

## NEWSLETTER 84

FEBRUARY 2000



# IS THIS THE WORST YET?

The Maltese-registered *Erika*, on charter for the French oil company TotalFina, broke up off the coast of Brittany, France on 12 December 1999. Around 26,000 tonnes of fuel oil were subsequently released from it into the northern part of the Bay of Biscay. This spill is probably the worst ever to hit Europe in terms of the scale of the seabird mortality.

By Christmas Eve, 250 birds had been washed ashore along the coasts of south Finistère, Morbihan, Loire-Atlantique and Vendée, most of which were guillemots. It was feared that the slick was moving towards a sea area known as Plateau de Rochebonne, a region rich in plankton and fish that is an important wintering area for seabirds. The coastal areas of Vendée and Charente-Maritime, important areas for wildfowl and waders, including 60,000 brent geese, were also threatened. Large numbers of birds began to be washed ashore on Christmas day. By 27 December, 15,000 dead or oiled birds had been found, and birds and oil had been washed ashore along 400-500km of coast between Finistère and Charente-Maritime. At the time of writing, more than 60,000 birds have

been washed ashore, of which around 75% are guillemots and a further 15% are other auks (mainly razorbills). A large number of other species have also been affected in smaller numbers including kittiwake, gannet, storm petrel, great northern diver, shag and cormorant, and a number of more strictly coastal species (grebes, herons, brent goose, eider, common scoter, several species of wader). Around 10,000 of the birds have been washed ashore alive.

At the time of writing, only 35 ring recoveries have been reported to the BTO. One batch from France contained 17 rings from 700 birds found along a 10-km stretch of coast near Baie de Quiberon. This sample suggests that with more than 60,000 birds washed ashore in total, more than 1000 ring returns should be expected. However, a number of contacts who have visited the area to help with the clean-up operations have reported that many rings will go unreported because of the thickness of the oil (making the carcasses difficult to check), the rapidity with which authorities are trying to dispose of carcasses, and the emphasis that is being placed on saving birds that

come ashore alive by the volunteers that are searching the beaches.

From the small sample of ring returns available, it is too early to determine for certain which colonies have been most affected by this spill. The numbers recovered from each colony depend not only on the number of birds from that colony that die in the area and that come ashore and get reported, but also on the numbers of birds from each colony that carry rings. Of the 35 recoveries so far, 28 are guillemots, which form the bulk of the casualties, but there are also five razorbills and two gannets. As expected, the closest colonies to the oiling incident contribute almost half of the recoveries: Scilly Isles (one), Pembrokeshire (one), Great Saltee (13). Other guillemot recoveries come from the Clyde (three), Canna (10), Cape Wrath (one), Fair Isle (one) and the Isle of May (one). All age classes of guillemots are represented in the recoveries so far. The two gannets are a four-year old ringed as a nestling on Ailsa Craig and a fifteen-year old ringed as a nestling in Shetland.

The BTO has recently updated analyses of the locations of recovery of ringed British and Irish seabirds outside the breeding season from birds ringed since 1909, as part of the *Migration Atlas* project. From this work, the waters of the Bay of Biscay are known to be an important wintering area for auks from colonies in Southern Ireland, South Wales and Western Scotland. Of these colonies, and particularly the more northern ones, immature birds are likely to be more affected than adults by the *Erika* spill because they have a generally more southerly distribution outside the breeding season and do not show the tendency of return to the breeding colonies soon after the post-nuptial

moult that is shown by many adults. It is hoped that more recoveries of British and Irish ringed birds will be sent to the BTO by the French ringing scheme (CRBPO) soon. Once more recoveries are available, it will be possible to define more clearly which of our colonies are likely to have been most affected by the spill and the likely effects of the mortality event on breeding populations at these colonies. Whatever the effects on British and Irish colonies, the smaller breeding populations of auks along the Brittany coast and in the Channel Islands will be more severely affected. Those in Brittany number only hundreds of breeding pairs of guillemots, razorbills and puffins and breeding numbers have still not increased to their levels prior to the Torrey Canyon spill in 1967.

