

Gannet Rescue!

ALAN BEAMISH

I was walking my dog along the track parallel with Dowles Brook below Wimperhill on Tuesday 1st July 2008, this being one of my favoured walks in the Forest, when I was astonished to see a juvenile Gannet on the ground in front of me. As a bird watcher of more than thirty years, there was no doubt in my mind as to what it was. My first reaction was to catch my dog, but my next thought was: how had the bird got there and what was to be done? It appeared to be uninjured and in good condition but reacted by spreading its wings and jabbed with its substantial beak while making a cackling sound if I approached. The grasses and bracken on either side of the track were about a metre high and the surrounding trees would have made it difficult for a bird of this size to make a clear flight.

I was concerned because about three hundred yards further back I had seen a Fox which had gone across the track and up hill into the forest. I considered how I could manage to catch the bird and carry it while controlling my dog at the same time. The problems seemed insurmountable. At this point I have to admit that I tried to walk away from the problem and leave the bird to its fate. I didn't get far however. I tied up my dog, took off my fleece and tried throwing this over the bird but it spread its wings and continued to attack with its beak. I had thought that I might be able to restrain it if I could keep its wings under my arm and hold its beak with my hand but with its wings spread this was impossible. I decided to leave it where it was and seek help.

There was nobody in at either of the two cottages up the lane so I drove round to the Information Centre at Callow Hill. I was in some doubt as to whether I would be believed but the ladies took me through to the back office and they were able to put me in touch with Brian Stretch the Worcestershire Bird Recorder, neither of the wardens being in.

Eventually Brian Stretch arrived with a colleague and a large cardboard box and I took them back to the forest. Luckily the bird was where I had left it and was introduced to the cardboard box, though not without some difficulty and Brian's colleague getting some pecks on his hand caused by the 'nail' on the birds bill. Eventually the Gannet was captured and could be taken to a place of safety!

Further notes by the Editor, with thanks to the Vale Wildlife Hospital and the RSPCA at West Hatch.

The Gannet was taken to the Vale Wildlife Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre near Evesham. They fed the bird for a few days to build up its strength and then drove it down to the RSPCA West Hatch Wildlife Centre in Somerset for further rehabilitation. One



Gannet near Dowles Brook, 1st July 2008

Brian Stretch

of the RSPCA officers from West Hatch has kindly provided me with the following information:

"29 Gannets were brought to us in 2008. We get them blown inland every year, both juveniles and adults. Although these are blown off course by gale-force winds, there is usually another underlying problem that has weakened the birds, such as oiling, swallowing a fish hook, being underweight or having sustained an injury.

The Wyre Forest Gannet was a third summer bird i.e. it was 4 years old. When it was brought in on the 6th July 2008, it was very thin and weighed only 1.8 kilos (3 kilos being the norm) even though the Vale staff had been feeding it. We did a PCV blood test to see if it was anaemic, dehydrated or had an infection, but the results were normal. So we proceeded to look after it to restore its weight and strength. We put it on a course of antibiotics as a precaution against infection and forced it on whole mackerel until it was able to feed itself, which it did from 11th July. As it became stronger we introduced it to one of our pools. This has side ledges so that the bird can get in and out of the water when it needs to. It was able to clean its plumage and start preening to oil its feathers.

As it approached its full weight we needed to check that its feathers were fully waterproof before it could be released. So we introduced it to the pool where there are no side ledges and the bird had to stay on the water, so giving us the chance to check that it was seaworthy.

On 1st August 2008 the Gannet was declared fully fit and it was released from the top of a cliff near Lynton in north Devon from where it flew strongly north west out to sea."

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