

## NEWSLETTER 77

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## WORLD RECORD BREAKING BIRD

Studies in bird habits increase our knowledge of the amazing flying feats of the globe-roaming migratory species. The Victorian Wader Study Group (VWSG) of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) has captured a juvenile common tern, *Sterna hirundo*, that had flown over 26,000 kilometres from its nest in Finland to coastal Victoria, in south-eastern Australia.

The tern was caught on 24 January 1997 on a beach near the RAOU's Rotamah Island Bird Observatory on the Gippsland Lakes, after what is believed to be the longest documented journey of any bird in the world. It was banded as a chick, in its nest on an island, in a lake in central Finland on 30 June 1996.

The tern averaged an amazing 120 kilometres a day, for every day of its life, as it travelled to make this epic trip from Finland. Given that it would not fly until two weeks after banding, and it may have taken some time for the bird to grow strong enough to make the journey, and also as it cannot be assumed that the bird was caught the day it arrived, experts believe that its actual speed of travel may be closer to 200 kms per day.

The Guinness Book of Records states that the longest bird journey was one made by an arctic tern, banded in Russia, on the White Sea in July 1955 and found

in Fremantle in May 1956. Assuming it also flew following a coastal route, that bird would have travelled approximately 22,500 kilometres.

Assuming the bird followed the normal migratory route of common terns from Finland, it flew out into the Atlantic, down the coast of Africa, arriving at the normal wintering area at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

From there it was probably caught up in severe southern ocean gales, and so followed the route taken by the two recently rescued solo sailors. Refuge was found on the Gippsland Lakes beach where the bird research and conservation team was studying birds to determine their migratory paths, and hence what important wetland regions to protect.

Dr Clive Minton, who leads the VWSG, is excited by this very important find, as it provides another small clue to the puzzle about how and why birds make these amazing journeys. Dr Minton was surprised that, given the ordeal the bird was subjected to, it was in excellent condition, and its weight was normal.

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### **IS THE JAMAICA PETREL *PTERODROMA CARIBBAEA* STILL ALIVE IN JAMAICA?**

In 1886 the ornithologist Dr Alexander Carte named a new species of petrel collected in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, which was known to locals there as "the Blue Mountain duck". The species was first mentioned nearly a hundred years earlier in 1789 in Browne's Natural History of Jamaica, but no formal description was then given. Around November and December 1879 a botanist from Kew Gardens, London, Dr W. Nock was charged with the plantation of cinchona trees on the south flank of the Blue Mountains in St Andrews parish, the bark from the trees yielding quinine for medicinal purposes. Dr. Nock, known among local sportsmen as "the W.G. Grace of Jamaica" during his cricketering years there, collected some 22 birds of this species while land was being

cleared for planting. The birds nested in burrows in the soft earthy ridges and "in the crevices of almost inaccessible mountains" at around 1600 metres above sea level and many miles from the sea, and were purely nocturnal in their habits (Godman, 1907-1910). The present location of most of these Jamaica petrel skins is known, with 8 in Cambridge University Museum and 4 in the British Museum of Natural History. There are in addition two specimens recorded as being in the Institute of Jamaica. The others are spread among several European and American institutes and museums.

The last mention of living birds was in 1891 when it was believed that introduced mongeese had eradicated the birds from their former breeding areas (Godman, 1907-1910). Since that time no Jamaica petrel has been conclusively seen alive. James Bond, author of the Field Guide to the Birds of the Caribbean, reported in the early 1930's a possible sighting of the species off Bimini in the Bahamas. There have been rumours and some searches but nothing tangible has been seen of the Jamaica petrel since the last birds were collected.

Lost species can still survive to the present day. In terms of area/per capita of human population, Bermuda is one of the most densely populated islands on earth, yet the cahow or Bermuda petrel *Pterodroma cahow*, nested undiscovered on some small islets for over 300 years. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic on Portuguese Madeira, the freira or Madeira petrel *Pterodroma madeira* was thought extinct after nearly 50 years when little or nothing had been known of the breeding sites. In 1969 a few were found still breeding high among the mountains of that island by a local shepherd who recognised calls of a similar species played to him by Alexander Zino (Zino & Zino, 1986). David Wingate found a strong healthy colony of diabolins or black-capped petrels *Pterodroma hasitata* in the mountains of Haiti in the early 1960's, when at one time the species was thought extinct, having "gone" from

several of its former West Indies colonies (Wingate, 1964). In 1978 David Crockett tracked down the taiko or magenta petrel *Pterodroma magentae* of the Chatham Islands, New Zealand when only historical accounts were known of the species (Crockett, 1994). All these species have perhaps eluded detection through being nocturnal but even extremely large diurnal species such as the Andean condor *Vultur gryphus* had been thought "lost" in the Merida Andes of Venezuela for over 60 years until re-discovered there in 1976 (Zonfrillo, 1977). "Lost" species, particularly nocturnal ones, clearly have a better chance of survival and their re-discovery and conservation may simply await a more concerted search.