The French BirdLife partner, Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO), and Bretagne Vivante – SEPNEB (Société pour l'Etude et al Protection de la Nature en Bretagne) have mobilised a large number of volunteers to search for birds along the affected coastlines. The numbers of birds washed ashore alive have been greater than the French welfare organisations could handle, and they have been assisted by organisations in other countries. More than 600 guillemots have been flown to the UK for treatment by the RSPCA, and 4270 to rehabilitation centres in Belgium or the Netherlands. Previous studies, including a recent one by BTO, have shown that the survival rates of guillemots after oiling, cleaning and release are very low. It is hoped that all the birds released after cleaning during this spill will be ringed, so that their survival can be monitored subsequently.

Up-to-date information on the *Erika* spill can be found on the following website:-

<http://www.multimania.com/hnature/>

Chris Mead & Chris Wernham

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## 7<sup>th</sup> SEABIRD GROUP CONFERENCE

It is still not too late to register for the conference to be held on 17–19 March 2000 in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. The programme has now been assembled and looks to be an exciting series of talks and presentations. If you need more information, contact the local organiser: Peter H. Becker,

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email [ifv@ifv.terramare.de](mailto:ifv@ifv.terramare.de) (subject: Seabird Group Conference).

Details are also available on the conference homepage <http://home.t-online.de/home/O.Hueppop-IfV/Seab2000.htm>

## GOOD NEWS FROM THE BONN CONVENTION FOR SEABIRDS AT RISK FROM LONGLINING

In November last year the Sixth Conference of the Parties (6th COP) of the Bonn Convention for the Conservation on Migratory Species of Wild Animals was held in Somerset West, South Africa. BirdLife International attended as an International NGO Observer, with representatives from several national partners, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and BirdLife South Africa.

At the previous Conference of the Parties Southern Ocean albatrosses at risk from longline fishing had been added to Appendix II of the Convention, creating the opportunity for the development of a Regional Agreement between range states for their enhanced protection. During the course of 1998, a review commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (Brothers et al. 1999) had shown quite clearly that, in addition to the albatrosses, the larger petrels of the genera *Macronectes* and *Procellaria*, totalling seven species, were also under serious threat from longliners in the Southern Ocean and adjoining seas. In the first half of 1999

the BirdLife International Seabird Conservation Programme wrote the necessary texts (Huyser et al. 1999) so that the South Africa could nominate these seven species for inclusion in Appendix II of the Convention.

Bonn Convention COPs by tradition include a scientific symposium on migration. I gave an invited lecture that emphasised how the migration patterns of southern albatrosses included the territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones of a number of countries, thus making them an excellent group of birds for international conservation efforts via a Bonn Convention Agreement. Utilising the latest findings of satellite-tracking and some hard-hitting slides of corpses of birds drowned by longliners, I was able to alert national delegates to the very serious conservation problems facing southern albatrosses and petrels, in time for the crucial discussions that followed.

Once the Conference of Parties started, all went relatively smoothly. First the Scientific Council and then the full COP unanimously approved the nominations, thus successfully adding the seven petrel species to Appendix II. BirdLife also offered strong support to an adopted resolution led by Australia (and importantly supported by France, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Uruguay, all range states for Southern Ocean albatrosses) that encouraged speedy action towards finalising a Southern Ocean Albatross Agreement. Inter-governmental meetings have already started this year to get the Agreement underway. It is hoped that the seven petrel species will be included along with the albatrosses. In this way all the Southern Ocean seabird species most affected by

longlining will be included in an Agreement.

A number of albatross and petrel species now listed in Appendix II of the Bonn Convention breed at several United Kingdom Overseas Territories (UKOTs) in the South Atlantic. At the Tristan da Cunha and Gough Islands three albatross species, including the endemic Tristan albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* and endemic Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross *Thalassarche chlororhychos*, the southern giant petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, the endemic Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata* and the Grey Petrel *P. cinerea* all breed, the Falkland Islands supports a huge population of black-browed albatross *T. melanophrys* as well as some southern giant petrels, and South Georgia has four albatross species, two giant petrels and the white-chinned petrel *P. aequinoctialis* as breeding species. Most of these species have been accorded a IUCN (World Conservation Union) category of threat by BirdLife International.

