the Seabird Group

NEWSLETTER 88

June 2001

THE *TREASURE* PENGUINS: PRELIMINARY RESULTS AFTER FIVE MONTHS OF MONITORING

The sinking of the *Treasure* on 23 June 2000 had a larger impact on African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* than any earlier oil spill incident (Crawford *et al*. 2000). The *Treasure* was a 140,000-tonne bulk-ore carrier, transporting a capacity load of iron-ore from Brazil to China. It sank strategically between Robben Island and Dassen Island, north of Cape Town. Nest counts had been completed just a few weeks earlier and shown that these two islands supported the largest and third largest breeding colonies of African Penguins in 2000. The two islands then held approximately 40% of the total population of this "Vulnerable" species.

In round terms, 19,000 penguins were oiled, and taken to the cleaning stations of the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). The permanent SANCCOB facility can cope with a maximum of about 3,000 penguins, so most of the cleaning took place in a totally incongruous setting, a disused railway shed, about 100 m long by 100 m wide. Penguins occupied this entire area. An impressive 90% of the oiled birds were cleaned and released. Virtually all of these were released with stainless steel flipper bands, so that their post-release survival could be monitored.

Close on 20,000 penguins were prevented from getting oiled, by removing them from Robben and Dassen Islands, trucking them to Port Elizabeth, and letting them swim the 800 km back to their islands. The concept of removing birds in a spill was not in any oil spill contingency plan. The combination of circumstances giving the opportunity to prevent oiling by evacuating birds had not arisen before. This was largely because the response to the spill on Robben Island was immediate, and teams of rescuers were on the island before penguins on their nests and loafing within the colony could leave for sea and get oiled.

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The scenario on Dassen Island was also unusual in that the spill drifted slowly towards it, taking a week to surround this colony so that there was time to prevent birds from becoming oiled. Port Elizabeth was selected as the release point for several reasons: it was within the breeding range of the species; it was far enough away that we were certain, from previous observations, that the penguins would take at least 10-14 days to return; there was institutional support there to handle the release operation. About 5,000 of the relocated birds were flipper banded.

Intensive monitoring has been in place since the first birds were released. Preliminary results are available for the colony on Dassen Island. 3,674 resightings of flipper-banded penguins were made over the period 12 July to 10 December 2000. This represents a major investment of time and effort. To avoid unnecessary disturbance within penguin colonies, the band numbers, which are 6-7 mm tall, are usually read by telescope.

Of 13,500 birds evacuated from Dassen Island to Port Elizabeth during the three-day evacuation operation on 2-4 July, 1,130 had flipper-bands. 478 (42%) of these banded birds had been resighted on Dassen Island by December and 205 had been recorded breeding since their return to the island. One bird, released in Port Elizabeth on 4 July, was resighted on House Bay beach, Dassen Island on 14 July. This fastest bird, 'S22061', was a graduate of SANCCOB, having been cleaned after the *Apollo Sea* oil spill, six years earlier, in June 1994. Two birds, released at Cape Recife on 3 July, were also resighted on 14 July. Nine birds released on 4 July, and one bird released on 5 July, were resighted on 16 July. The weights of returning birds were above average, indicating that they had been feeding on their return trips.

Of 2,744 oiled adults removed from Dassen Island for cleaning, 644 (24%) had been resighted by December and 17 cleaned birds had been recorded breeding. 142 have been recorded during moult. Of 772 oiled juveniles removed for cleaning, 191 (25%) have been resighted and 76 have been recorded during moult. These results have to be seen in the context of a population of about 55,000 penguins on this island – it takes years for researchers to cross paths with all birds. Several factors would

contribute to the lower proportion of cleaned birds relative to evacuated birds. Most cleaned birds were released from mid-August to mid-September, so they would have had less time to be seen than the evacuated birds, most of which would have returned by the end of July. Many evacuated birds returned early enough to initiate a breeding attempt, and therefore were present on the island for considerable periods of time. In contrast, cleaned birds mostly arrived too late to breed, and would have gone to sea; they would only have been present on the island for relatively short periods.

In brief, these first results parallel the results obtained after the *Apollo Sea* spill in 1994 (Underhill *et al*. 1999, 2000). It is clear that, once again, the overwhelming majority of cleaned birds have successfully made the return to the wild.

It is planned to continue the monitoring operation for years, or even decades. In part, we will compare results obtained after this spill with the 1994 results, and we also plan to do additional research. For example, we plan to measure more precisely the rate at which cleaned birds rejoin the breeding population. But the overall message is clear and simple; cleaning oiled penguins does make an important contribution to the conservation status of the African Penguin.

Results of the monitoring will be updated regularly on the Avian Demography Unit's website: www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu. The monitoring is a joint project of Western Cape

Nature Conservation Board, Marine and Coastal Management, and the Avian Demography Unit, and is supported by WWF-SA, the Royal Dutch Embassy, SAP Southern Africa and Schuurman Engineering. Many individuals have contributed observations to the monitoring programme.

