

WARDEN'S REPORT FOR 1996

The beginning of the year certainly had its problems! In January easterly storms, coupled with big spring tides undermined the Beach Road causing it to collapse in several places; luckily, temporary repairs were effected fairly easily. Soon after the road had been fixed news came from Pembrokeshire of an impending oil tanker disaster.

The *Sea Empress* ran aground at the entrance to Milford Haven on Thursday 15th February. During the following week attempts to free the ship, off-load its cargo and float it in to safe water failed. Before the ship was successfully salvaged over 70000 tonnes of oil had been spilled creating a huge slick along the Pembroke and Carmarthen coasts. During the week following the grounding of the tanker it became increasingly obvious that Lundy was likely to be affected by the resulting oil spill. Devon County Council set up an emergency team based at County Hall and began contingency planning. Volunteers were alerted and offers of help came in from all around.

Oiled birds began to wash ashore on the Landing Beach in alarming numbers. Volunteers from the RSPCA and Devon Wildlife Trust were brought over to assist island staff in collecting and treating seabirds. A total of 165 oiled birds were given first aid treatment on the island and then shipped off for cleaning at one of the RSPCAs centres. Another fifty-six dead seabirds were found and collected. The birds were predominantly Guillemots with a smaller number of Razorbills, one Red-throated Diver, one Shag and an Oystercatcher. Oil was observed just offshore of the island with an oily sheen on the water in the Landing Bay and on some days a very noticeable oily smell on the air. Thankfully, only small amounts of oil came ashore. In the south east corner of the island, a few rock pools in the Devil's Kitchen were very heavily covered for short periods of time. By the time any oil reached Lundy it had been at sea for over a week, it was well broken down and emulsified and therefore reduced in toxicity. A fortnight after the spill the initial crisis had passed and survey work was carried out to assess any damage. Sea caves used by grey seals as breeding sites were checked and found to be free of oil. Rock pools in the Devil's Kitchen which had been covered with oil showed no effects of damage, seaweed was not bleached and invertebrates all appeared intact. During June annual seabird counts at seven study plots on the west side were conducted. Numbers of auks were comparable with last year's surveys and Kittiwake numbers had increased. It seems that on this occasion Lundy escaped any permanent damage; the oil spill that effected two Marine Nature Reserves and the media circus that surrounded it will not, however, be forgotten.

Despite these problems 1996 should be remembered as a good year for conservation on Lundy; there have been many positive developments.

The display in the Church has gradually been added to with two new marine display boards illustrating different aspects of the Reserve as well as a hands on geology "rock box". A Marine Nature Reserve interpretation board designed and built by a local artist has been added to the wildlife display in the fishing hut on Ilfracombe quay. The National Trust archaeological survey team visited during the summer to complete their survey by covering the south end of the island. They left behind a small archaeological display now sited in the church. English Heritage are in the process of reviewing the statutory protection afforded to Lundy's ancient monuments under their Monuments Protection Programme, adding new sites to the Schedule and producing management guidelines to help protect these nationally important sites.

A small display on Basking Sharks was produced by our long term summer volunteer, and just in time, as it proved to be an excellent year for Basking Shark sightings. July was the month of the shark with over twenty reported sightings. Both staying and day visitors were able to watch these fantastic animals. On one Oldenburg voyage eight sharks were seen from the ship! Perhaps the soupy plankton bloom present during June and early July attracted the sharks to the island. There have been plenty of other fascinating marine observations: three Sunfish were seen during the late summer, two of which were swimming over the site of the *Carmine Filomena*. Red Band Fish burrows were found east of the quarries and just north of the Knoll Pins many of these burrows had fish in them; night diving these sites proved particularly rewarding. There have

been few cetacean sightings with only two Bottle Nosed Dolphins seen in early April.

In late August a Leathery Turtle was spotted swimming over the site of the MV *Robert*. An impressive sight at over 5ft in length the turtle was watched craning its neck and looking around before diving from view. As far as I am aware the last reported turtle sighting was over four years ago. Several dive groups have reported underwater encounters with Grey Seals at sites around the Island, at Gannets Bay, Knoll Pins, on the *Montagu*, Rattles, and in the Landing Bay. A young male seal hauled out on the Landing Beach one summer day was identified by a tag as a released pup from the Gweek seal sanctuary.

