

## **NEWSLETTER 67**

**FEBRUARY 1994**

# **SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE 1995**

The next Seabird Group conference will be held from 24 to 26 March 1995. As in 1992, it will be in Glasgow, at the Kelvin Conference Centre. The theme this time will be "Threats to seabirds". A precise programme has yet to be worked out but, as ever, we aim to have a range of speakers coming from several countries. This should not however deter anyone from offering a paper, either oral or a poster. Papers need not necessarily be relevant to the theme - if you have something interesting to tell us about your work on seabirds, we want to hear it!

Mark Tasker (JNCC, 17 Rubislaw Terrace, Aberdeen, AB1 1XE, Scotland) is responsible for the scientific programme. We have decided to keep the conference registration fee exactly the same as in 1992. Further details of registration etc. will be enclosed in the next newsletter; those wishing to have more details now should write to Bob Furness, Applied Ornithology Unit, Dept. of Zoology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ. We hope that as many members as possible will be there.

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**EDITORIAL**

This newsletter brings the first announcement of the next (5th) Seabird Group conference. As with the last conference, it will be held in Glasgow. Your executive committee has responded to comments on the cost of the conference, as has decided to hold the registration (all meals included) price at the same level as in 1992. We hope this will encourage as many members as possible to attend. The conference will centre on the theme of "Threats to Seabirds", and there are plans for an exciting range of speakers.

I apologise for the rather late nature of this issue of the Newsletter; as a consequence, it is longer than average. I will endeavour to issue the April number on time, but for this I require more input. I seem to have written much of the present issue. Please, if you have any news items (e.g. reviews of conferences you have been to, descriptions of current work by you/ your institute etc.) let me have them. I am happy to edit, so please do not feel inhibited if English is not your first language.

Mark L Tasker

### **SULE SKERRY, ORKNEY - 1993**

Visits to Sule Skerry were achieved successfully during both June & July of 1993 after an abortive attempt in 1992 caused by poor weather conditions. The purpose of the twin visit was to continue the monitoring of the puffin population which commenced in 1975 and to examine in more detail the growth and fledging weights of the chicks. Ideally such an investigation needs full time effort over the breeding period but, as amateurs, we were limited to two 1 week visits. The first was planned to be a few days after chick hatching and the second with the period of fledging.

The puffin population was again estimated using random quadrats and this gave 43400 pairs which is within the range

obtained since 1975 of 29100 - 44300 pairs.

Sandeels comprise about 90% of the prey utilised by the Sule Skerry puffins, but in 1993 there seemed to be fewer of the large specimens noted in earlier years. The adults were probably compensating for this by bringing in greater quantities of the smaller individuals. Fish load weights and numbers were collected but this data is still to be compared with the information from other years. Of the number of puffin pulli which could be weighed on both visits, an average growth rate of 166 g was achieved over the period (5 weeks). This of course only referenced those individuals which had survived and were still present in their burrows.

Fulmar have continued to increase from the 6 pairs nesting in 1928, to 40 pairs in 1975 and to the present 400 pairs. This bird is now nesting in small colony clusters over much of the island. Numbers of guillemots were similar to those recorded on previous visits, but razorbills appeared to be more numerous. This may have been a result of visiting the island earlier in the season. Most previous visits have been in July when many razorbills and the majority of guillemots had left the colony. However, the number ringed during the previous early visit in 1986 was only half that of last summer.

As is often the case, arctic terns failed to breed successfully, caused by the periods of heavy rain. There was a breeding population of about 100 pairs still incubating and supporting 1-3 days old chicks at the beginning of our June visit. Within the week the whole colony (a main of 80 pr and a smaller one with 20 pr) had been washed out. No fledged young were produced. It is interesting to note that in the days of the lightkeeper Tominson, about 1930, the arctic tern was the second most common species after the puffin.

Last summer's visit to the island verified the breeding of great skuas after many decades of absence. Whilst the

Lighthouse had been manned, this species had not attempted breeding but after the Light automation in 1982 the first prospecting pair were noted in 1989. A pair was also present on our arrival in 1990 and a chick was produced in 1993. It is assumed that this survived to fledging; being fully feathered on our departure in July.

The storm petrel population appears to have reduced over the last decade based simply on the numbers of birds ringed. A more detailed assessment of the data is to be made however to see how the ringing rate varied for the various days over each of the previous years. The numbers of Leach's petrel flying over the island was the highest on record with a total of 74 ringed. This compares with the highest previous visit totals varying from 1 to 28 birds. A more precise comparison is the ratio of the leach's to storm petrels ringed, as this removes any bias of trapping effort influenced by the weather situation. This produces a factor of 0.5 to 6.0 in the earlier years as against 25.2 last summer (i.e. 100\*leach's/storm). The birds were very vocal and responded well to tape lures, even to the extent of singing from the hand whilst waiting to take the next bird from the net; a live lure.

It should be noted however that there is no direct evidence of the species breeding (e.g. nest, eggs, young) on Sule Skerry and the records in the *Status of Seabirds in Britain & Ireland* and *The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain & Ireland* should be interpreted as such. As in other years, we devoted many hours of searching the island for any evidence and none was found. The last record is still therefore that of an egg reputed to be taken from Sule Skerry in 1933.

