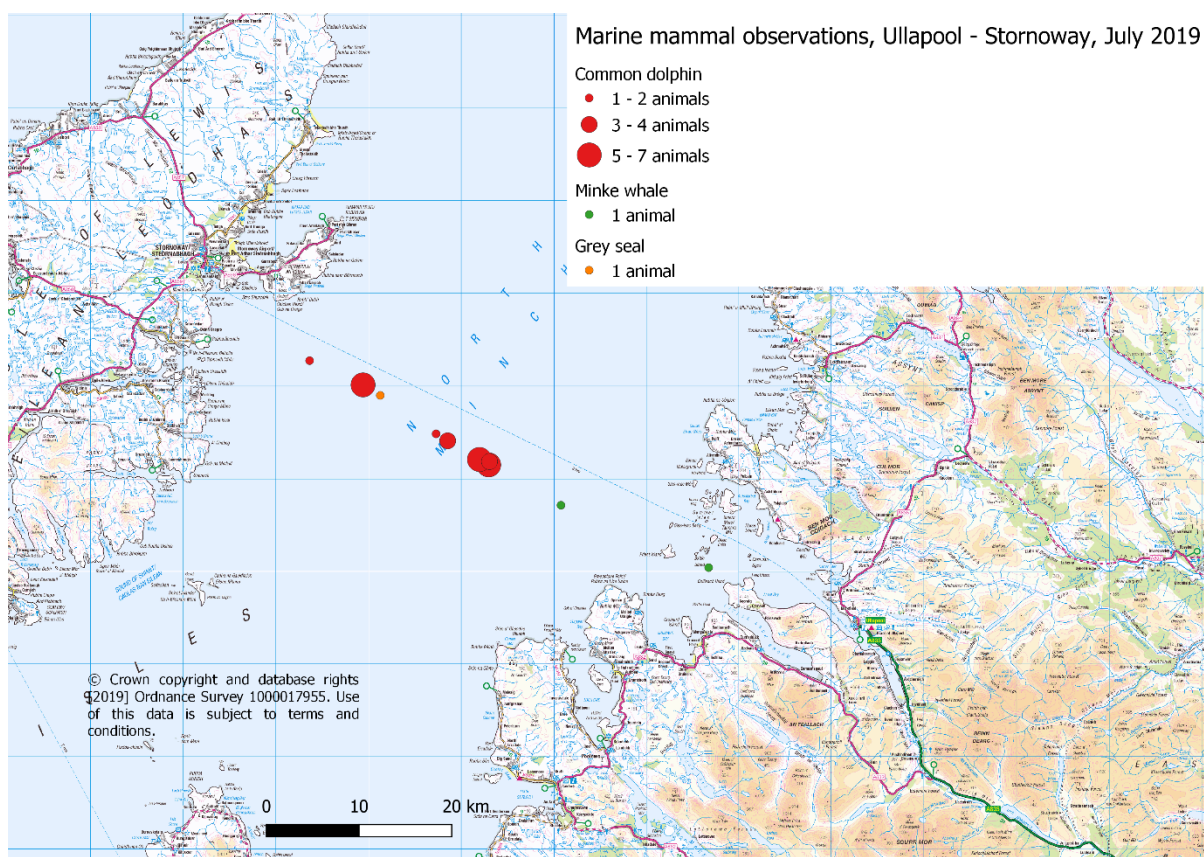


Figure 8. Observations of marine mammals, Ullapool – Stornoway, July 13th 2019.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the volunteers who gave up their time to take part in this survey – we hope this report serves as a useful reminder of your time on board! We would also like to thank the Captain and crew of the Islay ferry for welcoming the survey team on board, and Klare Chamberlain and Ruth Rice at CalMac who helped with access and other arrangements. Finally, thanks to Simon Pinder and Rob Petley-Jones at MARINELife for coordinating volunteer effort.