There thus seems a strong probability that the Jamaica petrel still exists somewhere in the high mountains of eastern Jamaica (Imber, 1991). Petrels in general are long-lived birds (20 + years for the smallest storm-petrels, 50+ years for albatrosses). Using data from literature and the collected specimens mentioned earlier, an expedition to search for the bird is planned for October or November 1997, using modern equipment and methods to detect nocturnal species.

The search will be a joint effort with a professional team from three Commonwealth countries - Jamaica, (L. Douglas, University of the West Indies and Gosse Bird Club), Scotland (B. Zonfrillo, Applied Ornithology Unit, University of Glasgow) and New Zealand (Dr. M. Imber, Dept. of Conservation) - combining to add experience and expertise with petrels in general to that of local knowledge and history in Jamaica. The Jamaica Petrel Research Group has been constituted in Kingston under the Chairmanship of Dr Peter Vogel, (Dept of Life-Sciences, University of the West Indies) to undertake the organisation and logistics.

Added to the land search, a seaborne team from USA, Drs. P.A. Buckley (Graduate School of Oceanography, University of Rhode Island) and E.S.

Brinkley, (University of Virginia) have volunteered to cross suitable marine locations with a view to sighting birds at sea. They will use various techniques for attracting birds at sea and will attempt visual searches in suitable oceanographic locations.

The search for the Jamaica petrel will be long-term, lasting some years, but it is hoped for some early positive evidence once the groundwork gets under way. Finding the species alive in Jamaica would have immense benefits there for conservation in general which is presently at a stage of awakening. Realisation of the importance of habitat and species preservation is rapidly gaining momentum in Jamaica, and a small but highly dedicated and motivated band of local ecologists will hopefully form the nucleus of future advances there in conservation.

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## **EAST CAITHNESS SEABIRD REPORT**

The East Caithness Seabird colonies (Ceann Ousdale, Badbea, An Dun, Inverhill) have a long (recent) history of being monitored and as part of this monitoring large numbers of Guillemot chicks have been ringed. My involvement in this work has been since the mid eighties when I joined the RSPB team led by Greg Mudge during the ringing sessions. I have continued to ring Seabirds in the East Caithness sites since then. The ringing was carried out with Stewart and Ian Mackay of Wick in the late Eighties and since 1989 independently with a small team of Forestry Commission (FC) workers. The FC has provided indirect help to the project by allowing staff time and transport as I have been able to use the ringing sessions as part of a broader bird monitoring training programme for the FC people involved. The FC support continued until 1994 and for 1995 we were able to obtain a small grant from the Seabird Group to help cover transport and overnight accommodation costs.

In the past four or five years the number of colonies visited has had to be reduced through lack of time and finding. As most of the sites are only accessible from the sea the weather plays a crucial role in determining which colonies are visited and how many chicks are ringed. Since the JNCC subsidies on rings have been reduced only 1000 subsidised rings have been made available to our group. Because of this we have concentrated our efforts over the past three years on the Guillemot colonies at Ceann Ousdale, where in most years all the allocated rings have been used. Any remaining rings were used at the next colony up the coast at Badbea. Despite less than favourable sea conditions in some years we have still been able to ring a sample of Guillemot chicks every year since 1989 by utilising one 'walk' in site at Badbea in really rough sea conditions. A small Cormorant colony at Ceann Leathad is also visited most

years and nests counted (Data to Robin Sellers) and the chicks ringed.

No attempt has been made in this short report to investigate trends or look for patterns of movements, dispersal etc, this will hopefully be the next stage of the work if the study continues. We are still looking for funds to continue the work and feel that it is very important to carry on the monitoring of these colonies with at least the effort that has gone into the study in the past, or with more effort if funds are available. This seems to be even more important now with the latest two major oil spills and the continuing threat to fish stocks in the North Sea.

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## **IUCN LONGLINING RESOLUTION**

The resolution on longlining impacts on seabirds was passed by a convincing margin at the world Conservation Congress of the IUCN in Montreal last October. The resolution called for the development of techniques to eliminate seabird mortalities from longline fisheries, for education and financial support, and for the IUCN Species Survival Commission to collaborate with seabird experts to study the problem.

Only Japan and Panama opposed the resolution. The main objections from these countries were that the resolution was scientifically unsupportable, that Japan was already doing as much as it could to protect seabirds, and that the resolution should be broadened to include other types of fisheries impacts, other bycatch, and other factors implicated in seabird declines.

Japan's late decision to oppose was especially disappointing since it came after earlier signs of agreement. Nevertheless, environmental bodies should use the momentum of the IUCN resolution to help bring Japan back into serious negotiations.

