GOWER BIRD HOSPITAL

2002

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OUR COVERSTORY:

Mucking about in the cowshed

LATE one evening in February the RSPCA brought this little owl to Gower Bird Hospital. He had been found in an outbuilding in Hendy and was covered in mud. Closer inspection revealed no injuries but that the mud was in fact cow dung!

All his feathers were caked in dry cow manure making him look like a fir cone with a huge pair of very angry eyes. He must have taken shelter or tried hunting in the cow shed and once his feathers were wet and heavy, couldn't fly away.

We let him rest overnight with a dish of mealworms and a shrew to get over the shock of being caught and transported. (When our neighbours' cats catch small mammals, we freeze the dead shrews, mice and voles as they provide a natural food source for some of our patients.)

The next morning he was much brighter and had eaten overnight so we carefully dipped him in warm water. After a couple of minutes, although the dry dung was coming off, the little owl was going into shock again through the stress of being handled.

He was quickly transferred to one of our special privacy units under a heat lamp and left well alone for a couple of hours.

A shallow bath of warm water was provided and he was left to perform his ablutions in private. By the evening there was a much cleaner little owl sitting under the heat lamp drying off and a bath full of very dirty water. A much less stressful way of getting clean!

His bath water was changed two or three times a day and within four days he was perfectly clean and had eaten plenty of food.

A test flight in the raptor aviary, observed through the CCTV, proved he was fit and ready to go. He was taken back to the farm where he would be familiar with his own territory and be able to start hunting again straight away.

Hopefully, he will remember to stay out of the cowshed. . .

Treating wild animals is different to treating domestic animals. A sick cat or dog used to human company will benefit from petting and constant attention. A wild bird or animal will be frightened by the presence of people and terrified when being handled. This presents a problem as the wild patient needs to be examined to diagnose the illness or injury.

Gower Bird Hospital has a minimum contact policy – skilled, experienced staff can quickly assess the problem and administer initial treatment. For example, this little owl could easily have died from shock. During his five-day stay, he was in direct contact with people for less than an hour, which meant he didn't burn up valuable reserves of energy through stress and therefore recovered quickly.

More than a thousand wildlife casualties arrive at Gower Bird Hospital every year. The Hospital treats all species of wild birds and small mammals and is now a nationally recognised wildlife rehabilitation centre.

Above: Treating a patient in the original unit.

A well earned break during the building work.

Welcome to our sixth newsletter

MANY thanks to all our supporters. Thanks to your kind donations, Gower Bird Hospital has again been able to make major improvements as well as continue to provide our essential service to wildlife.

This year, the Hospital has been able to convert an outbuilding into a second treatment unit. The new unit was meant to replace the original one, but increasing patient numbers mean that both units will be fully employed!

Every new patient is examined and assessed in the treatment unit and all data is recorded. Details of the capture site are particularly important as an adult bird will know its own territory and should always be released where it was found to have the best chance of survival.

On arrival, each patient is weighed as this gives an instant initial indication of its health. If severely underweight, the casualty has probably been struggling in the wild for a while, a normal weight indicates a sudden trauma such as a road traffic accident.

Some patients are not well enough to survive if left in the wild, but well enough to go straight into a rehabilitation aviary to feed and build up strength. Others need to stay in the treatment unit for medication, hand feeding, wounds needing attention or treatment for shock until well enough to start rehabilitation.

The nest of these young wrens was destroyed during a garden clearance. It was impossible to return them to the parents as the whole area had been cleared. After a few days of hourly hand feeding in the treatment unit, they were able to start their rehabilitation in one of the aviaries where they quickly became independent and regained their natural fear of people – vital before release.

Karen Simon

Left: A mute swan receives treatment for an infected wound on its leg caused by discarded fishing line.

Above: It will need one of the aquapens to keep its plumage in peak condition.

