

## **NEWSLETTER 65**

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### **EDITORIAL**

This newsletter is extremely thin. This is not due to the lack of information on seabirds and research relating to them, but more because the contents are all that I have received. Several people have promised me articles, but nothing has been forthcoming from them. They know who they are, but before you think "I'm glad that's not me", are you sure there is nothing you could put into the newsletter? I am prepared to spend a fair amount of time editing and assembling the newsletter, are you prepared to put in a fraction of that time in writing something for it? I thank my regular contributors, and hope that a few more members will join them.

Mark L Tasker

### **ENGLISH CHANNEL OILING INCIDENT, JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1993**

The New Year celebrations were over, people were getting back into routine and the MV Braer was crossing the North Sea on its way to Canada. Routines, however were about to be disrupted when the Braer, as it passed the southern tip of Shetland suffered a main engine breakdown, which together with very severe gales at the time, resulted in the vessel grounding at Garth's Ness where it began spilling its cargo of 85,000 tonnes of crude oil into the sea.

This of course has very little to do with oil contaminated birds appearing in the English Channel. However, on 11 January (6 days after the Braer grounding) live oil-contaminated guillemots *Uria aalge* started to come ashore along the Kent coast and were sent to the RSPCA Wildlife Hospital at West Hatch, Taunton. These first strandings were quickly followed over the next two to three weeks by large numbers of seabirds (95% guillemots) being stranded along the English Channel coast, in Sussex, Isle of Wight, Portland Bill, Lyme Bay and on to the Devon and Cornwall coasts.

During the period from 5 to 11 January, the staff at West Hatch plus some experienced volunteers had been preparing to deal with the influx of

contaminated birds from the Shetlands, expecting there to be many hundreds. In fact, Colin Seddon, the wildlife manager, had travelled to the SSPCA oiled seabird unit at Middlebank, near Edinburgh, to assess the situation and organise the transportation of birds needing to be moved on to West Hatch.

The expected birds at West Hatch did not materialise from the Shetlands - as is now well known the number of live contaminated victims from the incident was relatively small, some 250 birds which were dealt with quite adequately at Middlebank. However they did start to arrive from the Kent coast and quickly numbers built up as the victims became stranded progressively along the south English coast. The majority of the birds were taken to West Hatch (392) and as the contaminated birds started to turn up in Devon and Cornwall, birds were taken to the RSPCA oiled seabirds units at Plymouth (120) and Perranporth in Cornwall (138). A further 52 were treated at the Teignmouth oiled seabird unit. All of these birds stranded over a three week period and totalled some 703 birds. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of these birds, together with the number treated, cleaned, rehabilitated and released at the four cleaning centres.

In Plymouth, an approximate 10% sample of guillemots were examined and biometrics recorded using the Jones et al (1982) standards. Seventeen of this total were carcasses and have been frozen for future internal examination and for organ, tissue and bone samples.

What we do not have from the English Channel oil pollution incident is any idea of the number of birds that died. Several carcasses were reported of birds washed ashore dead or that died after stranding. It is doubtful if the RSPB beached bird survey, carried out on 28 February gave a realistic picture.

It is worthwhile to reflect that while the world waited for the horrific details of seabird mortality from a major pollution incident, as many, if not more birds were

contaminated with oil from a slick that is labelled as chronic pollution and under normal circumstances would gain a two-inch column on page 5 of a local newspaper. However, due to the fact that some media and local government interest was aroused because of the number of birds involved in the English Channel compared to the number in Shetland, we have been able to present a file relating the "chronic" oil pollution situation in the south-west of England to Lord Donaldson's Inquiry into transport of oil and other products.

The system of oiled seabird holders, established by the south-west oiled seabird group, on much of the south-west coast of England, together with the immediate first-aid treatment they were able to administer worked very well indeed and reflected favourably in the numbers of birds rescued and eventually released. This was the first occasion that the system had been tested under the pressure of large numbers of birds over a relatively short periods and we are encouraged in our plans to extend the coverage.

Reference: Jones, PH, Blake, BF, Nilssen, TA, Rostad, OW. 1982. The examination of birds killed in oil spills and other incidents. A manual of suggested procedure. NCC Report.

