

# GOWER BIRD HOSPITAL

10th birthday  
issue 2006

£1.75

I spy  
with my  
heron's  
eye . . .  
– page 2

Inside  
stories



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MPhil, CBiol, MIBiol  
Registered Charity No: 1053912



# Young heron on road back to health

*Cover story*



**T**HE heron on the cover arrived in July (just one of the 1,330 patients admitted at the Hospital in 2005).

He had been spotted in a small stream in Gowerton and stayed in the rather overgrown area for a few days – this is unusual behaviour as herons will normally move around, spending a few hours here and there in different locations.

He was brought to the Hospital for a check-up and was found to be a thin juvenile with no physical injuries, but very weak and underweight.

We prepared one of our seclusion aviaries where we could keep a close eye on him through the CCTV system. The seclusion aviary has solid wooden walls so that patients inside can't see out and don't get disturbed by the sight of Hospital staff walking past.

The roof is made of soft netting allowing natural light in and the aviary is planted with shrubs and grass to provide a natural environment. There is also a privacy screen – a small area screened off inside the main aviary – for the patient to hide when startled by someone entering the aviary to replenish food and water.

This is one of the many occasions where CCTV is invaluable – if a heron is startled the first reaction is to fly away. But, in the temporary captivity of the aviary, flying away is not an option and the next reaction to fear is to vomit.

Without the CCTV, opening the door to “see how he’s

doing” would just result in the food being vomited and the patient losing a day’s recuperation. By using the CCTV, we can monitor both the heron and the food provided and make sure to wait for at least four hours after the last fish has been eaten before replenishing. This gives the heron plenty of time to digest his meal and gain weight quickly.

Another interesting observation was food preference. We provided both fish and defrosted day-old chicks and the heron ate the chicks with great relish, even whacking them on the ground to ‘kill’ them first!

Ten days later, the heron had almost doubled in weight and was flying up onto the high perches with ease. During his entire 10-day stay, he had seen human beings for only around 40 minutes, while we had been able to observe him throughout his stay via the CCTV. He was fitted with a BTO ring and released at the marsh near Gowerton with an excellent chance of survival.

Video clips of this heron featured in Simon’s presentation “The Use of CCTV in Wildlife Rehabilitation” at the British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council’s Annual Symposium 2005 in Inverness.





## Newsletter no 10

**G**OWER Bird Hospital registered as a charity in March 1996 when support and publicity increased during the rescue operation following the Sea Empress Oil Disaster.

Since 1996 more than 12,000 wildlife casualties – including almost 2,000 hedgehogs – have been admitted for care, treatment and rehabilitation.

The secret of our success is that we never stop learning. Wildlife rehabilitation is a relatively new science. In the early years we spent a lot of time on the phone to other rehabilitators asking for advice and reading as many publications as we could lay our hands on.

Ten years later we find our role is reversed and we are often giving advice and publishing our own findings. Simon is now a member of the British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council's steering committee and we have given many presentations of the results of our post-release and behaviour studies.

What makes wildlife rehabilitation exciting is that we

# Decade of dedication

will always be learning and every time we learn something new it benefits the wild creatures concerned. This is what keeps us going – doing our best for each individual arriving at Gower Bird Hospital.

Keeping Wildlife Wild is our motto and keeping Gower Bird Hospital running is our aim more than ever! Every patient needs the experienced staff, specialised treatment and rehabilitation facilities provided by the Hospital.

Many thanks to everyone who raises funds, gives a donation or supports us by standing order, your support makes sure we are here for the next 12,000 patients.

*Karen. Simon*

## What's inside

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### Nothing but the best

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One of our most fascinating mammals

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### Trouble in store

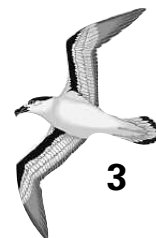
An owl discovers the wonder of Woolies

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## Five-star lodgings

# Nothing

**E**VERY year facilities at Gower Bird Hospital are improved. Two new aviaries have recently been built with improved design: All our aviaries incorporate a roofed section to provide shelter from heavy rain.

Previously these have been made of wood covered with felt for waterproofing but the new aviaries have the luxury of opaque plastic roofing allowing much more natural light into the aviaries.