Dave Budworth

### **THE IMPACT OF THE BRAER OIL SPILL ON SHETLAND'S BREEDING SEABIRDS**

In the April Newsletter (65), I reported initial results of tystie pre-breeding surveys that attempted to quantify the

effect of January's *Braer* oil spill on breeding numbers in Shetland. Four species comprised 82% of the oiled birds found, shag (975), eider (122), kittiwake (136) and tystie (219), but there was no way of determining the number of victims not collected from the beaches. Other questions to be answered included whether the losses would be spread widely among the breeding populations (in which case they might not be detectable) or be more localised, and in the case of kittiwake, whether the birds were actually from the Shetland population (the only ringed kittiwake found had been ringed as a chick on the Farne Islands in 1964 - the oldest kittiwake recorded so far by the British ringing scheme!). All four species are included in SOTEAG's long-running monitoring programme which was expanded in 1993 to assess the impact of January's oil spill, with financial and logistical support from the Ecological Steering Group on the Shetland Oil Spill, Sullom Voe Association, JNCC, SNH and RSPB.

Since the early 1980's, breeding numbers of tysties had increased at monitored sites in some areas of Shetland (especially on the west coast) or else remained rather stable at others. Where localised reductions had occurred after inshore oil pollution incidents (Yell Sound in 1979, Mousa in 1985 and south-east Mainland in 1991, numbers had increased again relatively quickly. The outcome of the 1993 surveys remains much as reported in April. Reduced numbers were found on Fair Isle (-25% since 1989) and West Burra (-35% since 1992), but not at other monitored sites elsewhere in Shetland. Results of a survey of the entire coast of south Mainland proved difficult to interpret for some areas, especially for most of the oil affected coast between Sumburgh Head and the Scalloway Islands where the only counts available for comparison dated from 1982/3. However, the conclusion reached was that the *Braer* had had little or no impact on breeding numbers along the south-east Mainland coast. Along the coast of south-west Shetland and allowing for probable

changes between 1982/3 and 1992, decreases between 1992 and 1993 in some areas (e.g. the Scalloway Islands) had probably been greater than the 35% observed at the Burra monitoring sites, but probably less elsewhere (e.g. counts of 77 at St. Ninian's Isle in 1983, and 75, 72 and 86 in 1993).

The greatest fear in January 1993 was for the shag population, in view of the numbers found oiled and the overall decrease in recent years. After the experience gained during fieldwork for the Seabird Colony Register (SCR) our monitoring strategy for shags has been to count and map nests and adults along

entire stretches of Shetland coastline from a Zodiac inflatable, with land counts made only at colonies where a high proportion of nests can be seen from the clifftop. In June this year we repeated these counts for as much coastline as possible for which post-SCR counts existed. The most obvious impact of the spill was at Sumburgh Head (the origin of 15 of the 34 ringed birds found), where a count from the land of 151 nests compared with 304 in 1992 and 508 as recently as 1988 (Figure 1). No 1992 counts were available for the coast of south-west Mainland (where smaller numbers bred) and so while 1993 counts indicated considerable reductions (e.g. 9 nests at St Ninian's Isle compared with 38 in 1989), it was less clear when the decreases had occurred. Further north along the west coast of Shetland and along most of the east coast, the 1993 counts indicated relatively small decreases in breeding numbers that

broadly corresponded with recent trends. Eleven recoveries were of birds ringed at Fair Isle and six from Foula; a survey of Fair Isle found 946 nests, only 9% less than the 1043 recorded in 1990.

The Shetland kittiwake population has declined markedly in recent years, but at greatly varying rates at different colonies or regions. In 1993, counts of nests and adults were made at all colonies except those on Foula, Noss, north-west Mainland and Unst. Apart from increases at some of the small colonies on Fetlar, Yell and Out Skerries the recent decreases had continued, in some (but not all) areas at rates greater than recorded recently. At colonies in the southern half of Shetland from Watsness in the west to Mousa in the east, totals of 3693 nests were recorded in 1993, 4917 in 1991 and 8905 in 1981. Because of the considerable recent changes at colonies it is difficult to know how much the reductions in 1993 were attributable to the *Braer* or simply reflected a continuing downward trend.

Surveys of flocks of moulting eiders suggested that after a considerable decline from an estimated 16,500+ birds in 1977, the Shetland population (assumed to be largely resident) had stabilised by 1991/92 at c. 7200, again based on surveys of moulting flocks which located 6544 birds. In January 1993 most of the 120 oiled eiders were found in the Sumburgh area. Later counts of moulting birds were about 450 lower than in 1992. The proportion of the total population moulting in each area varies from year to year but it is interesting to note that further north on the oil-affected coast of south-west Mainland (where few oiled eiders were found), moulting numbers were actually higher in 1993 (636) than in 1992 (529). In conclusion, it is likely that the impact of the *Braer* on Shetland's eider population was relatively small and that had the oil spill not occurred, numbers may have increased slightly between 1992 and 1993.