The way back to the wild

WHEN a patient is well enough to leave the treatment unit and go outside into an aviary, rehabilitation starts. Any bird must be 100 per cent fit before release into the wild if it is to survive.

Different aviaries cater for different species. Water birds such as swans, gulls, ducks and grebes, need access to water to wash, preen and ensure completely waterproof plumage.

The water is kept clean by skimming the surface water off through small overflow drains. The concrete floors are covered with Astroturf to prevent callouses forming on the feet. Other birds need to forage in earth and grass and all aviaries must be big enough for them to fly to build up muscle tone.

Part of the roof and walls are covered to provide shelter from adverse weather. A water bath ensures they can wash to keep their feathers in good condition.

Shrubs provide cover and perching opportunities and the floor is earth with bark chippings and leaves to forage in. The food supply is topped up with earth worms, mealworms and other food supplements.

Gower Bird Hospital specialises in the rehabilitation of sick, injured or orphaned wild birds and animals with the sole intention of returning them to the wild.

This rose coloured starling, a rare visitor to Britain was found in Horton, Gower. Although quite weak on arrival at the Hospital, he was quickly diagnosed as suffering from candida (a fungal infection) in his mouth and prompt treatment soon had him on the road to a full recovery.

Watching the birdies

ONCE outside in a rehabilitation aviary it is still difficult to assess a patient's true condition, as human presence can cause different reactions in a captive wild bird.

If the bird can see you it will modify its behaviour to disguise any weakness - in the wild, a predator will pick out a weak specimen as easy prey.

Left alone, the bird will relax and again limp on the painful leg, drop the aching wing, close the sore eye or, if it is weak, simply fall into exhausted sleep.

Someone actually moving close to an aviary and looking in will cause any species of wild bird to freeze or panic.

Either way, we realised that our physical presence would affect the bird's behaviour greatly, thereby reducing any useful information about its true state of health.

Therefore, all our aviaries are now fitted with CCTV cameras for remote observation, enabling us to watch a patient's natural behaviour for hours and properly assess its accurate condition.

Gower Bird Hospital's lab with CCTV viewing monitors.

The use of CCTV provides an excellent opportunity to observe behaviour. Footage is recorded and studied, leading to great improvements in aviary design and the mental well being of our patients.

Students from Swansea University use the facilities at Gower Bird Hospital to carry out research projects. The welfare of our patients is paramount. No experiments are carried out to induce stress – we record normal activities at the Hospital and this behaviour is studied.

For example, hand reared blackbirds were observed in one of our aviaries and it was noted through the CCTV that staff walking past the aviaries would frighten the birds. The birds would stop whatever they were doing and take cover, remaining in hiding for several minutes. While this was a good fear response, it meant the birds weren't feeding, socialising and exercising as much as they should. It was impossible to reduce the human traffic passing so fine green netting (used for wind breaks in gardens) was fitted over the metal mesh walls of the aviaries and shrubs allowed to grow up the outside. This resulted in a much more secluded space inside the aviary and the birds were much less affected by passers-by.

Another important discovery was the amount of squabbling over high perches. At the time of recording only one or two of the natural branch perches were high in the aviary, resulting in the pecking order of the birds being a constant source of aggression. Simply providing more high perches for roosting restored equilibrium and reduced stress considerably.

All this may sound obvious, but without the CCTV, it would not have been observed and the improvements wouldn't have been made.

The private life of our patients

DURING 2001 we were able to fit a camera into a privacy area in the treatment unit and for the first time we filmed a "flat" seagull's recovery.

A flat gull is suffering from food poisoning and appears paralysed – no movement in their legs, sometimes unable to lift their heads.

The normal procedure was filmed:

A flat gull unable to stand.

Initially the gull is tube-fed with body fluid replacement. As the bird gets a little stronger, even though it can't stand, we put it into a shallow bath of warm water for a few minutes where it will drink for itself, eliminating the stress of being tube fed. This also helps to keep the feathers clean underneath as there is usually a nasty build up of green droppings. This goes on for a few days.