The profile of the issue has received a big boost from the resolution's success, which hopefully will lead to stronger political decisions in the future. While not binding on signatories, the IUCN resolution has been endorsed by a prestigious international body which should prove persuasive to governments and regional fisheries institutions that do have statutory authority. It is also noteworthy that some fishing nations, such as Norway and Iceland, agreed to help rather than fight the resolution.

Euan Dunn

## MORE ON CARCASS STORES

At last it is out, storing stiffs is in, well Martin you are not alone. I have just received a small grant from English Nature towards establishing a store of frozen tagged seabird corpses in the Southwest. Local organisations such as the RSPCA and the Southwest Oiled Seabird Group have been asked to save birds that die before treatment. I have gone for a rather more detailed tag from Dalton Supplies, these comprise a flexible coloured tag approximately 80 x 40 mm with a contact address and telephone number on one side and a number on the other. The tags will be attached to the wing with a self locking electrical tie. Whilst these are more expensive than plain numbered tags (£0.24 each), they do allow for discovery by members of the public who may be unaware of a drift experiment or incident. These corpses are being collected either for use in some future incident anywhere in the country, or for a drift experiment in Lyme Bay in winter 1997/98.

During the *Sea Empress* incident we released 238 tagged corpses at sea off the south Pembrokeshire coast, whilst none of them were subsequently recovered in Wales (and were therefore of no value in calibrating Welsh beached bird data), 5% were recovered from Southeast Ireland two weeks after

release. This was an important result for many reasons, I even heard from ITOFF that they used the information as proof of the fact that the oil that arrived there was from the *Sea Empress*, thereby avoiding expensive hydrocarbon fingerprinting (they have not offered to split the money saved)! At the time, despite the fact that there were thousands of spare corpses, it proved very difficult to get hold of any for the drift experiment, in the end only half the corpses used resulted from the *Sea Empress*. Tagging heavily oiled birds in a hurry is not something I would wish to repeat (we were reprimanded for doing it on the lawn in front of the Joint Response Centre because it would cause 'bad publicity'! The whole experience convinced me of the importance of having a pre-tagged store of corpses for the next event. If anybody has access to large numbers of freshly dead seabirds, perhaps from gull culls, please let me know and I will try to arrange collection. Alternatively get on your freezer and set up your own store.

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## DO CORMORANTS AND SAWBILLS EAT TOO MANY FRESHWATER FISH?

Russell, I.C., Dare, P.J., Eaton, D.R. and Armstrong, J.D. 1996. ***Assessment of the Problem of Fish-eating Birds in Inland Fisheries in England and Wales.*** Directorate of Fisheries Research, Lowestoft. 130pp. ISBN 0 907545 04 1. £10. Available from CEFAS, Fisheries Laboratory, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR33 0HT, England. Tel. +44 (0) 1502 562244.

This A4 softback book is the report to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from contract MAFF Project VC0104, part of a coordinated research programme funded by MAFF, Department of the Environment, Environment Agency, and Welsh Office. It represents a 'state-of-the-art' review of our understanding (or lack of understanding), in the context of England and Wales, of freshwater fish

distributions, stock assessment techniques, and fish population dynamics, cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, red-breasted merganser *Mergus serrator* and goosander *M. merganser* taxonomy, populations and seasonal distributions, population dynamics, foraging behaviour, diet and daily food intake. The assessment of impacts of these birds on freshwater fish stocks forms a major section of the report, which also includes a 9 page executive summary and 4 pages of conclusions (which consider in particular areas needing further research). There is a detailed and up to date Reference list containing about 500 citations, predominantly to papers in the primary literature published in the 1980s and 1990s, showing the explosion of interest in this subject in recent years.

The report has to deal with many thorny issues, including problems of estimating freshwater fish stock sizes; whether stocking of fish to enhance natural populations is worthwhile (or even acceptable practice); what regulates the stocks and recruitment of freshwater fish and whether or not predation by birds is compensated by density-dependence within the fish population; which (of the many and varied) estimates of daily food intake of piscivorous birds are most reliable; and how satisfactory are the various estimates of predation impacts of cormorants and sawbills on freshwater fish stocks. The appraisal of these difficult issues is very detailed and careful, and seems to me to be well balanced given the highly polarised views often expressed on these issues in the literature. The research programme of which this review forms a part is a response to the conflict between conservation bodies arguing that the issuing of licenses to shoot cormorants and sawbills cannot be justified, and the anglers and freshwater fishery managers arguing that the (rapidly) increasing numbers of these birds (particularly in England and Wales) are having unacceptable impacts on managed inland fish stocks and fisheries.

