Extended Abstract

Post Release Monitoring of Rehabilitated Seabirds

Jean Bradford

South Devon Seabird Trust

The importance of monitoring rehabilitated creatures post release cannot be emphasised enough. It is only by ringing/tagging creatures that success or failure post release can be established and a judgement made regarding the rehabilitation methodology employed.

Ringing Recoveries often describe the reason for finding, which is very useful when building up a picture of the problems creatures face post release.

Building up a data base of notable ringing recoveries is a useful tool with which to challenge reports that question the value of rescuing oiled seabirds and giving them a second chance.

The South Devon Seabird Trust has a small oiled seabird rescue centre situated in an area close to one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, which has meant that its services have been called upon almost constantly to rescue and rehabilitate stricken seabirds.

Oiled auks are the most numerous seabird casualties that the Trust is called upon to rescue from those beached along the coast of south Devon and neighbouring areas and, therefore, for which we have the most ringing data. Guillemots (Uria aalge) are the most abundant auks around the coast of Britain with a population of 1,400,000. Razorbills (Alca torda) number 190,000. These are the latest figures from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee as provided by the UK's Seabird Monitoring Programme (2008).

Although we have been involved in the rescue of oiled seabirds since 1983, it was not until 1993 that the full rehabilitation process was undertaken, and the Trust embarked on its own Ringing Programme, in order to establish how well the birds fared post release. In this respect we are fortunate to have the services of a ringer who holds a Class 'A' Ringing Permit with the British Trust for Ornithology, the recognised authority in the UK for the issue of rings through its Ringing Scheme.

The Trust has always kept up-to-date, accurate, ringing records, as it is only through ringing (tagging) creatures that centres can evaluate their work. All the records are held by the Ringer and the Manager of the Trust. During the period 1993 to 2003 (inclusive) we ringed 1,124 auks (1064 Guillemots and 60 Razorbills).

The importance of keeping accurate records cannot be emphasised too much, because when a Ringing Scheme is commissioned to provide details of ringing recoveries from the data it holds (which occasionally happens if a study is being conducted into the effectiveness of rehabilitation), the data provided will be general to that subject, unless specific details are requested. No breakdown of data is provided relating to individual rehabilitation centres. This is unfortunate, as no two centres will have the same results

with their rehabilitated birds. Therefore the onus is placed on each individual centre to look at its own data in isolation from any other held by the Ringing Scheme, in order to prove its effectiveness.

The data provided by the Ringing Scheme is also ongoing and, therefore, biased against long-term ringing recoveries – a matter which might not be of importance to those ringing birds in the wild, but is critical in making a judgement as to the viability of treating oiled seabirds. Obviously the only manner in which a fair assessment can be made regarding the feasibility of rehabilitating these creatures is by viewing the data for a specific time period only, thereby allowing both short and long term recoveries to be presented together for that period.

The Trust was not fazed by either of two reports – Sharp 1996 and British Trust for Ornithology Report No. 186, published 1997, both of which questioned the value of rehabilitating oiled seabirds. Although we had only been ringing for three years when the first of these report was published, the data we already held at that time was sufficient for us to be confident that our birds were surviving post release. However, these reports did have a devastating effect on most wildlife rescue centres in the UK, and as a consequence of this many of them considered euthanasia to be the kindest option, subsequently hundreds of oiled sea birds were destroyed needlessly.

The latter of these two reports suggested that because rehabilitated birds are released close to rehabilitation centres, in areas of dense human population, they might have a higher reporting rate than non rehabilitated birds. For this reason the authors of that report considered it appropriate to use immature Guillemots, ringed as nestlings, as the control group, as they travelled further from their natal colonies and into areas of denser human occupation, providing a higher reporting rate than the mature birds which stayed closer to their remote colonies where finding a stranded bird is almost impossible. This is borne out by comparing the kilometres travelled between mature and immature birds.

This is an important factor when making comparisons between the data held for rehabilitated birds and those ringed in the wild. The coastal human population in the immediate vicinity of the release site used by this Trust is 210,000 and the beaches are walked continuously summer and winter, this number is swelled by those who frequent the beaches from nearby cities and towns. Consequently a bird only has to look unwell for someone to report it! We also have volunteers all along the coast, who regularly patrol beaches local to their homes to look for beached birds.