The diving season started late after the *Sea Empress* scare but has since then been very busy; four charter boats now operate regularly around the island in addition to several local clubs who are regular visitors. Diver numbers for all diving visitors during 1996 (charter boats, local clubs and independent groups) have been collated, reaching a total of over 2350 diver days. An underwater archaeology team visited this summer to complete the survey of the *Iona II* wreck site. During their stay, an open day on the protected wreck site, *Iona II*, was held. Divers were given information about the wreck and pointers to look for while underwater. The idea was well received by visiting divers and might provide a useful future management tool for the site.

There has been considerable fishing activity, concentrated on the west side of the island. Some problems have been experienced with boats potting inside restricted areas or carrying out restricted activities. Devon Sea Fisheries Committee are always quick to react to problems ensuring that fishermen are aware of the restrictions. The Marine Nature Reserve Advisory Group remains an excellent forum for discussion about the reserve and all parties involved in the Reserve are being encouraged to join the group.

It has also been a good year for terrestrial conservation. With grazing pressure reduced, areas of the island badly effected by last year's combination of dry weather and over stocking have gradually recovered. Heather is starting to return to areas around the Rocket Pole and on Acklands Moor. North of Quarter Wall flowering heather produced a brilliant show of colour and is showing no signs of over grazing. The marsh around Pondsburry produced a great show of Heath-spotted Orchids, Bog Asphodel, Round-leaved Sundew and Heath Milkwort. Thankfully a sensible farm policy now seems set for the future.

Although not a good flowering year for the Lundy Cabbage, large numbers of non-flowering plants have been counted suggesting that next year may be spectacular. The Lundy Cabbage has received new status being included in the Biodiversity Action Plan; the National Trust have undertaken to 'sponsor' the cabbage and a steering group to 'look after' the cabbage in the future has been set up! Large patches of uncut thistles and nettles helped to make this a good year for both Painted Ladies and Red Admirals; thousands of Painted Ladies emerged during early August almost equalled by numbers of Red Admirals emerging the following week.

Volunteers continue to carry out essential work, tree maintenance, dry stone walling, footpath repair and Rhododendron control amongst a multitude of other tasks. Groups from the LFS, National Trust and Hartland Heritage Coast have all made a valuable contribution. Dry weather reduced the amount of Rhododendron work that could be completed with conditions unsafe for burning. Groups of volunteers concentrated on footpath work renovating the east side paths as far as the quarries. The battle against the Rhododendron will hopefully be boosted with some extra funding provided by the newly fledged cabbage project. A small programme of tree planting was carried out early in the year: a mixture of sessile oak, goat willow, rowan, ash and beech was planted with some hawthorn and blackthorn in recently cleared Rhododendron patches; survival has so far been fairly good. There are plans to set up a tree nursery in the top walled garden at Millcombe to grow Lundy's own stock. This project will provide a future challenge for Field Society volunteers. One long-term volunteer stayed over the summer and proved very helpful in a whole range of conservation tasks. Volunteer conservation assistants for next year would be very welcome.

A Soay count, after lambing, recorded nearly 250 individuals. Although pressure

from domestic stock has been greatly reduced, numbers of Soay need to be controlled to safeguard grazing to the north end of the island. The goats have also increased in number producing six kids this year, the last of which arrived in mid August. A prolonged outbreak of Myxomatosis has greatly reduced rabbit numbers from an estimated 1200-1500 at the beginning of the year. The low numbers of individuals remaining are healthy.

This year has been very dry, with rainfall above average in only two out of nine months (April and May); summer conditions have been predominantly fine and sunny with some prolonged spells of easterly winds.

At the beginning of October I will be leaving Lundy and moving to Australia. Many thanks to everyone who has made my stay on this beautiful island so enjoyable and rewarding. I look forward to returning on holiday !

EMMA PARKES
September 1996

[Editor's note: Emma Parkes was replaced as Warden by Liza Cole, who took up the post in November 1996.]