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Wildlife

Robert Atkinson BSc MSc DPhil
(head of department)

Colin Booty BSc
(deputy head of department)

Tim Thomas MBE Adam Grogan BSc
(senior scientific officers)

Ros Clubb BSc DPhil
(scientific officer)

Sophie Adwick BSc MSc
(scientific information officer)

Alison Charles VN
Bel Deering BA MA PGCert(Res)
Rupert Griffiths Andrew Kelly BSc PhD
(RSPCA wildlife centre managers)

Sue Gallagher Carol Pye
(administration staff)

Despite growing public concern, the appreciation of the welfare needs of wild animals is often inadequate. The RSPCA wildlife department seeks to improve welfare provisions for captive and free-living wild animals. This is achieved through research, promoting an awareness of the requirements of animals, and an emphasis on a precautionary and humane approach to human interactions with wild animals.

Changes to the licensing of dangerous wild animals

Protection currently afforded to 'dangerous wild animals' has been threatened by proposals to amend the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 (the Act).

Those who wish to keep animals of a species listed on the Schedule to the Act – which covers tigers to camels and vipers to scorpions – must apply for a licence from their local authority, who should then check that conditions are safe for the public and appropriate for the species concerned before issuing a licence. Although the Act and its enforcement have many weaknesses, it does at least provide an opportunity to check conditions before animals are acquired.

Last year, the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) proposed various changes to the Act which would greatly reduce protection for animals. Most concerning was a suggestion to remove all reference to animal welfare, leaving the Act solely about public safety. Other proposals would greatly increase the time between inspections – licences would run for two years rather than one and, more worryingly, inspections for licence renewal would not be mandatory. This could leave several years between inspections, during which conditions and animal welfare could deteriorate considerably.

PROTECTION UNDER THREAT

The RSPCA wildlife department highlighted the danger posed to animal welfare by these changes. Thankfully, Defra have decided not to remove animal welfare from the Act or waive requirements to inspect at the time of renewal. The proposal to inspect every two years has, however, been retained. These changes are expected to come into force in 2010. While not as bad as it could be, this still represents a backward step for animal welfare.

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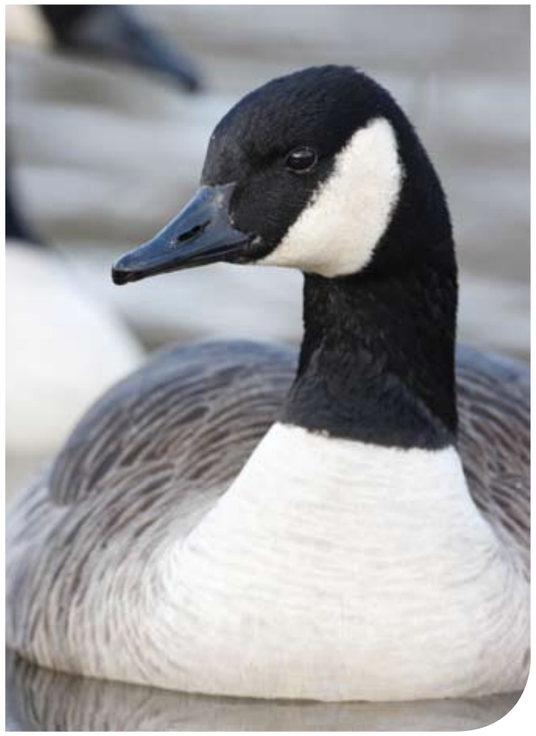
Wildlife licensing

Wildlife licences are issued by government bodies to allow people to undertake activities that would otherwise be unlawful. Such licences may be general or individual. General licences are issued to allow certain actions without the need for people to apply for a specific licence. They are used to regulate activities such as the sale or killing of certain species but with minimum bureaucracy. However, those acting under a general licence must be satisfied they are acting within the provisions of that licence and the law.

The species covered by such licences, the actions permitted and the conditions attached are important from an animal welfare perspective and the RSPCA wildlife department therefore made detailed submissions to separate consultations undertaken during the year by Natural England and the Welsh Assembly.

