



# The Rehabilitator

SUMMER 2023

ISSUE 85

+ BWRC NEWSLETTER +

**Welcome to  
the BWRC:  
House Martin  
Conservation**



## **Also in This Issue:**

- Imping: An option for the future?
- Meet Fran from Cuan Wildlife Rescue
- Red Squirrels: A case study

# THE REHABILITATOR

+ BWRC NEWSLETTER +

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## CONTENTS

- Welcome –Editor
- Imping – An option for migratory birds of the future?
- A new hope for House Martins
- Meet a rehabber – Fran Hill Cuan Wildlife
- What to do if you find a seal pup? BDMLR
- Case study: Red Squirrel
- The Next Generation Rehabilitator

# Word From the Editor

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We are sorry for the delay in our latest newsletter, the Summer season has certainly taken its toll on proceedings. In this issue we welcome our newest associate member, we go behind the scenes at Cuan to meet Fran Hill their founder and we have an excellent case study regarding red squirrels.

We also approach the interesting subject of imping in migratory birds and ask: Is this an option for the future and how can we be sure?

There is also some helpful advice from our friends at the BDMLR regarding seal pup season.

As always, we are looking for interesting case studies, tips and tricks and if there is a subject you want us to delve into then please do let us know ([admin@bwrc.org.uk](mailto:admin@bwrc.org.uk))

We hope you enjoy this latest issue

The Editor



# Imping: An Option For Migratory Birds?

Chris Riddington Trustee BWRC

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As our summer visitors begin to migrate home, rescues start to release hand reared swifts into the sky. The hope being that they will successfully make it on their long journey and one day return to breed.

With feather condition being crucial for these journeys, one problem that can prevent migration is broken or damaged feathers. It leaves rescues with the only option of Euthanasia as these migratory birds cannot and should not be overwintered. A bird that is fundamentally programmed to migrate needs to fly.

It leaves rescues helpless, but what other options are there? One option is to have the feathers removed by a vet under anaesthetic. This is not a guaranteed success. Removing such heavily anchored feathers risk damaging tissue, risks poor regrowth and even no regrowth at all. Even if it is a success, it leaves us with 7 to 8 weeks of regrowth.

A German clinic do offer imping as another option. A process in which the birds broken feathers are replaced using feathers from a deceased donor bird of the same species and size. Whilst there is a lack of data and post releasing monitoring for imping in swifts, there is vast amount of research and data proving the success of this historical falconry method for getting birds back into the sky quickly.



## What and How?

Whilst this procedure has been carried out, it is not often discussed in the UK as an option. I have been fortunate enough to see this process performed on two swifts in my care.

The procedure involves the bird being placed under anaesthetic and the damaged feathers trimmed down. A donor bird of the same species and size has the same feathers removed and then very carefully measured, then trimmed to the required length. Splints are used, ideally carbon rods, and measured to the correct size for the shaft of the feather. Using two-part epoxy glue the splint is carefully glued in place, ensuring that there is no spillage. The donor feather is then attached snugly and glued in place bringing the two parts together. Allowing 48 hours for the glue to dry, the bird should go through a series of test flights before release.

The aim is the donor feather stays in place until naturally moulting out and the birds natural feathers come through.



## Why isn't it done more?

Whilst we know that imping in falconry is often successful, for imping in swifts to be a credible option, we need to research the success rate before we make this a routine procedure. To do this we need to post release monitor birds that have had the procedure. At this stage, whilst we may feel we are giving the bird a second chance, there is a risk. If any rescues do imp swifts we would be very interested in hearing from you in the hope we can begin to build a picture and research into whether this is a viable option for swifts and possibly other migratory birds. **Please email [chris.riddington@bwrc.org.uk](mailto:chris.riddington@bwrc.org.uk)**

# A New Hope for House Martins

Ian Donovan Trustee HMCUK-IE

House Martin Conservation UK & Ireland (HMCUK-IE), our national charity, originally evolved from social media in 2019. I'd spent an intensive period of time setting up Hastings and Rother Swift Conservation Group and participating heavily within the Swifts Local Network group and had reached midsummer on the Kent/East Sussex borders.

