Specializing in the Treatment of Oiled Seabirds

The Trust has a small rescue and rehabilitation centre close to one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, and has dealt with a variety of seabirds, from the tiny Storm petrel (Hydrobates pelagicus) and Little auk (Uria aalge) to the largest of the seabirds in UK waters – the Northern Gannet (Sula bassana) – and in doing has learnt a lot from each species.

Velvet scoter (Melanitta fusca) is a victim of the Sea Empress disaster.

Common scoter (Melanitta nigra) is a victim of the Sea Empress disaster.

However, auks are the most numerous seabird casualties that the Trust is called upon to rescue from beaches along the coast of South Devon and neighbouring areas, and 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. During the period 1993 to 2003 we ringed 1,064 Guillemots and 60 Razorbills. As at 2009 there have been 40 ringing recoveries.

When a Ringing Scheme is commissioned to provide details of ringing recoveries from the data it holds (as it did after the Sea Empress disaster), the data provided will be general to that subject, unless specific details are requested. No breakdown of data is provided relating to specific rehabilitation centres, which is unfortunate as no two centres will have the same results.

Map of places where our ringed birds have been found. However, despite the fact that 75% of the Guillemots in the UK are in Scottish colonies and most of our incoming ringed Guillemots are from the west coast of Scotland, (and presumably most of those that are un-ringed also), it will be observed that there are no ringing recoveries from that area whatsoever. This is because birds that are stranded in that location are unlikely to be discovered due to the terrain and very low population density. This is an important factor when comparing ringing recoveries for birds ringed in the wild with those from rehabilitated centres.

2009 Effects of Oil on Wildlife Conference
In 1996 the first of two damning reports was published. These reports questioned the value of treating oiled seabirds. However, the problem lay mainly in the fact that some centres were releasing their birds prematurely. These reports had a devastating effect on most rehabilitation centres in the UK. Consequently many oiled seabirds were destroyed needlessly. The reports, however, did not faze us as although we had been ringing for only 3 years we already had sufficient evidence from our ringed birds to know that they were surviving post release.

All the birds admitted to our centre have the same opportunity of treatment, irrespective of weight or degree of oiling. Some people have considered weight to be an important factor and have destroyed small birds. But we have had excellent ringing recoveries for 2 of our small guillemots — X59860 was found alive 423 days post release – a victim of the Erika disaster — R05426 was found alive, oiled again 690 days post release. Both weighed just 700g when they were released.

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There will always be some ‘quick’ ringing recoveries for both rehabilitated birds and those ringed in the wild. However, birds released in areas of high human population density close to rescue centres are much more likely to be found than those ringed in remote sparsely populated areas. This is an important factor when trying to make comparison between rehabilitated birds and those ringed in the wild.

Each one of our rescued birds leaves with a wish for a long and fruitful life. The ring it bears may bring some news one day.

We are still getting ringing recoveries for our rehabilitated birds and each one adds weight to our claim that these birds are worth saving and are excellent subjects for treatment and rehabilitation.