

# GOWER BIRD HOSPITAL

Keeping wildlife wild



Issue 13 2009/2010

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This male sparrowhawk (above left) had hit a window whilst chasing a bird. Thankfully there were no broken bones and the next day we were able to release him where he had been found. The eyes of a mature adult male sparrowhawk can be deep orange.

The young male sparrowhawk (above right) was brought to Gower Bird Hospital covered in oil. A large factory had closed down and he had mistaken a pool of waste oil for water. The sparrowhawk spent 20 days at the Hospital receiving treatment and the picture shows him cleaned up and being put into one of our rehabilitation aviaries before release. Note the difference in eye colour due to his age.



## Born to be a hunter

**W**e often receive phone calls asking us how to stop sparrowhawks taking birds from people's gardens. It's important to remember that sparrowhawks have been hunting birds for thousands of years and have evolved to be very efficient hunters – they can't eat anything else!

RSPB studies have proved that sparrowhawks do not reduce songbird populations and a good sparrowhawk population indicates a good healthy population of songbirds.

What people can do is look at the position of their bird feeders. If your feeders and/or bird table is in an open area giving you a good view of the birds, what may be happening is that you are providing the sparrowhawk with extremely easy targets.

A clear flight path with little cover makes it a lot easier for the sparrowhawk to catch the birds. Most birds forage for food near natural cover with an eye always open for danger. Positioning feeding stations close to hedges or shrubs provides more protection for the birds as they can dash for cover very quickly.

Cover picture: Tawny owl

## Newsletter no 13

**Gower Bird Hospital registered as a charity in 1996. All care is given to patients totally free of charge, but it does cost money. It currently costs around £50,000 a year to run Gower Bird Hospital which is a relatively small amount for the work we do – a salary for one person in some big charities!**

**We depend entirely on donations. Members of the public, the RSPCA and private vets bring over 1600 patients to us every year – without Gower Bird Hospital there simply wouldn't be anywhere for most of them to go to receive the specialist help they need. Gower Bird Hospital only exists because of**



Iolo Williams (one of the patrons of Gower Bird Hospital) chatting to Simon and Karen in the treatment room.

**our supporters' kind donations and standing orders. Thank you!**

*Karen + Simon*

## What's inside

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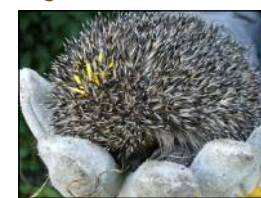
Getting our patients up and about and back into the wild is our number one priority.

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How we stay in touch with old friends after they've flown the nest.



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Hedgehogs are regular visitors to the Hospital and sometimes the utmost skill is needed to save their lives.

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Sometimes we get some surprising visitors rooting around the place.



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# Nurture needs special skills



**BLACKBIRD NESTLINGS BEING FED** — the bird is facing away from the person feeding it and is responding to the movement of the tweezers. As well as not talking whilst feeding the birds, we also try to keep their focus on the food, not us.

Over a third of wild bird casualties brought to Gower Bird Hospital are babies - young dependant birds whose nests have been disturbed or destroyed. Hand rearing these youngsters is not just about feeding. For the best chance of survival in the wild they must be fed, but equally important is the mental development.

If young enough, a baby bird will open its beak and beg for food from any object (cat, dog, human!) that comes close to it. Understandably people find this begging irresistible

## Sad but true

Rearing a young bird on its own, talking to it and letting it become used to people is doing it no favours.

Sadly, we get calls every year from people who have hand reared a young bird and are wondering why it won't fly away.

It won't fly away because it has been reared as part of a human family and doesn't know how to interact with wild birds.

A hand reared bird can become humanised — it's tame but also thinks it is human and looks to people for food and may even try to mate with you. A sad, confused and usually short life as people quickly become fed up with bird droppings all over the house.

and start feeding it.

Is there magic or special skill or a relationship involved in the act of feeding a baby bird?

The skill is in avoiding developmental psychological problems. The relationship is in the social grouping with other birds of the same species — not the person.

The magic is in releasing the birds knowing that they can interact with their own species, find their own food and not just survive but also find a partner and raise their own young.