I work on a 33 garden estate in Kent where, on arrival there a decade ago, I was greeted by a healthy colony of breeding house martins (HMs). Four years ago, the house was redeveloped and during the building work, the martins simply relocated to parts of the building unaffected by the work. Unfortunately, their numbers have slowly diminished since then, to the point that we have no house martins return each spring. It was during this decline, I set up the House Martin Conservation Facebook group and during the following autumn, in the year of the pandemic, 2022, the seeds were sown of our now national charity.

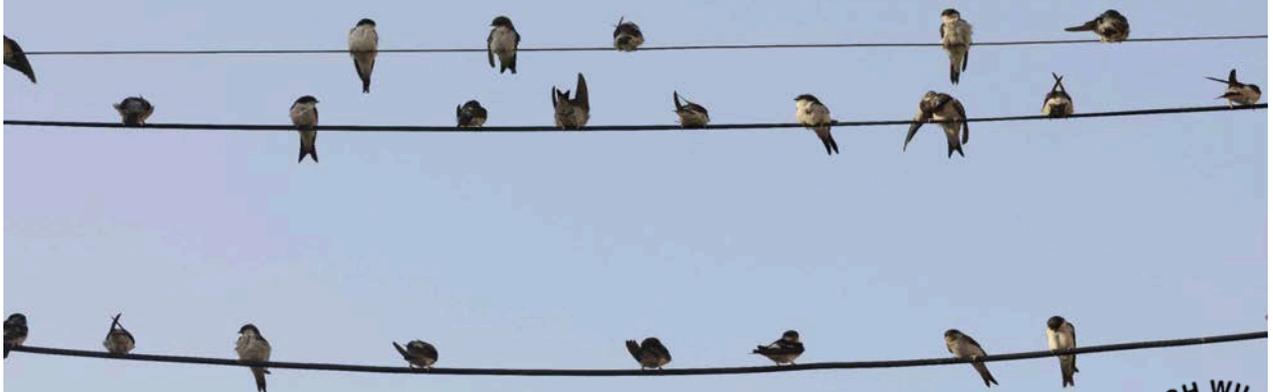
## SOCIALS

[https://www.facebook.com/groups/429717927897413/?ref=share\\_group\\_link](https://www.facebook.com/groups/429717927897413/?ref=share_group_link)

<https://twitter.com/ukhousemartins?t=afS8mnk0cJ17HIXoGDGrqw&s=09> <https://housemartinconservation.com>



associated Twitter page Our small, free, official membership through our website <https://housemartinconservation.com> is currently around 300 people. Donations mainly filter in via our website and the three spheres of funding we concentrate on are, expansion/creation of colonies with artificial nest cups (ANCs), rescue and rehabilitation and education.



In our short lifespan, we have had some success – the protection, in affiliation with the North Berwick HM Defenders of the Tesco's colony there, protection and expansion of the small but growing colony at Ascot Racecourse, the launch of a HM reintroduction project at the Grade 2 listed Ashburnham Place in East Sussex and positive coverage in Petra Jones' 15 minute award winning piece on Radio 4 recently.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001p78m?fbclid=IwAR0PnRrYCvF3jV46erUnflq5dTAlS1RYXjvOlnj9uO4HwJhFnQPtfjMmLxl>

We work with accredited HM rehabbers throughout the year, whether it's peak breeding season, or close season when we formulate new protocols to ensure a high standard of rescue and rehabilitation and to allow us to grow our network of HM rehabbers.

HMCUK-IE have recently enrolled as associate members to BWRC and will bring awareness raising of BWRC to the general public and other wildlife rehabbers through their website and social media channels. They are also currently working on protocols in relation to provision of accepted and high standard quality of care for house martins in the rehabilitation environment. These protocols will be sent to wildlife rescues/sole rehabbers who will be asked to implement these protocols as closely as possible. Once protocols are adopted, rescues/individuals will be added to HMCUK-IE's published list of accredited HM rehabbers

With the insect apocalypse, the climate crisis and the evolution of non stick uPVC soffits, we certainly have our hands full in conserving and enhancing this very special recently red listed species! <https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/birds-conservation-concern>



# Meet a Rehabber!

This issue we meet Fran Hill of Cuan Wildlife

## What is your name, what do you do and where do you work?

My name is Fran Hill. I have worked at Cuan Wildlife Rescue in Much Wenlock in Shropshire for the last twelve years and have been the hospital manager there since 2014.



