

## MINK CONTROL PROJECT LAUNCHED IN LOCHABER

A mink control project in Sunart, Lochaber has recently been launched as part of a range of biodiversity improvements in the area.

The £90,000, three year project will judge the effectiveness of mink control and will

be managed by Scottish Natural Heritage. Additional funding is coming from The European Agricultural Guidance Fund (EAGGF), the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative, including Forestry Commission, Highland Council and Lochaber Enterprise. The predator which hails from America has been identified as the main reason for declining numbers of bird populations on the Sunart islands and coastlines. Tern colonies to common gulls have fallen prey to the foreign non-native American mink which escaped from fur farms in the 1960's and which have been breeding in

the wild ever since.

Mink control projects in other areas have proved very successful and it is hoped the Lochaber project can help restore the numbers of breeding birds which a recent report revealed has now almost or completely disappeared.

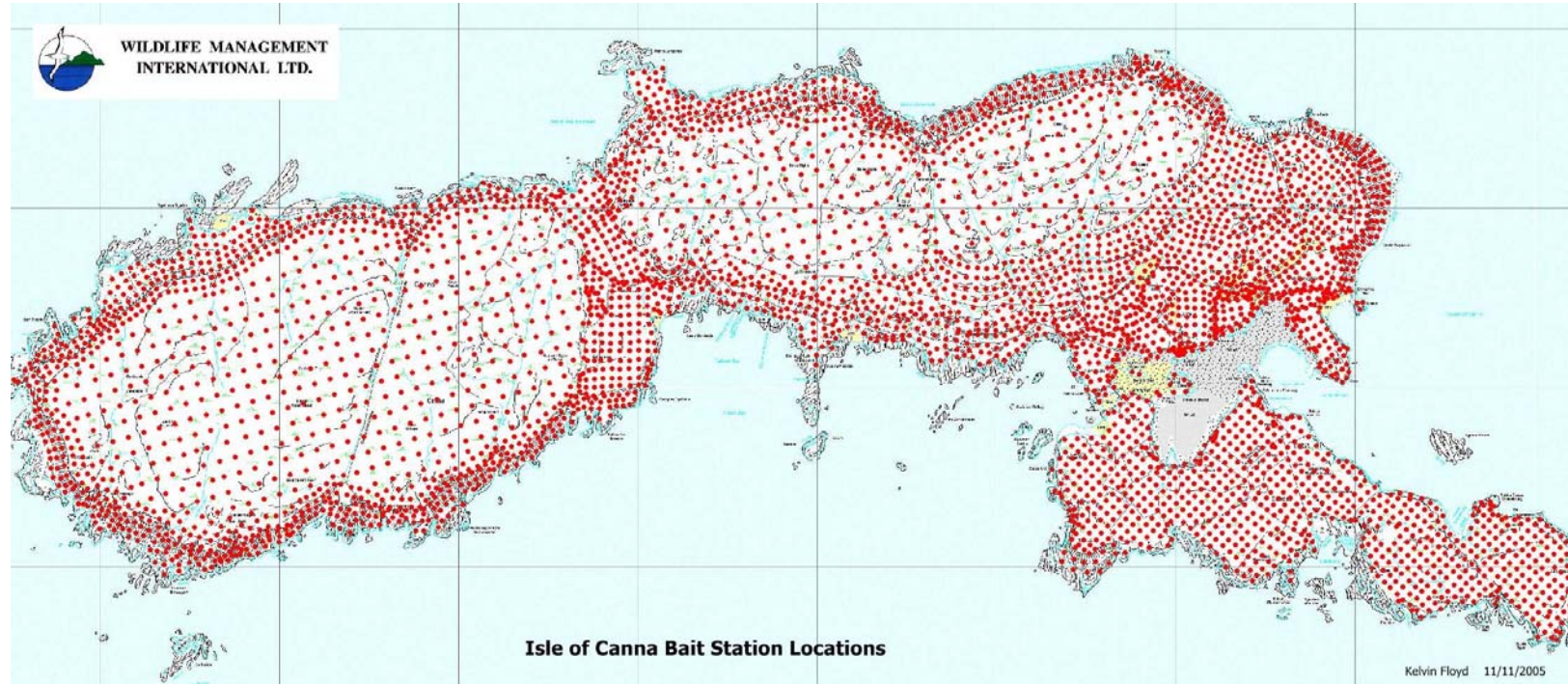
The project will involve traps being set in the ground nesting bird season and trapped mink will be dispatched humanely.

