Industrial matter in dead birds

By PEARCE WRIGHT
Science Correspondent

Abnormally high concentrations of an industrial chemical, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), were found in some of the bodies of the 10,000 sea birds killed off the west coast of Britain over the past three weeks.

The presence of the chemical which is used in a wide variety of manufacturing processes, including plastic and paints, was 10 to 12 times the amount found on routine monitoring of birds for poisonous substances.

Such large quantities are most likely to be explained by an accumulation from estuaries of rivers draining dense industrial areas, or the dumping of factory waste in the sea.

The presence of 100 parts a million of PCBs was found by a research team of the Monks Wood experimental station, Huntingdon, and was reported in a statement from a meeting at the Natural Environment Research Council's headquarters in London last night.

The details were given after an all-day meeting attended by representatives from the Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence, Department of Health, Medical Research Council, Ministry of Agriculture, the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, Cambridge University Department of Animal Pathology, the Nature Conservancy, government research stations of animal and marine biology, and voluntary organizations.

The meeting took the form of an official inquiry in which evidence was given by expert investigators. The area affected was established as being on both sides of the Irish Sea from Wexford and Merioneth northwards to the Isle of Mull and around the Isle of Man.

The meeting concluded that the deaths were probably caused by a number of factors.

One in 10 of the sea birds were contaminated by oil.

Severe gales during the peak period of mortality undoubtedly drove many birds ashore. The few birds which were still alive when examined did not show signs of gross starvation.

Further tests were to be carried out for virus infections and organochlorine residues. Until more information was available, no more definite conclusions could be drawn.

The detection of large quantities of P.C.B.s was the most disturbing evidence examined at the inquiry. Dr. Martin Holdgate, director of research, Nature Conservancy, emphasized last night that the analysis had been on a small batch of eight guillemots.

Rabies test on wild life

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Pollution clue in dead-bird epidemic

Express Staff Reporter

AN emergency conference of scientists investigating the epidemic which has killed an estimated 10,000 sea birds on Britain's western coast was told yesterday that pollution from industrial waste killed some of them.

Post-mortems had discovered heavy concentrations of chemicals called polychlorinated-biphenyls, widely used in industry.

But only a fractional proportion of the birds were involved—seven guillemots collected from South-West Scotland, and one each from Wales and Ulster.

Further tests are being carried out on hundreds more birds delivered to research laboratories from around the coasts.

The epidemic began about three weeks ago. Starvation did not appear to have killed many of the birds examined.

DISCOVERY

Yesterday about 40 scientists from organisations dealing with fisheries, animal conservation, and water pollution were summoned for urgent talks at the London headquarters of the Natural Environment Research Council.

The discovery of poisons in the guillemots may rule out the theory that the mass deaths are due to a virus.

It is unlikely that human life will be affected, the scientists believe.

Plans were made at yesterday's talks to step up observations.

"Until more information is available, the meeting was emphatic that no more definite conclusions could be drawn than those mentioned today," a spokesman said.

For some time there has been growing criticism over the thousands of gallons of effluent being daily pumped into the sea from factories along the west coast.

Apart from birds being washed ashore, reports have been increasing of birds flopping down on to ships.

Dr. Leslie Cooper, a chemical oceanographer at the Marine Biological Station at Plymouth, revealed yesterday that the crew of one of the station's ships said that at one time there were so many birds landing that it was difficult to walk on the decks.

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