## Tell us about your childhood – do you have any particular memories of animals and wildlife?

I grew up on a dairy farm in Wiltshire with my parents and two older sisters. From a very early age I was involved in caring for the animals that we had on the farm and that is where my love of animals developed. I started off being encouraged to care for the chickens and ducks, then progressed to helping with the dairy herd - feeding the calves, etc. I also had my own horse and developed a love of horses and riding that has stayed with me through my adult life. Being part of a large farming community in the local area, I was aware of shoots going on in the area and considered it to be a normal part of life. We also had hunts on our land and, I'm ashamed to admit now, I took part in some of these hunts. For me, it was all about enjoying the ride, not killing the fox, but of course now the whole concept of what I was involved in makes my toes curl. My Dad was never keen on foxes because we kept chickens and ducks and I suppose his attitude of foxes being pests was passed down to me to some extent.

As far as wildlife is concerned, I remember there being deer on the lawn from time to time and standing with my family to admire them. I also remember going out with my Dad in the truck one even to check on the herd and him taking me to where he knew there was a badger sett. As we approached, we saw two badgers running away from the truck. I was fascinated by them – I think that was probably my first experience of seeing wildlife close up.



## How did you come to work for Cuan Wildlife Rescue?

For many years after leaving school, I had no connection with wildlife at all and didn't really have any interest although I always had that underlying love of all animals. After several different jobs and then a move up to Shropshire, I ended up working with horses at a racing stud yard just outside Much Wenlock. It is there that I met Anna Morris-Jones who used to come to ride some of the horses. We soon became friends and she used to talk to me about the work that her Mum – Megan Morris-Jones - did, rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife at Cuan House. I was fascinated by the fact that she had a house and garden full of wildlife and used to ask a lot of questions!

I started to become disenchanted with my work at the yard where I worked and Anna was aware of that. One day she approached me to ask if I would consider going to work with her Mum who had decided that she needed another member of staff to help her care for the wildlife at Cuan House. Although I had absolutely no clue about caring for wildlife, it didn't take me long to accept because I knew that it would be interesting and I loved animals ... and the rest is history!

## What are your memories of your initial training period with Megan?

I went home every night with a headache, every day was such an intensive learning experience and I had information overload! There was so much to learn about so many species and I couldn't see how I was ever going to know enough, despite Megan's faith in me. Megan's passion for what she did was infectious and that kept me going. I remember sitting in her kitchen by the Rayburn, surrounded by boxes and cages of animals and birds, and being blown away by her care and attention to every creature. I was immediately fascinated by the birds and had an immediate love for pigeons which has always stayed with me. I also loved the hedgehogs; I had never seen one before starting work there.

## Where there any animals or birds that you were initially reluctant to work with?

I was terrified of badgers and still have a healthy fear of them to this day. I hadn't been working with Megan for long when we were called out by an irate farmer to catch and release a badger that was inside his chicken house. As soon as Megan and I were in the chicken house, he locked the door behind us and said he wasn't opening it again until we had caught it. The light was poor, we had no idea where the badger was and I was scared. That incident did not help my fear! I was also always respectfully nervous of birds of prey, especially after an early incident in which I foolishly bent down over a buzzard that I was holding, allowing it to get a good grip of my lip with its beak!



## **Was there a particular case that made you realise that you were hooked into this work and that you'd made the right decision to work in wildlife rehabilitation?**

We admitted a buzzard that had obviously hit something and twisted its neck very badly. Megan and I discussed what to do and Megan was of the opinion that the best option was to put it to sleep because its chances were so poor. I asked if I could persevere with it for a few days just to see if there was any improvement and Megan agreed. I took responsibility for the bird, tube feeding it and observing it for the tiniest of changes every day; something told me that rehabilitation was possible and that it could recover. To cut a long story short, a month later I was able to release it. I still well up every time I think of that bird and its stay at Cuan House.