Eventually the gull starts to stand and eat and when strong enough to walk is transferred to an outside rehabilitation pool to gain strength and condition before release.

This has always been a successful treatment, but because the bird is only observed when having fluids we thought it would be worth filming its recovery. Our student Matt started the task of watching video tapes of a mostly immobile gull for 72 hours.

The bird obviously couldn't tuck its head under its wing to sleep because of the temporary paralysis. We saw its eyes close, its head nod, its beak drop to the floor and then it would wake with a start. This carried on until its condition had improved enough to be able to turn its head into its wing.

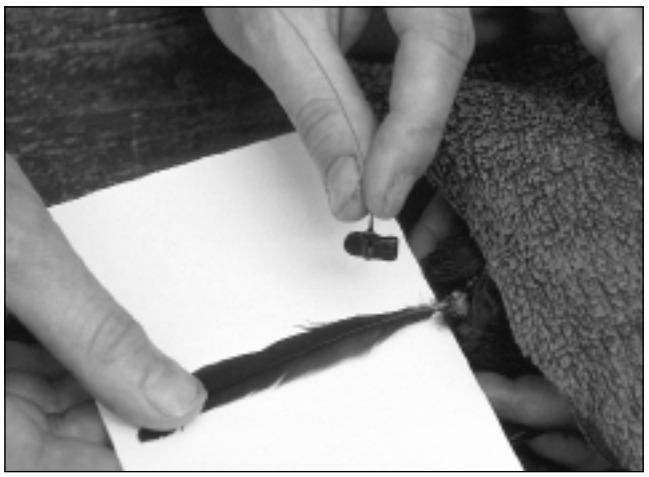
The gull did not get any quality sleep for more than 48 hours!

We already provided rolled up towels for very sick flat gulls to rest their beaks on as they obviously needed it, but didn't do this for birds that could hold their heads up as it didn't seem necessary. Thanks to Matt's research, all flat gulls now get pillows. This reduces stress, aids recovery and makes convalescence a lot more comfortable.

When patients are released they often fly off never to be seen again. Are they surviving well or will they be dead in a few days? Post-release monitoring is vital to ensure successful release back into the wild.

A tiny radio transmitter is attached to the middle tail feather of the bird. This will naturally moult so the transmitter is not a permanent attachment, but stays on long enough for us to gain valuable information.

● Our picture shows a transmitter being fitted to a blackbird's tail feather.



On the trail of a seagull

Matt with radio-signal receiver above Swansea.

A TRANSMITTER was fitted to the tail feather of Matt's seagull. The seagull ("Fred", as he was now nicknamed) stayed in the aquapen for a day so we could watch him through the CCTV to make sure he wasn't distressed.

After a few curious prods with his beak, he quickly settled down and completely ignored the transmitter. Confident that he was completely at ease, we released him at Swansea Bay where he had been originally found.

Fred immediately soared into the air with obvious relief at regaining his freedom, then joined a group of gulls already foraging on the sand. The first day out he flew to a landfill site at Briton Ferry (with Matt in hot pursuit!) and back to Swansea in the evening to spend the night on top of the Debenhams building. This became a daily routine with other trips to various parts of Swansea.

We are pleased with all our post release radio tracking projects so far, but this is an on-going study as every species is different.

We would love to track gannets – every year young gannets arrive in an exhausted state. After feeding and time in the rehab pens they are released but what happens to such a specialised bird? They are on their way to Africa for the winter, so tracking them would be a very expensive project, needing a boat and crew capable of following their progress for a couple of months. Maybe there's a bored millionaire out there who would fancy this adventure?

In the meantime we'll carry on gathering all the information we can.

Another important part of post-release research is ringing the birds.

After a lot of hard work, Gower Bird Hospital now has its own coloured leg rings for herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls. The rings are fitted by a British Trust for Ornithology-trained ringer.