Brian Eardley, SNH area officer in Fort William is pleased with the project. He said: "Helping to keep the Sunart islands

and coastlines mink free should not only help alleviate mink problems at the fish farm but also give a real boost to the success of ground nesting birds and other natural heritage to be found on the island.

"Some local people have already been making a valuable contribution to controlling the mink population during the key ground nesting bird breeding season. It is a problem which needs a concerted and focused effort and it would be fantastic to get terns back to nesting on the islands and coasts again."

## CRACK TEAM SOLVE CANNA SEABIRDS PROBLEM



A team of specialists from a New Zealand company have eradicated an island full of brown rats which have threatened its well known seabird colonies.

The island of Canna which is one of the 'Small Isles' just south of Skye has around 15,000 seabirds of 14 different species nesting around its shores. Under the European Birds Directive, Canna had been designated a Special Protection Area for its seabirds.

Their fortunes have been monitored for nearly 40 years by volunteers from The Highland Ringing Group but recently it has become evident that many of the seabird populations were in serious trouble.

The nocturnal, burrow-nesting Manx shearwaters, numbering some 1,500 pairs in the 1980s, were all but extinct. The Canna shag colony had been one of the largest in Europe, but three of its small sub-colonies had disappeared and the fourth had undergone a major decline.

Some of the pairs had relocated to safer cliff sites but the total number of nests had halved. So too had the number of black guillemots, another occupant of the boulder fields. Razorbills and ground-nesting gulls had declined by two-thirds while common guillemots – safe on their rock ledges – and puffins on the isolated stacks, were just about holding their own. Only kittiwakes, building nests on the cliff faces, had increased.

It was discovered through research carried out by the Highland Ringing Group and the National Trust for Scotland who own and manage the island, that brown rats were eating birds eggs, and even the young chicks, so depressing the seabird breeding output and, ultimately the breeding numbers. Estimates put the rat population at between 5,000-10,000.

### FUNDING

With EU Life Funding and financial assistance from the National Trust for Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage, a project to eradicate rats from Canna and

its adjoining near-neighbour, Sanday, was put in place.

Wildlife Management International Ltd from New Zealand who are world experts in this field won the contract and were able to move to Canna immediately. The eight strong team, augmented by volunteers arrived on Canna in late August 2005.

In no time at all they had deployed an impressive 4,273 bait stations, 50 and 100 metres apart in a GPS covered grid system covering the entire island (see above map). They were concentrated around the farm and the shore where the rats were most abundant. Canna's imposing cliffs were even covered by abseilers to ensure that nowhere was left out.

### POISON

Around 23 tonnes of poison was used and the first generation rodenticide, diphacinone, was selected as it causes minimal risk of secondary poisoning. This meant local birds of prey and the like were as safe as possible from eating

affected rats.

The piping used to trap the rats (below) excluded anything bigger than a rat, but the local population of field mice were vulnerable. They are a special subspecies unique to Canna, not unlike the mice of St Kilda. In order to ensure their survival, 158 of them were live-trapped and moved to the mainland before the poison was laid out.

The mice will be returned to their homes from their temporary accommodation in Edinburgh Zoo and at the Highland Wildlife Park in Kingussie.

By mid-November 2005, the team had accounted for 90 per cent of the islands' rats, and a month later began replacing the baits with tasty chews in the form of chocolate, soap, candles or wooden stakes soaked in cooking oil. This allowed the team to measure how many rats were left by monitoring the tooth marks in the chews.

By early March 2006, the team were confident that they had finally eliminated all the rats but monitoring will continue to be carried out periodically.



Above: Blocks of poison within a bait station—cut away for the photograph.

Left: The 600ft north cliffs of Canna.



## SNH SPEARHEAD MONITORING ON RUM

One of the most remarkable seabirds in the country is to be the subject of a major monitoring survey by SNH.

The Manx shearwater which number around 100,000 pairs on the Rum National Nature Reserve, is to be studied to see whether the population numbers have changed at all over recent years. Rum is a Special Protection Area for shearwaters, one of many internationally

important conservation designations on the island.

The colony, which accounts for up to a third of the entire world population of Manx shearwater, live in what can only be described as large rabbit warrens. Known as 'Manxies' these black and white birds only enter or leave their burrows after dark, so monitoring them can provide a real challenge! However, in late September every year, intrepid ornithologists make night-time visits to the colony to ring young birds for study purposes.

