

Cormorant culling

The RSPB claims that as many as 1,500 cormorants have been shot since the Government licensed the killing of these birds in September 2004. This could rise to up to 3,000, even though there are fewer than 3,500 nesting pairs in England. Many licences are being granted unnecessarily, the society says, and has called for more work to be done to develop ways of sustaining fish populations without killing cormorants. More at www.rspb.org.uk

Botanical protection

Botanical gardens provide a safe haven for 9,000 endangered plants species – a quarter of the total number of plants known to be threatened globally. Botanic



The giant titan lily, here pictured at Kew, is an endangered plant.

Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) made the discovery when it set up a new database which allowed the world's botanic gardens to check their collections against the IUCN Red Data Book. More at www.bgci.org



Guillemots failed to raise any chicks in one of their strongholds, Fair Isle in Shetland.

On the rocks

UK Seabird breeding failure raises long-term fears.

As seabirds return to their breeding cliffs this spring, ornithologists will be watching with concern because 2004 was the worst breeding year on record for several species in the UK. On Orkney, for instance, kittiwakes failed to raise any young last year, and did little better on Shetland or at Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire, while guillemots suffered a total breeding failure on Fair Isle, and raised only a few chicks on other Shetland islands.

The most likely cause, according to some observers, is climate change. Last year was the second warmest on record in Scotland, and sea temperatures in parts of the North Sea have risen by 2°C in 20 years.

Euan Dunn, head of marine policy at the RSPB, says that the plankton mix in the North Sea is

being changed fundamentally by the warmer water, to the detriment of sandeels, which are a major food source for many seabirds.

Dunn believes “we could be witnessing the single biggest change in the North Sea since it was formed 10,000 years ago,” and calls for further major cuts in the industrial sandeel fishery to help seabirds.

Bob Furness, a seabird expert at Glasgow University, believes the situation is more complex, with larger numbers of herring also playing a part. He thinks the recent recovery in herring stocks “may represent the return of the northern North Sea to a more natural ecosystem, dominated by adult herring, but with fewer sandeels and perhaps also fewer seabirds.”

Mark Tasker of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee

emphasises that one year alone does not spell disaster for Britain's seabirds. Their long lives and slow breeding rates help them cope with the occasional bad year.

But whether the issue is high herring stocks or rising temperatures (or both), he does not expect 2004 to be a one-off. The coming months may confirm this gloomy prognosis.

Michael Scott

HERRING TROUBLE?

- In the 1960s, herring and other fish were drastically reduced by overfishing, leading to an abundance of the sandeels on which they prey.
- This probably helped fuel big increases in seabird numbers in and around the North Sea, because sandeels are better seabird food than herring.
- Today, a steep recovery in North Sea herring stocks, following international fishing controls, may be causing a matching decline in sandeels.

Tiger killed by canine virus

RUSSIA Asia's big cat vulnerable to new disease.

The first known case of a wild tiger dying from Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) has been reported in the Russian Far East. CDV causes death through broncho-pneumonia, lymphoid depletion and brain lesions. It has been found in zoo tigers before but its discovery in the wild has

implications for the survival of the species.

In 1994 CDV wiped out a third of the Serengeti's 2000-3000 lions. Tigers, being less sociable, are assumed to be less susceptible. But they exist in much smaller, isolated populations, with a high risk of

inbreeding, so numbers might not easily recover should infection set in.

Scientists have now discovered CDV antibodies in other wild Russian tigers. Though the disease is common in feral and domestic dogs, they are sampling various wild carnivore populations, including racoon dogs and foxes, in case they provide a reservoir for the disease. **Stephen Mills**

TIGERS AND CDV

- Siberia's 400-450 tigers, probably comprise the largest single population out of a world total of 5,000-7,000.
- Tigers live in diminishing and increasingly isolated populations, raising the threat of inbreeding which could exacerbate their vulnerability to diseases such as CDV.







Amur leopards have thicker coats and tails than others of their species.

Last leopards of the east

RUSSIA Proposed pipeline to go straight through home range.

The world's rarest cat is threatened with extinction by plans for an oil pipeline that will cross Russia and end in the most important part of its territory in Amur Bay in the extreme south-east corner of the country.