# Pictures tell the story in a tale of our tits



The blue tit nestlings.

If a single nestling is brought to the Hospital, we have so many inpatients during the busy fledgling season, there is a good chance that we are already rehabilitating some of the same species. These blue tits are not all siblings but are quite happy socialising with their new family group.



The blue tit fledglings.

A couple of weeks later and the blue tits are almost ready for release. As soon as they had enough feathers to keep themselves warm they were transferred into one of our aviaries and we continued to hand feed. They soon fledged out of their nests and started learning the skills needed to survive in the wild — perching, flying, finding their own food and interacting with each other.



## It's a wild wild world ... **And that's**

**O**ur rehabilitation aviaries often mean the difference between life and death for our patients. The aviaries are camouflaged so people cannot see in as this would only frighten the inpatients or, in the case of young hand reared birds, make them too accustomed to people which would greatly reduce their chances of survival when released.

Inside the aviaries we provide as much natural material as possible – plants and shrubs, soil and leaf litter on the ground and an extra privacy screen at the back so the birds can feel secure and take cover if they feel they need to.

Food appropriate to the species is supplied and we can supplement the natural diet of insectivorous birds with mealworms scattered on the ground. All our aviaries have CCTV cameras so we can keep an eye on our patients without disturbing them.

**TEMPORARY LODGINGS** — Inside one of our aviaries.



**FLYING THE NEST** — One of a nest of three hand reared song thrushes (the other two have already taken cover!)



## **where we belong**



**ABOVE** — Collared doves are also regular inpatients at the Hospital.

**RIGHT** — This woodcock needed special care after being wounded by a bite from a dog.



## Care tailored to suit an individual's needs

OUR rehabilitation aviaries can be adapted to suit different species.

Woodcocks have long tapering beaks to search out their diet of worms, beetles, snails and other insects. They spend much of the day under cover and are most active at night. The woodcock pictured here was brought to the Hospital with a bite wound from a dog.

The wounds healed well and being able to recuperate in one of our rehabilitation aviaries played a major part in its recovery. The privacy and natural environment reduced the stress of temporary captivity and enabled the woodcock to feed itself, foraging through the earth and vegetation as it would in the wild.

### What is tame?

There does seem to be some confusion about the word "tame". A gentleman once said "I've got a tame robin in my garden, what's wrong with that?" The answer is absolutely nothing, the difference is that the robin knows exactly what it is, it was reared by its own parents - it is a wild bird.

Robins also follow large animals (not so long ago it would have been wild boars rooting around woodlands) so following you around as you dig the garden looking for insects and worms in the disturbed soil isn't too far from their normal behaviour.



# It's good to stay in touch **Gone but not forgotten**



Goosander in aquapen.



Gulls at the poolside.

As well as our earth floored aviaries we also have two aquapens – rehabilitation aviaries for water birds. The water pools are absolutely essential for all water birds as their plumage has to be

waterproof and washing and preening is essential to keep the feather structure in tip top condition. Many species of water birds have arrived needing these facilities including all species of gulls,

cormorants, shags, fulmars, gannets, kittiwakes, coots, goosanders, great northern divers, little and great crested grebes, mallards and tufted ducks.

This great crested grebe was brought to the Hospital with a head injury resulting in a not so great crest. It received treatment from our vet and after a couple of weeks recuperating in the aquapen was released fit and well.



## Chicks away

Gull chicks are routine admissions in the summer and again it is vitally important not to humanise these birds. Apart from the birds own welfare, large birds like these, if humanised and released would cause major problems. With no natural fear of people, they would automatically assume people are going to feed them and their natural aggressive behaviour would make them a real nuisance. Fortunately, these little chicks don't need hand feeding, they are able to feed themselves which keeps our contact with them to an absolute minimum.



**W**hat happens to our patients after we've released them? We make great efforts to find out if what we are doing is worthwhile. As many rehabilitated birds as possible are fitted with BTO rings, gulls also have a coloured ring (blue with a white Y) specific to Gower Bird Hospital, released hedgehogs are also marked. So far we have over 100 reports of our patients after release.

