



# Wildlife

The appreciation of the welfare needs of wild animals is often inadequate. The RSPCA wildlife team, together with the RSPCA wildlife centres, seek to improve the welfare of captive and free-living wild animals through research, promoting an awareness of the requirements of animals, and an emphasis on a precautionary and humane approach to human interactions.

## Ringling of Canada geese in Cumbria

Early in 2012 the Windermere goose management group proposed a cull of Canada geese to reduce the population on Lake Windermere. The RSPCA supported local campaigns to stop the cull, which was postponed so that further research could be undertaken into the population to inform any future management plans.

The RSPCA is therefore undertaking a five-year study in collaboration with Cumbria University. The aim is to collect information on the Canada goose population by ringing as many geese as possible so that they can be easily identified and reported to us.

In July, we rounded up 216 Canada geese. All – except for two that had already been ringed – were ringed with red rings bearing a unique four letter code and aluminium rings from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

We expect to repeat this process again over the next four years to ring as many Canada geese as possible during the

moultling season (July) and the breeding season (April).

If anybody sees a Canada goose with one of these rings, please report the sighting via the BTO website: [www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/ringing/ringingscheme](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/ringing/ringingscheme).



Captive Animals' Protection Society, Rachel Barrat



## Wild birds and netting

Each year around 2,000 reports are made to the RSPCA about wild birds trapped in or behind netting. Pigeons and gulls are the most commonly affected species – in 2012 we received 924 reports of pigeons trapped by netting and 628 about gulls<sup>1</sup>.

A major cause is bird-deterrent netting. This can be effective in keeping birds off structures without resorting to lethal measures, but it must be fit for purpose, correctly installed and regularly checked and maintained. Problems arise when netting is put up incorrectly or becomes damaged, leaving gaps where birds can enter and become trapped. These birds can suffer a long and painful death from injury or starvation.

Unfortunately bird-deterrent netting is often fixed in high or hard-to-reach areas, making rescue of trapped animals difficult

and dangerous. If the issue is unresolved, then RSPCA officers are called repeatedly to the same address, resulting in further animal suffering and depleting charitable resources. In response to recurring reports, the RSPCA's wildlife team has been writing to property owners urging them to take more responsibility, asking them to remove or repair netting that is causing an issue and to put in place a system of checking remaining netting for trapped birds. Seventy percent of property owners contacted via letter have agreed to take measures to resolve the problem.

The RSPCA leaflet *Wild birds and netting* is available to order from [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk).

### REFERENCE

1. Figures from RSPCA data 2008-2012. Data includes all types of netting (bird-deterrent netting, garden netting, pond netting), excluding sports nets or litter.

## Circus ban in sight

The RSPCA is hopeful that the use of wild animals in travelling circuses will be a thing of the past from the end of 2015. Some 28 wild animals, including lions and tigers, continue to travel and perform in the UK with Peter Jolly's Circus and Circus Mondao.

The Westminster government released draft circus regulations in April that would bring an end to this in England – a result the RSPCA has long campaigned for, along with the Born Free Foundation, the British Veterinary Association and the Captive Animals' Protection Society. Wales has indicated willingness to come under the Westminster legislation (crucial to ensure the problem does not simply move across borders), but Scotland and Northern Ireland wish to consult further.

The RSPCA responded to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) select committee's inquiry on the draft Bill, supporting the ban but drawing attention to some shortcomings; such as failing to define a 'travelling circus' and permitting wild animals to tour with a circus, albeit not to perform or be exhibited.

The select committee produced a report and recommendations on the draft Bill in July, proposing to restrict the ban to certain species including elephants and big cats, the remainder to be licensed by a scheme the RSPCA has no faith in whatsoever. Thankfully, this was rejected by the Westminster government.

It is imperative that an amended ban is fully implemented at the earliest opportunity so that England can join the dozen other countries that have stopped circuses using wild animals.



## Marmoset rehoming project

This year has seen a further five pet primate cruelty cases, with three successful prosecutions.

Four of these primates – three marmosets and one squirrel monkey – are now living happily in the new Monkey World Ape Rescue Centre complex, which we managed to fill in just seven months. We are now planning to help Monkey World build another enclosure to help even more animals in need.

Primates are highly intelligent social animals with complex behavioural needs that are difficult to satisfy in captivity and they are not suitable as pets. The RSPCA wants to see an end to primates kept as pets and we are calling for this in our submission to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs select committee of MPs.



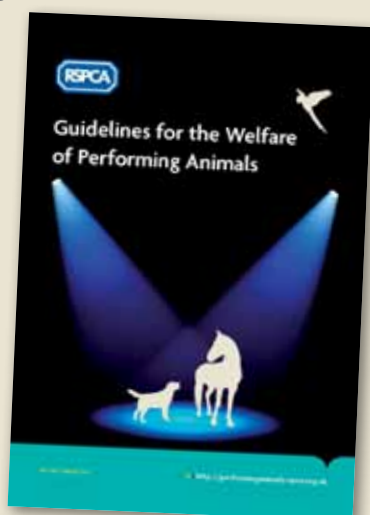
## Animals used in the media

The RSPCA has long been concerned about animals used in performance, including films, TV programmes, advertising and theatre.