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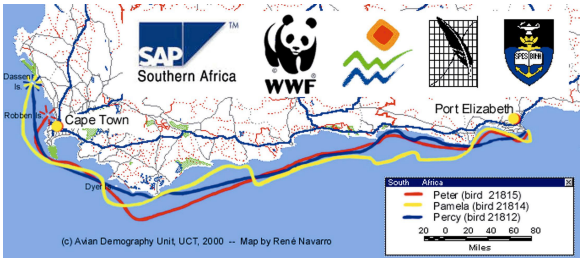
Have a look at the website for the fantastic journeys of the satellite-tagged penguins, as shown on the map below.



THE SPREAD OF THE BLACK GUILLEMOT IN NORTH WALES IN 2000

The Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle* or Tystie breeds almost exclusively amongst rocky boulders and cracks in crags. In Britain and Ireland it breeds from the north of Scotland, including Orkney and Shetland, down the west coast to England (where it breeds only in Cumbria), on the Isle of Man, and the coasts of Eire (see also the article on page 9). There is a small outlying population on Anglesey in North Wales.

In North Wales, the small population on the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Mon) was known from as early as 1780, though by 1894 none was left and the island was reported as 'deserted'. There were then sporadic records through to the 1950s, when birds were believed to have returned to Anglesey to breed. The first recent confirmed breeding came in 1962, when a bird was found incubating. Since then, Tysties have nested around the Anglesey coastline in 20 years at about four or five favoured sites, with up to 12 pairs present.

East of Anglesey, on the Great Orme and Little Orme, Tysties once nested but none has done so in recent times, although birds were said to have been present throughout the summer of 2000 on the eastern end of the Little Orme. However, to the south of Anglesey on the southern side of the Llŷn Peninsula lie the St Tudwal's Islands. Here, in 1954-57, Tysties were known to have nested, and they were strongly suspected again in the 1980s though were never proven to breed then.

There have been no recorded attempts, either modern or historically, of Tysties nesting on Ynysoedd Gwylan, two small islands in Aberdaron Bay on the southern tip of the Llŷn. It was therefore a great surprise to find the familiar distinctive odour of Tysties exuding from a burrow amongst a colony of 1,500 Puffins. Firstly, I thought my nostrils were trying to play tricks on me, though the small pile of reddish droppings at the front of one of the holes left me in no doubt that there were Tysties about. During the two previous visits to the island earlier in the spring, there had been no sign of the birds, though on this occasion the

parent birds both did a circle of the area before landing on the sea, both carrying Butterfish! The nest hole was probed with a leg hook and two rather large, fluffy black chicks were found. This is the first proven breeding attempt for Tystie this far south in Wales.

I would like to thank Peter Hope Jones for abstracting the information for use in this short note.

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SABINE'S GULLS IN THE EASTERN CANADIAN ARCTIC

Since its discovery to science in 1818, the Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) has been rarely studied and little more than anecdotal reports exist regarding the general ecology of this species. As an Arctic breeder and a trans-equatorial migrant, its breeding areas are rarely visited and its wintering areas have been documented only in relatively recent years. It is considered unusual within the *Laridae* and is recognised as phylogenetically distinct, as well as atypical in several aspects of behaviour and breeding biology. It is precisely these characteristics that make the Sabine's Gull an interesting subject for ecological and behavioural study.

An investigation of the reproductive ecology of Sabine's Gulls has been ongoing for three breeding seasons (1998-2000), carried out in the East Bay Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Southampton Island, Nunavut, in the eastern Canadian Arctic (64°01'N, 81°47'W). Despite its location within the Low Arctic region, East Bay is High Arctic in character, influenced in its ecological and physical characteristics by the deep, cold waters of the Foxe Channel. Land-fast sea ice remains in the bay well into July and daily minimum temperatures are close to freezing throughout the summer. The research camp lies on a raised gravel ridge, perpendicular to and approximately 2 km south of the southern shore of the bay. The study area, immediately north of the camp, is a block of low-lying, boggy tundra, with a complex of brackish and freshwater ponds, typical of the area.

Sabine's Gull foraging in a meltwater pool (Photo by Iain Stenhouse)

In 1998, while on contract with the Canadian Wildlife Service, I found that adult Sabine's Gulls can be caught at the nest using a simple wire mesh 'drop-box' trap. Chicks are also relatively easily caught at the nest, although this must be carefully timed because there is only a short window of opportunity (~48 hrs) before the entire family leaves the nest area. Throughout this study, adults have been ringed with individual colour combinations, while chicks have been ringed with a single colour (indicating year of hatching). All Sabine's Gulls observed within the study area, and further afield in East Bay, are checked for rings. It is rare, however, to even glimpse rings of airborne birds, and confirmation usually requires birds to land.

Since 1998, a total of 37 adults and 85 chicks have been ringed at East Bay. Of the adults banded in 1998 and in 1999, approximately 81% returned in the following year. In the second year, however, only 55% of adults banded in 1998 returned to the study area. Sabine's Gulls are assumed to first breed at two years of age, as they acquire mature plumage in their second spring moult. Two birds (6%) ringed as chicks in 1998 returned to the study area in 2000, although neither paired-up successfully.