## References

Brothers, N.P., Cooper, J. & Lokkeborg, S. 1999. The incidental catch of seabirds by longline fisheries: worldwide review and technical guidelines for mitigation. *FAO Fisheries Circular* No. 937. 100 pp.

Huyser, O.A.W., Nel, D.C. & Cooper, J. 1999. Proposals from the Republic of South Africa for amendments to Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (the Bonn Convention). *ADU Research Report* No. 34. 41 pp.

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## **THE BTO *MIGRATION ATLAS***

The BTO is currently running a 3.5-year project to collate information on the movements of birds that use Britain and Ireland throughout the year based on recoveries of birds ringed since 1909 and other sources of information on bird movements (e.g. at-sea distribution surveys for seabirds). Analyses for the project are funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, ringers, BTO members and some charitable trusts and commercial sponsors.

The *Migration Atlas* will form a companion volume to the other BTO atlases of breeding and wintering bird distributions. The core of the book will comprise individual accounts for 188 species, for which there are sufficient numbers of recoveries to reveal useful information on movements. Each account is being written by an invited expert on the species concerned. Most of the seabird species breeding within Britain and Ireland will be included in these main texts, the level of treatment depending on how much information is currently available from ringing. Other species of seabird that are not ringed in any numbers in Britain and Ireland but are nevertheless regular visitors to our shores (e.g. sooty shearwater, Pomarine skua) will have current knowledge of their movements summarised in a further reference section of the book.

The finished *Migration Atlas* will form a comprehensive reference volume on the movements of British and Irish birds for conservationists, policy-makers and birdwatchers. It will also contain important supporting chapters dealing with broad patterns of movement of the main ecological groups of species using Britain and

Ireland throughout the year, implications of the movement patterns shown for conservation, methodological issues, methods of studying bird movements and, perhaps of greatest importance, gaps in our current knowledge of movements and how these can be addressed in the future.

Editing of the main species texts for the book is currently underway and the supporting chapters are being written. The *Migration Atlas* is due for publication by T. & A.D. Poyser in autumn 2001.

**Chris Wernham**

## **MANX SHEARWATER MEETING**

A Manx shearwater symposium will be held at Funchal, Madeira on 12-15 September 2000. Contact Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo das Aves - Madiera, Rua dos Murças, 3-3 Andar, Sala A, 9000-058 Funchal, Madiera, Portugal. email: [speamad@mail.telepac.pt](mailto:speamad@mail.telepac.pt)

## **THE GREAT AUK**

Errol Fuller has now published his monograph on the great auk in a 448 page large hardback book. This must be the most exhaustive treatment of the species so far, with chapters on every aspect of the natural history of the bird, as well as chronicling the history of the bird in art and artefacts. The book is well laid out and is heavily illustrated. It costs £45 and is available direct from the author and publisher post free. Contact Great Auk Publishing, 65 Springfield Road, Southborough, Kent, TH4 0RD, England, or email to: [errol@hoppa.demon.co.uk](mailto:errol@hoppa.demon.co.uk)

## **THE FUTURE OF *MARINE ORNITHOLOGY***

The African Seabird Group, based in Cape Town, South Africa, and the Pacific Seabird Group, based in California, USA, have this month formally agreed jointly to manage and publish *Marine Ornithology*: an International Journal of Seabird Science and Conservation from its 2001 volume.

John Cooper and the African Seabird Group founded *Marine Ornithology* (initially named *Cormorant*) in 1976, and it has a distinguished international board of editors. Under the new joint venture agreement, *Marine Ornithology* will be managed by a Steering Committee appointed by both groups. Tony Gaston of Ottawa, Canada, and John Cooper of Cape Town will serve as co-editors and have already started the process of inviting new members to the editorial board. The groups hope that seabird biologists and managers will publish their work in *Marine Ornithology* to attract the widest possible international readership.