## **When did you move to your current premises?**

We moved to our current location on the outskirts of Much Wenlock in 2014. As our work had become more well-known in the county and admission numbers increased, we ran out of room in Megan's house and desperately needed better facilities. Anna took on responsibility for the charity and Megan stepped back from her to day-to-day role working at the hospital. This is when I became hospital manager. Everything felt much "easier" – we had more room, nicer facilities for the animals and birds and we didn't have to transport animals and birds to and from the vets because we had our own vet room in the hospital that our vet Chris could use when he visited. Moving day was chaotic – four of us using our cars to transport all the animals and birds in boxes to their new home ... thank goodness we didn't have to move far!

## **How has your role changed since 2014 and what are your main challenges?**

At first my role didn't change that much. We had a very small staff team of three and a few volunteers and my days still very much consisted of working hands on with the animals and birds and little else. Since then, we have seen big increases in numbers of staff and volunteers, admissions and costs and this has led to a corresponding increase in the number of responsibilities that I have. The most challenging parts of my role are people and time management – I'm sure that every manager would say the same! My days are very full and I have so many demands on my time, especially during the summer "silly" season. Specific challenges like the Avian Flu epidemic make my job even harder and the responsibility of protecting the work of the centre weighs very heavily on me.



## How did the Covid Pandemic affect your work?

The summer of 2020 was a summer like no other! Admissions to the hospital went through the roof due to people being out on their daily exercise walks and finding things. We were often short staffed due to people contracting the virus and many volunteers stayed away – understandably – to protect themselves and their families. Keeping track of the ever-changing government guidance on good practice in the workplace was exhausting and often impacted on how much work we could safely get done. The size of our hospital rooms meant that at one stage we could only have one person working in each room; during the height of summer and with an explosion in admissions that meant that the workload was often pretty unmanageable. When mask wearing became mandatory, those of us wearing glasses found working in the rooms unbearable – top tips on how to stop glasses steaming up were constantly shared!

## What would be your ideal day at work?

I would be mainly working in the bird room – feeding! I absolutely love hand feeding the hatchlings and nestlings, swifts and pigeons. I also love working with swans, I find them so expressive and emotional and would enjoy the luxury of being able to just stand and observe their behaviour. Add to that a spot of test flying a red kite or two and some time working with foxes and I'd be in heaven.

## Finally, do you have a favourite species?

Oh yes ... swifts! I developed an early fascination for these birds and the more facts that I have learnt about them, the more my admiration for these amazing birds has grown. The fact that when the youngsters are released, they don't land again for two to three years is mind blowing. I love to observe and admire the sheer beauty of the bird when we have one admitted – their aerodynamics, the size of their mouths, their claws, their sleek shape – absolutely incredible!



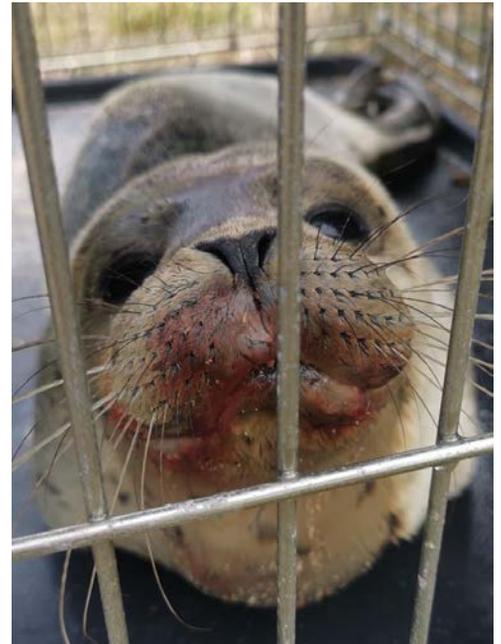
# What to do if you Find a Seal Pup

Written by: Dan Jarvis, Director of Welfare and Conservation  
BDMLR

In the UK there are two native species of seal: the common and grey seal. Common seals are smaller, growing up to 1.8m long and with a short muzzle, giving them a slightly 'cat-like' appearance. Grey seals can be much larger, with adult males reaching 2.8m (females smaller) and a longer muzzle that gives them a comparative 'dog-like' appearance.