In terms of phenology, 1998 was an early year, with the onset of snow-melt and the initiation of breeding 10-14 days earlier than other years. This suggests that the general timing of breeding in Sabine's Gulls is highly dependent on environmental conditions, particularly (but not surprisingly) the extent of snow cover. In 1998, mean clutch size was higher, perhaps due to the shortened period between their arrival and the exposure of tundra.

The author in his study area in June, on the look-out for early arrivals.

Sabine's Gulls showed a similar density of nests within the study area and a similar total number of eggs laid in all three years of this study, but they differ, however, in overall reproductive output. Due to increased egg-loss to predators in 1999, the number of chicks hatched per clutch was approximately one third of that found in 1998 or 2000. The extraordinary level of predation in 1999 was the direct result of increased Arctic fox activity in the study area, adding to a growing body of evidence that links the reproductive success of Arctic-breeding, ground-nesting birds to the microtine rodent cycle. Sabine's Gulls exhibit intense anti-predator behaviour, such as calling, chasing, mobbing and distraction displays. Their distraction display is particularly notable, more characteristic of a shorebird than a gull, suggesting that they have evolved in an environment where predation pressures are intense.

In 2000, I initiated investigation of factors influencing reproductive success of pairs of Sabine's Gulls nesting sympatrically. In particular, I focused on the importance of behavioural synchrony within pairs, and nest attendance. In 2001, I intend to expand this work, and will also examine anti-predator behaviour experimentally. My aim is to examine why some pairs are highly successful, even in years of high predation, while others do poorly.

I'd like to thank the Seabird Group for their support in 2000, and for continued interest in this research.

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AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF ALBATROSSES AND PETRELS

On 2 February 2001, a press release announced a new international agreement to protect threatened seabirds throughout the world. A meeting to discuss the new international treaty, the 'Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP)' was held in Cape Town, South Africa from 27 January to 2 February 2001, hosted by the South African Government. It involved government representatives from albatross and petrel range states and nations with fishing fleets that interact with these highly threatened seabirds.

Albatrosses have the highest proportion of threatened species of any bird family, and 26 species of albatross and petrel may soon become extinct unless firm steps are taken to reverse the destructive effects of threats such as uncontrolled long-line fishing, pollution, habitat degradation, human disturbance of breeding sites, and introduced diseases and predators. Of the 24 species of albatross, 21 species have declining populations, or have populations of

unknown status. Around 50% of albatross populations contain fewer than 100 breeding pairs, making them extremely susceptible to random events or even low levels of mortality.

All the species of albatross, and 7 species of petrel from the Southern Hemisphere, were listed on the Appendices of the Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species in recognition that urgent international cooperation was needed to improve their threatened conservation status. Following the listings, governments (led by Australia and others in the Valdivia Group of Southern Hemisphere Countries for the Environment) embarked on discussions to develop the new Agreement. The Cape Town meeting followed an earlier negotiation meeting held in Australia in 2000.

The new Agreement includes an Action Plan and describes a number of conservation measures to be implemented by signatories. These include research and monitoring, reduction of incidental mortality in fisheries, eradication of non-native species at breeding sites (especially introduced predators such as rats and cats), and the reduction of disturbance, habitat loss and polluting activities.

The South African Minister for Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Mr Mohammed Valli Moosa, informed the meeting that albatrosses and petrels breeding on the Prince Edward Islands are now threatened by the effects of pirate longline fishing, and recent studies by South African researchers show alarming trends in their populations. It is hoped that the Agreement will help to eradicate pirate fishing. The Minister also indicated that South Africa is in the process of nominating the Prince Edward Islands for World Heritage listing for their outstanding conservation value. Dr Denzil Miller, the Head of the South African Delegation to the negotiations, reiterated that South Africa carries, along with the other participating countries, a unique responsibility for ensuring the ongoing survival of some of the most threatened albatross and petrel species that breed in areas under its control and visit the waters where its vessels fish. BirdLife International was pleased with the outcome of the negotiations and called for countries to begin implementing the terms of the Agreement immediately, without waiting for the formality of entry.

The Agreement meeting in Cape Town was sponsored by the governments of South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Additional support came from the African Seabird Group, the World Wide Fund for Nature (South Africa) and the University of Cape Town. Countries attending the meeting came from both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, including several from South America.

I am grateful to John Cooper, Head of the Secretariat, for allowing me to adapt their press release for the *Newsletter*. He can be contacted for further information at:-
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Chris Wernham

BRAZILIAN OIL SPILL

On 20 March 2001, two large (8 km x 2 km) oil slicks were reported off the Brazilian coast. They were thought to have originated from the 40-storey Petrobas-36 oil rig that sank 120 km north-east of Rio, reportedly with 9,500 barrels of oil aboard.

BirdLife International have expressed particular concern for populations of two species in the area, the critically endangered Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata* and the near-threatened Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thelassarche chlororhynchos*. Both species are present in large numbers in the waters off Brazil at this time of year. The Spectacled Petrel is critically endangered because it breeds only on one tiny island (Inaccessible Island, Tristan de Cuhna) and breeding numbers are thought to be declining due to mortality in long-line fisheries. Around 700 birds may be killed each year by these fisheries, from a population of only 2,500 – 10,000 individuals. There is little information on population trends for most populations of Yellow-nosed Albatross but, once again, mortality due to long-line fishing is thought to be high. This is one of the commonest species to follow long-line fishing boats and mortality off south-eastern Brazil is estimated as at least 900 individuals per year. Clearly, further

mortality of individuals of these species as a result of the oil spill could be significant.