For anyone interested in these topics I would strongly recommend this report. It would also be useful reading for students of fish biology, aquatic ecology, population dynamics and fisheries biology. It would undoubtedly also be a very useful text for undergraduate tutorial discussions as it raises many controversies.

In addition to this detailed scientific review, a companion volume has been produced aimed at the lay reader wanting all the basic information without the detailed discussion of the pros and cons of the heavy science, but still full of the facts and figures pertinent to the interactions (Russell, I.C., Dare, P.J., Eaton, D.R. and Armstrong, J.D. 1996. ***Assessment of the Problem of Fish-eating Birds in Inland Fisheries in England and Wales - Summary Report.*** Directorate of Fisheries Research, Lowestoft. 48 pp. ISBN 0 907545 05 X. £7.50. Available from CEFAS, Fisheries Laboratory, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR33 0HT, England. Tel. +44 (0) 1502 562244.

This shorter volume includes some very nice colour photographs of birds, fish and typical habitats as well as colour distribution maps and several summary tables and graphs. It still contains a great deal of precise information but will be of interest to the lay person wanting the best review possible but without the depth of discussion. For example, this shorter volume has a list of about 40 key references compared with the 500 or so in the longer account.

The answer? Certainly they do eat a lot of fish, and they are increasingly 'hitting' put and take ponds and other small freshwater fishery sites in England and Wales during winter, but there seems to be little or no evidence that natural stocks of fish in freshwater systems are significantly reduced by piscivorous birds, but this is at least in part because the data on freshwater fish stock dynamics are inadequate for such an assessment.

Bob Furness

## **GREAT NORTHERN DIVERS IN SHETLAND**

Two weeks of calm anticyclonic weather over the Christmas and New Year period in Shetland allowed a good number of counts to be made of diving seabirds, including great northern divers. The quality of telescopes now available means that in good light and sea conditions, these enigmatic birds can be detected at ranges of 3-4 km, and in some areas the numbers counted were similar to, or exceeded, previous highest counts, for instance 53 in the voes between Whiteness and Skeld (55 were recorded here in December 1991) and 55 around Nesting (45 in February 1993). In the former area, a leucistic individual (which at a distance most resembles a ghostly gannet) is back in the same area of Sandsound Voe for the sixteenth successive winter, which suggests that adults of the species may be generally faithful to their wintering sites as well as to their breeding lakes.

The situation is different in Yell Sound, where 131 oiled great northern divers were found on shorelines in early 1979 after the *Esso Bernicia* oil spill (1174 tonnes of Bunker C). Although the whole area cannot be surveyed in one day, repeated counts from both land and sea suggest that there are probably not many more than 30 birds there this winter, 18 years after the incident. The 1979 spill, involving heavy fuel oil and occurring in a sheltered sea area important for wintering birds had, and is likely to have, a much greater immediate and long-term impact than the *Braer* 'disaster' of 1993 (87,000 tonnes of light crude).

The Bluemull Triangle (the area of sea between Unst, Yell and Fetlar) was also surveyed by boat for the first time since October 1994. Here, in good conditions, mid-winter counts of 50-60 great northern divers were normal in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Then, over a period of three winters (1983/84 to 1985/86), numbers declined and since 1986/87 no count on the survey route has exceeded double

figures (only 4 were seen on 4 January 1997). There is no obvious explanation for what seems to be a highly localised change in status, and it may be that these birds are so site faithful. Something happened to the Bluemull birds (or their habitat) elsewhere in their annual range.

A paper is being prepared on the numbers of great northern divers in Shetland, and if anyone has any clues to the mystery of the Bluemull Triangle, I'd be only too keen to hear about it.

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## **CATS, RATS, PEOPLE AND SEABIRDS IN THE AZORES**

Breeding seabirds on remote islands are often free from exposure to mammal predators and so have evolved no anti-predator behaviours to deal with the threats presented by mammals. As a result they are extremely vulnerable to any alien mammal predators, and many islands around the world have lost populations of seabirds as a result of the introduction of rats, cats, pigs, mustelids and other predators. Some seabirds have also been severely affected by human exploitation of chicks or adults for food or for bait.

The Azores archipelago lies about 1500 km west of mainland Portugal, at the junction of European, African and American continental plates, and consists of a group of islands of relatively recent volcanic origin. The Azores has a large human population, subsisting mainly by agriculture and small scale fishing. Many of the islands have had rats, cats, dogs and other mammals introduced. Because the climate is oceanic and warm throughout the year the lush growth of

plants provides ideal conditions for rats, and the black rat, *Rattus rattus*, is abundant and widespread through the archipelago. Very little is known of the seabird populations of the Azores. There are some 16th and 17th century chronicles but these are not easy to interpret as even the names used then are not clearly identifiable. However it is clear that in the early period after initial human settlement seabirds were abundant and were also important as food for the human population. Between 1850 and 1980 several ornithologists visited the Azores and made brief reports on the status of seabirds (including the Bannermans), the most detailed of these being a review by Le Grand who worked in the Azores for several years. However, most of these observations were vague, and quoted numbers of birds were largely based on subjective guesses rather than on census work. In the 1980s, Euan Dunn recognised that the Azores held the largest breeding population of roseate terns in Europe, and stimulated a research programme led by the RSPB on that species, but the status, population sizes and population trends in other seabirds remained unclear. Given the fact that most of the islands were heavily infested with introduced mammal predators and that people clearly still harvest shearwaters despite these having legal protection, an assessment of the status of seabirds and impacts of humans and introduced predators seemed urgent.