Common seals are found mainly along the east coast of the UK around to the west of Scotland, with small groups found sporadically elsewhere including Wales and Northern Ireland. They give birth during the summer months starting in June through until August. Pups are fairly adept at swimming from birth and stay with their mum for three to four weeks. Pups will grow from an average of 9-10kg at birth to over 25kg at weaning. Common seal pups are born with their spotty grey/black/white coat, however the exception is premature pups, which are born with a long white fur coat like grey seal pups usually are. This is an evolutionary change back to the last Ice Age where pups would be born on ice and the white fur would camouflage them from predators. As the ice receded there was eventually no need for the white fur anymore and so it moults while the pup is still in the womb.

Grey seals on the other hand are widely distributed around the UK. Their pupping season is more staggered too, beginning in Wales and south west England in August and lasting to around November. Scotland starts a few weeks later, followed by north east England and then finally down to the south east. This means the end of the pupping season for the south east area is around January or February. These pup spend even less time with their mother than common seals, and have been known to wean in 16 days, though 21 days is more usual. They are born at around 10-12kg and are weaned anywhere over 30kg. One key difference is that grey seal pups are born with a longer white fur coat, known as a lanugo, which is moulted out during the weaning period to their usual mottled grey/black/white colours and patterns. As mentioned above this is for the pup's protection, but as grey seals were still giving birth on ice longer than common seals this is why they are still born here with whitecoats – they're just a few thousand years behind in evolutionary time! Whitecoats are not as adept at swimming as common seal pups, but they can be capable at just a few days old.



For both species, the mother has a fat-rich milk to help their pups gain as much weight as possible during the weaning period. This is crucial as the mother does not teach the pup how to catch fish! This is entirely for the pup to learn on its own while living off that fat reserve it has built up, so they naturally lose a significant amount of weight over the following weeks until they learn enough to build it back up and survive. This is where life can be extremely difficult for pups as missed meals from mum due to human disturbance can lead to separation, or at least being weaned at a smaller size than they should and increasing the chance they will not survive. First-year pup mortality is estimated to be over 70%, illustrating how difficult life is for young seals, and this is unfortunately worsening as a result of human activity. Increased storm activity due to climate change is increasing mortality due to separation, severe injuries, exhaustion and reduced ability for post-weaned pups to feed themselves. Direct disturbance from human activity or interference is at chronically high levels across the country, especially since the rapid expansion of watersports in recent years such as kayaking, paddleboarding, wild swimming and so on that has enabled lots more humans to get to places that boats can't. Entanglement in litter is a growing issue too, especially with ring-type frisbees which retailers and consumers are being urged to not sell or buy, with many successes including Tesco, Pets at Home, numerous beach shops and a number of vet surgeries taking them out of their product lines entirely as they learn the impact they have when lost on the coast.

Over the last few years a coalition of seal conservation and research organisations from across the country called the Seal Alliance have been promoting a best practice seal-watching code of conduct to help prevent or reduce the impacts of disturbance. They have also been feeding in evidence of the disturbance issues, such as survey data, case studies, photos and videos to illustrate the scale of the problem to national policymakers like DEFRA, who earlier this year launched the first Government-backed marine wildlife watching guide for England and Wales (which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/marine-and-coastal-wildlife-code/marine-and-coastal-wildlife-code-advice-for-visitors?fbclid=IwAR3Fb1QSMkgvHtsvKU3BjGp9OP3-TVmBgyEoDXEbTiOAbyVhn43V4nJLPZl>)



One such survey by the Seal Research Trust revealed one offshore island site experienced visible disturbance on average every 14 minutes every day throughout the summer due to human activity, and this is clearly unsustainable. However, it is also not illegal, for example, for a jogger to run across a beach of hundreds of seals and scare them all into the sea, as seals have no legal protection from this except at Sites of Special Scientific Interest where they are a named feature, or are at a designated site in Scotland. This is another branch of the Alliance's efforts, which is to get seals added to Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act so that they will be afforded the same legal protection as whales, dolphins and porpoises from disturbance, and it is hoped this law change will come very soon as DEFRA committees and Joint Nature Conservation Committee reviews have both published reports recommending this very thing in the last year.