Other, more abundant species that pass through Brazilian waters in the spring may also be affected by this spill, including Manx *Puffinus puffinus*, Cory's *Calonectris diomedea* and Great *Puffinus gravis* Shearwaters.

Further information from:-
www.wing.wbsj.or.jp/birdlife/brazil

Chris Wernham

BOOK REVIEW
OMAN BIRD LIST

The Official List of the Birds of the Sultanate of Oman, Edition 5. (2000) Compiled by Jens Eriksen and Dave E. Sargeant.

Available from: Oman Bird Records Committee, P.O. Box 246, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman.

Oman used to be a quiet corner of Arabia difficult of access via a mysterious process requiring the acquisition of a 'No Objection Certificate' from the authorities. Its avifauna was poorly known, except through the seminal work of Gallagher & Woodcock (published 1980), but nowadays the bird photography of Jens and Hanne Eriksen has put the country fair and squarely on the ornithological map. The country has now opened up considerably and birding in the 'Gulf' is very much on the increase.

I have followed this publication through its earlier editions and it has certainly matured into its present form where it can be considered as a book for review. Although the 168-page book is a list, it is no ordinary list like its predecessors. In this one, most species have histograms showing the monthly phenology of records and, for breeding species, a distribution map with half-degree squares as the recording unit. The short text accounts give details of status, habitat and good sites to see concentrations. Co-ordinates for all place names are given in a comprehensive gazetteer and thus this book could be used in lieu of a 'where to watch' guide on a general birding trip, as long as you take a GPS. Turning to breeding seabirds, although the maps give a good impression of where colonies are, more exact information on colony size and specific location cannot be deduced given the half degree square scale (approximately 50 x 50 km) and three sizes of dot corresponding to possible, probable and confirmed breeding. However, it is unlikely that many Seabird Group members would travel to Oman just to see breeding seabirds; most are on islands that are fairly difficult to get to ..... and it is very hot in the summer! For those dedicated (mad?) enough to try, the breeding specialities include Persian Shearwater, Red-billed Tropicbird, Masked Booby, Socotra Cormorant, Sooty Gull and a diverse bunch of terns (viz Swift, Lesser Crested, Roseate, White-cheeked, Bridled, Sooty, Saunder's and Common Noddy). One has to mention the enigmatic Jouanin's Petrel here: until very recently, as breeding has just been confirmed on Socotra, the only clue to the breeding site(s) of the species, where some puzzling records of (usually dead) adults and juveniles in the interior desert of the southern half of the country. Despite this, Eriksen & Sargeant still consider nesting may yet be proved on Oman's islands or coastal hills.

A non-breeding autumn trip to mainland vantage points may at first glance seem a poorer choice but, as the authors of this book confirm in their section on future work, could yield new discoveries for the country. Sea-watching could give you Pale-footed, Wedge-tailed and Persian Shearwaters, other petrels and Brown Booby. Several of the interesting terns (Swift, Lesser Crested) can still be found on a mid-winter visit, along with Caspian, Sandwich, Whiskered and White-winged Black. Slender-billed and Great Black-headed Gulls are common in winter and, once you have sorted them out, then there is that problem group of large white-headed gulls to get to grips with (*Larus fuscus* / *cachinnans* / *heuglini* / *taimyrensis* / *barabensis*). Whatever, you will not be bored in this country. Make sure you take this book with you alongside your choice of the more classic identification guides.

Verdict: thoroughly recommended.

Steve Newton

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BOB CHESTNEY

Bob Chestney, who spent nearly half his life as warden of Scolt Head nature reserve on the north Norfolk coast, died at the age of 75 at his home in Brancaster Staithe on 31 March after a long illness. He carried on a family tradition by taking over the post of warden from his father Charles in 1950, and then cared for the tern colony at Scolt Head until his retirement in 1986. In 1975, he was awarded the MBE for his service to conservation. Bob is survived by his wife Phyllis (his indispensable back-up team at Scolt!) and three daughters.

In his years as warden, Bob turned Scolt into one of Europe's foremost tern colonies, renowned for its healthy population of Sandwich terns. He spanned an era in which reserve wardens did not just 'implement' management plans. Rather, they had to invent them from the bottom up by first unravelling uncharted natural history, and in this Bob Chestney was an outstanding pioneer. In his autobiography, *Island of Terns: warden of Scolt Head* (1993, Quiller Press), Bob communicates his experiences with the recall, mischievous sense of humour and infectious enthusiasm that delighted the legions of visitors he hosted at Scolt Head. In an interview in 1991, he said "You have to keep both birds and humans happy – if they go away happy, both will return next year."