Each gull will have a normal BTO ring and a blue plastic ring with a white letter Y which will be clearly visible through binoculars. This means the birds will be identifiable by bird watchers and casual observers. We are looking forward to reports of sightings so that we can understand more about what our patients are getting up to after their release.

More than 150 hedgehogs arrive every year and the Hospital also treats other species such as bats, voles, shrews and even toads and frogs.

Hedgehogs need looking after too

ALTHOUGH founded specifically for wild birds, the Hospital also cares for small mammals. Most of the small mammals treated at Gower Bird Hospital are hedgehogs.

They arrive suffering from breathing problems caused by infections or lungworm, and skin problems such as ringworm or injuries. The injuries are often caused by strimmers or garden forks.

The hedgehog may have been run over or caught up in plastic can holders or rubber bands dropped by the postman.

Every year Gower Bird Hospital receives hedgehogs which have been trapped in steep sided garden ponds. The poor hedgehog has usually been struggling to get out all night and is eventually spotted and rescued the next day.

These hedgehogs arrive exhausted, very cold and with a good chance of pneumonia through inhaling the water. These accidents could be so easily avoided by providing ramps for the hedgehog to climb out or by designing the pond with natural sloping edges.

Many baby hedgehogs are brought to the Hospital. Usually the nest has been disturbed and the mother has had to abandon them or has been killed on the road. The hoglets are often cold and dehydrated.

The treatment unit provides essential heat pads and heat lamps and staff can administer body replacement fluids if necessary.

The youngsters are then hand-fed with goat's milk or milk substitute and toiletted until they are big enough to start eating mealworms and cat food.

Toiletting is very important as a very young hedgehog does not pass urine or droppings of its own accord and must be encouraged to do so by gentle wiping with damp cotton wool – simulating the mum cleaning the baby.

Remember – never give cow's milk to hedgehogs as it can cause enteritis.

Eating to get into shape

AFTER three or four weeks, when the hedgehogs have increased in weight to about 300g and can maintain their own body temperature without the heat pad, they are transferred from the treatment unit to the rehabilitation runs outside.

Here they have a chance to dig in the earth and grass and start learning to find their own food. After spending a week or so in the rehab runs and when we have made sure that they are gaining weight, sleeping all day and active at night, they are ready for a "soft release".

The runs have a sleeping compartment and a mesh-lidded area allowing access to the natural ground. At the end of the run is a small door. This allows the hedgehog to explore outside and return to a safe nest for the day.

Food is still supplied in case they haven't managed to find enough natural food. Several times, hedgehogs have continued to use the sleeping area but ignored the food.

When weighed we found the hedgehog had increased in weight so was obviously feeding well in the wild but still needed the day nest. After a few days, the hedgehog doesn't return to the run at all.

A hedgehog demonstrates the scales.

Hedgehog rehabilitation run.

Hedgehog hideaways

Day nests built by the radio tracked hedgehogs.

AFTER hedgehogs are released, how are they coping in the wild? The young hedgehogs have been hand-reared and have had no natural parents to show them the tricks of the trade. To answer this question Gower Bird Hospital's hedgehog radio tracking project started in 2001.

A transmitter is fitted to the back of the hedgehog – like the bird tags, this will also moult off with the spines and is not permanent. After fitting the transmitter, the hedgehog is observed using infrared light and CCTV to ensure the tag is not causing any distress before release. Another student from Swansea University, Stam, then began the heroic task of following the tagged hedgehogs through the night!

During August, Stam tracked four hedgehogs every night from dusk until dawn for 21 nights. Using infrared light, he was able to observe their natural behaviour without disturbing them. Before dawn every morning they would make a nest to sleep for the day.

The summer day nests are not as robust as the hiberniculum built to hibernate over winter. One female youngster was followed until November when she made a very solid hiberniculum under a pampas grass plant in a garden and hibernated very successfully.