Martin Heubeck

## **GIZZARD CONTENTS OF SEABIRDS COLLECTED AFTER THE *BRAER* OIL SPILL**

Collection of seabirds found dead or dying on the shore of Shetland immediately after the *Braer* oil spill made available a large sample of seabirds of several species. This provided an opportunity for various studies that could not otherwise have been carried out without deliberately killing birds. This report summarises information on the diets of these birds as indicated by prey remains in the gizzards. Full tables of data are not provided, but are available from the author on request.

After birds had been measured and internally sexed, those that were not required by the National Museums of Scotland for skeleton or study skin preparation but which had a gizzard present were dissected to remove the gizzard and intestines. Most of the gizzard removals were undertaken by staff and students from Glasgow University, especially Belen Calvo, Bob Furness, David Searle, Mark Bolton, Kenny Ensor, Caroline Askew, Jose-Pedro Granadeiro and Luis Monteiro. The gizzards were

stored frozen for subsequent dissection, and the intestines passed to Professor DWT Compton for studies of parasite burdens. Most dissections into the gizzards were done by Sue Furness, some of the shags by Andy Russell. Prey remains removed from gizzards were stored in 70% alcohol. Items were identified to the lowest taxonomic group conveniently possible. Most attention was given to the identification of fish otoliths.

Most shag gizzards were empty. Those containing prey remains mostly held fish otoliths, especially those of sandeel *Ammodytes* (935 of all otoliths and present in all gizzards containing prey remains). Most of the gadid otoliths present were rather small (3-9 mm). A very high proportion of the shags had parasitic worms in the gizzard. The proportion of shags with prey in the gizzard declined rapidly with finding date, 375 containing sandeel otoliths on 6-7 January but only 7% containing sandeel otoliths after 16 January.

Black guillemots held crab remains more often than otoliths, most of the latter being sandeels. Eiders contained mainly bivalves, gastropods and crabs. Long-

tailed ducks had mainly empty gizzards or small quantities of algal material that may or may not have been ingested while feeding on invertebrates. Animal prey remains consisted of bivalves, gastropods, sandeels and polychaetes, thus showing only partial overlap with eider diet.

Kittiwakes mostly had empty gizzards, but sandeels were present in 38% of those with prey. 10% contained plastic pellets, as did 50% of the fulmars examined. Guillemots mostly contained fish otoliths, predominantly those of sandeels or gadids. The small numbers of gizzards of other species provided little clear indication of diet, but it was surprising to find great northern divers having only bivalve fragments and no fish otoliths in their gizzards.

The high frequency of sandeels in diets of shags, tysties, kittiwakes and guillemots in January provides clear evidence that this fish is available to seabirds even during winter, and appears to be the main food of shags and guillemots in this season at Shetland.

The clear trend for stomachs of shags to be empty if the bird was collected later after the spill may suggest that some of the later-collected birds died of starvation rather than dying rapidly from the immediate effects of the oil. However, the ratio of sandeels to gadids found in the shag gizzards did not change over time, suggesting that diets and rates of otolith loss in gizzards were not noticeably different over the month. Also the number of otoliths per gizzard with otoliths changed little; the reduction was predominantly in the proportion of shags with any otoliths in the gizzard.

Once the data set for sex, age and biometrics of these birds has been completed and can be matched up with the dietary data, it might be possible to test for any differences in diet between the sexes or between age classes of shags.

Bob Furness

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## **THE SUSTAINABLE EXPLOITATION OF SOOTY TERN EGGS IN THE SEYCHELLES**

In the Seychelles, sooty tern eggs are harvested commercially; they are highly regarded as a delicacy. Numbers of sooty terns in the Seychelles and other western Indian Ocean islands have declined this century and some colonies have become extinct. Human exploitation may have contributed to these declines but the main cause of population decrease in the Seychelles has been habitat modification, especially through the establishment of coconut plantations, on islands supporting breeding colonies.

A strategy for sustainable exploitation of sooty tern eggs was proposed, based on research carried out in the past by Chris Feare. This strategy was founded on several untested assumptions and, at the request of the Seychelles government, we visited the islands in 1993 to begin a ringing programme (to test some assumptions) and to train Seychellois staff. The visit received a Seabird Group grant, and this is a synopsis of the full report. Our plan had been to travel to Desnoeuufs Island with egg collectors, however poor weather had curtailed the egg collecting programme. We were however able to arrange to travel on a catamaran chartered by the Japanese Broadcasting Company, who were making a documentary on the sooty tern. The SE trade winds were strong, and the journey took 50% longer time than expected; worse still, conditions at the island were so bad that we were unable to land.

We were however able to fly later to Bird Island, where we were able to mark adult and young sooty terns. One thousand two hundred birds were marked with BTO rings. The 550 adults were additionally given a yellow plastic streamer, 2cm x 2cm, attached to the ring in order to

provide a more conspicuous mark that can be looked for on Bird and other islands. The 650 pulli were given a yellow Darvic ring each to identify the island of origin when these birds return to breed. Searches for the streamers should give useful information on the longevity of this novel marking technique, and help us assess the frequency of breeding by these birds.

During work on Bird Island, we were badly bitten by *Ornithodoros capensis* ticks. Larvae were very numerous and active at night. Video tape taken by infra-red at night revealed that both adult and chick sooty terns repeatedly and frequently raised their feet, each time with a slight shake. This may be related to the tick infestation and may serve to reduce tick bites.

