

## Icon: Puffins

Puffins aren't just cute to look at, they can also tell us something about the state of the environment. Each year after breeding on land, puffins spend around eight months out at sea. Because they return to the same nesting burrow each spring, any changes in the number of breeding birds can be a useful 'bioindicator' of conditions in the open sea.

### See puffins on the Farne Islands

You can visit England's largest puffin breeding colony on a boat trip from Seahouses. Puffins breed on the islands between April and mid-August and school and community groups can book guided walks with a warden. Find out more about the islands and download walking and wildlife-spotting activities at the National Trust's website: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-farnes/w-farnes-thingstodo.htm>

Wardens regularly count the number of nesting puffins, by sticking their hands down metre-long burrows. After 40 years of rising populations, numbers in 2008 dropped (from over 55,000 pairs in 2003 to less than 37,000 in 2008). This was surprising because there were plenty of sandeels (puffins' standard food) in the area and few ground predators raiding the burrows.

- Imagine what it would be like to be a warden, living and working on the Farne Islands. What would you miss from home?
- Look out for other wildlife. Why do you think thousands of birds choose to breed here?
- If the missing puffins didn't disappear because of conditions around the islands, why do you think the number of birds dropped?

### Make your own puffin story

- Take a photograph, draw a picture, or find a postcard of a puffin.
- Choose three words to describe what the bird looks like.
- Write a story about what happens when it goes out to sea. Maybe your puffin gets caught in a big storm, follows a fishing boat or meets other birds or marine life.

## Help protect puffins

Puffins are on the Amber list of UK Birds of Conservation Concern because more than half of the UK population breeds in ten or fewer sites. This means even small environmental changes in or near these places can affect the number of puffins in the future.

- The Farne Island puffins may have been affected by unusually bad storms out at sea, which may be due to climate change. List three things you and your family can do to help tackle climate change.
- Although most people don't eat sandeels, they can be accidentally caught while fishing for other stocks. Over-fishing can also affect the delicate balance of different fish in the environment. If you eat fish, find out where and how it has been caught.
- Puffins and other seabirds can die if they eat discarded plastic rubbish. Check out our Get Involved webpages and take part in a beach clean-up.

## Find out more about bird conservation

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) runs nature reserves and activities around the country. Explore their website to find out more about birds and see how you can get involved in your local area: <http://www.rspb.org.uk>