In a new departure, a web site ([www.marineornithology.org](http://www.marineornithology.org)) has been registered and is currently under construction that will make *Marine Ornithology* available to anyone free of charge as an e-journal from 2001. However, *Marine Ornithology* will continue to be published in paper format for those who wish to subscribe and also be available to institutional subscribers for archiving in libraries. The two groups hope that other seabird groups and societies in Asia, Europe and elsewhere will join into this joint venture over the next few years.

For further information contact John Cooper at [jcooper@botzoo.uct.ac.za](mailto:jcooper@botzoo.uct.ac.za)

or Tony Gaston at [Tony.Gaston@ec.gc.ca](mailto:Tony.Gaston@ec.gc.ca).

## **From *MARINE ORNITHOLOGY*, Vols 24, 25 & 26**

Three volumes of *Marine Ornithology*, relating to 1996, 1997 and 1998 all arrived together in February 2000. The journal is trying to catch up its serious backlog prior to its transferral to joint ownership with the Pacific Seabird Group (see earlier). A letter with these three volumes indicates that we should expect Volume 27 (1999) later this year, along with the first part of Volume 28. The 1999 volume will be devoted to presentations made at the third international penguin conference, held in Cape Town in 1996. The journal has also become A4 in size - slightly annoying for those of us wanting to store these volumes alongside previous ones, but apparently a considerable money saver.

Volume 24 starts with a paper by Irynej Skira and co-workers on the short-tailed shearwater in Tasmania - an estimated 11.5 million burrows of this species occur within 209 colonies covering only 1813 ha. Five colonies hold over 50% of all burrows. These figures put NW Europe's breeding seabird populations a little into the shade! Huin and Croxall report on the ingestion of plastics and fishing gear in albatrosses on south Georgia. This work, carried out in 1993/94 showed a six-fold increase in the incidence of fishing lines and hooks in these seabirds compared with the previous year. This coincides with a jump in the fishery for toothfish around the island. A paper by Dimiter Nankimov summarises the seabird populations of the Black Sea. A total of 41 species occur there, with 24 breeding. The

Sea holds over 90% of the World's population of Mediterranean gull, 75% of the pygmy cormorant and 65% of the Sandwich terns.

Volume 25 is larger (at 87 pages than Volume 24. Rob Barrett and colleagues review razorbill morphometrics and show distinct clines in measurements in northern Norway and Russia. However, differences are not great enough to be able to attribute source of birds on the basis of measurements alone. Early results from radio- and satellite-tracking of Westland petrels off New Zealand are reported by Freeman and co-workers. Brothers and Foster report on seabird catch rates, causes and solutions in the Australian tuna long-lining fleet. Large papers review diets of Atlantic petrels and yellow-eyed penguins.

Volume 26 has an interesting paper by Dirk Spennemann on the exploitation by Japanese feather collectors of the seabirds of uninhabited atolls in the Pacific around 1890s and 1900s. The main markets for this trade were milliners in Paris and Hamburg and it seems likely that some 3.5 million seabirds were killed, with albatrosses, frigate birds and tropic birds being particular targets. Outright extirpation of a few islands occurred.

This brief review only gives a few highlights (in my eyes) of these issues. All interested in southern seabirds should read these volumes. Enquiries for subscriptions should be addressed African Seabird Group, PO Box 34113, Rhodes Gift 7707, South Africa, or to [jcooper@botzoo.uct.ac.za](mailto:jcooper@botzoo.uct.ac.za)

Mark Tasker

### **From PACIFIC SEABIRDS Vol 25 (2)**

Alan Burger and co-workers document a change in distribution of brown pelicans in the 1997 El Nino, and Tony Gaston and Anne Harfenist show that the timing of breeding varies on either side of Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) for ancient murrelets.