In 1989 a student expedition from Glasgow University (on which I was the statutory member of staff) visited several islands in the Azores, assessed the breeding status of seabirds and surveyed the habitats, threats to seabirds and seabird numbers at Vila Franca Islet, one of the more accessible seabird breeding sites. From this developed a series of visits to investigate seabird populations in the Azores, involving a variety of folk from Glasgow, together with Dr Luis Monteiro of the University of Azores in Horta, Jose-Pedro Granadeiro of the Department of Nature Conservation in Lisbon, and Les Batty, then of the University of Algarve.

This has now developed into an EU funded project in the LIFE programme under the direction of Luis Monteiro, aiming to further improve knowledge of Azores seabirds and to take practical steps to improve their conservation.

One attractive aspect of fieldwork on Azores islands is that it is still possible to find birds that you do not expect. In 1993 we came across the first red-billed tropicbird to be found breeding in Europe, in the middle of a yellow-legged gull colony on top of a small islet. A few days later we caught a Fea's petrel on another, nearby islet, which possibly could be one of a very few remaining as a relict population in the Azores, or could be a lost bird from Desertas. If the former, then this could even be an endemic species or subspecies. One islet has a pair of breeding sooty terns, which have been there now for quite a number of years. But our main interest was to determine the status of those species already known or suspected to be breeding in the Azores: Bulwer's petrel, Cory's shearwater, Manx shearwater, little shearwater, Madeiran storm petrel, yellow-legged gull, common tern and roseate tern. Reviews of the status, morphometrics, breeding seasons and general ecology of these species are now published in *Biological Conservation* and *Colonial Waterbirds* (see references below). By 1995 we knew that Bulwer's petrels and Madeiran storm petrels were to be found at two small islets, but breeding had not been confirmed at any other sites in the Azores. The two islets where these birds occurred were free from rats, cats or other mammal predators, unlike most islands in the Azores, and it appeared that the usual story that small petrels could only survive in rat free islands seemed to hold true in the Azores. The Madeiran storm petrels turned out to be particularly interesting because they breed in two discrete groups, one in spring and one in autumn, but time-sharing the same nest sites. From ringing we found that the birds do not interchange between breeding seasons, and that the two groups differ in measurements. They also differ in



plumage, vocalisations and DNA so perhaps really represent two sibling species separated by breeding seasons. Whether the same is true of the Madeiran storm petrels (=band-rumped storm petrel) at other sites around the world is not so clear. In some places there are cool and hot season populations as in the Azores, but the DNA of those populations has yet to be examined, and data on biometrics and vocalisations are limited.

In 1996, teams from Azores and UK visited all of the Azores islands in a search for further breeding sites of storm petrels, and we located several probable colonies. These included sites on Santa Maria and San Jorge, inhabited islands with rats, cats and dogs, which had thus seemed unlikely to be suitable for storm petrels. So perhaps storm petrels can survive and breed on islands with rats present in some circumstances, but these sites need further investigation to confirm that the storm petrels are breeding there, which they do seem to be, and to determine numbers. However, the overall picture is that there are only very small populations of storm petrel and Bulwer's petrel left in the Azores, and that rat control would be the best approach to try to conserve these. Already a programme of rat control has apparently eradicated rats from the islet at Vila Franca, and for the first time storm petrels were seen prospecting there in 1996.

Cory's shearwaters breed throughout the archipelago and clearly can coexist with the black rats. Black rats are largely vegetarian in diet, but studies at Mediterranean sites showed that *Rattus rattus* can have a measurable effect on Cory's shearwater breeding success, though there are sites there where the two species have apparently coexisted for centuries (Thibault 1995). In the Azores one of the largest colonies of Cory's shearwater is on Corvo, the smallest and most remote inhabited island in the archipelago (also the westernmost and so an outstanding site for American vagrants!). This island has an abundance of black rats, and so the islanders have