Although the trip was only partly successful, the work must be viewed as the start of a long-term study to provide reliable information which can be used to calculate a sustainable harvest strategy. We have plans to continue the work, and to learn from the problems encountered this year. We thank the many people who helped and funded the study.

Chris Feare and Elaine Gill  
(text culled from full report by Mark Tasker)

## INLAND BREEDING GULLS IN WESTERN IRELAND

A survey of gull colonies was undertaken in summer 1993 at inland sites in western Ireland. This was with the aid of funding from the Seabird Group. Three sites in Mayo (Lough Conn, Lough Cullin and Lough Alick) were not covered properly due to a combination of poor weather and ill health. Counts for common and black-headed gulls for Mayo must be taken as absolute minima. However, the large black-headed gull colonies on Lough Conn were not present at their old sites in 1993, so they may have shifted/ dispersed totally because no new colonies were found in the region. The common gull totals are likely to be short only by about 100 individuals. Taking into account the missed sites, it is probably safe to say that the total number of gulls in the four counties has declined by 33-38% since 1977/78.

The only major inland tern colony encountered in 1993 was of 30 arctic terns on rocks north of Rialisk on Lough Mask. On Lough Corrib in 1993, after some moving about because of changing water levels, 21 arctic tern nests were recorded at Birchall and 16 common (including a few arctic) nests at Ard.

Tony Whilde

TABLE Numbers of individual gulls counted in four western Irish counties in 1992/93, compared with counts made in 1977/78.

County	Black-h gull		Common gull		Lesser b-b gull		Herring gull		Great b-b gull	
	77/78	92/93	77/78	92/93	77/78	92/93	77/78	92/93	77/78	92/93
Donegal	1090	718	232	66	96	806	25	26	2	10
% change		-34		-72		-11		+4		(+400)
Sligo	890	210	202	114	750	1260	50	16	2	6
% change		-76		-44		+68		-68		(+200)

Mayo	8121	2902	2034	1460	733	745	61	2	11	2
% change		-64		-28		+2		-97		(-82)
Galway	4895	4442	1256	876	2592	389	616	6	35	6
% change		+13		-30		-85		-99		-83
TOTAL	14996	9372	3724	2516	4981	3201	752	50	50	24
% change		-37		-32		-36		-93		-52

## ORKNEY SEABIRD PRODUCTIVITY MONITORING IN 1993

*Red-throated diver*: 99 breeding attempts monitored, 47 were successful in rearing 51 young.

*Fulmar*: 855 sites monitored and 357 produced young. Papa Westray was particularly successful, Mainland did well. Success on Hoy was comparatively low, while inland nests on Rousay failed completely.

*Arctic skua*: 194 nests on five islands were monitored. Overall mean hatching success was 68% from a clutch size mean of 1.87. Overall fledging success was 0.46 per nest though. Fledging on Westray was good, while none fledged on Hoy following predation by bonxies

*Bonxie*: 155 nests in 3 colonies were monitored. Clutch size averaged 1.91 and hatching success was 66%. Productivity was 0.34, a fall from 0.55 in 1992, ascribed largely to cannibalism.

*Kittiwake*: Mean productivity from 793 nests was 0.88 on Mainland, 323 nests on Rousay produced 349 young (average 1.08), while a similar productivity came from 139 nests on Papa Westray.

*Arctic tern*: Mean clutch size in 750 monitored nests was 2.07 and hatching success was 29.7%. This low success rate was due, at least in part, to prolonged periods of cold and/or wet weather which caused flooding at some colonies. Overall productivity for the islands was 0.33 per nest.

*Guillemot*: Overall productivity from 243 was 0.64 chicks per site.

I than all who contributed to monitoring seabirds in Orkney in 1993. This report is

a very brief summary; full results have been provided to Paul Walsh for the Seabird Monitoring Programme report.

Eric Meek

## PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE - SACRAMENTO, JANUARY 1994 A PERSONAL VIEW

The 21st Pacific Seabird Group conference was held in Sacramento, California from 26 to 29 January 1994. This is a personal view of events and highlights, and is not fully comprehensive; readers are advised to see the next PSG Bulletin for a full set of abstracts. The programme was possibly as full as was possible with a scheduled 63 oral papers over 3.5 days, in addition to 15 poster papers and several workshop/committee meetings. John Piatt chaired the scientific programme committee, and assembled a symposium on the behaviour, ecology and status of the rare alcids. The choice of symposium subject was particularly relevant as it is the 150th anniversary of the demise of the great auk. When this was originally conceived, the rare alcids were defined as spectacled guillemot; whiskered auklet; and Japanese, Kittlitz's,

Xantus' and Craveri's murrelets. The first paper on the programme, given by Vicki Friesen revealed that DNA analysis indicated that the eastern Pacific race of marbled murrelet was genetically further from marbled murrelet than Kittlitz's murrelet, and should therefore be properly treated as a full species. This was supported in a later paper by John Piatt which showed distinct morphological differences also. The "new" murrelet (christened either partridge murrelet or long-billed murrelet) also appears to be rare (only one nest found) and threatened by logging of old-growth forests in eastern Russia. Koji Ono showed that there were only 26 colonies of Japanese murrelets in a population comprising perhaps 4000 to 5000 individuals. Of these, about 50% were probably on Biro (!) Island. Greatest threats are probably from disturbance and introduced rats and other predators. Plainly, this species needs some urgent conservation action - which will be difficult given the relative lack of knowledge and politics of nature conservation in Japan. Nancy Naslund should be credited for keeping going with her paper despite a complete power outage in the lecture theatre. The symposium reviewed the known biology of the other rare alcids: a great deal remains unknown, and I was left with the impression that much more research will be required before we can devise strategies that will ensure that another auk does not follow the great auk into extinction.