The outcome of the Welsh consultation will not be available until summer 2010 but in England the changes have now come into effect. We questioned the evidence regarding the addition of Canada geese and Monk and Ring-necked parakeets to the general licences issued for the purpose of conserving wild birds but Natural England did not change their position. However, they did agree to include guidance regarding a definition of humane killing and to add a note reminding users of their obligations under the Animal Welfare Act.

The killing of Herring gulls will now only be allowed under the air safety general licence. We provided evidence that nest or egg control can be effective and humane in dealing with problems the gulls may cause in urban areas and they agreed to continue to allow the destruction of nests and eggs where necessary for public health and safety.



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The effect of satellite tagging devices on seabirds

The RSPCA has long been concerned about the welfare of animals used in research, as demonstrated by the article on editorial policies in scientific journals (page 19). Wild animals are no exception and have been equipped with a wide variety of devices to collect data on their movements, foraging behaviour, dive depth and duration etc. However, few studies critically investigate the effects that these devices have on their subject animals.

As part of our work on the survival of rehabilitated oiled seabirds, we commissioned Rory Wilson and Sylvie Vandanbeele, of Swansea University, to investigate different attachment methods for satellite tags. As part of her study, Sylvie reviewed 357 papers where animal-attached devices were used on seabirds, to determine the extent to which the authors had considered the effects of such devices.

These papers were split into two groups: those termed 'direct' – where the aim of the paper was to assess the impacts of such devices (42) and 'indirect' – where effects were recorded incidentally. A majority of the direct papers (38/42) recorded an effect on the subject animal, compared with only 13 of 315 indirect papers. This indicates that although devices may cause problems, researchers do not invest enough time and resources to investigate these effects. Devices affecting their wearers not only impair the welfare of their study animal, but also run the risk of biasing conclusions about populations of animals based on data collected from a few compromised individuals.

This paper has been submitted to the *Journal of Field Ornithology*.

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A role for wildlife casualties in conservation

Wildlife rehabilitation is not usually considered important in terms of wildlife conservation. Rehabilitation works to improve the welfare of the individual, while conservation works to improve the survival of populations. However there are times when rehabilitation can benefit the cause of conservation.

One example is the role that casualty animals can play in disease surveillance, especially if the animal has died. Post mortems can reveal much about an individual animal, but they can also identify potential threats to the wider population. The hedgehog is considered a common species in the UK, but recent reports suggest a decline in the population across the country.

RSPCA wildlife centres submitted hedgehog carcasses to Bristol University as part of a project investigating this decline. The hedgehogs were subject to a post mortem and their livers analysed for first and second generation rodenticides. These results show that hedgehogs are exposed to these rodenticides, with 57.5 per cent being exposed to second-generation rodenticides. Overall, the study indicates that these rodenticides present as much of a risk to an insectivore like the hedgehog as they do to a predator of rodents, like the polecat. This therefore creates a challenge for the management of rodent infestations. We continue to recommend removing food sources and places of shelter as the first methods to control rodents. The use of rodenticides should only be practised as a last resort.

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Reference

Dowding, C.V., Shore, R.F., Worgan, A., Baker, P.J. and Harris, S. (2010) *Accumulation of anticoagulant rodenticides in a non-target insectivore, the European hedgehog (Erinaceus europaeus)* Environmental pollution. 158, 161-166.

RSPCA wildlife centres review

The centres continue to strive for a better understanding of the casualties in their care. Numerous research projects have been undertaken this year to investigate post-release survival in several species. Techniques such as radio tracking are used, as well as simpler methods such as marking, e.g. ringing birds and relying on re-sightings for information on how long these animals survive and how far they have travelled. Some of this work is carried out in conjunction with the wildlife department and has been promoted widely at various conferences and symposia. In addition, the wildlife department and centres continue to develop species rehabilitation protocols, based on best practice and sound science.