Returning to pups, as naïve young animals they often pop up on public beaches where they are not normally found during their first few months of life until they figure out where the safer places to be are. It is part of their normal behaviour and, in fact seals spend more time out of the water digesting food, sleeping and conserving energy than in it. Therefore, finding a seal on the beach does not mean there is necessarily a problem and a healthy seal should be left alone.



The advice from British Divers Marine Life Rescue is to not approach a seal on the beach – keep yourself and others well away with dogs under control on a lead. Seals are wild animals and although they look cute, they will defend themselves aggressively if necessary. They do not need to have food thrown at them, be chased or picked up and put back in the sea – if the animal is poorly it will waste its final energy reserve and potentially lead to death. If there is concern for its welfare due to it appearing unwell, injured, malnourished or entangled then contact the BDMLR 24hr hotline on 01825 765546 for advice and, if necessary trained volunteer Marine Mammal Medics can be sent to assess it.



# Case Study: Red Squirrel

## Morgane Ristic New Ark Wildlife Rescue

In March we received our first red squirrel kit of the year at New Ark wildlife rescue, swiftly followed by our second on the same day, though from a different area. A blessing to any wildlife rehabilitator fearing to have to rear an animal on their own.



The first young female was brought in after being found next to her deceased mother and was kept by the finder for 4 days before transfer. She was estimated to be about 7-8 weeks of age and was set up in a large, 2-leveled, metal chinchilla type cage for close monitoring. Sleeping boxes were provided as well as climbing opportunities using large, stable branches as she was still a little unsteady.

The second individual was transferred from a local vet practice after being picked up on a path with cat-like punctures to his groin. The kit was estimated to be about 5 weeks of age as his bottom incisors had not erupted and he wasn't able to sit or curl his tail yet. As advised by the veterinary practice, the kit received a course of antibiotics and pain relief, and based on his age and weight was given 4 hand feeds a day using Royal canin babydog milk. He was set up in a carrier on a heat mat with fleeces to nest in where he spent most of his day sleeping.



By the time our male kit was able to feed himself, we were able to introduce both individuals to one another to continue the rehabilitation process all the way through to about 12-14 weeks when red squirrels are usually ready for release.

Sadly after the end of his antibiotic course, the young male started showing signs of lameness in one of his back legs and was transferred to our vets for an assessment as the punctures had healed and the leg had, until then, been functional. Our vet suspected a re-infection due to the scar tissues breaking down as the squirrel became more mobile and active and therefore prolonged his antibiotic and pain relief course. Once more the kit was isolated and kept in a smaller space with no climbing features to allow his body to recover.



A week later both kits were reunited and started to self-wean, eating more and more of the natural food provided alongside a variety of vegetables and fruits (mostly native). Once weaned off formula they both moved to an outdoor enclosure with climbing opportunities at all angles, sleeping boxes, natural foliage, and hiding spots. They were immediately observed carrying moss into their nest boxes and caching nuts. Both animals wilded up within a matter of days and just a few weeks later were released in a local, well-populated pine woodland where squirrel feeders were kept filled up.

The rearing process of any native animal is hugely rewarding to any devoted rehabilitator, but combined with the reintroduction of one of UK's most endangered mammals, it is all the more meaningful. I hope to see the role of the wildlife rehabilitator in conservation taken more seriously when it comes to the conservation of such species, as, all together, we may be playing a larger role than we realise!





# THE NEXT GENERATION REHABILITATOR

24<sup>th</sup> Century Quotes Simon Allen

*“Some creatures have the capacity to fill spaces you never knew were empty”*

Star Trek TNG, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Series 2, Episode 15: Pen Pals (1988).

Wildlife rehabilitators sometimes debate the motivation behind rescuing animals; is it for their benefit or ours? There is no doubt that some people become involved with rescuing a wild animal because it's a chance to get really close, to handle and to appreciate its beauty close up.

This is completely understandable as most wild animals are elusive and will not let you pick them up or allow you to pet them or even let you get close enough to touch them. It only becomes possible if they are displaced through injury, disease or become separated from their parents.

However beautiful they are and the immense privilege that it is to handle and be close to them, whilst in rehabilitation they are not here for our entertainment and should never be used to fill that empty space that is ours, not theirs.





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