The irrational bias against cormorants (this time double-crested cormorants) erupted when some 1000 were shot illegally at a colony in New York. Much of the remainder of this issue is taken up with regional reports, accounts, a membership directory and book reviews

### **From PACIFIC SEABIRDS Vol 26 (1)**

John Warham was awarded one of PSG's Lifetime Achievement awards at the 1998 annual meeting: his plenary presentation on remaining puzzles in the petrel world fills the first pages of this issue. He feels that the current split in the albatrosses to a greater number of species, may be premature and deserves further reflection.

The two articles in this issue are on nesting marbled murrelets, and working out ways of protecting seabirds during a mast demotion on Johnston Atoll.

Russian seabird biologists seem to have a harder time than others. In March 1999, Natalya Litvinenko was working on Karamzin in the Bolshoi Pelis archipelago, when the Navy decided to use the island for live firing practice. She was lucky to find a crevice to hide in until the firing was over, but reported that the island was covered in a bloody mash of birds. It used to be home to 150 pairs of

“locally endangered” streaked shearwaters, black-tailed gulls and Chinese egrets.

The majority of the issue is taken up with abstracts of the 1999 meeting at Blaine, Washington. This included a symposium on the effects on seabirds of climate change - this looks to have been the best exploration of the issue, with data, yet. Another symposium was on seabird by-catch - again a very important current issue, that had a good turn-out from all corners of the planet apart from our own.

### **From *SEEVÖGEL* Vol. 20 No 3**

Reinhard Möckel and Heiko Michaelis review the development of new gull colonies in the Brandenburg/Saxony region of Germany. These have developed in flooded former brown coal mines. 2000 pairs of black-headed gull have moved in, along with herring, yellow-legged, Mediterranean and common gulls, common terns and cormorants. However, these colonies may not last long; apparently water levels continue to rise and all breeding sites may be flooded in due course. David Fleet and colleagues review beached bird survey results from German North Sea coasts in 1998/99. Results were heavily affected by the wreck of the cargo vessel *Pallas*, especially large numbers of eiders and common scoter being oiled. A seabird wreck in late winter (guillemot, fulmar, gannet, kittiwake and razorbill) also affected the oiling percentages.

### **From *SEEVÖGEL* Vol. 20 No 4**

The gannets on Helgoland obviously receive a lot of attention, being the only breeding pairs in Germany. On 17 June 1998, Katrin Totschek and

two co-workers recorded every movement of a pair of gannets over all daylight hours. Sleeping, looking around and preening seem to dominate the behaviour of the birds

### **FROM *BIRDLIFE IN EUROPE***

A while ago, SGN reported on the disturbance of the world's most important colony of Dalmatian pelicans by local fishermen who fired shots into the air, causing loss of 80% of nests in the colony as eggs got chilled. BirdLife reports that the colony relaid two weeks later, this time successfully. The incident also seems to have prompted the clearance of a bureaucratic blockage in Greek government, and steps are being taken to protect the site. However, the Hellenic Ornithological Society report that insufficient colonies of shag and Audouin's gull, among other species have been protected under European legislation in Greece.

The residues from a large oil spill in the Caspian Sea in May/June 1998 continued to damage birds in 1999, according to the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society.. Particularly affected species included great crested and red-necked grebes and herring gulls.

One of the great seawatching locations in Europe, Cape Clear Bird Observatory has launched an appeal to raise funds for essential refurbishment. If you are able to help, please send contributions to Birdwatch Ireland Cape Clear Appeal, Ruttledge House, 8 Longford Place, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland.



**From *WORLD BIRDWATCH* Vol 21  
No 3**

This issue is a special one to co-incide with the BirdLife World Congress held in Malaysia in 1999. It summarises all that the BirdLife partnership is doing globally. A few seabird facts: Penguin parade on Phillip Island, Victoria, Australia is the country's third largest tourist destination after the Great Barrier Reef and Ayres Rock. One thousand jobs are generated locally by this attraction, which brings in more than half a million visitors who spend an estimated US\$63 million. In the meantime, the Boulders Bay penguin colony in South Africa generates around \$2.4 million. Six-eight thousand people visit Cousin Island in the Seychelles every year, sustaining this island that was once a loss making coconut plantation.