The Amur leopard is a distinct subspecies, with a thicker winter coat and tail and larger rosettes than other leopards. But it has a minute range, and only an estimated 30 animals survive in the coniferous and deciduous forests south of Vladivostok, making the species highly vulnerable.

The pipeline – which will be built by state-owned company Transneft – will go straight through Barsovy Zakaznik wildlife refuge, but it is the associated road building and population influx that conservationists fear most. Russians are keen hunters, and more hunting will create additional disturbance for all wild animals in the region.



Vegetation will be removed from both sides of the pipeline, to protect against fires and terrorists. "This creates a barrier for wildlife," said Sarah Christie of the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). "Even if they can physically cross it, they do not like to cross it."

The irony is the threat comes just as conservationists in Russia's Far East have started to make progress in efforts to save the Amur leopard.

A camera-trapping survey in the winter of 2003-2004 identified 13 individual leopards, up from 10 the previous year. Population estimates have increased from 22-28 in 2000 to 30 in 2003.

Conservation work includes setting up anti-poaching units and tackling the problem of forest fires. Satellite imagery has revealed that nearly 50 per cent of South-west Primorye – the leopard's prime habitat – burned at least once in the past six years, according to the grouping of conservation bodies known as the Amur Leopard and Tiger Alliance (ALTA).

ALTA says it has no problem with the pipeline being built, but that it should be rerouted to the north of Vladivostok – so that it avoids the leopard's home range. **James Fair**

Action

Donations marked 'Amur Leopards' to the ZSL Field Conservation Fund, ZSL, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY; www.zsl.org; www.amur.org.uk

Ratty gets help ...

Some good news for Ratty, the guise under which the water vole has inaccurately entered our affections. From about seven million in 1989, by 1996 the species had suffered an estimated 90 per cent decline. Now the Government says recovery is possible and plans to give it full protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Other species it says need more care are the short-snouted and spiny seahorses, two sorts of burnet moth, the angel shark, four skate species and the Roman snail.

and Otter lends a hand

Oddly, water vole habitats are already protected, but not the animals themselves. They are still poisoned by people who mistake them for rats, but probably their worst enemies are mink, which eat them. Otters, now recovering across much of the UK, keep mink out but live happily alongside the voles. For those who remember *The Wind In The Willows*, Otter giving Ratty a helping hand will sound like life imitating art.

The TB question

There's mixed news for another Kenneth Grahame hero, the badger. A trial in Ireland found removing badgers from four areas reduced the rate at which cattle caught tuberculosis by between 60 and 90 per cent. But the National Federation of Badger Groups says the study is flawed, while the researchers themselves say widespread culling is "feasible" but not "viable". One told the NFBG that culling would be illegal, because it would flout the Bern Convention. That says badgers (and other

species) can be killed to control disease only when alternatives have been tried – which as they have not been with badgers. Dr Elaine King, the NFBG's chief executive, said: "This trial suggests badger culling only reduces TB in cattle if every single badger is exterminated."

Long-distance fliers

Grey-headed albatrosses should benefit from work by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) to find where they spend their time. BAS scientists fitted tiny, light-sensitive logging devices, called geo-locators, to the birds' legs, and found most travelled from their breeding sites off South Georgia to the south-west Indian Ocean. More than half then flew right round the world, the fastest in 46 days, covering at least 22,000km in that time. Longline fishing is reckoned to kill 300,000 seabirds annually. Knowing far more accurately than ever before where the albatrosses will meet the fleets should enable governments to protect them better.

Urban rarities

A survey by Mammals Trust UK looking for the presence of mammals at green sites in built-up areas found encouraging signs. Almost three-quarters of participants discovered their chosen site was home to mammals of conservation concern such as red squirrels, water voles, hares, dormice and every species of bat. More than half the sites harboured the even more important 'priority species', those with their own action plan. One puzzle was the many hedgehogs 'found' in eastern England – earlier surveys showed a sharp decline there in the past decade. Whether



hedgehogs are now becoming urbanised may become clearer after the trust's next survey, starting in early April.

A survey has found that red squirrels thrive in urban areas as well as more rural ones.

Alex Kirby is BBC News Online's environment correspondent