A session of general papers followed the symposium. I enjoyed learning from Lisa Ballance that the gliding style of flight of red-footed boobies is likely to use three times less energy than if the birds flapped. In the first of a series of papers from Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO) staff, Jeremy Eddy showed that some common murrelets (guillemots) varied consistently in their laying date relative to the colony average. David Ainley presented a paper on population estimates of four rare procellariids (one of the few procellariid papers in the entire meeting!) gained from at-sea transecting across a very large area of the tropical eastern Pacific. Gene

Fowler's paper on hormonal production in oiled penguins was interesting in indicating that perhaps lightly oiled seabirds should not be cleaned. This was based on evidence that cleaned seabirds were considerably more stressed than those birds which had been left to clean themselves. Perhaps the most thought provoking paper was one by Fred Sharpe on bubbling behaviour by foraging auks (common murrelets and rhinoceros auklets). Most of us have heard of the use of bubble nets by foraging cetaceans; Fred had captured on video the apparent use of bubbles by auks as they fed on tight schools of fish in Puget Sound. While the evidence was not conclusive, the hypothesis seems good, and the film of hunting auks excellent. I look forward to a lot more work on this topic. The increased use of video footage at the meeting as a whole was useful, and certainly made several papers more interesting.

The next session was on marbled murrelets; this enigmatic species remains at the top of many PSG members' list for conservation and research. Its dependence in the southern part of its range on "old growth" (unlogged) forest means that it is very susceptible to logging operations. The campaign against such logging is being waged with considerable intensity. This session was followed by one on population dynamics and the environment. Two further papers by PRBO indicated that seabirds on the Fallaron Islands may not be able to recover rapidly from events such as breeding failures caused by El Niño years, and if these occur too close together then long-term population declines are likely. The studies by Point Reyes are particularly good examples of the results of long-term investment in seabird research. It is a pity that many of their papers at this conference were marred by rather poor overheads. These contrasted with the generally high-quality, uncrowded slides used by most other speakers.

The next day started with a session on feeding ecology. Dr Watanuki demonstrated the extreme flexibility of

Japanese seabird diets. This was followed by an excellent and thought-provoking talk by Paul Walton on the results of the study by himself and co-workers from Glasgow on seabirds at Shetland. Besides presenting solid results from an area where seabird diets cannot be flexible, he indulged in some interesting speculation on optimum diving strategies. This paper quite rightly won the best "student" paper award. Lindsey Hayes had looked at gulls kleptoparasitising black guillemots, and Grant Gilchrist found that predation by gulls at a thick-billed murre colony that had been reduced drastically in size by gill-net mortality was probably sufficient to prevent recovery. Predation impact was probably higher than might be expected because the density (and therefore collective defence abilities) of the colony had been reduced. This seemed a convincing explanation, and could have much wider implications for other "low-density" guillemot/murre colonies.

In a session on pelagic distribution and biogeography, Larry Spears showed that the distribution of some tropical petrels was most closely correlated with wind speed. Vicki Friesen's second genetics paper explored the genetic relationships within murre. Thick-billed murre fell into two relatively homogeneous groups, that in the Atlantic and that in the Pacific. Common murre fell also into these groups, but the Atlantic population was not homogenous, but was clined (confirming previous morphological and plumage studies). These findings have implications for any strategy to conserve genetic resources of murre. Tony Gaston started his excellent, but depressing, talk (on the impact of racoons on nesting seabirds in Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) with a doggerel poem. This device to relieve the flow of 11 papers on the final afternoon should be used more often! I was alarmed to hear from Art SOWLS that US Coastguard estimates that there are about 60 ship groundings per year in the western Aleutian islands; this has obvious implications for the potential introduction of rats and cats.

The poster papers revealed further information on marbled murrelet nests. Hokkaido's large numbers of breeding alcids were described in a paper by Y. Watanuki (an island obviously worth a visit). I was pleased to see that further efforts to remove rats from seabird islands are about to be undertaken in Canada - with guidance from colleagues in New Zealand.

In all, another inspiring conference that left me with several new ideas and lines to follow. I congratulate the organisers, especially the local committee for an interesting and vibrant conference

Mark L Tasker

### **CIRCUMPOLAR SEABIRD WORKING GROUP**

Following on the heels of the Beringian Seabird Bulletin reported in SGN 66 comes news of an expansion to cover the entire arctic. The Circumpolar Seabird Group has been established to help service the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF); this is part of the Arctic Environment Protection Strategy, which was adopted by a inter-governmental ministerial meeting held in Rovaniemi, Finland in 1991. The first meeting of the group, which is comprised of up to two designated representatives from each of the eight Arctic nations, was held in Sacramento on 20-25 January 1994. The group will promote, facilitate and co-ordinate seabird research, management and conservation among the circumpolar nations. A bulletin will be produced, and the editor (Kent Wohl, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99503, USA) would be keen to have an articles on arctic seabird research.