Recovering birds seem to prefer this as they can take shelter without going into a darkened area. When we are hand-feeding young birds in the spring and summer, the extra light enables us to feed into late evening.



**WILD LOOK** One of the new aviaries.



**Starling nestlings** Hand-reared starlings are brought up in the shelter section of the aviary where the new roof lets in much more natural light. Being in a large group enables them to develop their social skills – essential for survival in the wild.

## Why you should have a soft spot for starlings

MANY different species can use these aviaries. Almost 50 starling nestlings were brought to the Hospital during April, May and June of 2005.

Starlings regularly build their nests under roof eaves and most of our patients had been deliberately removed from their nests because of building work or because the

people living in the house didn't like the noise of the youngsters!

One burly chap turned up at reception in tears with a box containing 15 starling nestlings. He explained that his workmates were nailing up boards and sealing the nestlings inside, while the parents frantically tried to get in to feed their broods who were still calling.

This hero managed to get the babies out, then collected the ones that his workmates had simply thrown onto the ground "to stop him making a fuss".

Three of the 15 had suffered major fractures and had to be put to sleep on humane grounds, but the others were successfully reared and released.

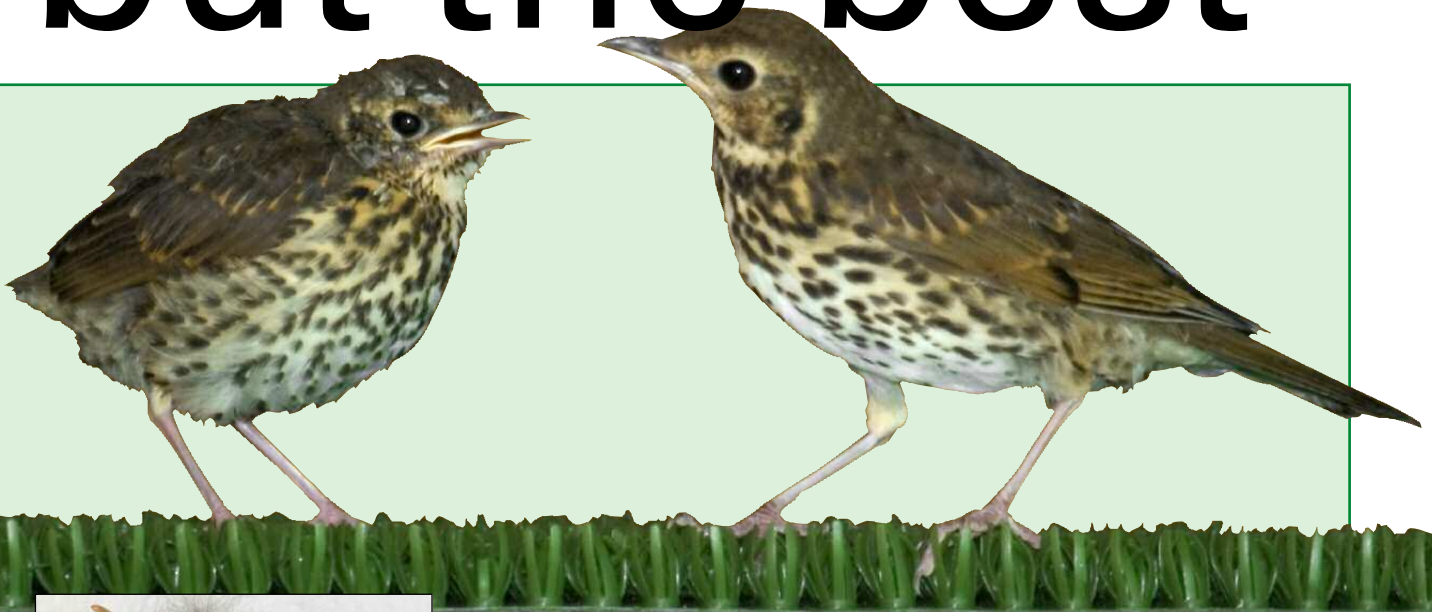
**Red  
alert**

**Starlings are on the red list. The breeding population of starlings has decreased by 50 per cent in the last 25 years**





# but the best



**HOUSE GUEST** A duncock nestling.

**THESE** young song thrushes (above) arrived at Gower Bird Hospital separately but were able to rehabilitate together – vital for learning those all-important social skills

Rearing a nestling or fledgling bird on its own will bring disaster for the bird. With no siblings or companions of its own kind it will quickly become tame – imprinted onto the carer.