Bob drew on his first calling as a wildfowler and gamekeeper to enhance the Scolt experience. He was a master at mimicking wader calls to attract them in, and he would often bring curlew, redshank and godwit circling just overhead, to the delight of visitors. Once, when we found a pheasant's nest, he predicted to me with great accuracy (as a subsequent visit proved) when the eggs would hatch; he did this by picking up an egg and touching each end to his lips. The temperature difference between the two told him how much the air sac at one end had reduced with the growth of the embryo, and thus how near the egg was to hatching.

But party tricks apart, Bob was passionate about tern conservation and justifiably proud of his beloved tern colony, at one stage the largest in Europe. Here he had a healthy rivalry with the late Ted Eales at the Blakeney Point colony further down the coast. There were several reasons for the success of Bob's colony. He was critically aware of the impact of disturbance on nesting success. With his gamekeeping experience, he did not shrink from predator control, and the likes of foxes were never allowed to make inroads for long. But, arguably, his greatest contribution was to devise a system of monitoring Sandwich tern productivity by the least number of visits necessary into the colony. The most dramatic outcome of minimising disturbance in this way was to eliminate creching behaviour of the young (which had hitherto been widely accepted as natural behaviour of the species) such that the bulk of them, instead of dispersing from the nest-site, fledged from it.

Bob Chestney worked things out from first principles, and translating his deeply instinctive understanding of tern behaviour into scientific endorsement was not without its personal frustrations. His book apart, what he knew in his head about terns and their conservation never found a systematic, statistically proven place in the official journals as much as it deserved. But the resounding success of his colony was testimony to his insight. More than that, Bob will simply be remembered for inspiring countless numbers of the public to share his love of terns and the area he worked and lived in.

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SEABIRD 2000 UPDATE

BLACK GUILLEMOT SURVEY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

From an Irish perspective, the two most interesting opportunities opened up by participation in Seabird 2000 were getting to grips with the real population size of Black Guillemots (Tysties) and, likewise, for the nocturnal petrels and shearwaters. Although reliable methods for surveying Tysties were available during the Seabird Colony Register, 1985-1987, these were not strictly adhered to in Ireland. In common with Operation Seafarer, most data for Tystie were gathered whilst censusing cliff-nesters later in the summer rather than the optimal early mornings in April. The deficiencies of earlier surveys were appreciated by a small group of keen seabird workers in Ireland and we actually started a systematic Tystie survey in 1998, one year ahead of the commencement of Seabird 2000. Now, after three springs (April - early May) of fieldwork, we have covered around 80-90% of the Republic's coast. With very few exceptions this has been done on foot, in the early hours of the morning, by a dedicated bunch of BirdWatch Ireland staff and volunteers, and National Parks and Wildlife (Dúchas) conservation rangers and research staff.

What have we discovered? No big surprises regarding geographical distribution; this very much follows the maps given in both the *New Breeding Atlas* and *The Status of Seabirds in Britain and Ireland*. Tysties are present on all Irish coasts, especially the north, west and southwest where 'hard' cliffy coast predominates. They are relatively scarce on the south coast (east Cork, Waterford and Wexford), despite the presence of hard coasts, and they are patchy but locally abundant in the east. Muddy estuaries, sand and shingle beaches are frequent on the latter coast, so the Tysties are more or less confined to the rocky headlands, such as Wicklow, Bray and Howth Heads.

The table opposite gives some preliminary numbers on a county-by-county basis. Asterisks indicate those areas in which significant sections still remain to be done (Foot and Mouth permitting) in 2001.

TABLE - Numbers of Tysties counted in the Republic of Ireland during three springs of fieldwork, 1998-2000.

Donegal*	471
Sligo/Leitrim	101-125
Mayo	389
Galway & Aran Islands	249
Clare	147
Kerry*	273
Cork	563
Waterford	21
Wexford	10-15
Wicklow	208
Dublin	181
Louth	23
Total	**2,636-2,655**

With the counted total standing at around 2,650 (pre-breeding adults), covering the remaining sections of Donegal and Kerry should take the total to over 3,000. What a let down! After all that effort we have only just surpassed the estimate of 2,500 given for the Republic in *The Status of Seabirds*. However, and perhaps more importantly, we now really know where the important 'colonies' are, and we have a much better idea of nesting habitats. The full story will be written up in detail in the near future.

We are very grateful to the Seabird Group for their financial support of the Irish Black Guillemot Survey in 1999 and 2000.

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BirdWatch Ireland.

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JOURNAL REVIEWS & 'BITS' BY MARK TASKER

From *WORLD BIRDWATCH* Vol 23(1)

A new nesting site for one of the world's rarest seabirds, the Chatham Island Taiko, has been found. Prior to the find, only seven active nests were known; the new find takes this number to ten. The New Zealand government is funding a large biodiversity restoration programme for the Chatham Islands.

A cat eradication programme on Macquarie Island has allowed Grey Petrels to return to nest after a long absence.

British troops showed a severe lack of environmental sensitivity when they decided to attempt to remove ordnance from South Jason Island in the Falklands at the height of the breeding season. They started a fire accidentally, which went on to burn 40% of the island and, in some places, smouldered into the peat for more than a month. The island is rat-free and thus home to large colonies of smaller seabirds, such as Fairy Prion, as well as holding important colonies of Black-browed Albatross and Rockhopper Penguin. The albatross and penguin colonies appear to have escaped the worst effects of the fire - possibly due to habitat modifications made by the birds themselves. However, around 90% of the tussock grass used by the smaller seabirds was destroyed. It seems extraordinary that this operation was carried out at the most sensitive time of year.

