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Poisoned birds storm victims

By ANTHONY TUCKER, Science Correspondent

Both man-made and natural causes contributed to the massive sea-bird kill in the Irish Sea during September and October, a group of specialists in wild life suggested yesterday in an interim but not unanimous finding.

Since preliminary findings were announced a few weeks ago further investigation has now ruled out any possibility of the deaths being caused by a viral or bacterial infection, the specialists' second meeting at the Natural Environment Centre in London revealed.

But analysis of the weather and sea currents during the period, which explain the distribution of the 10,000 dead and dying guillemots and razorbills, have shown that gales were unusually frequent.

Although bird deaths increase normally during that time—the end of the breeding season and the beginning of the moult—the strong winds alone are not thought to be an adequate explanation. Analyses carried out on 100 birds reveal in many of them an unusually high level of industrial chemicals called poly-chlorinated biphenyls (PCPs). Its action is milder than, but similar to, organo-chlorine pesticides. An earlier report that it has been of the order of "several hundred parts per million" in many birds is now confirmed.

The inference is that, because of the weakening effect of a high but not necessarily lethal level of poison the birds were unable to survive a rough spell of weather.

PCBs, employed in the plastics, coatings, paints, cosmetics and other industries, have been in use since the 30s. But research since the kill—carried out by the marine laboratory of the Scottish department of Agriculture and Fisheries—has found that the levels in marine organisms are generally low.

The highest four parts per million in herring of the Clyde does not correlate with the five parts per million found in the most seriously affected sea-birds. There is therefore a mystery to be solved and a co-ordinated research programme involving the monitoring of levels of PCBs in sea water and in marine organisms around Britain has begun.

Death of 10,000 birds 'not caused by virus'

By ADRIAN BERRY
Science Staff

INFECTIOUS disease has been ruled out as a cause of the deaths this autumn of some 10,000 sea-birds off the north-west coast of Britain.

Dr Martin Holdgate, of the Nature Conservancy, told correspondents yesterday: "Some 40 to 50 corpses were examined, which had been taken at random, and no trace at all was found of any infectious virus."

He was speaking at a Press conference in London of the Natural Environment Research Council, at which marine scientists gave interim reports about the deaths. No cause is definitely known.

Traces of DDE (the breakdown product of DDT) were found in many of the birds, as were traces of the industrial chemical PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl), but these were in much too small amounts to have caused widespread deaths.

Dr Holdgate said it was unlikely that oil slicks were the cause, since very little oil was found on the corpses. Few of them had suffered from more than a "15 per cent. oiling."

He went on: "We cannot rule out the possibility that this was a purely natural occurrence. The usual gales in September and October blew for much longer than is customary.

"This is the time of year when sea-birds, particularly guillemots, auks and razorbills are vulnerable. Their breeding season is over, and their food reserves are low."

He said a similar incident had occurred in 1879, which was obviously due to natural causes, when a ship in the Irish Sea reported vast numbers of dead razorbills. They were all in the same emaciated condition as the 1969 casualties.

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