Following the Westminster government's refusal to better regulate the use of performing animals, the RSPCA developed a set of voluntary guidelines. These *Guidelines for the Welfare of Performing Animals* firstly question the necessity of using live animals and, when animals are used, provide advice about what steps to take to prevent suffering and ensure the animals' needs are met.

To date, the guidelines have been used on productions such as CBBC's *Pet School*, ITV's *Top Dog Model* and Channel 4's *Jamie and Jimmy's Food Fight Club* and have been downloaded almost 2,500 times from [www.performinganimals.rspca.org.uk](http://www.performinganimals.rspca.org.uk).

The wildlife scientific team helped train five specialist performing animal inspectors who are now in the field, delivering the advice contained in the guidelines to production companies, as well as investigating complaints involving performing animals.



Joe Murphy/RSPCA Photolibrary

## RSPCA wildlife centres review

The RSPCA's four wildlife centres continue to strive for a better understanding of the casualties in their care.

Research is undertaken to investigate the treatment and post-release survival of rehabilitated casualties using techniques such as radio tracking and ringing of birds and bats. A summary of this research can be found in the *Veterinary Record* doi:10.1136/vr.101139<sup>2</sup>

This year, the RSPCA wildlife centres, in conjunction with the wildlife team, have completed and published 16 protocols on wildlife rehabilitation and care, covering a wide variety of species commonly admitted.

These protocols are now available to RSPCA branch and animal centres who also admit wildlife.





## RSPCA EAST WINCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

### Veterinary care of wild owl casualties

Injured wild owls are commonly presented for attention. Vets at RSPCA East Winch and RSPCA West Hatch wildlife centres co-authored an article published in the journal *In Practice* to assist veterinary surgeons in dealing with them. Most owls rescued by the public have traumatic injuries from man-made hazards, in particular vehicle collisions. Other common incidents include entanglement in garden netting and barbed wire fencing, and birds trapped down chimneys. Recent studies have identified a potential new threat to barn owls by exposure to anticoagulant rodenticides.

Thorough clinical examination is essential to assess their injuries and guide decisions about the chances of recovery. Owls must

be fully fit in order to survive back in the wild. Many have severe injuries and have to be euthanased immediately. Pre-release assessment, including aviary exercise, is necessary and only birds with a survival chance similar to their wild counterparts should be released.

Routine examination of the eyes should be undertaken since they are vulnerable to injury. Radiography of traumatic injuries is also useful. Obtaining a detailed history of the owl from the finder is important to assist with clinical investigations and decisions about release.

Young owls (owlets) are often found and taken into care. However it is important to identify the species before taking such



action, since different species have different fledging strategies and they may be best left alone. For example, juvenile tawny owls found on the ground should generally be left alone because they can climb branches and are probably still being cared for by parents. Conversely, young barn owls found out of the nest are usually in need of assistance.



## RSPCA WEST HATCH WILDLIFE CENTRE

### Rehabilitation of seabirds contaminated by Polyisobutene

Two incidents occurred in the English Channel that resulted in the mass contamination of seabirds with an unidentified sticky, glue-like substance. The species most affected was the common guillemot *Uria aalge*.

A total of 551 birds were rescued; 308 in January between Charlestown, Cornwall and Swanage, Dorset and 243 in April between Veyan, Cornwall and Seaton, Devon.

Our treatment regime was based on previous oils spills, with variations to remove the stubborn contaminant as it persisted after detergent washing. A hydrogenated vegetable spread was used as a solvent, followed by a two-stage detergent wash.

The contaminant involved in both incidents was identified by Plymouth University's Petroleum and Environmental Geochemistry Group as Polyisobutene (PIB), an industrial oil-based copolymer that is transported by sea. Uses range from an engine oil additive to chewing gum ingredient. Ships were legally allowed to discharge a maximum of 100-litres of PIB when flushing their tanks into the sea.

Different effects were observed throughout the veterinary treatment and rehabilitation process; from Packed Cell Volume (PCV) tests we found no anaemia from the haemolysis caused by the breakdown in blood cells and no haemorrhagic enteritis, normally associated with oil spills.

In total, 127 birds (41 percent) were released from the first incident and 51 (21 percent) from the second. In October 2013, after a

joint campaign by the RSPCA, the RSPB and wildlife trusts, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) reclassified higher viscosity PIBs prohibiting their discharge.





## RSPCA MALLYDAMS WOOD WILDLIFE CENTRE

### Factors influencing the admission of casualty herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*) into a rehabilitation centre and post-release survival

Herring gull admissions to RSPCA Mallydams Wood wildlife centre were reviewed to determine factors affecting likelihood of release and post-release survival. It was found that orphans, inexperienced juveniles, fishing litter casualties and birds found caught or entangled were most likely to regain fitness and be suitable for release, whereas birds admitted as a result of disease, weakness, collisions or having been shot, were least likely to be released.