Recent observations of rat predation have prompted SNH to study the breeding

success of Manx shearwaters more closely over the next few seasons and to look into other factors that may be affecting the shearwater's ability to raise chicks. These other factors include predation of eggs or chicks, flooding of nest burrow and lack of food. From this summer, researchers will investigate rat abundance, assessing the likelihood of burrows to flooding and measuring chick growth rates. This will inform SNH of the conservation issues that need to be addressed to ensure the long-term viability of the Rum Manx shearwater colony.

### SEE SHEARWATERS AT NEW DISPLAY

Visitors to Rum can now encounter the sights and sounds of the Manx shearwater colony without the need to climb to the high peaks on a dark night.

An interactive display of a shearwater burrow can now be found in Kinloch Village. With the press of a button you can see a chick being fed in the snug of its nest chamber whilst being serenaded by the cackling and shrieking calls of the adults.

There is also a new leaflet that describes the amazing lives of Rum shearwaters. For those wishing to experience the colony for real, SNH staff provide regular night-time visits throughout the summer.

## IN BRIEF.....

### SEA EAGLE

#### SUCCESS STORY

A successful SNH publication about sea eagles has been re-written and will be published in time to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> sea eagle chick to be fledged in Scotland this summer.

The success story of the reintroduction of sea eagles to Scotland has attracted a lot of interest nationwide after a pair on the Isle of Mull featured in the BBC's Springwatch programme. Over 30 pairs are now established and a nest can be viewed on CCTV at the Aros Centre in Skye.

The updated and revised publication has been written by John Love who has been involved in the project since 1975, and it is illustrated by spectacular colour photographs, with paintings by Keith Brockie.

### NATURAL TREASURES

#### UNEARTHED IN NEW

#### LEAFLET

From the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head, a new leaflet has been produced that shows nearly 50 amazing places to visit in the Outer Hebrides.

The full colour leaflet indicates where some of the most remarkable scenery and wildlife exists giving visitors and locals alike the inside track on sampling these natural treasures.

Produced by Western Isles SNH staff, the full colour leaflet follows a successful format developed previously in Caithness and Sutherland. Each site has a description summarising features of interest that can be located on a colour map. The colour leaflet will be free from local outlets by the end of May and an all-Gaelic version should also be available soon.

### CATTLE GRAZING STUDY

SNH has recently commissioned a literature review to clarify both the benefits and detrimental effects of cattle on a range of unimproved habitats and wildlife species.

This work reviewed existing literature and research studies on large herbivores with the aim of collating information from all those involved in cattle grazing on unimproved habitats.

Initial findings confirm that compared to other domestic grazers, cattle can result in a more structurally diverse sward; a reduction in tussock forming vegetation; and an increase in niches for plant generation.

However, there is very little information on the effects of cattle on priority plant species and no scientific comparisons on the foraging behaviour of different breeds of cattle, with much of the information on the benefits of cattle appearing to be anecdotal. The report will appear on the SNH website soon.

### MALLAIG SEA EAGLE

#### EVENTS

In March, Martin Carty of The Moorings in Mallaig and a raptor worker with the National Trust for Scotland, organised a series of events in the Mallaig area about the reintroduction of sea eagles.

He enlisted the help of John Love of the Project Team and formerly manager of the release programme in the Isle of Rum National Nature Reserve from 1975 to 1985. John gave a slide show about the reintroduction in the Mallaig Heritage Centre on the evening of 8 March to a full house of some sixty people, including locals who had helped on the Rum project in various ways.

Local fishing boats, fish merchants, Calmac and other charter boats, and townsfolk were and still are generous in their wholehearted support for the project and its outcome. Martin and his wife Jenny, together with Martin Poole of the Heritage Centre, organised tea and sandwiches to follow.

The next day Martin and John talked to the primary schools, first in Mallaig, then Arisaig and finally Morar, to an enthusiastic reception from the children who were armed with many interesting and searching questions. Thanks are due to the teachers and pupils, and the people of Mallaig for making the whole experience so worthwhile.

### EDITORIAL

Welcome to the fourth edition of Teachd an Tìr, which reports on the work of Scottish Natural Heritage in West Highland and the Western Isles. Scottish Natural Heritage is a government body, who work with Scotland's people to care for our natural heritage.

Teachd an Tìr is published twice yearly in Autumn and Spring. It contains regular features on National Nature Reserves, book reviews and Gaelic articles. As always, we welcome feedback from readers. This edition will be available online soon, through the SNH website ([www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk)), also for the visually impaired, a large-print version is available by contacting Margaret Munro at the SNH Office, Portree (01478 613329).

The editorial team for this edition was Margaret Munro & Stephen Varwell (Portree), John Love (South Uist), Dominic Sargent (Fort William) and Kenny Nelson (Kinlochewe)