I attended the final part of the Group's inaugural meeting. The meeting had evidently been successful. Representatives had given summaries of seabird resources in their countries. Tony Gaston has assembled a draft of an international murre conservation strategy;

this apparently is aimed mainly at thick-billed (Brunnich's) murre, and will not extend to cover murrelets south of the arctic. John Chardine introduced the concept of a circumpolar seabird colony register. Kent Wohl (address above) is assembling a circumpolar seabird expert directory. If you have worked, or are an expert, on arctic birds, Kent would like to include you in the directory. Please send him the following details (or just your name and address and he will send a full questionnaire): Name, Affiliation, Address, Telephone, Fax, Telex, E-Mail, Species interest, Geographic interest, General topic interest.

Mark L Tasker

### **AUK MONITORING MANUAL**

Martin Heubeck has just recovered a large number of copies of this Seabird Group publication of about 10 years vintage. It is on the verge of becoming superseded by a new Seabird Monitoring Manual, being produced in Aberdeen for JNCC, RSPB, SOTEAG, ITE, the Seabird Group and the many other organisations participating in the Seabird Monitoring Programme. If you would like a copy of this valued historical document, please send 50p in stamps to Martin at Mansfield, Dunrossness, Shetland, ZE2 9JH, Scotland.

### **FROM RECENT ISSUES OF *SULA***

In addition to the regular issues of *Sula*, there have been two recent special supplements. Volume 7 (1) has two papers on beached birds; one from Portugal and the other from Belgium. Mortality in Portugal was lower in 1991/92 than in previous winters. Ommo Hüppop and Stefan Garthe review the interaction of seabirds and fisheries in the south-eastern North Sea. Positive gains for seabirds come from discarded fish, while others are entangled in waste netting and line. Short notes include mention of a guillemot with deformed primaries; observations on the coast of Morocco and a note by Mardik Leopold of the interaction of a novel shellfish fishery and

large flocks of common scoter. Volume 7 (2) has two papers; the first by Bram Couperus describes the behaviour of killer and pilot whales near trawlers east of Shetland. The killer whales were apparently feeding on discarded fish from the trawlers, while the pilot whales may have been preying on the mackerel schools that were being trawled for. Phillip Derks and Kees de Kraker describe changes in numbers of Sandwich terns at a colony in Lake Grevelingen. Numbers have been declining - predation and changes in food availability are thought to be the causes. Short notes in this issue concern sperm whales off the Netherlands and an item on the inaugural meeting of a group working on the conservation of arctic seabirds (see item on Circumpolar Seabird Group in this Newsletter).

The first of the Special Issues is the Proceedings of a meeting on the Frisian Front. This hydrographic feature off northern Netherlands is important for seabirds, particularly after the breeding season and in winter. The area is licensed for exploration for gas. This licensing has created some controversy. The seminar consisted of a background paper on the front from Mardik Leopold, and papers from the Dutch Gas Company and Greenpeace advancing the cases for and against drilling. A summary of discussion is included. The issue is in Dutch, with English summaries.

The second special issue is written (in English) entirely by Kees Camphuysen. It concerns observations while working for the Plancius Foundation in the Greenland Sea and around Svalbard. The first paper concerns observations of birds and mammals in Svalbard, and adds considerably to knowledge of the area. The second paper is on the distribution of seabirds and cetaceans in summer in the Greenland Sea. This also adds much to the published literature, and extends north-westwards the area within which European Standard seabirds at sea recording has been made. I enjoyed learning that black guillemots can be found far offshore in deep waters in this

area. All those interested in this part of the Atlantic should own a copy of this special issue.

Mark L Tasker

### **FROM RECENT ISSUES OF MEDMARAVIS NEWS - ISSUES 13 & 14.**

An inventory of important seabird sites in the Mediterranean has been compiled by Joe Sultana, with the help of others. Important Seabird Sites in the Mediterranean lists about 130 sites spread all over the Mediterranean, giving a brief description of the localities, the various threats to the sites as well as the status of the seabirds. It includes 16 pages in colour depicting several sites and seabirds. The main aim of the publication is to inform governments and authorities of the various Mediterranean countries of these important areas. The catalogue has been published by the Maltese Ornithological Society. Those interested should write to The Director, M.O.S., PO Box 498, Valletta CMR 01, Valletta, Malta.

The 4th Pan-Mediterranean seabird symposium will be held in Tunisia from 11-16 April 1995. The main theme will be "Mediterranean seabird ecology". Although the Newsletter does not make it clear where offers of papers should be sent, presumably the secretariat (MEDMARAVIS, BP2, 83470 Saint Maximin, France) would help. A one-day session will deal entirely with North African seabird studies and coastal ecology. There will be a post-symposium excursion to the world's largest Cory's shearwater colony on the island of Zembra.