Between 1999 and 2010, 2,796 herring gulls (84 percent of those admitted, excluding birds euthanased within 48 hours) were ringed with colour rings and released. Reports of colour ring sightings of these birds include 44 gulls found dead; 46 found sick and 2,179 birds seen alive and well by over 200 observers in the British Isles and Continental Europe.

There was no significant difference in the survival of adult birds (848. 7days) compared with juveniles (718. 6 days). Adult and juvenile birds travelled approximately the same distance following release (adults 58.6 km and juveniles 69.5 km). Post-release survival was better than expected for adult birds who had been shot (47 percent) and for inexperienced juveniles (40 percent).

The survival of rehabilitated juvenile birds was also compared with survival data from wild herring gull chicks ringed on the nest in urban areas of Southern England. No significant differences in survival was found between these two groups for birds that were subsequently categorised as 'Found dead'.

The results of this study demonstrate that the rehabilitation protocol used by RSPCA Mallydams Wood for this species is appropriate for helping to reduce the suffering of these casualties and improve the likelihood of release with only minor improvements needed to the release criteria. This study can also help us better manage the issues that arise between urban gull populations and people and the national decline in the sub-species of herring gull (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) could be supplemented through rehabilitated birds.



The data collected suggests that the rehabilitation of herring gulls is important from both an animal welfare and population perspective and is therefore cost effective for the RSPCA.



## RSPCA STAPELEY GRANGE WILDLIFE CENTRE

### Rehabilitation of house martins

In 2013 the team put in place a number of changes that affect the way we care for house martins (*Delichon urbicum*), one of the more demanding species that we admit into the centre. Over recent years we have encountered a number of issues, most notably eye problems, that we believe may be a result of our having to force feed nestlings. Changes included: those who cared for the house martins; provision of different hospital accommodation; improvements in barrier nursing and instigation of a new protocol of mixing individuals into groups.

Although the number of days in care increased for both those martins released and those that died or were euthanased after 48 hours, the number of animals that were finally released dramatically increased, rising from 26.3 percent in 2012 to 61.1 percent.

Three individuals were euthanased because of expected eye problems – far fewer than in previous years; post mortem tests taken

for microbiology, parasitology and PCR for *Mycoplasma* spp. were inconclusive.

The improved release rate could have been influenced by the fact that fewer animals were admitted than in previous years, which meant staff had more time to care for the house martins and enabled the team to use larger outdoor aviaries. The team will continue to review the way we rehabilitate house martins over the coming years.



# Engaging with decision makers

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

Below is a small selection of the committees, meetings, events and consultations in which wildlife staff have participated during 2013:

## Representation on committees and working groups:

- Animal Welfare Network (Wales).
- British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC) Steering Committee.
- International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC).
- Marine Animal Rescue Coalition (MARC).
- The Deer Initiative.
- The Mammal Society.
- Sea Alarm.
- Wildlife and Countryside Link: Wildlife Trade working group.
- World Conservation Union's Otter Specialist Group.
- Zoo Expert Committee.
- BIAZA Elephant Welfare Group.

## Responses to consultations in 2013:

- Draft Wild Animals in Circuses Bill (EFRA Select Committee).
- Consultation on proposals to ban the shooting of white-fronted geese in Wales.
- Web-based wildlife legislation tool.
- 25 year strategy to eradicate bovine TB.
- Evidence submission to Defra regarding bTB vaccination.
- Meeting at Swansea University to discuss badger project.
- CITES Joint Liaison Group meeting re wildlife trade.
- Meetings about Canada goose management and ringing project on Lake Windermere.

- Meeting to discuss red deer conservation grazing project in Surrey.
- British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS) meeting.
- Meetings with government and NGOs to discuss impacts and lessons learnt from the PIB spill in the English Channel.
- Meeting to discuss International Tanker Owners Pollution Fund (ITOPF) grant.
- Meeting with highways agents Enterprise Mouchel to discuss deer vehicle collisions mitigation work.
- World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) wildlife crime reception and exhibition.
- Meeting with Natural Resources Wales.
- Defra TB Science workshop.
- Presentations at Carnivore Welfare Symposium at Copenhagen Zoo.
- TB vaccination event at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL).
- Tortoise welfare conference at Colchester Zoo.
- London Vet Show and British Veterinary Association (BVA) Congress.
- Elephant Focus Group meeting of elephant keepers at Dublin Zoo.
- Meeting to discuss Garden Wildlife Health Initiative.

## External funding

- Ongoing research into the effect of tags on rehabilitated and released seabirds (at Swansea University).
- Contribution to construction of primate enclosure at Monkey World Ape Rescue Centre.
- Survival of hedgehogs during hibernation (with Brighton and Reading University).
- Research into badger behaviour and movements during and post rehabilitation with Swansea University.

## Scientific publications

- Grogan A. and Kelly A. (2013) *A review of RSPCA research into wildlife rehabilitation*. *Veterinary Record*, published online doi: 10.1136/vr.101139.

For a full list of papers produced by or in conjunction with the RSPCA wildlife centres, please go to:  
[www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/wildlife/currentresearch](http://www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/wildlife/currentresearch)