Three of the four hedgehogs explored and settled into the surrounding area with appropriate caution, covering an area of about half a square mile. They foraged during the night and although they had walked three or four miles remained in much the same area, building the day nests in various places.

However, one female had other ideas – on her first night of freedom, she set off and left Sandy Lane, travelled across the golf course and made a perfect day nest under a gorse bush. The next night she crossed a main road and eventually settled down for the day in a garden in Southgate.

On the third night she left Southgate via Hael Lane and headed into Bishopston Valley where Stam lost her signal! A day of frantic tracking still produced no signal – had she fallen off the cliffs or into the river? The next day we found her back in the middle of Southgate sleeping contentedly in a garden in Heatherslade Close.

All the hedgehogs did well and managed perfectly in the wild. They gained weight and had an excellent chance of surviving hibernation.

An interesting observation was the use of nests. One hedgehog would wake in the evening, forage for a couple of hours then go to a different day nest to sleep for an hour. He then woke, fed again and chose a different nest to spend the day clearly enjoying his freedom of choice.

What to do if you find sick or injured wildlife

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 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.

A healthy mistle thrush fledgling.

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). Close the curtains in the room and open the box. If the bird is flying well, simply open the window, draw back the curtain and it will fly out. If not, put it back in the box.

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 a person approaches the young bird the parents take cover but the fledgling will easily be caught. People then assume the fledgling is abandoned and take it away to be cared for while the parent birds are watching from their hiding place!

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.

Any hedgehog seen in daylight hours is usually in trouble.

Hedgehogs are nocturnal creatures. If seen in daylight 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!

When you have settled the casualty into a box, "How to get the patient to Gower Bird Hospital" is on the back page.

One of our camouflaged aviaries (yes - it is hidden inside the shrubs on the right!) with hedgehog runs alongside. As you can see the aviaries are not designed for looking into, but the birds enjoy the natural environment and feel secure inside.

Patients are our first priority

PEOPLE often ask to have a look around the Hospital but this really isn't in the best interests of our patients. Wild creatures are very easily frightened and need as much peace and privacy as possible to aid their recovery.

Staff spend as little time as possible with the birds and animals to minimise stress.

The CCTV system was installed for this reason. As described earlier, all the aviaries are camouflaged so the patients inside have privacy and feel secure, which is the complete opposite of a zoo where animals are on display.

Gower Bird Hospital does not keep wild disabled birds captive as our research has shown that their quality of life is not good. Stress symptoms can be seen through CCTV. Repetitive behaviour such as hopping from twig to branch to ground to twig again is a sure sign that all is not well. Also "wall clutching" – huddling against the wall of the aviary and not moving – indicates depression. The mental health of our patients is as important as their physical fitness. No matter how big the aviary, it cannot replace the sky!

Keeping disabled birds would also mean that our rehabilitation aviaries would soon be full of birds which could never be released, leaving no facilities for those birds with a real chance of getting back to the wild.

We do understand and appreciate that people are interested in our work. Gower Bird Hospital can now provide an illustrated talk with slides of our facilities and procedures. Feedback has been very positive, our audiences have enjoyed the show and found it very informative – a picture speaks a thousand words!

The secrets of our success

Diagnosis and treatment

The Hospital provides vital treatment and diagnostic facilities for every patient.

Behaviour studies

Enable us to provide the best rehabilitation techniques.

Rehabilitation

After treatment, rehabilitation programmes are in place for different species ensuring they are strong enough (physically and mentally) to have the best chance of survival in the wild.

Post-release monitoring

Essential as our responsibilities don't end with release – we want to make sure our patients survive and re-integrate into the wildlife community.

Soft release

Providing supplementary food and a suitable environment for hand-reared orphans and adults that have arrived at the Hospital with no history of where they were found.

Hard release

For adults already equipped with the skills to survive and released at the capture site so they already know the territory.

The best of friends

BLODWEN the goat is still very much part of the team at Gower Bird Hospital - she supplies the milk for the baby hedgehogs! Here she is being entertained by Brita, our veterinary surgeon.