In 2009 a gentleman in Pennard noticed a female blackbird with a BTO ring on her leg in his garden. Using a telescope with extreme patience and perseverance, he eventually managed to read the ring number and we discovered it was a blackbird we had released in 2003.

Originally a young fledgling that had been

attacked by a cat, she had been treated and rehabilitated at Gower Bird Hospital and six years later looked in fine condition and obviously a successful breeding individual. Good luck to her in 2009!

Another successful blackbird arrived at Hospital in November 2008. He was attacked by a cat in Neath and the RSPCA brought him to us. He had a Norwegian ring on his leg which had been put on just 29 days before! He had quite extensive injuries but, thanks to Gower Bird Hospital's excellent treatment and rehabilitation facilities, made a full recovery and was released fit and well – where will he turn up next?



## Hedgehogs in trouble

Hedgehogs are regular patients at Gower Bird Hospital all year round. In 2008, 329 hedgehogs (including 94 baby hedgehogs between June and September) were brought to Gower Bird Hospital from all across South Wales. Hedgehogs suffer from all sorts of illnesses and injuries. The key thing to remember is that they are nocturnal animals and a hedgehog out in daylight is usually in trouble and will need expert help quickly.



**SAVED** — the surgical skills of our vet Brita saved these two young hogs.



## Saved from a painful death

THANKS to the quick action of one of our supporters, Val, two young hedgehogs were saved from a slow and painful end.

Val spotted the youngsters in her garden in daytime and discovered they were stuck together – both entangled in one piece of green plastic garden netting.

Val quickly got the hedgehogs to the Hospital but the hedgehogs curled up tightly when we tried to examine them. Our vet, Brita, anaesthetised them and the full extent of the

problem was revealed.

The netting was tightly wrapped around their necks and had been there for a considerable time – as the little hedgehogs were growing the netting had got tighter and tighter and a lot of it had cut through the skin and was buried in the flesh underneath.

Thanks to Brita's surgical skills the netting was carefully removed and the deep wounds cleaned. Both hedgehogs made a full recovery but if Val hadn't spotted them it would have been a different story.

## On your marks, get set, go



**J**ust as with rehabilitated birds, we need to know what happens to our hedgehog patients after they have been released.

We always try to release hedgehogs where they were originally found as they will be familiar with their home range and it maintains the natural balance.

"Local" hedgehogs from areas close to Gower Bird Hospital are micro-chipped as they are very likely to be brought straight to us if in trouble, we can scan them and check if they have been previous patients.

Hedgehogs from further afield are marked with coloured heat-shrink sleeving. The plastic tubes leave the pointed ends of the spines exposed so the hedgehog doesn't lose any of its natural defences.

These marks can last for around four years and we have had



**READY TO GO** — A marked hog and (left) Tom, one of our hedgehogs ready for release.

hedgehogs brought into the Hospital with their "ID" clearly visible.

Another advantage of this way of marking hedgehogs is that people can identify "their" hedgehog if they spot it again. We have had many reports of healthy hedgehogs from our supporters.

We released a female hedgehog marked with red heat-shrink sleeving in Deirdre's garden in Birchgrove and she was spotted doing very well in the wild. Deirdre then emailed to ask if we'd released another one as her husband had seen two hedgehogs with the same red markings.

Amazingly the second hedgehog was a male hedgehog we had released about two miles away.

This just goes to prove how far these little creatures can travel.

## It's the truth

An average hedgehog will use an area of around 20 football pitches on its travels.



# Well, look who's here!

As well as birds and hedgehogs, other wildlife is brought to Gower Bird Hospital.



After a particularly long period of heavy rain this mole was found on the road running alongside the kerb. It wasn't injured in any way and had probably found itself on the road whilst trying to escape the very wet conditions in the fields. Although it ate the worms we provided, it was very distressed at being in captivity even for just one day. Fortunately the rain had stopped and we were able to take him back to where he was found and released him slightly uphill as the ground was draining.

A young snake was brought to the Hospital because the people who found it in their garden didn't know what it was. On being reassured it was a perfectly harmless grass snake (identifiable by the yellow collar across the back of its neck) the finders were perfectly happy to take it back and release it in their garden.



