

Are Birds Disturbed by Boats?

A topical article for the Boat Owners' Response Group
by Michael Simons, December 2014

1. Introduction

Conservationists are increasingly making claims that sea birds can be adversely affected by the mere presence of boats, through "disturbance" of the birds as they go about their daily business. For example, in the following document

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370523/MPA Strategic Management Table.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370523/MPA_Strategic_Management_Table.pdf) the following formulaic statement is applied to 42 marine sites:

"Birds highly vulnerable to recreational noise and visual disturbance". Note they are said to be not

just vulnerable, but ***highly*** vulnerable in each of the 42 sites, although the sites are all different and the range of bird species in each site will be different. Clearly this assessment is not the result of careful site-specific investigation. The "visual disturbance" aspect appears to cover boating, and this is spelled out for several Eastern Region sites: ***"Recreational disturbance including recreational boating as high risk to the site"***.

Most people who actually go on boats will be bemused by this. Birds generally seem to ignore boats, unless they're about to be run down by one. If food is on offer, they can be attracted to the boat, a flock of gulls closely following a fishing boat being a common and iconic sight (above). Birds perch or rest on moored boats, as boat owners are only too aware as they clean up the droppings left by gulls, cormorants, starlings, even pied wagtails where the author's boat is moored. The main problem there is starlings, which cluster on the masts and shrouds of the moored boats, even with people sitting on the deck below, and despite many efforts, no way has been found to keep them off apart from scaring them with loud banging noises. I have seen a large yacht leave its pontoon and motor down the exit channel with a dozen or more starlings still happily perched on the shrouds near the masthead.

This article will illustrate the proposition that boats cause surprisingly little disturbance to seabirds by showing examples of images and videos from the internet of birds being closely approached by boats without being "disturbed", as well as reporting personal observations and images made by the author. Note that a number of the internet examples are from important bird reserve areas, and the authorities concerned seem happy to countenance sight-seeing trips by boat, although sometimes, understandably, landing is not permitted. The reader is strongly encouraged to click on the video links as the videos convey a much clearer impression of proximity than do the still images.

2. Author's Personal Observations

The author's boat, a 30 ft sailing yacht, is kept at Northney Marina, Hayling Island, within **Chichester Harbour**. The important nesting site for little terns in Langstone Harbour is nearby, about 1 mile away, and little terns are also seen in Chichester Harbour, the two harbours being joined by a channel nearby.

Common terns are usually encountered on a passage through the harbour during the summer, and little terns sometimes. Both appear unconcerned by boats passing close by, they continue fishing and entertain passing boaters with their aerial acrobatics and diving. They will fly close to boats under way, and one once flew between our side stays and the mast, i.e. actually through the boat's rigging. They are also seen fishing within the marina, between all the moored boats. They seem quite undisturbed by boats close by.

While sailing or motoring through the harbour we will at low tide pass birds feeding on the mud or in the shallows, including little egret, oystercatchers and curlew, these appear undisturbed by our passage.

We have often observed the birds at **Newtown Creek, Isle of Wight**. There is a popular and compact anchorage there, Clammerkin Lake, which frequently has 30+ boats at anchor, with boats coming and going throughout the day. Birds and boats coexist happily there. If we throw a crust of bread in the air, a



dozen or more black headed gulls will appear in the air to catch any food going. They will fly or swim close to the anchored boat to pick up any floating food, but are reluctant to come any closer than about 2 metres.

Mute swans come closer. They can be seen methodically visiting boats in turn to ask for food or fresh water, and we have known them to attract attention by knocking on the hull with their beaks. Our boat has a stern bathing platform with a lip in which a little water will collect if we pour some over it, and swans will gratefully drink fresh water from it.

The sea wall, the posts along it, and the strip of seabed beneath, exposed at low tide, are frequented by a variety of birds. Lots of boats will be at anchor within 60 m, but we often anchor within 20 m and watch the birds feeding or resting. It should be noted that a boat at anchor is not entirely stationary, it swings around under the influence of wind and tide. The birds include oyster catchers, ringed plover, curlew, little egret, gulls, terns, Canada geese, and once in September a migrating osprey some 30 m from our boat. Sandwich terns often perch on the posts, and do not move when the author and his dog go past in a dinghy with outboard motor at a distance of about 10 m.

