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Treatment and Rehabilitation of Oiled Birds

The RSPB in general supports the rehabilitation of oiled birds by expert organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA) or the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA). These animal welfare organisations treat those oiled birds that their veterinary surgeons judge to have a chance of survival. Some birds are so badly affected that the vets judge it more humane to put them down.

It is generally recognised that, depending on weather (particularly wind strength and direction) and sea conditions (particularly current strength and direction), anywhere between 3-10 times as many birds die at sea than are washed up on shorelines. For example, after the *Sea Empress* spill, approximately 3,500 dead birds (out of a total of 6,900 oiled birds) were washed up, but it is believed that 10,000-15,000 perished in total. Whereas after the *Erika* spill on the Brittany coast, 44,000 dead birds (64,000 oiled birds in total) were found but it was estimated that 120,000-300,000 were actually killed by the spill.

How birds respond to treatment

There is no fixed rule on this issue, and it is generally accepted that survival rates are very low. However, different species do respond to cleaning and returning to the wild in different ways. For example, swans often survive well after cleaning. Some swans have been successfully rehabilitated several times. Species such as geese, ducks and swans are more hardy and likely to respond well to cleaning and treatment, with high success rates (over 90%) and release in as few as three to four days¹. Other species are more difficult to treat, and more likely to develop captivity-related complications. A study by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) following the 1996 *Sea Empress* spill in South Wales showed that rehabilitated guillemots do not fare so well, being 100 times more likely to die than those who have not been oiled in the first place². After the *Sea Empress* spill, the average survival time for rehabilitated guillemots was 7 days. After 1 year, less than 1% (only 0.6%) of those cleaned survived.

This confirmed the results from a similar survey of oiled, cleaned and rehabilitated North American guillemots. The average survival time was between 5-8 days after release, with an estimated 87% dead after 20 days, leading to negligible survival after a year³.

Marine bird species with similar 'living habits', or ecology, eg other auks such as razorbills, common scoter, etc., are assumed to suffer similar mortality rates to guillemots. However,

¹ 'Rehabilitation manual for oiled birds' (October 1998), Greer, RD, O'Connor, DJ, Frick, L & Welte, S. Exxon Biomedical Sciences Inc, N Jersey, USA & Tristate Bird Rescues and Research, Delaware, USA.

² Wernham, CV, Peach, WJ & Browne, SJ (1997) *Survival rates of rehabilitated guillemots*. BTO Research Report No.186

³ Sharp, BE (1996) Post-release survival of oiled, cleaned seabirds in North America. *Ibis*, 138: 222-228



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little is known about the reasons for the differences in survival between different bird species.

The African penguin survives reasonably well after being oiled and cleaned, in contrast to Magellanic penguins, which do not survive well after oiling and cleaning. African penguins have been successfully rehabilitated after oil spills near their Dassen Island (South African) colony in 1972 (37-84% survival rate, 10-29% known to have breed later); 1994 (minimum of 45% survival), and then more recently after the *Treasure* tanker spill in 2000.

Indications are that improvements in clean-up techniques have done little to improve these survival rates. More recent research also suggests that birds may suffer from significant sub-lethal negative effects from oiling that could lower longer-term survival and reproductive rates. The RSPCA and BTO are now working to ensure that better information is collected on all rehabilitated oiled birds, so that techniques can be improved.

The RSPB's role

As a bird conservation organisation, the RSPB directs its efforts to preventing oil spills. We also work with government and industry to reduce the risk of oil spills to birds and other wildlife. In recent years we have helped bring about some major improvements, including:

- facilities in all UK ports and harbours for disposal of oily waste, so there is no excuse for dumping at sea
- strong international rules against ships discharging oil in the seas around the UK
- Government action against oil spills up to 200 nautical miles from the coast of the UK

If an oil spill does occur in the UK sea area⁴, the RSPB has an official role in the government National Contingency Plan for Marine Pollution⁵. The RSPB's role includes:

- surveying/providing information on which birds are in the danger area;
- advising on how to conduct the clean-up operation with least risk to birds;
- directing the animal welfare organisations to the location of live oiled birds and, later if appropriate, advising on release sites.

This conservation role of the RSPB is built on our strengths of long experience and scientific research into how best to protect birds in the wild. The RSPCA/SSPCA/USPCA, by comparison, have a long tradition of developing expertise for birds in care.

⁴ The UK sea area in which the Marine Pollution Control Unit (MPCU) has powers to tackle oil pollution is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The EEZ extends from low tide level around the coast out to 200 nautical miles or the boundary with another country. For example, to the west, the UK EEZ extends 200 nautical miles into the Atlantic; but in the south, the EEZ extends only to the middle of the English Channel.

⁵ MCA (2006) National Contingency Plan for Marine Pollution from Shipping & Offshore Installations. Maritime & Coastguard Agency, Southampton, UK.