Ready  
to take  
flight

A fulmar being released at Southgate. When releasing birds we never throw them into the air – if a bird is well enough to be released it will have the strength and ability to fly. After a few minutes of preening and assessing its surroundings, this fulmar flew gracefully out to sea.

## Did you know?

The fulmar has been used to monitor pollution in the North Sea!

### How?

A North Sea international study of fulmar stomach contents became possible as part of the Save the North Sea Project. Dead birds washed up on the beach are taken to the laboratory where their stomach contents are examined and all the undigested items are counted, weighed and identified.

### Why the fulmar?

Virtually all tube-nosed seabirds like the fulmar mistake marine litter for food. It has been estimated that the North Sea has to cope with 20,000 tons of litter per year and that plastics can constitute 95% of the total amount of litter.

Non biodegradable and indigestible items especially plastics accumulate in the stomachs of these birds. Ingested litter may not be a direct cause of mortality but reduces fitness of the animal for survival and reproduction.

This is known as a sub-lethal effect - it doesn't kill the individual animal but reduces the number of that species over time. The fulmar is used as the symbol of the Save the North Sea campaign.



# Money, money, money

A huge “thank you” to all our supporters – thanks to your kind donations, Gower Bird Hospital can continue to give injured, sick and orphaned wildlife the specialised treatment and facilities they need.

Each patient’s care costs are different. More than 1600 patients are admitted every year and the average cost is £30 per patient. No donation is too small, every pound is much appreciated.

Gower Bird Hospital applies for grants every year. Grants are usually only awarded to charities which are

well supported by members of the public so your donation helps us twice!

In 2008 the Hospital received grants and donations from:

The Gower Society, Pennard Community Charity, Gower Friends, Glantawe Trefoil Guild, Pettifor Trust, Llysddinam Trust, Swansea Development Fund, RSPCA (Ceredigion, Cardiff, Pembrokeshire and Gwent branches), Royal Pigeon Racing Association, Beryl Thomas Animal Welfare Trust and Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust.

## Walking to Branston without getting in a pickle



Tracee and her partner Ben.

Wildlife is benefiting far beyond the 200 square miles of woodland creation and countryside transformation that is the National Forest in Staffordshire thanks to Tracee and partner Ben. Tracee raised over £300 by doing a sponsored 22 miles circuit walk from Jackson’s Bank to Branston in the National Forest. Tracee’s target was £170 to buy the special milk needed to feed orphaned hedgehogs for a year and the extra money was put towards their “growing up” diet of mealworms and cat food!



# and it’s thanks to you

## Running jump for wildlife!



Picture: South Wales Evening Post

**THE RUNNER:** Rhydderch raised over £250 in sponsorship by running the 2008 Cardiff Half Marathon — since 2002 Rhydderch has raised over £2,000 for Gower Bird Hospital.

**THE JUMPER:** Dawn raised over £350 doing a sponsored skydive at Swansea Airport.

OUR local ceilidh band Rough Edge organised a dance at Pennard Parish Hall and raised £350. It was an excellent performance from the band and the dancers!

Gower Bird Hospital also receives donations in lieu of flowers at funerals. We are always touched by this act of kindness at what must be a sad time.

Steve from Birmingham telephoned with a wonderful story; his father had passed away and the family had

decided to scatter his ashes at his favourite places including the coastline of South Wales. As a last gesture, Steve wrote a note promising £50 to a charity chosen by the finder and sealed it into the empty urn. A few weeks later, Steve had a phone call from a lady who found the urn washed up on the shore at Ferryside and she nominated Gower Bird Hospital to receive the donation. Steve was particularly pleased as his father had been a great nature lover with a passion for robins!





# Good start in life



Our "Hook A Duck" stall at Pennard Carnival was extremely popular. It netted a very useful £200, helping us give these young tufted ducks a good start in life.

● If you would like to send us a donation but the form is missing from this magazine, please make cheques payable to Gower Bird Hospital and send to the address below, or if you would like to donate by card, you can do this securely via our website. Please include your name and address for our mailing list.

## Getting in touch

**Tel: 01792 371630**

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

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Patrons: Paul Llewellyn MPhil, CBIol, MBIol and Iolo Williams broadcaster and naturalist