RSPCA EAST WINCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

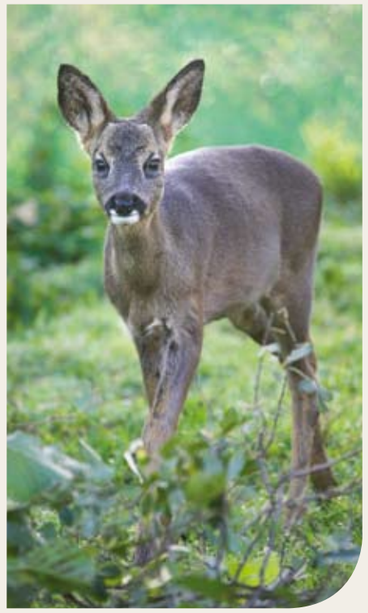
Update on roe deer tracking

Between 2005 and 2009, East Winch and West Hatch wildlife centres jointly released and tracked 12 hand-reared roe deer fawns (*Capreolus capreolus*). The five females and seven males were fitted with ear-mounted tags and hard released whilst approximately six months old.

Staff tracked the deer daily and recorded deer positions via either a visual sighting or compass bearings and triangulation. All tracking was done during the hours of daylight, though it did vary between the morning and afternoon. Two of the deer are still being tracked. Preliminary data for the remaining animals shows that three of the deer survived until the battery on the tag died and four were confirmed dead by a mixture of dog attack, shooting, unknown causes and euthanasia (all bodies found).

A further two deer have inconclusive outcomes as their tags were recovered, having been torn out. It is unknown if this was an accident or an intentional act, after the animal was shot. Both animals survived for over 70 days, and no body was recovered for either. One deer shed its tag after 30 days but was seen alive at a later date.

A preliminary view of the data indicates that all of the female deer remained close to the release site at both centres. In contrast, all of the males made noticeable movement away from the release site. It can, however, only be said that this held true at the precise time of radio tracking and it is entirely possible that at other periods such as during darkness, the behaviour would yield different data.



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RSPCA STAPELEY GRANGE WILDLIFE CENTRE

Post-release survival of hand-reared pipistrelle bats (*Pipistrellus* spp.)

In the *RSPCA Science group review* (2006), we reported on our pipistrelle bat radio-tracking project, which demonstrated that hand-reared bats were able to survive independently in the wild, at least in the short-term (Kelly *et al.*, 2008). Since then, we have radio-tracked a further 13 bats.

In an attempt to measure long term survival, 39 released bats were fitted with individual, numbered 2.9mm aluminium 'C' rings (see photo). Roost boxes on site were checked regularly (under licence) for the presence of ringed bats following release. Of the ten bats radio-tracked in 2007, three were retrieved within four nights after becoming trapped in roof spaces and the transmitters removed. These bats were subsequently over-wintered and released in 2008. The remaining seven bats were tracked for between four and ten days before the signal was lost. Six ringed bats were recorded in roost boxes with the minimum post-release survival ranging from 27 – 236 days (Table 1).

Of the three bats over-wintered, one was tracked for 10 days and continued to use the release box for at least 30 days. The tag failed on the second bat after three days and was removed. However, the bat continued to use the bat box for at least 28 days. The third was tracked for two days before the signal was stationary in a roof space for three days before being retrieved. The tag was removed and the bat was subsequently released again two weeks later.

The results of this project demonstrate that hand-reared, orphaned pipistrelle bats are able to survive in the wild following release and we can be confident that the rehabilitation process is effective.

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References

Kelly, A., Goodwin, S., Grogan, A. and Mathews, F. (2008) *Post-release survival of hand-reared pipistrelle bats (Pipistrellus spp.).* Animal Welfare.17, 375-382.

TABLE 1: Post-release survival of six ringed bats released at RSPCA Stapeley Grange in 2007. [1] [3] were also radio-tracked (both for 10 days). [2] retrieved day 27.