A report from the Croatian coast indicates, not surprisingly, that tourists were totally absent in summer 1993, however, seabirds too were absent, and several breeding colonies deserted. Yellow-legged herring gulls were the only seabirds present in any numbers, with a few Cory's shearwaters offshore. The

coast of Libya was surveyed by a Libyan-Dutch team in July 1993. Two lesser crested tern colonies were located: a small colony on Geziret Al Elba off the coast north of Ain Al Ghazalah, and a large colony on Geziret Garah, southwest of Zuwaytinah. These are the only two known colonies of this species in the Mediterranean. A full report, including information on other species is awaited. A survey of 254 km of sandy beaches in the 602 km long coast between Alexandria, Egypt and the Libyan border discovered no seabird colonies, but some nesting turtles, and a considerable amount of relatively unspoiled habitat was found.

The Centro Italiano Studi Ornitologici has published a special issue of its journal *Avocetta* containing the ornithological papers presented at the MEDMARAVIS symposium held in Chios in 1992. This is a mine of information about the less well-known seabird life in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Amongst the species treated in the papers are Audouin's, Armenian and slender-billed gulls and Cory's shearwater. Those wishing to acquire a copy of this special issue should write to: The secretary of CISO, Prof. NE Baldaccini, Dipartimento di Scienze del Comportamento Animale, Via A Volta 6, 56126 Pisa, Italy.

An early report of the Colonial Waterbird Society's meeting in Arles in October 1993 indicates that it was a great success (your editor had to cancel his attendance at the last minute!). A fuller report on proceedings will be made in a future issue of this newsletter. The MEDMARAVIS newsletter indicates that several of those present were keen to organise a World seabird meeting; perhaps in association with another meeting. Suggestions for August 1994 were rejected on grounds of inadequate time, those participating felt the meeting (see above) at Easter 1995 was a good opportunity. The Seabird Group has yet to be approached (and certainly the feeling within the Pacific Seabird Group was that Easter 1995 was too soon). A meeting to help implement the Alghero convention on coastal and

marine biodiversity in the Mediterranean is planned for Alghero 19-21 January 1995.

Mark L Tasker

### **FROM RECENT ISSUES OF *SEEVÖGEL***

Issue 14 (2) of *Seevögel* has articles on cormorant food on the Baltic coast of Schleswig-Holstein and an excellent long article on contaminants in eiders from both the North Sea and Baltic coasts of Germany, indicating that variation in physical condition probably influences the breakdown of PCB contaminants. The following issue (14.3) has news that a young gannet fledged for the first time ever from Helgoland on 28 August 1993. Axel Siefke reports on the numbers of breeding birds at protected areas on the southern Baltic coast over recent years; relatively large numbers of black-headed and common gulls breed in this area. Peter Gloe reports on the pre-breeding behaviour of Audouin's gull on Mallorca.

Mark L Tasker

### **FROM *LE CORMORAN***

*Le Cormoran* is published by Le Groupe Ornithologique Normand (Université de Caen, 14032 CAEN Cedex, France). The group covers the departments of Manche, Calvados, Orne, Seine-Maritime and Eure in northern France. Issue 39 contains only one paper directly related to seabirds, on the third kittiwake colony to be discovered in the area, at Fécamp, in Pays de Caux.

Mark L Tasker

### **FROM *PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP BULLETIN - VOL. 20 (2)***

This features a long article on Alaska's alien animals by Edgar Bailey. As with every other part of the seabird world, these are seriously affecting the seabird populations there. Many Alaskan islands had arctic foxes introduced for their fur in the period before the 1930s; a collapse in the fur market in that decade led to the closure of farms and the release of animals. Huge numbers of birds were killed; it has been shown that, in a year, about a dozen foxes could kill about as many birds as were picked up after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. Fortunately foxes only remain 48 Alaskan islands; trappers have taken them off some islands, and they have died out on others. The US Fish and Wildlife Service have removed them from about 20 islands, but this effort has slowed as the use of poisons, the most effective means of killing, has been banned. On several islands cleared of foxes, seabird population recovery has been rapid.

Rats and other rodents have arrived on many islands. In some cases rodents were introduced to feed the foxes when seabirds were absent, while ship wreck has led to the accidental introduction of rats. Various game herbivores (deer, moose, goats etc.) have been introduced on some islands, and have severely altered the vegetation. This is important for those seabirds which rely on forests for nesting, and where the vegetation has been more fully removed, erosion has resulted. PSG has been campaigning hard for predator removal programmes and for the use of poisons to be allowed. The Pribilof islands are at present rat-free, but PSG is extremely concerned that harbour developments there have seriously increased the risk of introductions. US Fish and Wildlife and the local communities on the islands have put various anti-rat defences in place.