encouraged the development of a large population of feral and semi-feral cats to help to keep the rat numbers in check, especially in the one small village on the island. Perhaps not surprisingly, there seem to be no storm petrels, Bulwer's petrels or Fea's petrels in Corvo. Most of the common terns nest on an islet in the crater lake inside the volcanic cone of the island, so they have to carry fish over a 1500 ft cliff and then 300 ft down into the crater, an energetic way to avoid the rats and cats! Yellow-legged gulls and a few terns nest on the sea cliffs. Cory's shearwaters, and apparently also small numbers of Manx shearwaters and some little shearwaters also nest on the cliffs, with some Cory's shearwaters also among the boulders along the cliff base, so that their nests can be accessed from the village along the cliff base. While investigating this area at night we regularly saw the bright reflections of cats' eyes among the boulder colony of Cory's shearwaters, and guessed that these cats must be taking chicks, if not adults as well. However, the next season we marked a sample of nearly 100 burrows with small downy chicks that had just grown large enough to be left unattended by the adults, and monitored their survival and growth over 10 days. Not a single chick disappeared, so it seems that at least in that year neither the rats nor the cats had any impact on Cory's chick survival.

In June-July 1996 a survey of the numbers of Cory's shearwaters was carried out throughout the archipelago by counting numbers in rafts towards dusk. Two zoology students from Glasgow carried out Honours research projects in association with the census, one looking at count accuracy and the other at correlates with coastal habitat. The raft census seems to have worked well and is really the only viable approach in the Azores since most Cory's nest in cliffs that are as spectacular as they are inaccessible. The numbers of occupied burrows have been counted at a few accessible colonies and provide a conversion factor between raft totals and

burrow totals, but the census has also permitted an analysis of the distribution of Cory's shearwaters in relation to habitat and other factors. That indicates that Cory's shearwater density is higher along stretches of coast with higher cliffs and cliff composed of softer rock, but tends to be low where there are fajas (flat beaches at the coast below inland cliffs), or where there are no cliffs. However, numbers on small islets are often surprisingly few, which seems to be most likely an effect of human exploitation. Several times over the last few years we have seen people harvesting chicks or adults, for food or for bait for fishing, and this seems to have reduced numbers on the more accessible islets considerably. Thus the population of Cory's in the Azores is large, but most are on inaccessible cliffs. Not very convenient for a seabird ecologists!

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## SOUTH AFRICAN OIL SPILL

Seven hundred tonnes of fuel oil leaked out of a Panamanian cargo ship that sank off the east coast of South Africa in early November. The two main penguin islands in this area (Bird and St. Croix) hold 89,000 birds. These populations are already suffering from declining fish stocks and previous oil spills. Two hundred live oiled birds had been bought by December.

## LES OISEAUX DE LA MER DE LA MANCHE

The programme for this symposium on Channel birds to be held on 5 & 6 April 1997 in Caen, France reveals a schedule of 26 talks covering all aspects of the Channel's birds. Sessions cover studies of seabirds at sea, counts of colonies, shorebirds and conservation. The Annual General Meeting of GISOM will occur at the symposium. To register, send your name and address to GONm/Colloque oiseaux marins, Université, F14032 Caen cedex, France. Meals cost FF 90.00 each, participants will have to arrange their own accommodation.

## 24<sup>th</sup> PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP ANNUAL MEETING, PORTLAND, OREGON, 8-12 JANUARY 1997

In 1975 the Pacific Seabird Group helped organise a particularly interesting and well-attended seabird meeting in Seattle, and it remains possibly the most active of the Seabird Groups, so it was interesting to see how it is getting on. This annual conference, devoted to nearshore ecosystems, was mainly composed of a new generation of people with only a few old soaks like me. It was organised by local members in a comfortable hotel near central Portland overlooking a lawn running down to the Willamette River. The river was frequented by a selection of local waterbirds, with the rest available on Sauvie Island State Area where it joins the Columbia downstream. The meeting

included some seventy spoken contributions, usually taken two abreast, forty poster papers, one or more meetings, at least seven open committee meetings (quite a change), a general discussion, at least five local excursions, three parties and a banquet, after which one ended up a trifle tired and confused.

The contributions were generally both interesting and of high quality. The species which attracted most attention were the guillemots *Cephus* spp. (10 spoken papers), marbled murrelet, first found breeding quite recently, but now appointed (with the spotted owl) inland Patron Saint of native forests (8) and Xantus murrelet (5). The subjects attracting most attention were habitat and distribution (10), foraging (9), breeding (7) and associated physiology (4), pollution (5) and conservation (4), with 11 more contributions on the marbled murrelet and others on a wider variety of other subjects among the posters. The most important contributions were possibly reports of losses of North Pacific albatrosses through long-lining, of threats to the Californian endemic Xantus murrelet from mice and ashy storm-petrel from gulls, of reduction of seabird bycatches in nets using visual and acoustic markers, of successful attempts to persuade translocated puffins to return to Maine and Californian murres to return to former colonies through the use of dummies, mirrors and broadcast calls, and of evidence for little auks breeding on St Lawrence Island, Alaska; abstracts will appear in due course in *Pacific Seabirds*.