RING NO.	SPECIES	SEX	RELEASE WEIGHT	NO. OF DAYS
Z3283[1]	COMMON	FEMALE	5.2	53
Z3254	COMMON	MALE	4.2	53
Z2943[2]	COMMON	MALE	4.5	27
Z3279	SOPRANO	FEMALE	4.5	38
Z3280	SOPRANO	FEMALE	4.8	236
Z3278[3]	SOPRANO	FEMALE	5.2	235

RSPCA WEST HATCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

Peregrine falcon rehabilitation at West Hatch

Between January 2005 and November 2009, 42 peregrine falcons were admitted to RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre. The rehabilitation of peregrine falcons gives rise to difficult challenges, including factors such as their high wingloading – each cm^2 of wing carrying 0.70g which is double that of a Common Buzzard (Fox, 1995). This combined with a specialised hunting technique explains post-fledging dependency periods in the wild of up to two months (White *et al.*,1994).

Some of our casualties are recently fledged juveniles that have made flight errors due to inexperience. Since 2007, we have had the help of peregrine falcon nest site researchers, and returned six juveniles to their nest sites. The use of plastic coloured rings has enabled the success of these returns to be assessed and we have found that juveniles returned to the nest after a separation as long as eight days, are accepted and fed by the parents.

Those that cannot be returned to the nest sites need time to improve their skills and fitness before release, to mimic the dependency period. Falconry techniques are deployed to allow for these needs (Holz *et al.*, 2006) found that survival of peregrines provided with falconry training was better than those without. The wildlife centre radio-tracks these juvenile birds as an essential part of their training process, and this also permits assessment of their post-release survival. One goal of the tracking work is to establish that released peregrines are capable of catching prey. Since 2008 we have tracked three released juvenile peregrines trained with falconry techniques and all were recorded successfully catching prey. Longer-term survival requires satellite tracking to assess.

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Footnotes and references

Holz *et al.* (2006) *Fitness Level as a Determining Factor in the Survival of Rehabilitated Peregrine Falcons (Falco peregrinus) and Brown Goshawks (Accipiter fasciatus) Released back Into the Wild.* Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery 20(1):15-20.

Fox, N. (1995) *Understanding the Bird of Prey.* Hancock House Publishers. pp.40-44.

White, C.M. *et al.* (1994) *Family Falconidae,* in del Hoyo, J., Elliot, A. and Sargatal, J. *Handbook of Birds of the World: New World Vultures to Guineafowl,* 2, Barcelona: Lynx Edicions, pp. 216–275, plates 24–28.

RSPCA MALLYDAMS WOOD WILDLIFE CENTRE

Air gun shooting injuries in gulls

Annually, over 550 large gulls are admitted to the RSPCA Mallydams Wood Wildlife Centre in East Sussex. These are generally orphaned chicks that have fallen from urban nesting sites. However, an increasing number of adult birds from the Southeast region have been shot using air rifles or shotguns.

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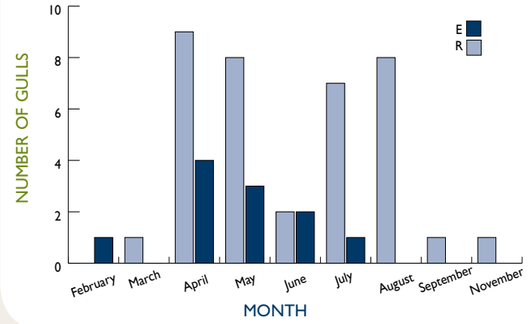
FIGURE 1: Multiple pellets can be found in single birds.

In 2000/01, only 16 birds were found with visible air gun pellets and associated injuries, but by 2008/09, this number had increased to 48. The main victims are adult birds, with peak admissions between April and August, when birds are defending or maintaining nest sites, providing static and easy targets for assailants (Table 1). The frequency of birds admitted with no visible injuries, but unable to fly, necessitates all gulls to be routinely X-rayed. Many birds have typical fractures of the limb – for example fractured ulnas – but some have visible pellets embedded in the head and chest tissue. Multiple pellets were found in 10 per cent of the birds examined, indicating the animal was maimed then shot while on the ground. In one incident, five pellets were found in a single bird (Figure 1).

These figures from the Southeast region indicate a possible trend throughout the country. Gulls are afforded a level of protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 legislation, but causing suffering to an individual animal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and discharging a firearm in a public place carry further penalties.