The persecution of Double-crested Cormorants in the USA continues on the grounds that they have a significant impact on sport fisheries and commercial aquaculture facilities. The former of these charges has not been proven despite numerous studies, and the latter problem can usually be controlled with non-lethal methods.

A pair of Short-tailed Albatrosses has been found incubating an egg on Yome-jima, one of the Ogasawara archipelago, Japan. This is an encouraging sign of natural expansion of this rare species.

The issue has a three-page item on the *Jessica* oil spill in the Galapagos Islands. The captain of the *Jessica* had chosen to enter the rock-studded bay on Isla San Cristobel to tranship oil there, rather than a nearby deeper water bay normally used for this purpose. There are reports that the ship had no proper charts of the area. Some 240,000 gallons of diesel and bunker oils leaked into the sea but, luckily, it appears that wind and weather conditions kept the slick away from the most sensitive areas for seabirds, and most of it evaporated. In the end, only a few pelicans and boobies were found oiled. Needless-to-say, further measures are plainly needed to control shipping in this most sensitive area.

From *SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF MARINE SCIENCE* Vol. 22

This issue contains a 20-page article by 14 authors on the initial impact of the *Treasure* oil spill on seabirds off western South Africa. This is a good description of this oil spill and its aftermath, and contains some remarkable pictures of the massive rescue operation.

As noted in the last issue of Seabird Group Newsletter, such action costs money - some may be recovered from the *Treasure's* insurers but, in the meantime, SANCCOB has launched an appeal to help - if only to keep their facilities available if idle. If you wish to contribute, then their bank account is SANCCOB Treasure Account, First National Bank, Tableview Branch, South Africa. Account number 620 178 439 22, Branch code 20 38 09, or donate via their website: www.sanccob.co.za.

From *BIRDLIFE IN EUROPE*

Those interested in the conservation of Steller's Eider might be interested to join a newly-founded email group by sending an email to majordomo@wwt.org.uk with the words 'subscribe stellers'. Those interested in Pygmy Cormorants might wish to send an email to bdzp_pd@plovdiv.techno-link.com with the words 'subscribe PC list' in the subject line.

From *SEEVÖGEL Vol. 22 (1)*

An article by Maik Marahrens describes breeding Arctic Terns at a colony on the German Baltic coast. The main foods at this colony were Herring, shrimps and polychaete worms. This food was in good supply, but the colony declined, probably due to flooding of the nesting site at the height of the breeding season in successive seasons.

From *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.*
Vol 93 (172-173)

It seems that the relentless expansion of the Fulmar's range has finally reached Denmark. The first pairs bred in 1998 at Bulbjerg in Jutland. Next stop: the Netherlands?

From *SEA SWALLOW* Vol. 49

The annual summary of seabird observations by Bill Bourne has a declining number of contributors but still some observations from relatively unexplored areas. It is noticeable also that contributions from the Royal Navy are particularly low this year. Summary statistics on the birds seen on the England - Spain ferry route are presented. The JNCC Seabirds at Sea Team that has been working in Falkland waters for the past three years contributes an article on uncommon seabirds seen in their first two years of survey. The contrast between these systematic records and those from previous uncoordinated records is not surprising. Shy Albatrosses are regular visitors to these waters, as are Little Shearwaters. Antarctic Petrels are distinctly sporadic in their occurrence. Birds breeding on the Tristan da Cuhna group use the waters north-east of the Falklands in the austral summer.

From *GISOM INFOS* - March 2001

This issue summarises the recent fourth complete census of French seabirds. With a few exceptions, breeding numbers appear to be stable or increasing compared with the last census ten years ago. The exceptions are Roseate Tern, Guillemot (which has shown an increase in more recent years) and Razorbill. The largest increases were shown by Gannets and Mediterranean Gulls. An impressive list of studies aimed at understanding the effects of the *Erika* oil spill on seabirds are listed. An article on the petrels of Reunion completes the issue. An annex listing much French seabird literature from 1997-200 is particularly useful for those without regular access to the French literature. Membership of GISOM costs 100 Francs/year. Send subscriptions to Annie Croiset-Érand, Trésorière du GISOM, CRBPO, 55 rue Buffon, 75005 Paris, France.

From *Marine Ornithology* Vol. 28 (1)

As usual, Marine Ornithology is packed with interesting papers on Antarctic seabirds. I can only provide a flavour here. S. Hamilton found that burrow-scopes were not very good at finding Sooty Shearwater nests in complex burrow systems. Three separate thorough searches of a colony failed to locate more than a third of the nests! Reinhardt and co-authors review the diets of southern hemisphere skuas. Several papers review numbers of breeding birds at specific localities. A comprehensive review of Antarctic ringing by R. Wanless and T. Oakley shows that Wandering Albatrosses and Chinstrap Penguins formed more than a quarter of the birds marked in the region between 1978 and 1996. Donna Patterson reports somewhat disappointing levels of recovery for Giant Petrels. C. Phillips provides a very useful compilation of 1995 bird literature for the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic. Marine Ornithology is changing to an e-journal in 2001 (www.marineornithology.org) but at the time of writing the website has not been updated since 2000.