An imprinted bird sees humans as its own kind and will defend its territory from all birds including its own species and look for a human to mate with. This

territory becomes “sterile” as no other birds can use it.

The bird itself doesn’t have a productive or happy life as it is in a constant state of confusion. Its inability to communicate with its own kind usually results in an early death from a predator such as a cat.

We do everything possible to prevent immature wildlife casualties becoming tame or imprinted so that they can be released back into the wild as fully functioning individuals with an excellent chance of survival.

## *Insider's view*

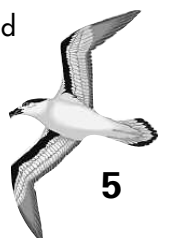
INSIDE all our aviaries we create as natural an environment as possible. For adult birds this reduces stress considerably as they are in a familiar environment and for hand-reared youngsters it provides valuable experience of the natural world before they are released.

They see the natural rhythm of sunrise and sunset, experience different weather conditions, see and catch insects flying in and out and hear other birds and natural noises. Watching fledgling blackbirds via the CCTV, it was interesting to see them respond to a wild blackbird’s alarm call from outside the aviary.

The adult blackbird had spotted a cat and gave an alarm call - instantly our fledglings took cover under the nearest shrub, keeping very still and silent. An excellent



response and another good skill to take into the wild when released.



# Radio tracking Birds on a wire

**W**HEN we release recovered wild birds and hedgehogs we need to know what is happening to them. If they simply died after a few days then we would have wasted their time, as well as our own – we would also be causing unnecessary suffering.

Wildlife rehabilitation is a relatively new science. If, as rehabilitators, we want to advance and make a worthy contribution to animal welfare and conservation, then post-release monitoring is essential. One way of following released patients and monitoring their progress is by using telemetry – radio tracking.

Over the past six years, we have radio-tracked hand-reared blackbirds, hedgehogs and house martins and gulls recovered from botulism. The results are very encouraging, proving that our rehabilitation techniques (including a strict minimum contact policy) are working

and giving each individual the best chance of survival.

In 2005, we followed up our 2003 house martin radio tracking project with excellent results. One of a group of hand-reared house martins was radio tracked for 13 days. The bird (and most likely the rest of the group) joined the local juveniles and moved between colonies in the Pennard and Bishopston area.

The feeding range during the radio-tracking period was approximately 14 square kilometres. The house martins came together in large groups in the evenings, splitting off into smaller groups before going to roost.

The birds chose different roost sites every night. Eleven roost sights were recorded, some in rural and some in urban areas. The radio tag seemed to have no effect on the bird's posture or behaviour. The tags will naturally moult off.



**UP CLOSE** Gower Bird Hospital's vet, Brita, attaching the tiny activated radio tag to a central tail-feather of the anaesthetised house martin.

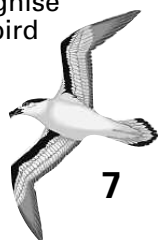




## Putting a price tag on proper after-care



**WHICH ONE ARE WE RADIO TRACKING?** One of the most satisfying feelings is not being able to recognise a bird you have rehabilitated in a group of the same species in the wild. This means the rehabilitated bird is not showing odd behaviour or physical problems and is acting exactly like its wild counterparts.





## Hedgehog heaven

# Handling pr

**A**LMOST 2,000 hedgehogs have been admitted at Gower Bird Hospital over the last 10 years. The knowledge and expertise we have gained from examining each hedgehog can only be acquired through this hands-on experience.

Just by picking up the hedgehog we can tell if it is underweight, dehydrated or has a broken limb. If the hedgehog has an infected wound we can often smell this, even if it is curled up and hiding the wound.

Hedgehogs are nocturnal, so any seen out in the day are already displaying abnormal behaviour and are probably just days away from death. Even those that appear lively and are rushing around need rescuing – they can seem OK for a day or so and then suddenly collapse and die.

A curled up hedgehog in the open in daylight is NOT hibernating, it is simply too weak to make it back to its nest.