There was also an interesting revelation by George Divoky at the banquet that examination of pictures of Michaelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel since they were cleaned by the Japanese, obtained via the internet, has revealed that the Superior Figure is actually handing out a grant to a sycophantic inferior perched by foliage containing a marbled murrelet surrounded by predators. There was brisk bidding at the subsequent auction by people anxious

to learn more from a closer scrutiny of these pictures.

Bill Bourne

## **NEW NEWSLETTER**

Wetlands International now issues a newsletter called "Wetlands"(!). The second issue came out in October, and while having little in this issue on seabirds might be of interest to readers of this Newsletter. Subscription information can be obtained from Natural History Book Service, 2-3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5XN. Readers might also be interested to know that Wetlands International have migrated from Slimbridge, their home for many years, to The Netherlands. Their new address is: Wetlands International, 11 Marijkeweg, PO Box 7002, 6700 AC Wageningen, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 317 474711, Fax: +31 317 474712.

## **FROM WWF ARCTIC BULLETIN No 4.96**

This bulletin brings details of the new intergovernmental Arctic Council. Opinion seems divided as to whether this will improve the political framework for arctic decisions. In seabird terms, a test of its effectiveness will be as to whether the necessary protection and sustainable harvesting of seabirds can be bought about. There seems to be little evidence that sustainable harvest policies are being implemented or enforced in Greenland where numbers of Brunnich's guillemots have fallen by half in less than 50 years. The primary reason seems to be overharvesting in the early spring, when hunters find it easy to kill many birds as they gather in relatively tight groups. The reduction in numbers has been greatest at colonies near settlements, so these areas are probably those that need the greatest reduction in hunting.

## **FROM CIRCUMPOLAR SEABIRD BULLETIN, No. 2**

This is a well-produced, but not frequent publication on arctic seabirds. This issue includes a review papers on the interaction of fisheries and seabirds in the circumpolar region (arctic and near-arctic) and of high priority needs for the conservation of arctic birds. Progress reports on various seabird conservation projects in the arctic include a useful review of human disturbance at colonies; the murre conservation strategy; the circumpolar seabird colony database and the eider conservation strategy. Projects on seabirds underway in Finland, arctic Canada, Greenland, Russia/Norway and Alaska are all neatly reviewed with one paragraph on each project and contact information for further details. Various meeting reports complete this most useful summary of arctic seabird work.

## **FROM PACIFIC SEABIRDS Vol 23, no 2.**

A three page review article on by-catch of seabirds in long-lines neatly encapsulates the state of knowledge on this topic. Possible conservation measures are listed, including use of streamer lines, night setting of lines, weighting the lines further, setting underwater, thawing the bait (frozen bait tends to float), reduction in discarding/offal disposal (reduces number of birds following the vessel), and fishing away from seabird feeding grounds. These measures need to be tailored to local circumstance, and most need to be used in combination.

The article on problems with long-line fisheries off the Galapagos that first appeared in SGN 74 appears again here, as well news that about 3000 albatrosses per year are being killed in fisheries by 120 boats off Hawaii. The latter information was ferreted out of the National Marine Fisheries Service by PSG using Freedom of Information Act powers. PSG has also been lobbying for better management of the Antarctic fisheries to

ensure that they are managed so as to safeguard the albatross population also. PSG has also challenged the Fish and Wildlife Service's legal opinion that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act only applies within the 12- mile territorial waters of the USA. PSG's opinion is that it should be applied throughout the 200 mile EEZ. This view is now apparently agreed with by the Official Solicitor, so changes may hopefully be expected shortly to ensure that intentional destruction of seabirds by US fishermen in the Bering Sea.

Other reports cover the activities of PSG's standing committees on Seabird Conservation, Japanese Seabird Conservation, Seabird Monitoring and Marbled Murrelet Conservation. PSG has also established a web site at <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/BIRDNET/PacBirds/>

Regional reports from six of PSG's regions cover the following 15 pages. An excellent way of keeping members in touch with the activities of others. Book reviews and the Treasurers report completes the volume.

## **FROM SULA Vol 10, No.s 4, 5 & 6**

These are a varied three issues of Sula. Number 4 is a regular edition, while no. 5 is a special issue on little auks. Issue 6 is an impressively comprehensive index to the first ten years of Sula (and is worth obtaining on its own even if you do not have every issue).