From *WWF ARCTIC BULLETIN*, No. 4.00

It seems likely that the Arctic Council Programme on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna will produce a report mapping most of the important arctic bird areas in the world. This was the main decision of a meeting held last September in Norway. The massive declines in Greenland's seabird colonies caused by over-hunting is highlighted in a two-page article. One colony of Brunnich's Guillemot has declined from about half a million pairs to a few thousand birds due to over-shooting, while the world's largest Arctic Tern colony has disappeared altogether due to egg collecting. Much of this has been caused by the importation of modern hunting technology. The Wildlife Institute of Greenland indicates that this problem is widespread; of the hunted species in Greenland, all but shrimps and Reindeer are now endangered. These declines rank alongside those of the albatrosses being caught in the southern oceans but seem to be attracting much less attention.

A fuller article on this issue will appear in the next edition of the *Newsletter* (Ed).

From *PACIFIC SEABIRDS* Vol. 27 (2)

Craig Harrison's conservation news section of *Pacific Seabirds* always makes interesting reading. It seems that American fisheries administrators differ little from those of Europe - with the great exception that the American legal system can force action upon the fisheries

administrators. A federal judge closed the entire Hawaiian longline fishery last July due to "pathetic" efforts to take action to reduce the turtle bycatch. This had knock-on effects on seabirds: Hawaiian birds would have benefited but the relocation of many of the fishing vessels to Californian may be adversely affecting birds there. The authorities on Hawaii must also now propose rules to reduce seabird bycatch off Hawaii. Most of the remainder of the issue is taken up with regional reports from the PSG community.

SEABIRDS OF THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

This 141 page special publication of the Canadian Wildlife Service was published in 2000. It is the first good review in English of the birds of this vital region for seabirds. Chapters cover a review of historical seabird studies, seabird habitats, breeding distribution, seabirds at sea, incidental mortality in drift nets and seabird conservation. Regrettably, the methods used for the studies do not appear to be described (meaning that it is rather difficult to be sure of the results, especially for seabirds at sea). Despite this, the 'literature cited' sections of each paper alone make this publication well worth obtaining. The incidental mortality chapter makes very alarming reading: I thought that the North Pacific drift net fishery for salmon had closed but, rather, it appears to have moved eastwards into the Russian economic zone. It is still largely prosecuted by the Japanese. The fishery used over 100,000 km of monofilament net set in 4 km units. Between 1993 and 1997, observers recorded 160,000 drowned seabirds. Extrapolated, this represents some 827,000 birds. Brunnich's Guillemot, Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters make up over 99% of the catch. I wonder if the decrease in numbers of Short-tailed Shearwaters off California - claimed to be due to global warming - may have a more prosaic cause?

ANOTHER ISLAND LIBERATED

Congratulations to the RSPB and their funders, including the Countryside Council for Wales and Sorex Ltd, for liberating Ramsey from rats. Ramsey is located off south-west Wales and has significantly less seabirds than its rat-free close neighbours of Skomer and Skokholm. The programme was undertaken in 2000 and was carefully designed to avoid damaging wildlife other than the introduced Brown Rats. Two tonnes of poison were donated by Sorex and were placed in specially designed bait pipes that stopped other species getting at the poison. A total of 1,200 traps were baited and checked every day over eight weeks. Just checking the traps meant a 10 km walk every day. Thirty bank voles were kept in captivity during the three months that the baits were laid for. Checks indicate that all rats have been destroyed but these need to be maintained for a further year to ensure success.

COUNTING TYSTIES ON BIG EBB TIDES

The methodology for pre-breeding counts of Black Guillemots is now well known. You get up very early in the morning during late March to early May, having checked the weather forecast the evening before, and survey your coastline in light or offshore winds and no precipitation. The mental and physical effort involved is considerable and the only reward is getting another 'good count' under your belt. If surveying by inflatable boat, you have to cajole one or two other folk to join you in the madness, and the extra effort in trailing the boat and launching it means the alarm clock can be set as early as 3am. You can do everything right, the forecast was spot on, it's a bonny morning, the outboard engines started first pull, and still end up with a rubbish count - because the tide's out!

At 5am on 25th April, Mick Mellor, Morag Fisher and I launched a Zodiac at Toft in Shetland to survey the west coast of Yell. The first hour would be spent heading north along low coastline with just the odd, scattered pairs of birds, before tackling the cliffs of Graveland, which hold one of the densest concentrations of Black Guillemots in the British Isles. It's not an easy piece of coast to survey because of the high cliffs, dangerously just-submerged rocks, large stacks, the number of birds involved, and exposure to Atlantic swell. On the last survey, on 30th April 1998, we notched up 12 adults along the low coastline and 734 along the high cliffs.