**CASE FOR TREATMENT** A hedgehog suffering from ringworm, a fungal skin disease. As well as causing loss of spines, the hedgehog also loses the insulating soft hair covering its face, chest, abdomen and legs making it susceptible to cold.

### That's my *home*!

Young hedgehogs are often the victims of garden clearance – people decide to clear that “untidy” patch in the garden which hasn't been disturbed for months and uncover hedgehog nests.





# ickly customers



**GROWING UP** A hedgehog around three weeks old.

**TOP** A litter of hoglets about 36 hours old.

**LEFT** Some of our new hedgehog rehabilitation pens.

## Winter's tale *of hibernation*

### WHY?

Hibernation is a survival strategy and is all about conserving energy. As the weather gets colder, the hedgehog's food supply of beetles, worms etc becomes more difficult to find.

A hedgehog would use up more energy looking for food than it gets from the food it does find. By hibernating it uses as little energy as possible until the warm weather and abundant food supplies return in spring.

### WHERE?

Hedgehogs do not hibernate in the open - they make a nest of dry leaves and hibernate in the middle, completely hidden from view. The nest or hibernaculum is very important as it has to insulate the hedgehog throughout the winter.

The insulation obviously serves to protect the hedgehog from the cold but also maintains a constant temperature in the nest, even when an occasional mild spell raises the outside temperature. Dry leaves are essential when building a hibernaculum.

The hedgehog chooses a suitable site in a pile of twigs and branches or under a shed for example, then collects leaves in its mouth and stuffs them into the centre of the nest. It then circles inside the nest pulling the leaves into position with its spines so they are all lying the same way.

A good nest will be made of lots of dry material such as twigs, leaves and even plastic bags with the centre being a ball of closely packed leaves up to four inches thick. This is an important reason why hedgehogs shouldn't be released in an area where hedgehogs are not naturally present.

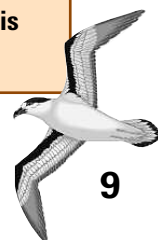
Even though there may be plenty of food and adequate nest sites during the warm summer months, if there are not enough dead leaves from deciduous trees in the autumn, the hedgehog may not be able to build a proper hibernaculum and may slowly die of hypothermia.

### HOW?

During hibernation the hedgehog's body temperature drops from 35C to 10C, heart rate drops to around 20 beats a minute and breaths are down to one every few minutes. The hedgehog wakes up every week or so during hibernation but does not leave the nest, slowing down into hibernation again.

To survive hibernation, the hedgehog will need to build up good fat reserves. The white fat (under the skin, like bacon fat) provides the energy to keep the hedgehog alive during hibernation and can make up one third of the body weight in the autumn.

Brown fat is also stored (mainly around the shoulders) and this brown fat is used to generate heat to wake the hedgehog up.



## *The wonder of Woolies!*

# Little owl gets

**A**ROUND 80 birds of prey or raptors are brought to Gower Bird Hospital every year. Species (in order of wingspan) include little owl, barn owl, short eared owl, tawny owl, sparrowhawk, kestrel, peregrine, goshawk, buzzard and red kite.

The adult little owl pictured right was found in Woolworth's store in Porthcawl. A wild little owl flying into a shop in close proximity to people is unusual and we were worried that he may have been imprinted – hand-reared by an inexperienced person and released to fend for himself.

Fortunately he showed no signs of being tame and exhibited all the behaviour of a wild bird. How he got into Woolworth's remains a mystery, maybe he was chasing a moth attracted to the lights of the shop and inadvertently found himself inside.

Weighing in at 166g on arrival, he was in fairly good condition. He made good use of one of our seclusion aviaries, eating mealworms and small defrosted mice. After four days, a BTO ring was fitted and the little owl was released back at Porthcawl weighing 189g.

Little owls are mostly crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) but also hunt during the day, feeding on a wide range of prey including mice, voles, shrews, insects, earthworms, snails, slugs and small fish. They nest in tree holes, old walls, rabbit burrows and cliff holes.

The female lays three to five eggs in early May and incubates them for 29 days. Only the male feeds the nestlings at first, but later the female helps and the youngsters fledge after 26 days. Like many species, severe weather can affect the population, especially a wet spring.