Elsewhere, it is common to find seabirds perched on navigational posts, beacons and buoys. Cormorants and herring gulls seem to occupy the choice spots, and we can pass within 3 m without disturbing them.

Out at sea, birds swimming or resting on the surface do not fly away unless the boat approaches quite close. Guillemots will fly away when the boat comes within about 10 m. On a very hot day in 2013 we were crossing Lyme Bay miles out at sea and found considerable numbers of single gannets, not flying and hunting, but sitting like ducks on the surface of the calm, mirror-like sea. We were under engine with mainsail raised doing rather over 5 knots and found that the gannets did not fly away until the boat was within about 20 metres. Then they would fly about 50 m further away and calmly settle back on the sea.

The approximate estimated distance of approach without disturbing the bird is tabulated on the right. In many cases this just happens to be the distance the boat was away from the bird: closer approach would probably have been possible. Only in the case of black headed gull, guillemot and gannet was this the distance at which the bird was disturbed and flew away.

Species	Dist., m
Starling	0
Common tern	1
Little tern	1
Little egret	20
Oystercatcher	20
Curlew	20
Black headed gull	2
Mute swan	0
Ringed plover	20
Canada goose	20
Osprey	30
Sandwich tern	10
Cormorant	3
Herring gull	3
Guillemot	10
Gannet	20

The above observations are generally without specific supporting imagery, apart from the swans, although a number of bird pictures taken from the author's boat are shown at the end of this article. These are from the author's photo archives, and distance from the boat was not recorded at the time.

Some videos and photographs illustrating the close approach of boats to seabirds in other areas have been sourced from the internet, and are shown in the next four sections. They all make the same point, that boats can go quite close to seabirds without disturbing them.

2. Coquet Island, Northumberland (RSPB)

From the RSPB website:

“Coquet Island is an RSPB reserve about one mile off Amble, Northumberland. It is home to a large colony of nesting seabirds and is specially protected under European Law for birds such as the roseate tern, one of our rarest nesting seabirds. Coquet now holds 90 per cent of the UK's roseate tern population.

Several thousand nesting Sandwich, Arctic and common terns accompany the roseates in May, June and July, and thousands of puffins occupy the main part of the island.

..... the island is designated as a sanctuary and the public are not allowed to land. **But you can also enjoy close-up views of the birds by taking a boat trip around the island on a charter boat.”**

A video on YouTube shows puffins being closely approached by a kayak, and swimming quite happily close to one of the 40 ft charter boats. See stills on the next page, and view the short video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35buasxv5_w The yellow object is the prow of the kayak.



A video taken on one of the Puffin Cruises ex-lifeboat charter boats which shows its close approach to the island and its terns is found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=wIS5huulebw

3. Farne Islands, Northumberland (NT)



This video is from a boat which approaches closely while the birds (which seem to be mainly kittiwake, razorbill and guillemots) remain undisturbed.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9RVZqttVzE>

A video showing Billy Shields trip boat approaching the birds without causing disturbance can be found at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q25yT27LsbA>

4. Blakeney Point, Norfolk (NT)

From Temples Seal Trips website:

“Blakeney Point is an internationally famous breeding and feeding ground for migrant birds.

Throughout the spring and summer months we have tern colonies nesting, including Sandwich, Common, Little and Arctic Terns.

We can view these very closely from the boat, with the adults feeding their partners on the nest. We also watch the young chicks being fed, and then observe them being marched down to the waters edge as the summer progresses.” (See next page for an image from the Beans Boat Trips website).



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blakeney point seal trips with beans boats

The Beans online brochure describes the terms then continues:

“ You will be able to get a good view of them from the boat as well as of the other various shorebirds: Oyster Catcher, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, and Dunlin to name but a few. During the winter months, you will see large numbers of duck and geese including Mallard, Widgeon, Teal, Pintail, Pinkfooted Geese. Greylag and Brent Geese usually arrive from October onwards”.

There are 3 boat operators with 10 or more boats between them, and some operate throughout the year. The terns and other birds, plus the seals, co-exist with a steady flow of sightseeing boats.