Brita studied veterinary science at the University of Liverpool, graduating in 1996. Since then she has worked as a small animal vet at the PDSA, Swansea, and in a private mixed practice in Llandovery. Brita gives very generously of her time and is a very valued volunteer.

"By law all vets in Britain are obliged to provide emergency treatment for all species. But not all vets are experienced in the treatment of wildlife, particularly wild birds. Yet this can be a challenging and rewarding task," says Brita.

"The Gower Bird Hospital provides the specialised knowledge required. After ten years of rehabilitating wildlife, Simon and Karen have developed techniques for the treatment of the birds and animals, and strategies for returning them to the wild. Over the last few years I have learnt from them and increased my own clinical knowledge in a field which isn't covered in great depth at University.

"The Hospital deals only with wildlife. The treatment of this is different to the domestic and farm animals I normally work with. A pet dog can be nursed daily by its owner for years, or can live a full life after having a leg amputated. In neither case would this be feasible for a wild bird or mammal. Wildlife needs to be kept wild. The policy of the Gower Bird Hospital is to treat its patients as quickly and efficiently as possible, and then return them successfully to the wild.

"The post-release studies have the potential to greatly increase our knowledge of bird and small mammal behaviour and give us feedback on the treatment we have given the patients. This also gives us access to academic research which may be difficult to find otherwise.

"The Gower Bird Hospital rehabilitation facilities are excellent. I hope donations will enable us to bring our clinical facilities to the same high standards. The Hospital needs more veterinary equipment.

"I find working at Gower Bird Hospital very rewarding and precious. It is wonderful to deal with these wild species and be able to help them along in an environment which is unfortunately becoming increasingly hostile to them due to human interference. It brings me just that little bit closer to nature."

Thanks – we couldn't do it without you

GOWER Bird Hospital is a registered charity entirely dependent on donations. It is because of the generosity of existing and new supporters that our work with wildlife casualties continues and expands. Your support is very much appreciated.

A huge thank you to everyone who gives a donation or helps at fund raising events. Leanne raised £21.64 by selling plants in the car park of Bishopston Valley Hotel. Anyone with a little time to spare who would like to help with fund raising (it can be fun, honestly!) please contact Sylvia Gooding on 01792 418710.

A young kestrel needing the rehabilitation facilities at Gower Bird Hospital.

Gower Bird Hospital needs your support and is very grateful for all donations. Since last year, we've been supplying a standing order form and have been very happily surprised by the response. Just £2 a month can make a big difference. If the form is missing, cheques can be made payable to Gower Bird Hospital and sent to our address on the last page. Please also make sure to include your address.

Major local donors in 2001 were the Gower Society and Pennard Community Charity. Thanks also for donations from the G C Gibson Charitable Trust, RSPCA, Wildaid, Barry Green Memorial Fund, Jean Sainsbury Animal Welfare Trust, Care for the Wild International, The Philanthropic Trust and Atlas Fire Engineering.

Thanks also to the RSPCA Animal Collection Officers and Inspectors who bring wildlife casualties to Gower Bird Hospital almost every day. Without their services many of the patients wouldn't be able to reach us.

You can recycle this newsletter by passing it on to someone else

How to get a patient to Gower Bird Hospital

IF you have transport, phone us. We usually meet people at the Gower Inn, Parkmill, as we are very difficult to find and the road to us is so rough. We are often busy with the birds, hedgehogs and other animals and sometimes can't answer the phone immediately – if you get our answerphone leave a message and we'll ring you back as soon as we can.

OR take it to your nearest vet. You will not be charged for taking a wildlife patient to them and after treatment the vet can then call the RSPCA to arrange transport to us.

OR Phone the RSPCA on 08705 555 999. The RSPCA bring injured wildlife to Gower Bird Hospital almost every day. During the busy months they will bring patients to us three or four times a day.

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