When feeding chicks, wet weather makes it difficult to hunt and the diet may consist mainly of earthworms. A strong adult can cope with the odd period of poor food, but observations have shown that young fed



**TROUBLE IN STORE** The little owl who went to Woolies.

mostly on earthworms develop problems such as weak bones and poor plumage.

Little owls are found across most of Wales and England today, but were only occasional visitors up to the late 1880s. The current population originated from birds introduced in Northamptonshire.

Lord Lilford bought many little owls trapped in the wild in Holland and left them in open cages around Lilford Park, leaving food available every day. Many perished, but the first nest was found in 1889 and then they seemed to spread quite quickly. When first established, it was known as the "fierce little foreigner"!

The little owl now seems accepted as part of British wildlife – unlike the grey squirrel which was also introduced around the same time. Currently the little owl comes second to the tawny owl as the commonest owl in Britain with between 6,000 and 12,000 pairs.





# in big flap at shops



## Easy prey — for car drivers

BUZZARDS can hunt rabbits and other prey, but usually opt for the easier option of carrion and, if times are hard, are often seen “worming” - foraging for earthworms in fields.

Many animals are killed on our roads every day and buzzards are quick to take advantage of a free meal. Unfortunately, as the corpse is usually in the middle of the road, the buzzard itself can be hit by traffic.

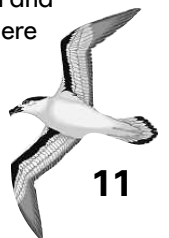
Buzzards are a common admission at the Hospital. This chap on the right had been hit by a car and was badly stunned and bruised. Warm, dark and quiet is essential for the first stages of recovery. Body fluid replacements and analgesics were also prescribed in the first 48 hours.

Two weeks later, he had completely recovered and was released where he was found.

At Gower Bird Hospital we always try to fit BTO rings to birds before release – any information from these rings is extremely valuable for our post-release research.

Some birds arrive with BTO rings already fitted, like the **red kite pictured above left** which also had wing or “patagial” tags so it could be identified with binoculars.

Found in December at Dinas Rock, this was a juvenile in poor condition. It was weak and quite easily caught, no injuries, just an inexperienced bird struggling to make a living. By late January, it had increased in weight and was released at Talsarn feeding station for kites where there would be a plentiful supply of food.



## Staying airborne

# Feathered

**G**OWER Bird Hospital has two aquapens (aviaries with integral pool) which are vital for rehabilitating water birds.

Marine species admitted include black headed, greater and lesser black backed, common and herring gulls, cormorants, shags, fulmars, gannets, kittiwakes, little auks, manx shearwaters, oystercatchers, razorbills and guillemots.

Fresh water birds including goosanders, little and great crested grebes, mallards, moorhens, coots, mute swans and water rails have also benefited from rehabilitating in our aquapens.

Most birds, whether aquatic species or not, have waterproof plumage (raincoats for inclement weather) with some exceptions.

For example, cormorants and shags are often seen perching and holding their wings out to dry, after chasing fish under water. Not having waterproof plumage enables them to manoeuvre quickly under water, any buoyancy would slow them down.

Land-living birds use puddles and other shallow water to bathe and preen their feathers into good condition. For aquatic birds, good waterproofing is essential for survival.

Many people believe the preen gland secretes oil which is used to waterproof the feathers but this is not the case. The preen oil certainly helps to keep the feathers in good condition but it is the actual structure of the feather which makes it waterproof.



**CLEANING UP A**  
goosander preens its feathers.

Each feather is made of thousands of tiny filaments which “zip together” to make the feather impervious to water. A bird with a damaged beak may be able to feed itself but if the beak can’t zip the feather filaments together, the feathers will become “tatty”.

The bird may lose its ability to fly and keep itself warm and dry, eventually dying of hypothermia as it can’t keep its plumage in good condition.



## Animal *all*sorts

**AS** well as birds and hedgehogs, we often find ourselves treating other species. Frogs, toads, lizards, newts, grass snakes and slow worms usually have lawnmower or strimmer injuries. Wood mice and short tailed field voles are commonly caught by cats. Other small mammals brought to Gower Bird Hospital include weasels, pipistrelle, long-eared and Daubenton’s bats.