5. Portsmouth Harbour

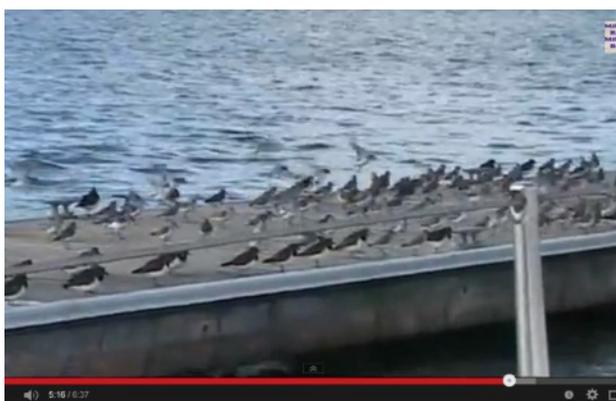
A video of a sailing yacht trip to view birds can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py008PrrPDs>. The best bird images are at about 5 minutes in when a large flock of dunlin and turnstone alight on a pontoon as the yacht closely approaches it. Note the guard-rail stanchion of the yacht in the foreground which gives an idea of distance and scale. The images are not high resolution - the blurs in the air are incoming birds which landed, and the continuous sequence lasted 28 seconds without the birds flying away. The video time stamps are shown between the pictures.



5m10s



5m15s



5m16s



5m31s

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has presented evidence of the close approach of boats to some 20 different species of bird, without causing significant disturbance, from Northumberland, Norfolk, the central South Coast and Lyme Bay. It is clear that the answer to the question posed in the title is no, birds generally are not disturbed by the approach of boats - but also that the question is rather simplistic.

In fact, any bird will fly or move away if a boat approaches close enough, and a more useful question is how close can a boat approach a particular species before that species of bird, or a defined proportion of a sample of that species, takes flight or moves away? The answer may vary with type, size, speed and noisiness of the boat, with different geographical areas, and whether the local bird population has become habituated and less sensitive to the presence of boats.

The answer to this question can then be compared with how close boats actually do approach the bird habitat in question, and then an assessment made of how much of that habitat might be affected, and how significant any resulting disturbance might be.

From the evidence in this article, it seems that birds which feed out on the water, like gulls, terns, gannets, are not disturbed by boats outside a range of 20 m for gannets, and very much less for gulls and terns. The area over which they feed is large, and temporary displacement by a few metres will be of little consequence.

Birds which feed in shallow water or on mud flats have a more defined feeding area, but generally boats are not able to get very close to such areas anyway, because of the shallow water. If the population in question is undisturbed by boats at 10 m distance, they could in many cases be completely undisturbed by passing boats, the boats just would not come that close - in general, boats will keep to the deep water channels. In the course of countless boat journeys up and down Chichester Harbour over many years, the author has never been aware of disturbing waders at the shore line.

Bearing in mind the above evidence and arguments, it is clear that formulaic statements such as *“Recreational disturbance including recreational boating as high risk to the site”* are naïve, simplistic, un-researched and, in all probability, untrue.

In fact, the conclusions of this report are in broad agreement with the report *“A simple method for assessing the risk of disturbance to birds at coastal sites November 2012”*, which was developed by Neil Ravenscroft (Wildside Ecology) through discussion with Trazar Astley-Reid (Suffolk Coast & Heaths) and Emma Hay (Natural England). It contains a very useful and thorough literature review of coastal bird disturbance issues and is at

<http://www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org/assets/Projects--Partnerships/Stour--Orwell/disturbance/A-simple-method-for-assessing-the-risk-of-disturbance-to-birds-at-coastal-sites.pdf>

On page 21 it contains the statement

“Speeding boats / jet-skis:

most sailboats or slow-moving motorboats cause little disturbance to birds. Disturbance is often caused by fast-moving, erratic or loud craft such as speedboats and jet-skis. These can also venture close to the tideline and birds”

It also comments that fast-moving sailboards and kite boards are a possible source of disturbance.

Our present article has not considered these fast moving craft, but BORG does suggest that in addition to the method of assessment put forward by Ravenscroft et al, it might be helpful to establish the distances at which these craft cause observable disturbance to feeding birds.

Please see next page for the Appendix.

7. Appendix. Some more photographs of undisturbed birds taken from the author's boat:
(including a Mediterranean gull, top centre. Note the swans and herring gull are actually in contact with the boat or its tender):