Attitudes towards urban nesting gulls are strongly divided, with 50 per cent of coastal communities wishing local authorities would implement proactive plans to reduce gull numbers. Nonetheless, deliberate acts of cruelty on individual animals will not resolve this issue. It is essential that further research be conducted to understand urban gulls and offer humane alternatives to control populations where necessary.

TABLE 1: Outcome for gulls admitted during 2009: euthanised (E) or released back into the wild (R).



Influencing decision makers

Scientific staff from the RSPCA's wildlife department promote the Society's agreed policies, aims and objectives through advocacy to government, statutory bodies and other organisations at the highest level. They are members of many national and international committees and working groups and also have key input into a range of consultations, both to government and non-governmental bodies, on a wide range of wildlife issues.

Representation on external committees

- The Deer Initiative.
- Ashdown Area Deer Group.
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Animal Welfare Act secondary legislation working groups:
  - Primate as pets.
  - Wild animals in circuses.
  - Lyssavirus in bats.
- British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC) steering committee.
- Species Survival Network (SSN) board.
- World Conservation Union's otter specialist group.
- Wildlife and Countryside Link (trustee).
- Wildlife and Countryside Link Wildlife Trade working group (chair).
- Whalewatch coalition.
- Marine Animal Rescue Coalition (MARC).
- Animal Welfare Network (Wales).
- Zoos Forum.

Consultation responses

Defra

- Proposals for fairer and better environmental enforcement.
- Proposals for a new independent body for animal health.
- Amendments to legislation allowing lay vaccination of badgers against bovine tuberculosis.

Natural England

- General licences under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Welsh Assembly government

- Tuberculosis Eradication Order.
- General licences under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Committee of Advertising Practice

- Review of British Code of Advertising.

Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice

- Review of Code for TV and Radio Advertisements.

Meetings and events

- Meeting with Eurogroup on European standards of care for non-domestic companion animals.
- Launch of Highways Agency's Deer Aware driver information programme.
- Joint conference with Lantra, RSPCA Education and other RSPCA science group departments for prospective teachers of the new Land-based and Environmental Diploma – animal welfare considerations.
- Stakeholder meeting of the England bovine TB eradication group.
- The Mammal Society Autumn Symposium on human-wildlife conflict resolution.
- Wildlife and Countryside Link whale group meeting to discuss future scope of work.
- Wildlife and Countryside Wildlife Trade working group meeting with the National Wildlife Crime Unit.
- Presentation to students at Hadlow College, Kent on RSPCA rehabilitation.
- Presentation to the elephant sub-panel of the Zoos Forum on the welfare of zoo elephants.
- Expert witness in USA court case involving elephants in circuses.
- International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) conference, Virginia Beach. RSPCA co-sponsored event with workshop on the importance of post-release monitoring in assessing survival of rehabilitated wildlife.
- Presentation on survival and breeding rates of elephants at British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums annual general meeting and conference.
- Otter biodiversity steering group meeting.
- Bat Conservation Trust conference. Presentation on the development of a bat flight at RSPCA Stapeley Grange Wildlife Centre and radio tracking of rehabilitated juvenile pipistrelle bats after release (see page 25).
- British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council conference. Presentation on the importance of research in wildlife rehabilitation.

External funding

- An assessment of the effects of transmitters on guillemots for satellite tracking.
- Research by the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, Oxford University, into the welfare effects on animals of re-wilding.

Scientific publications

Kelly, A., Leighton, K. and Newton, J. (in press) *Using stable isotopes to investigate the provenance of a Eurasian Eagle Owl (Bubo bubo) found in Norfolk, England*. British Birds.

Couper, D. and Gibbons, L. (in press) *First record of Tetrameres Species Parasites in Tawny Owls (Strix aluco) in the UK*. The Veterinary Record.

Griffiths, R., Murn, C. and Clubb, R. (in press) *Survivorship of rehabilitated juvenile Tawny Owls (Strix aluco) released without support food, a radio tracking study*. Avian Biology Research.

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