Ken E Partridge

## AFTER THE BRAER

As Dave Okill said in March "the oil spill was the easy bit"! And he was only talking about the mass of paperwork involved in the aftermath. More fun but much more tiring have been the pre-breeding tystie (black guillemots to non believers) surveys, trying to assess the impact of the spill on breeding numbers.

After the Esso Bernicia oil spill at the Sullom Voe terminal in December 1978, the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG) commissioned Oxford University to devise a method to monitor changes in breeding numbers of tysties. Ex-secretary of the Seabird Group, Pete Ewins, carried out the work which resulted in a bi-annual programme of surveys, alternately in Yell Sound where breeding numbers were severely reduced by the Esso Bernicia spill, and at 12 further sites around Shetland not directly affected by the spill. Pete and his helpers also carried out a complete Shetland census of pre-breeding adults in the springs of 1982-84.

The plan for this spring was to carry out a census of the south Mainland coast of Shetland (within which there are four control sites for Yell Sound), and survey the other monitoring sites including Yell Sound and Fair Isle - twice! Despite poor weather in late March and early April, we are close (at the time of writing 26/4) to achieving that thanks to the efforts of a small army recruited from SOTEAG, JNCC, SNH, RSPB and FIBOT.

The results will need careful interpretation. Counts up to 1992 at monitoring sites suggested a general increase in numbers since the early 1980s, especially on the west coast of Shetland. For much of the coastline the only comparison we can make now is with the 1982-84 counts. Tentative impressions are that most numbers this spring on the south-east Mainland coast are similar to the most recent counts, made in 1991/92. In the area of Quendale Bay and the Fitful Head cliffs immediately to the north of the wreck, numbers are generally lower than

1983 but there are anomalies. Along the cliffs a kilometre each side of the wreck, 58 birds were counted in 1983 compared with 96 this morning, including a dozen or so displaying on the water right beside the Braer's bow! (the only part still visible above water). Further north, numbers at the West Burra monitoring site are down 33% since 1992 while there may have been a decrease also among the Scalloway Islands. Further north than that, there has been little change since the most recent counts in regularly monitored sections, and considerable increases since 1982-84 on other coasts.

Tystie surveys were completed this morning on Fair Isle, and suggest a 25% decrease since the last count of the whole island in 1989. Again, this is just a first look at the results and previous whole island counts have shown some variation, but from ringing recoveries we know that some birds spend the winter away from the island and it is likely that some Fair Isle birds were included among January's oil victims.

Shag breeding success studies began during March at Sumburgh Head and by 21 April, birds had reoccupied 60% of the nest sites used last year in study plots, and were building nests or had laid in 47% of them. How many more will do so remains to be seen, but the colony certainly has not been devastated. Further work on seabirds continues; we are lucky in Shetland that good baseline data and a willing army of workers are available. We also appear to have been lucky in the weather conditions and type of oil spill. I will report further in the next newsletter.

Martin Heubeck

## **BACK NUMBERS OF SEABIRD**

I was amazed to receive, quite unannounced, several boxes posted to me by RSPB at Sandy. On opening these I found back numbers of Seabird Report 1969, Seabird Report 5 (1975-76), Seabird Report 6 (1977-81), Seabird 7 (1984), 8 (1985) and 9 (1986). Nobody on the Seabird Group executive committee knew of the existence of these copies, which must have been lying in some cupboard for the past seven years. We thought we had run out of these old issues. In addition to these, we have some copies of Seabird 12 (1989), 13 (1991) and 14 (1992) in stock. In order to save cupboard space here I would be delighted to sell copies! Volumes up to Seabird 9 (1986) are available for £2 per copy, and volumes 12 to 14 for £5 per copy. Send me your orders please. Postage and packing will be free (postage by surface mail, printed matter). Here is an opportunity for libraries to acquire an almost complete set of Seabird for less than the cost of a UK television license. What could be better value than that? (Please don't answer).

Requests for back numbers, together with a cheque made out to The Seabird Group on a UK bank account, or a Visa/Mastercard number, name on card and expiry date and signed authorisation for me to charge the cost to the card, to

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