

AN OILED SEA-BIRD AND ITS CARE

On December 14, 1975, a sea bird, covered in heavy, black oil was found on the North Shore of Prince Edward Island. It was identified as a Common Murre, a bird not usually found on the Island; and had, presumably, been blown off course in a recent storm. This bird normally ranges from the Arctic to Nova Scotia, and is the nearest thing to a penguin found in this area. It is about the size of a Mallard duck, but walks in an upright position, with much the same curious flat-footed waddle exhibited by penguins. At rest it flops down on its chest like a duck. It is a handsome little fellow with jet black head, back and wings, and a snowy white throat and underbelly. It has white cheek patches, with black circles around gleaming black eyes, and a thin line runs from the eyes through the white cheek patches. The beak is long, thin and pointed, and the tail is short and when outspread, fan shaped.

Cleaning the oil from the bird presented some problem, and washing with a mild liquid detergent proved to be the only practical method. Needless to say, our Common Murre did not appreciate this and a great battle ensued during which the quite amazing strength of the birds short sturdy wings was apparent. One person simply did not have enough hands to control flapping wings, flailing feet, and stabbing beak and still swish the soapy water through the feathers. It required many washings and as this was exhausting and distressing for the bird, it was done over a period of two or three days. Each time the bird was thoroughly rinsed and then put to relax in a small cage under a hair dryer, set on low, and positioned well above the cage so that no direct heat was concentrated onto the bird. This part of the operation the bird seemed to enjoy and he would fluff up his feathers and waddle into the warmth.

Unfortunately, and as had been expected, so much washing removed the natural oils from the feathers, and it was suspected that now the bird might become waterlogged and sink if placed in deep water. This proved to be so, and although there was still some oil adhering to the feathers, no further washing was attempted. To induce the bird to begin preening again, so that he could remove the remaining oil and at the same time start the distribution of natural oil through the feathers, a little warmed lanolin was smeared lightly over the plumage. This did seem to encourage some preening.

During this time, while the Murre was still quite frightened, it would repeatedly eject a loose watery excrement some two or three feet whenever approached. This appears to have been some sort of defence mechanism, since as the bird became more confident, it seldom happened; and now the droppings are deposited in the usual messy fashion of all birds.

One day the bird was found pointing its beak upwards, gaping and breathing very heavily. The first thought was that the bird was sick, and pneumonia was feared. Antibiotics were administered simply by putting a few drops inside a fish. Later information suggested that this may be the birds method of perspiring. This is most likely the correct explanation, as the same behaviour has been observed occasionally since, and the bird shows no other signs of sickness.

Feeding at first was difficult. Pieces of scallop were refused, but mackerel cut in long very thin strips was accepted, though with some reluctance and a deal of trouble in getting it down. However, smelts were accepted readily. It became apparent that the streamlined shape of the whole smelt, taken head first is the nearest thing to natural feeding. Now, a damaged fish, or one with a broken skin will be refused, as will one that is not ice cold. If a fish is mistakenly taken tail first (a rare occurrence)