The following comparison, illustrates the difficulties of finding and reporting beached birds in remote areas. When volunteers searched for stranded birds caught up in a sea bird wreck off the west coast of Scotland in the late summer of 2004, they had very little success. Although thousands of birds would have been affected, the conclusion drawn in a subsequent report was that the figures provided for the birds involved in the wreck were absolute minima, the reason being that “the coast of west and north Scotland is very indented with numerous skerries and islets and a very low population density, so that only a small percentage of the entire coastline was covered”.

75% of the Guillemots in the UK are on Scottish colonies. Most of the incoming ringed Guillemots to our centre are from the remote regions of western Scotland – Canna, Lunga and Sanda, and it is reasonable to presume that many of the un-ringed Guillemots

are from that area also. When our rehabilitated birds leave areas of high human population density and return to colonies in remote regions, they will be unlikely to provide long-term ringing recoveries. To-date we have had no ringing recoveries for our Guillemots from that region, and it is unlikely that we will, due to the difficulties of finding and reporting.

Whilst oil pollution is a major problem for sea birds, it is not the only danger posed. Static nets are a great cause of concern along the coast of South Devon; they are placed at regular intervals and often stretch for 100m, catching and drowning hundreds of unsuspecting diving birds. This problem probably exists all around our coasts, but birds taken from these nets and discarded have a greater chance of being found close to areas of dense human population. It is extremely unlikely that a reason will be given for the bird's demise on the Ringing Recovery, and it may, therefore, be considered to be a 'failed' release.

These are important factors when considering the feasibility of rescuing and rehabilitating oiled birds; it is obvious that there will be more short-term recoveries for rehabilitated birds released in areas of high human population density, than for those ringed in the wild. If however, a centre has an inordinately high number of short-term recoveries, then it must consider that it has a problem with its rehabilitation methodology and the manner in which birds are judged as fit for release.

The following table shows the up-to-date information, as at August 2009, regarding the rehabilitated auks released by the Trust. All but one of those on the list are Guillemots. There is just one Razorbill.

Days ascd.	Where found	Reason for finding	Km	Ring No.
6	Dawlish	Freshly dead	13	X35755
6	Dawlish	Freshly dead	6	X36013
7	Brixham	Alive, oiled	6	X59810
7	Guernsey (C.I)	Alive, oiled	126	X59859
8	Dartmouth		13	X60440
9	Lympstone	Freshly dead	21	X60433
10	Pigs Nose, Devon	Peregrine attack	31	R34320
10	Cornwall		491	X60411
13	Dorset		66	R34346
20	Sussex		301	R05401
21	Cornwall	Freshly dead	109	R05345
27	Beesands	Freshly dead	25	X36022
28	Sussex		190	X59816
30	Guernsey (C.I)		125	X36033
32	Exmouth		19	X35761
54	Dorset	Alive, oiled	52	X59620
105	Anglesey, Wales		322	R05460
150	Finistere, France	Alive, oiled	249	R05449
290	Holland		630	X35788
307	Norway	North Sea wreck	1134	X20125
324	Shetland	North Sea wreck	1089	X20114
340	Oviedo, Spain		788	R34345

385	Girand, France	Sea trap	672	X36060
423	Sauson, France	Oiled – Erica victim	343	X59860
587	Thurlestone	Alive, oiled	33	X59837
608	Cornwall	Alive, oiled	82	R20666
670	B. Salterton	Oiled, dead	24	R20606
690	Lydd, Kent	Alive, oiled	315	R05426
751	Skomer, Wales	Alive on colony	190	X60428
1302	Manche, France	Shot	207	X36039
1321	Halmstad, Sweden	Alive, oiled	1280	X36072
1408	Anglesey, Wales	Dead, violent weather	304	X36009
1585	Cullen, Scotland		805	X60485
1758	Holland	Razorbill, oiled, dead	615	X85936
2057	Northumberland	Freshly dead	578	R20570
2147	Ostend, Belgium	Oiled – Tricolor victim	457	X60475
2436	Cornwall	Freshly dead	131	R34239
2936	Brora, Scotland	Dead with others	841	R05429
3590	Germany		811	X60481
4596	Cumbria	Alive, injured	458	X36046

7 of the 14 ringing recoveries up to 30 days are for birds that have travelled several kilometres from the release site.

22 of the 40 ringing recoveries relate to birds that have survived over 9 months.

Obviously there will be more data to add to that already gathered, bearing in mind the longevity of these birds. However, the ringing recoveries already to hand strongly indicate that oiled auks can be successfully rehabilitated, can integrate back into their communities and benefit the colonies to which they belong.