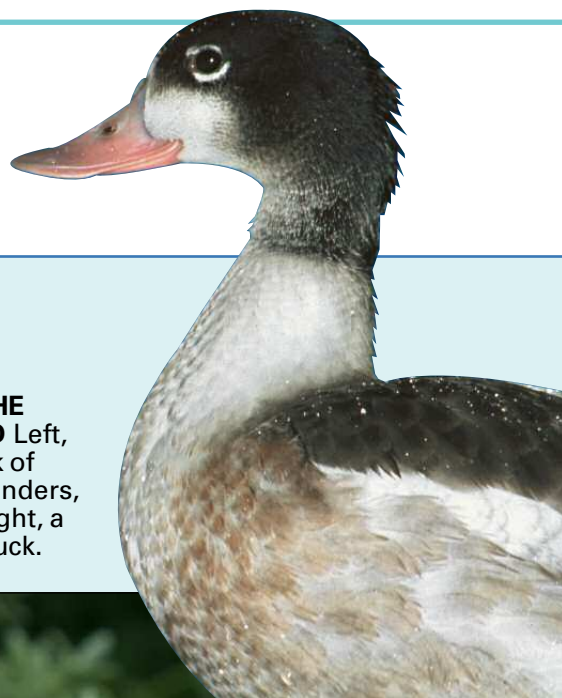




# friends



**ON THE MEND** Left, a flock of goosanders, and right, a shelduck.



**ONE** of the many gull chicks rehabilitated at Gower Bird Hospital. Once fully feathered in their speckled brown juvenile plumage, they are fitted with BTO and colour-coded rings and released at Swansea Bay.

Gower Bird Hospital has its own colour-coded ringing scheme for gulls – a blue ring with white letter “Y”. Some of our gulls have been spotted months after release, alive and well in Portugal, Spain and off the West coast of Africa.



## Money matters

# Thanks

**R**EHABILITATION means enabling an individual to gain the optimal mental and physical abilities to lead an independent life.

Wildlife rehabilitation is defined as restoring wild animals to their natural state. The rehabilitated bird or hedgehog must be able to find food and shelter, communicate with its own kind, breed and escape danger by recognising potential predators (including humans).

To achieve this, Gower Bird Hospital's facilities and techniques are constantly improving. Our minimum contact policy ensures that youngsters are not made tame and adults are not terrified by over-handling or seeing people more than necessary.

**This is why the Hospital is not open to the public - the last thing a recovering wildlife casualty needs is to be stared at by lots of people.**

Although we could make money by letting people into the Hospital, the welfare of our patients always comes first.

Many, many thanks to our supporters who understand this and give donations, raise funds and donate by monthly standing order to help us give wildlife casualties the best chance of survival in the wild.

**Grants** are usually awarded to charities which are well supported by the community, so your donations and support also help enormously when we are applying for grant funding. Major funders are *Wales Council for Voluntary Action*, Lord Mayor of Swansea's Charity Fund, *Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust*,



**WATCHING YOU** One of our infrared CCTV cameras, keeps a close eye on patients without disturbing them.

The Barry Green Memorial Fund, *Care for the Wild International*, The Gower Society, *Pennard Community Charity*, Llysdyman Trust, *The Animal Defence Trust*, Royal Pigeon Racing Association, *Mumbles Community Council*, Climate, Swansea and *The Walker 597 Trust*.

**Special thanks** to all our volunteers who do so many different tasks – from the layout of our magazine (thanks Eifion!) to power-hosing Astroturf, raising funds at stalls, managing our website, the list goes on and on.

Wales Council for Voluntary Action has awarded Gower Bird Hospital a grant to employ a Volunteer and Events Coordinator, so 2006/07 should see Gower Bird Hospital represented at many more local events.

**MONEY WELL SPENT** Our hedgehog unit and treatment room.





# to you ...



**ABOVE** Crossing the finishing line of the London Marathon in 2005. Rhydderch's running vest bore the slogan "I'm only doing this to impress the chicks!" and he raised £800 in sponsorship money for Gower Bird Hospital.

**H**ERE are just some of the ways you have helped keep Gower Bird Hospital in the black. Keep up the good work!

☐ Since 2002, Simon has given more than 60 presentations raising over £1,500 for Gower Bird Hospital.

