



Birds from the water: Reconstructing avian resource use and contribution to diet in prehistoric Scottish Island environments



Julia Best^{a,*}, Jacqui Mulville^b

^a Department of Archaeology, Anthropology and Forensic Science, Faculty of Science and Technology, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

^b School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article presents results from a large-scale investigation of bird use in the Scottish Islands. Although avian archaeology has sometimes been overlooked, it has become increasingly clear that birds were a small but often important component of past diets. This is particularly relevant when it is considered that a diverse range of birds, and particularly aquatic birds, thrive in coastal and island locations. Large colonies of gregariously breeding seabirds provided a concentrated resource which could be targeted intensely for both meat and eggs. The use of aquatic birds in the Scottish Islands is therefore integral to holistically understanding diet and resource use in these settings. Aquatic birds would have offered a wide variety of dietary resources to prehistoric populations including meat and eggs, but also oil and fat. The exploitation of seabirds endured throughout Scottish Island prehistoric living from the Mesolithic to the Late Iron Age (and much further beyond), within a picture of resource use that shows both continuity and flexibility in the exploitation of aquatic birds. The acquisition of these resources required the development of several species and habitat-specific fowling techniques that demonstrate in-depth understanding of the avian resources being exploited. Local hunting and targeted fowling trips to more distant locations in the landscape and seascape are indicated by the zooarchaeological data. Exploitation of aquatic birds displays a summer focus but as part of a year-round fowling calendar, whilst preservation for later consumption may provide information on another element of the dietary picture.

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1. Introduction

The Scottish Islands (Fig. 1) are home to a diverse array of aquatic bird species including seabirds, waders, and freshwater birds. These encompass resident species (present all year round) and migratory birds which may only be in the area for specific periods, such as winter visitors moving into Britain. The Scottish Islands also hold large numbers of breeding birds during the summer months, particularly sizable colonies of gregarious seabirds. These island landscapes contain a wide range of habitats used by aquatic birds: the islands themselves, the sea, inland water, and offshore stacs and skerries can all hold exceptional populations. The Scottish Islands contain important breeding sites for many species such as the northern gannet (*Morus bassanus*). Britain holds 60 to 70% of the world's breeding gannet population, the majority of which nest on the cliffs of Scottish islands and coastlines (Stroud et al., 2001b, 44; Pollock et al., 2000, 15–18). The JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) has established a large number of SPAs (Special Protected Areas) in the Scottish Islands. These SPAs signify that a

site is used regularly by a certain number of birds in any season (e.g. 20,000 waterfowl), or has a high breeding success rate or a long history of occupation by a given species (Stroud et al., 2001a, 7). The modern avian profile therefore suggests that in prehistory birds would have been an intrinsic part of life in these island settings and a potentially valuable food resource.

The zooarchaeological evidence for avian exploitation in these settings supports the above hypothesis and spans the prehistoric and historic, being evidenced from the Mesolithic to the very recent past. This paper presents prehistoric results of a large-scale investigation of bird use in the Scottish Islands conducted through collating pre-existing avian bone (and eggshell) data and combining it with in-depth analysis of new assemblages. Prehistoric populations in the Scottish Islands made use of a wide range of aquatic birds offered by this ecotonal landscape, sourcing them from the land, the sea, and the sky. Aquatic birds were valuable in these islands as part of a general programme of subsistence (both in pre-agricultural and farming societies), as a valuable initial resource on entering an area, as an occasional supplement, or even as emergency resources. They provided consumable resources including meat, eggs, oils and fat, as well as products such as feathers. From the Mesolithic onwards aquatic birds were an important (but sometimes archaeologically overlooked) part of past diets, on a variety of scales.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bestj@bournemouth.ac.uk (J. Best).

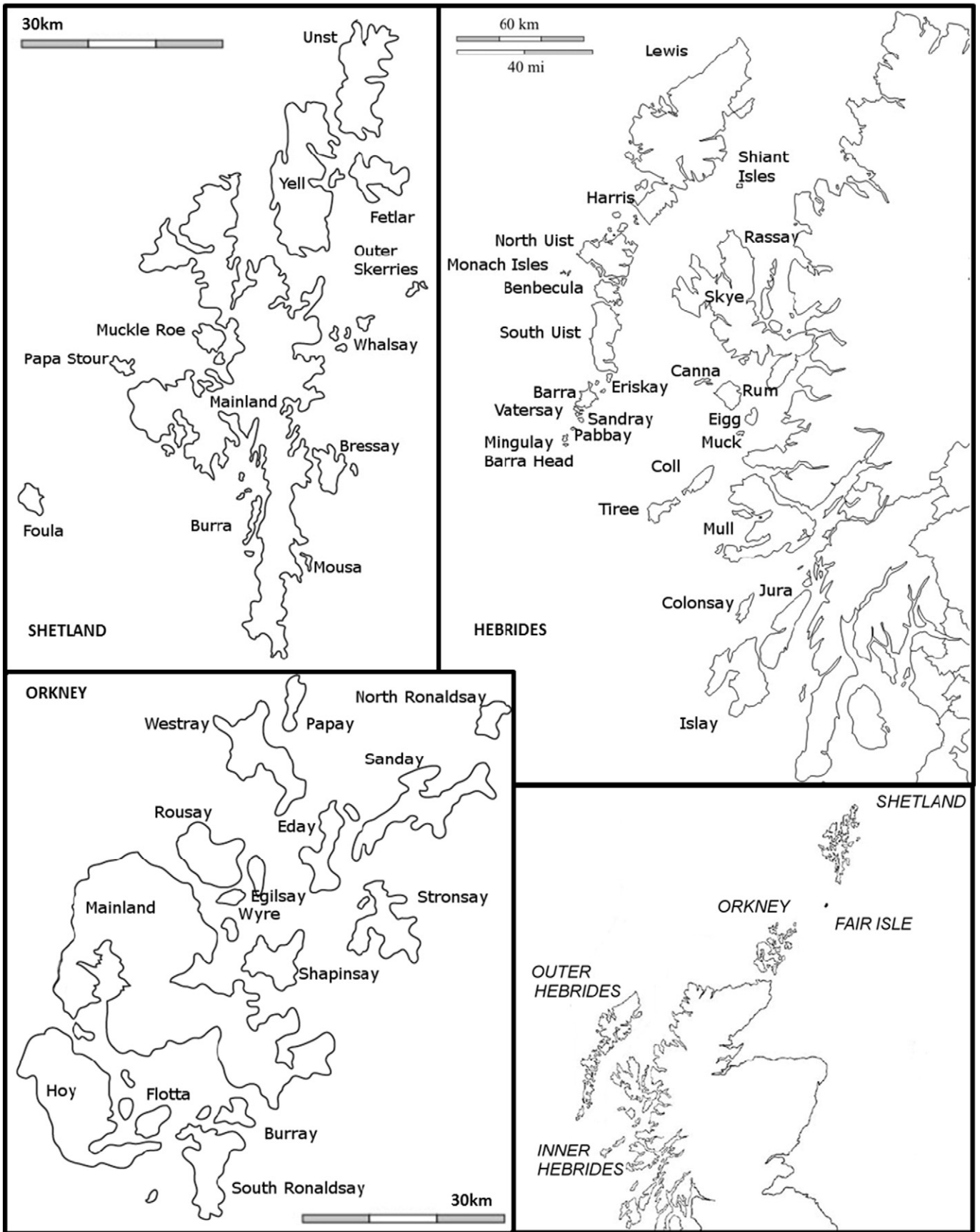


Fig. 1. Map showing Scottish Island groups (base map by Ian Dennis).

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