Roy Lowe reports on disturbance at Oregon seabird colonies; tour boats and other ships have approached close to breeding sites here on many occasions. Research shows that disturbance occurs when ships get within about 500 ft; it

seems likely that a 500 ft exclusion zone will be established at one colony at least. Harry Carter and Leah de Forest report (in part 1 of 3) on a trip to Japan, part funded by PSG. If anyone is considering going to Japan, this article is recommended. Gary Kaiser reports on a kill of auks in Boundary Bay, British Columbia, caused probably by gill nets. Problems with these continue in several parts of the world. An article records the first nesting of lesser black-backed gulls in North America - surprisingly, given its world distribution, in Alaska. The core of the bulletin is taken up with the Atlas of southern hemisphere albatrosses by Lance Tickell reported in the last issue of the Seabird Group Newsletter. A series of abstracts from the 1993 American Ornithologists Union meeting on the effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill show that it is very difficult to demonstrate any long term effect of the spill on seabird populations. Regional reports and a report from the marbled murrelet technical committee complete the issue.

Mark L Tasker

### **SOUTH WEST OILED SEABIRD GROUP**

The 4th issue of the newsletter of this group contains news from SW England. The group provided evidence for Lord Donaldson's enquiry into oil tanker operation and safety. A summary is given of a Lyme Bay coastal forum conference. This appears to have taken a hard look at this important bay on the south coast of England, and its human usage. A further article adds information on cleaning oiled birds successfully. Two articles on beached birds complete the issue, the first of which addresses some of the problems associated with counts of beached birds in areas where many arrive alive and the local authorities are keen on cleaning beaches. Copies of the newsletter may be obtained from Jeff Stratford, 93 Reddicliff Close, Radford Park, Plymouth, Devon, PL9 9QJ, England.

### **FROM WORLD BIRDWATCH**

Volume 15, issues 2 and 3, of BirdLife International's magazine have several items of interest on conservation of the world's seabirds. The Menderes Delta and Bafa Lake in Turkey are to be designated a National Park. The Delta is home to one of the largest known breeding populations of Dalmatian pelican (42 pairs in 1989), with over 400 individuals there in winter. As with many wetlands, the area has been threatened with drainage, large scale landclaim in the salt-flats, excessive use of agricultural chemicals and tourist development. The declaration should go some way to alleviating these pressures. Dalmatian pelicans remain threatened on the Eregli Marshes in Turkey, due to construction of reservoirs, and pollution from local industry.

More worrying is the article in issue 3 focusing on the destruction of the Mesopotamian marshes of Iraq. This vast area also holds large populations of Dalmatian pelicans, pygmy cormorant and other wetland birds. Hydrological schemes completed in the past 18 months are causing large areas to dry out. The River Euphrates has been diverted into a huge man-made canal, and water has been prevented from entering around two-thirds of the marshes during 1992/93. The Iraqi government claims that the schemes are to improve agriculture in the area. Independent studies indicate that drainage of the marshes, as well as being a human disaster for the resident Ma'dan or Marsh Arabs, is an ecological catastrophe of proportions not seen in western Eurasia in recent times. Further information on the Mesopotamian marshes can be obtained by writing to: The AMAR Appeal, c/o Emma Nicholson MP, House of Commons, LONDON, SW1 0AA, England.

Mark Tasker

## **BEACHED BIRDS WANTED**

David Houston and Bob Furness at Glasgow University are making a study of the digestive tract of seabirds, and would be extremely grateful to receive corpses in reasonable condition of any beached seabird except guillemot, herring gull and lesser black-backed gull (we have adequate numbers of these species already). It does not matter if they are oiled. They would prefer birds that are fresh, but any birds which are not noticeably decomposed would be welcome. However, birds which have obviously died of starvation are not of any use. They will pay all postage, but before sending parcels to the Zoology Department, Glasgow University, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, Scotland, could you please phone during the day 041 339 8855 and ask for extension 4775 or 8038, or during the evening 0360 50662 or 03012 603.

The project follows on from a study in birds of prey which has shown that the length of the digestive tract differs between species according to the predatory behaviour that they show. In summary, birds such as sparrowhawks which catch prey by an active chase, needing rapid acceleration, have gut lengths up to 50% shorter than species like kites and buzzards which scavenge or do not chase active prey. The reason for this is thought to be because predators which need to accelerate rapidly will develop as light a body weight as possible. Such species might be expected to evolve small digestive tracts. As a consequence their digestive efficiency is known to be poorer, but this does not matter if they can compensate by catching more prey.

In fish eating birds these same arguments may result in species such as auks, which catch fish by underwater chases, having short guts and poor digestive efficiency, as a consequence be forced to eat only fish with high energy content. However,

species such as gulls which scavenge and do not chase actively after prey would be expected to have long guts, digest food better, and be able to take a far wider variety of foods. The beached seabirds would be used to make a survey of gut length in different species to see if there is this link between gut length and the method of predation and prey selection.

David Houston, Bob Furness

## **SURVEY OF LARGE GULLS NESTING ON BUILDINGS, 1994**

We are carrying out a survey of large gulls nesting on buildings in Great Britain and Ireland to study the spread of this phenomenon since the last survey in 1976. If you have any information (past or present) on town-nesting large gulls in your area, or would be prepared to help in counting such colonies this spring and summer, please contact: Susan Raven or John Coulson, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Durham, South Road, Durham, DH1 3LE Tel: 091 374 3343 or 3349.

(We will include more on this survey in the next issue of the Newsletter - any counts you have supplied to the Seabird Colony Register will be passed on to the organisers of this survey directly - ed.)