Issue 4 starts with a paper on nocturnal migration of waders and other birds off Ijmuiden in spring. This study used radar, and found that terns did not move by night, while gulls that bred locally continued to roam around all night. A short paper describes jellyfish and fishery waste as foods for fulmars on St Kilda (in 1982!). Short notes include a description of yellow-legged herring gulls nesting at Ijmuiden, the problem of the removal of tern rings (and subsequent release of the bird) on wintering grounds in Africa, the non-fish diet of some Sandwich terns and

finally an excellent note from Bill Bourne exploring the contribution of seabirds to the diets of the British in the past, and what might therefore be inferred as to breeding distribution.

The special issue on little auks starts with a review of little auk invasions (to both the north-east and north-west Atlantic since 1840 (the earliest recorded). These, of course, are usually as recorded from land; but this is compensated for with a description of at sea distribution as well. There still seems to be a need to determine the distribution off eastern Norway in winter. The major known wintering area in the North Sea is the outer Skagerrak and western rim of the Norwegian Trench. Influxes into the waters of Germany, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, the northwest Atlantic and the east coast of Britain are reviewed in subsequent papers, with an emphasis on the wrecks of late 1985. A paper on ringing recoveries from Svalbard, where a total of over 11,000 birds have been ringed revealed that only 19 had been recovered so far! These at least showed that part of the population spends the winter off southwest Greenland. Short notes cover an observation of a feeding little auk off Texel, little auks beached in the Netherlands between 1969-96, notes from off southern Scandinavia, and a record of a peregrine eating a little auk. An issue worth obtaining if you wish to learn about little auk occurrence in winter.

## **EFFECTS OF OIL ON WILDLIFE**

The fifth international conference on the Effects of Oil on Wildlife will be held on 3-6 November 1997 at the Double Tree Inn, Monterey, California. The deadline for paper suggestions is 1 July 1997 and both oral and poster papers on the following topics are invited:

1. Spill response and contingency planning,

2. Moving from natural resource damage assessment to joint injury determination,
3. Restoration plans and projects,
4. Habitat, species risk and protection,
5. Wildlife response management,
6. Research on wildlife rehabilitation,
7. Evolving technology for oil spill response,
8. Rehabilitation,
9. Oil spill case histories.

The conference is being hosted by the Oiled Wildlife Care Network, the University of California (Davis) School of Veterinary Medicine, the International Bird Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, and the California Department of Fish and Game Office of Oil Spill Prevention and Response. Further information and paper submission forms may be got from Nancy Ottum (Tel: +1 916 752 3809, fax: +1 916 752 3318, email: ndottum@ucdavis.edu).

The conference is designed for industry personnel, government employees, academic researchers, veterinarians, contingency planners and wildlife rehabilitators. It will emphasise interagency and industry co-operation and proficiencies, short-term impacts, long-term impacts and bioaccumulation, advances in biomedical science, wildlife rehabilitation techniques, and wildlife habitat restoration. The conference itself will be preceded by workshops on 3 November and field trips are an added attraction. The multi-disciplinary nature of these conferences makes them extremely useful to anybody involved in planning for or responding to oil spills, and for people unfamiliar with northwest Pacific seabirds, the choice of venue is a considerable added attraction.

## **SEABIRD GROUP GRANTS - NOTICE FOR 1998**

This year has seen a welcome increase in the number of requests for grant aid from the Seabird Group. The down side of this has been that I and the rest of the Executive Committee have had to deal

with requests one by one on an *ad hoc* basis, and we have not been able to call a meeting to discuss them *en masse*. Anticipating the same level of interest next year, I would like to give you all advance notice that grant requests for 1998 will be considered at a meeting of the Committee early in 1998 and therefore you should try to get any grant requests to me before Christmas 1997. This does not mean that any requests submitted later will necessarily be unsuccessful, but note that money will be distributed on a first come - first served basis and we only have less than £1000 available most years.

Grants are available for activities such as surveys of seabird colonies, research into threats to seabirds or novel methods of countering such threats. Work outside of the UK is OK. Although in the past we have granted money to surveys or ringing studies that have been ongoing over many years these kind of requests must take a lower priority, unless there are particular extenuating circumstances such as a gap in funding or a need to replace capital equipment, such as a boat. Given the overall ceiling on the amount of funding available we are unlikely to offer any single project more than a few hundred pounds. You do have to be a paid-up member of the Seabird Group.

Now is the chance to get on your thinking caps and dream up that trip to the exotic island of your dreams or to work out what is hammering your favourite local colony. I will welcome any enquiries at any time.

John Uttley

## **E-MAIL -REPOST**

As announced in the last issue, the executive committee thinks that savings could be made by distributing the Newsletter electronically, particularly to non-UK addresses. We would also like to include email addresses in our membership address list. The uptake on this offer has not been overwhelming, but if you would like to receive the Newsletter by email, please email Bob Furness and myself on [r.furness@bio.gla.ac.uk](mailto:r.furness@bio.gla.ac.uk) and [mltasker@aol.com](mailto:mltasker@aol.com)

Mark L Tasker