Bird killer could be a chemical

WHAT killed 10,000 sea birds in the northern Irish Sea during the past three weeks, will probably never be known. Scientists from many laboratories and organisations who met in London last week, concluded that oil pollution and severe gales could have played a part in the wildlife disaster.

But the most disturbing results to come out of the inquiry were the high levels of industrial chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls found in eight out of nine birds examined at the Nature's Conservancy's station at Monk's Wood. The hundreds of parts per million of PCB's in the birds were almost certainly enough to be toxic, possibly to be lethal.

Last November, The Sunday Times published an article on the possible risk to birds from this widespread group of industrial chemicals. Their presence in dead birds was discovered in the first place purely by chance, for they happen to be similar to organochlorine pesticides and were identified by the same analytical procedures.

There is no guarantee that even if poisoning is suspected, analysis of a dead bird will reveal the substance responsible. Analysts can only find what they are looking for, and if some unknown poison is involved, the chances that it will identified are slim.

The organophosphorus insecticides, for example, which are closely related to nerve gases, cannot be detected in dead animals, and only with great difficulty in live ones. Because of the shortage of live specimens no tests for these poisons have yet been carried out, but the scientists hope to do so in the near future.

If nothing else the disaster has exposed the lack of any kind of organisation for dealing with incidents of this kind, a lack which was even more glaring at the time of the Torrey Canyon. It was only informal contact between scientists that ensured a reasonably thorough investigation.

At all stages it has been held up by lack of specimens, lack of people and lack of money. To analyse a single bird for organochlorine pesticides costs from £10-£20. It seems a trivial sum, but to a laboratory with modest resources and other work to do, it is far from negligible.

Bryan Silcock



Cause of death unknown: a technician at the Nature Conservancy Experimental station examines a dead guillemot

Sunday Times 26/10/69

lowered by expenses.

A spokesman for the General Optical Council said that a careers pamphlet showed that an optician could earn £2,500 or more a year. This figure would be raised in the next issue of the pamphlet.

SEABIRD DEATHS 'LACK SINGLE CAUSE'

The deaths of thousands of sea birds off the west coast of Britain could not be put down to one specific mystery cause, Dr Martin Holdgate, deputy director of the Nature Conservancy, said yesterday at a meeting of the Natural Environment Research Council in London.

It was probably an "unusual combination of usual causes," he said. Three factors had contributed to the high death rate—the annual moult, severe gales and oil pollution.

Examinations had not revealed anything abnormal, although some of the birds showed signs of "internal lesions and respiratory infection." There was no danger to human life.

Luxurious

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