**From *WORLD BIRDWATCH* Vol 21  
No 3**

Australian Scientists are attempting to relocate the entire population of Gould's petrel from their sole breeding grounds on Cabbage Tree Island to rabbit-free Boondelbah Island. So far, 100 fledglings have been translocated by National Park rangers and 100 nest boxes installed on the site. There are fewer than 500 pairs of Gould's petrel left and now rabbits have destroyed their only known nesting site.

Crazy ants have invaded another seabird island: this time the Australian Christmas Island. The yellow crazy ants are killing off land crabs, and consequently there are dense carpets of tree seedlings are springing up, with unknown consequences for future forest composition. The crazy ants also farm scale insects, and high infestations of these cause canopy

dieback. The special birds of Christmas Island, including the endemic Abbott's booby nest in the canopy, so it is likely that the crazy ant introduction will affect these species.

**From *WWF ARCTIC BULLETIN* No.s  
3.99 and 4.99**

Little of direct relevance to seabirds was reported in issue 3.99, except that the first oil drilling in deep water west of Greenland is scheduled for summer 2000. There are obvious concerns for the seabirds life of the area.

The large seabird colonies on Novaya Zemlya in northern Russia have been put forward as a key element in a proposed Willem Barents Memorial Park. Negotiations continue with the Russian government.

**From *PENGUIN CONSERVATION*  
Vol. 12 (2)**

John Orbell describes his technique for removing oil from plumage using very finely powdered iron filings to soak up the contamination, and then removing the oil-iron mixture with magnets. Tests have been done on feathers and road killed penguins from Phillip Island, Australia.

In a measure of success of traditional cleaning, Phil Whittington describes the survivors of the *Apollo Sea* oil spill. Readers with good memories will recall that this bulk ore carrier sank off South Africa and oiled approximately 10,000 penguins. About 5,000 of these were cleaned and released, and 4,000 of these were tagged. Over five years since release, about 73% of the oiled banded penguins have been seen alive at breeding colonies in South Africa and Namibia. About a

third are certainly still alive after five years. Mortality rates appear to be similar to those of unoled birds.

In a long and interesting article, Peter Barham, a polymer physicist, describes his development of a new plastic tag for penguins. Although not complete, he set himself the task of designing a tag that was non-toxic, not be adversely affected by seawater of UV light, must be stable over -55 to +40, must not harm the birds and must have minimal hydrodynamic drag. The bands must be able to carry numbers up to six characters long readable by eye at 5m. The hydrodynamic drag point is particularly important as other researchers have demonstrated that penguins need up to 20% more power to move through the water with the present metal tags. Prototypes will be tested in 2000. Plastics have a further advantage over metal: it is possible to imbed active electronic components in them - thus potentially neatly combining tag and the current external devices used to log position, time, depth etc. I have a suspicion that we may be seeing the development of replacements for our current metal rings in due course. A further long article deals with the hand-rearing of penguins on solid food.

Studies on the stress hormones in penguins visited by tourists indicate that most birds can habituate - in other words effects are worse on penguins at rarely visited colonies than in colonies visited frequently.

### **FROM SEA SWALLOW 48**

More than half of the issue is taken up with analysis of seabird and landbird records sent in from around the World by various members. Submissions of landbird records were evidently down

for 1998. Other articles in this issue include a description of the birds of Histria, two passage descriptions from seafarers, a complaint from Bill Bourne that he is having trouble keeping up with seabird literature, and two articles on early observations of seabirds.

### **INFORMATION REQUEST**

Piro Genovesi is looking for published and unpublished information on predation and disturbance of gull colonies by stray dogs. All contributions will be gratefully received and acknowledged when published. Contact Piero Genovesi, Istituto Nazionale per la Fauna Selvatica, Via Ca'Fornacetta 9, 40064 Ozzano Emilia (BO), Italy: email: [infspapk@iperbole.bologna.it](mailto:infspapk@iperbole.bologna.it)