Simon is also a member of the British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council's steering committee. The BWRC holds a wildlife symposium every year and Simon has given presentations at London: "Natural History and the Rehabilitator", Nantwich: "Pre and Post-Release Studies of Hedgehogs", and Inverness: "The Use of CCTV in Wildlife Rehabilitation".

☐ Many thanks to Mr X who donated £1,800 to enable us to purchase an LCD projector. This means we can now use video clips as well as stills in our presentations.

☐ Sarah Davies sells donated items on eBay, raising over £1,000 since 2004. Donations of any small items that are easily posted such as ornaments, jewellery etc are much appreciated.

☐ Dianne from Llanelli raised £120 with her Christmas Raffle - thanks Dianne!

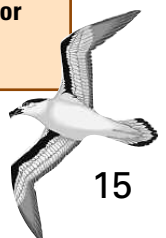
☐ There are now more than 50 Gower Bird Hospital collection boxes in shops around Swansea and Gower which collect more than £1,000 a year for the charity – many thanks to everyone involved.

☐ Where there's a will ... Thanks to all the kind people who have included us in their will or nominated Gower Bird Hospital to receive donations in lieu of flowers. In 2006 Gower Bird Hospital received its first legacy from the late Dave Kinsella.

## How you can help

**JOIN our Empty Printer Cartridge Appeal.** You can raise money for Gower Bird Hospital and help the environment by using our Freepost envelope for your empty inkjet cartridges. Since summer 2005 the Hospital has received

more than £250. Every cartridge helps – if the cartridge recycling envelope with this magazine has already been used, please phone EAH Recycling on 01473 658161 for extra envelopes.



## Caring for casualties

# What to do

If you find an injured bird you can save its life simply by putting it into a cardboard box. All wildlife has an instinctive fear of people. Putting an injured wild bird into a cage with nowhere for it to hide and constantly looking at it will rapidly put it into a state of shock and shock can kill.

**The first treatment is always a warm, dark, quiet environment** — a closed box with torn-up newspaper — to minimise shock. To provide warmth, a plastic bottle wrapped in an old towel makes a disposable hot water bottle and can be transported to Gower Bird Hospital with the patient.

A bird in a dark box will not feed and a bowl of water can be dangerous — if the bird gets wet, it can become very cold and die.

If you have a bird that has **flown into a window** it could simply be stunned. Leave it well alone in the box for about three hours (or overnight if you found it late evening).

Try releasing it, if it flies away — success! If not, put it back in the box and contact us.

Many **fledglings** are unnecessarily 'rescued' by well meaning people. It is easy to mistake a perfectly normal, healthy fledgling for an abandoned baby.

Fledglings have left the nest but can't quite fly properly, giving a helpless impression, when in fact they are still being supervised and fed by their parents. If left with their parents, they will usually be flying quite strongly in less than a week. (Blackbirds are completely independent just three weeks after leaving the nest.)

If you do find a fledgling, it is best to leave it well alone for a few hours and return to check on it later on. If the fledgling is in a public place such as on a path, just replace it a few feet away, under some cover if possible, to lessen the chances of someone else picking it up.



**Hedgehogs are nocturnal creatures so any hedgehog seen in daylight hours is usually in trouble. It could be suffering from an injury, starvation, dehydration or an illness.**

**Put the hedgehog in a box with torn up newspaper as bedding. If it feels cold, add a warm (not too hot) bottle. Make sure the box has small air holes and a secure lid as hedgehogs are remarkable escape artists, even when ill.**

**Then, contact us !**

If it is not possible to leave the bird and you have to remove it from the wild, ring Gower Bird Hospital. To have a real chance of survival and being released back into the wild, the bird will need our specialised facilities within 24 hours.

## Getting in touch

**Tel: 01792 371630**

A phone call is always greatly appreciated prior to the admission of a wildlife casualty

**Gower Bird Hospital, Valetta, Sandy Lane, Pennard, Swansea SA3 2EW**

**Website: [www.gowerbirdhospital.org.uk](http://www.gowerbirdhospital.org.uk)**

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**Registered Charity No: 1053912**

**Trustees** Nigel Howarth, Christine Griffiths, Barry Hicks and Simon Allen **Patron** Paul Llewellyn MPhil, CBiol, MIBiol