When we got to Toft this time it was as if Moses had parted Yell Sound, and we had to lug the

boat, engines and equipment way down the beach to find salt water. The sea was glass calm but just before starting the survey off south-west Yell we came across a loose flock of 86 adults and 7 immatures, miles from where the adults should have been. Along the low coast we recorded 27 adults inshore (*ie* potentially 'associated' with breeding habitat but more than could nest there), and 13 either offshore or flying south. Along the cliffs we found only 462 adults, 37% fewer than in 1998. Although numbers at some geos were similar to the 1998 count, they were generally low throughout the survey, and particularly so after 8am. On paper, this would go down as a substantial decrease but I am convinced that a percentage of adults made the decision at first light to go out and feed, rather than attend colonies and display. Two days later, along the high cliffs of Fethaland on the opposite side of northern Yell Sound, Mick Mellor and I got 163 adults, again in excellent conditions but on a very low tide, and again 37% less than the 1998 count. Unfortunately, weather conditions prevented second counts of these coasts, which will now have to be re-surveyed next spring. There is no reason to suspect that numbers have actually declined between 1998 and 2001, and every suspicion that birds were simply out feeding.

Over the years we have come across this phenomenon before in Yell Sound, with large numbers of adults well offshore on the edge of the tidal streams and relatively low counts at adjacent colonies. The effect of low tides reducing early morning colony attendance has been described for Pigeon Guillemots in British Columbia (Vermeer *et al.* 1993. Colony attendance of Pigeon Guillemots as related to tide height and time of day. *Colonial Waterbirds* 16: 1-8.). No such relationship has been described for early morning pre-breeding attendance in Black Guillemots, and the *Seabird Monitoring Handbook for Britain and Ireland* does not mention recording tidal state for the species.

Yell Sound may be particularly prone to this problem because of the strong tidal streams between it's small islands but if the phenomenon occurs here, it undoubtedly also does elsewhere. It would therefore be prudent to try and avoid mornings of very low tides when surveying Tysties in future, and to always record tidal state for the period of the survey. If you have to survey during low tides, make sure you record numbers of birds offshore and not apparently associated with breeding habitat. It would also be useful to use old Almanacs to work out the state of the tide on past counts where it wasn't recorded, especially for suspiciously low counts.

Martin Heubeck

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'THE PETRELS' ERRATA & CORRIGENDA

Errata and corrigenda for *The Petrels: their Ecology and Breeding Systems* (1990) and *The Behaviour, Population Biology and Physiology of the Petrels* (1996), together with details of publications listed therein as 'in press' and now published, are now available from my homepage at:-

http://www.zool.canterbury.ac.nz/jw.htm

or printed for 'tipping in' from me at:-

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Newsletter No. 88! As ever, I am grateful to Mark Tasker for the reviews and to John Calladine for proof-reading. This edition carries Les Underhill's long-awaited article on the *Treasure* oil spill, along with references for further reading about the mammoth penguin translocation and clean-up operation. I must apologise to Les for having to delay the article until this issue. Tysties feature prominently in this issue, and I am grateful to all contributors for offering articles and making my job so easy!

Chris Wernham

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The Newsletter is published three times a year. The editor welcomes articles from members and others on issues relating to seabird research and conservation. These should be received by 15 May (for June edition), 15 September (for October edition) or 15 January (for February edition).

The Seabird Group promotes and helps co-ordinate the study and conservation of seabirds. Members also receive the journal *Atlantic Seabirds*, containing papers on current research. The Group organises regular conferences and also provides small grants towards seabird research. Current 2001 membership rates are:-

Ordinary £10.00
Standing Order £9.00
Concession £5.00
Institution £15.00

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GROUP NEWS

SEABIRD GROUP WEBSITE

Following our request in the last Newsletter, I would like to thank on behalf of all of us Jeff Stratford for kindly offering to set up a website for the Group. Jeff already has a basic site in operation:-

(www.seabirdgroup.org.uk)

We have grand plans for additions as soon as we can find the time. If you have any suggestions for the development of the site, then please e-mail us at seabird@bto.org. In particular, we need to find ways of serving you, our existing members, with what you would like to see on the site and of making the site attractive to potential new members.

***** NEXT GROUP ***** CONFERENCE ABERDEEN, APRIL 2004

Mark your diaries now with the dates and venue for our 8th International Conference. This will be held 2-4 April 2004 in the King's College Conference Centre, University of Aberdeen. The conference will run from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon. A range of modestly priced accommodation is available on the campus right next to the conference centre, and will be available for delegates wishing to stay for one or more nights afterwards. The conference centre is a superb facility and, while more details will be announced later, we can say at this stage that the Scottish hospitality will live up to its reputation!

Martin Heubeck

*** MISSING PERSON ***

If anyone has an up-to-date address for Dr D.A. Curl, formerly of PO Box 151, Jabiru, NT 0886, Australia, could they please contact Sheila Russell, the Group Membership Secretary (address in box).

NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER

We welcome Martin Heubeck to the Executive Committee of the Group as organiser of the next international conference. Martin already has plans well advanced and is sure to do a fantastic job. On behalf of the Committee and Members I would like to thank Martin for offering to take on this important and time-consuming task.

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Martin Heubeck (see page 13)

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