



THE BELL REPORT

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Stamps Commemorate SGI PROJECT

Rats are rarely the subject of new stamps, but in mid-December, a rat gnawing on Bell's green conservation bait pellet debuted on a set of six stamps commemorating the work being done on South Georgia Island to rid this UK Overseas Territory of millions of rodents that are threatening its seabird populations.

Along with the targeted rat, the new stamps depict scenes of what has transpired since 2007 when the UK-based charity, the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) and its US counterpart, Friends of South Georgia Island (FOSGI), undertook the monumental task of ridding this once spectacular seabird habitat of rats and mice.

Invasive rats, riding aboard the ships of 19th and 20th century whalers and sealers, were introduced to this Antarctic treasure and have preyed on the chicks and eggs of defenseless seabirds ever since.

At greatest risk are petrel, pintail and prion populations which nest on the ground or in shallow burrows, easy prey for foraging rats. The endemic South Georgia pipit, pictured on one of the stamps, is threatened with extinction from rat predation.

All that will be reversed and seabird populations increased by an estimated 100 million when the South Georgia Habitat Restoration

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Depicted on the First Day Cover, crews load Bell's pelleted rat bait into the underslung hopper of a helicopter for aerial baiting on South Georgia Island.

Stamp photographers: Paul Wilkinson, Oli Prince and Tony Martin

TONY MARTIN



Photos: IOSSRP team & Alastair Wilson

While the majority of island rat eradication projects to date have occurred on remote, *uninhabited* islands, the Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project (IOSSRP) in the UK is setting the stage for community-based island restoration work on inhabited islands.

Currently underway on the islands of St. Agnes (105 ha) and Gugh (37 ha), located off the Cornish coast in the Isles of Scilly archipelago, the Seabird Recovery Project is actively engaging the community in eradicating brown rats which not only threaten the breeding populations of 14 seabird species, but make life difficult for the local residents.

“Success depends on the full participation and support of the entire local community,” noted Elizabeth “Biz” Bell, senior ecologist with family-owned Wildlife Management International (WMIL) of New Zealand, who set up the project’s rat removal program.

“Community” encompasses 75 or so residents on St. Agnes (only two live on neighboring Gugh) with 40 homes and 150 buildings scattered across the island, including a restaurant, pub, two cafes, school, post office and store. There are sheds, barns and other structures on the island’s six farms, and several holiday lets that cater to tourists who typically visit between April and October, many

to view the Manx shearwaters, lesser black-backed gulls and storm petrels on the isles’ designated seabird areas.

Conservationists Unite to Protect Seabirds

Protecting its dwindling seabird populations from predator brown rats, first accidentally introduced to the islands from shipwrecks in the 18th century, is a major concern of a conservation partnership comprised of the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, Isles of Scilly Bird Group, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Natural England, Duchy of Cornwall and other groups.

DEEMED THE LARGEST COMMUNITY-BASED ISLAND RESTORATION PROJECT EVER ATTEMPTED, THE ISLES OF SCILLY SEABIRD RECOVERY PROJECT SETS THE STAGE FOR SIMILAR POPULATED ISLAND PROJECTS AROUND THE WORLD.

In 1998, prior to the 25-year IOSSRP program to protect the UK’s “internationally important” seabirds, the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust rid Scilly’s uninhabited islands of brown rats. By 2006, concerned that rats might be reintroduced to those “rat-free” islands, the IOSSRP partnership commissioned WMIL to conduct a feasibility study on removing rats from the inhabited St. Agnes and Gugh islands.



“The view was that if anyone objected during the feasibility study, then the project would not commence,” Bell recalled. She previously worked on rat eradication projects

involving small communities on Scotland’s Isle of Canna and Lundy Island in England.

“The most important thing is communication and ensuring that the community understands what is required and how it will be done,” she stressed.

Bell spent time at every property talking with 55 residents about the project. Garnering 100 percent community support, the project proceeded with the community



PHOTOS Page 2: Jaclyn Pearson and Elizabeth "Biz" Bell with visiting TV crew on St. Agnes
 • Biz holds informational meeting with community members. Page 3 (top down): Team member takes a break after baiting with CONTRAC BLOX • Biz teaches local children about rat control • Placing CONTRAC BLOX in one of 1,000 bait stations • Staff and volunteers of IOSSRP.



involved in all aspects – from the feasibility study to implementation and biosecurity, particularly on their own properties.

Engaging Community in the Project

To prepare for baiting, Bell and Project Manager, Jaclyn Pearson, conducted numerous informational community meetings, both formal and informal, at a local shop or pub.

They created "Rat Awareness Days" at the local school where they showed the island children all the project equipment, including bait and different bait stations, and discussed "what to do and not do, and who to talk to if they saw something strange," Pearson noted.

To teach children the importance of having no alternative food for rats during the project, the team initiated "Apple Day." As children collected spare apples from orchards to make apple juice, they learned about reducing excess food for rats and identifying rat signs, such as teeth marks on apples.

Residents also helped get the island "bait-ready." Farmers worked with the team to clear vegetation from equipment in the fields and to sort out barns and sheds, providing access to walls and corners where bait would be placed. They also placed food stuffs, stock feed, hay and crops, such as potatoes, on pallets or in storage bins.

"They've been amazingly supportive and helped by doing whatever was necessary to ensure the success of the project," Bell noted.

Team Involved in Community Life

Likewise, the team is actively involved in island life. In October 2013, they held a "Meet The Rat Team" night at the local pub to introduce themselves and to answer questions from the community. When new volunteers arrive, they make a point to introduce themselves to island residents.

As a courtesy which the community appreciates, the team donned blaze orange hats with the project logo, making them easy to identify as they make their daily rounds checking for signs of rats in people's gardens, hay stacks and silage piles.

With weekly progress reports, the team keeps the community and other interested parties up-to-date on the project. Locals also received informational fliers describing symptoms of anticoagulant poisoning with treatment information, as well as what to do if they come across bait, bait stations or dead rats, and where to report live rat sightings.

"They have been vital 'eyes and ears' on the island, letting us know when and where they see any rats or rat signs," Bell added.

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Working Together

Brady Hudson, Bell's market manager for the UK and Ireland, worked closely with Elizabeth "Biz" Bell of WMIL in supplying the Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project (IOSSRP) with the right bait and other control products to achieve success.

"We were delighted when WMIL again contacted us to work as their main supplier partner for this project," noted Hudson who first became involved with the project in



May 2013. Bell Labs had previously worked with WMIL on the eradication of rats on the Isle of Canna, Scotland. (See *Bell Report, January/February 2006*).

With baiting now completed on St. Agnes and Gugh Islands, Biz Bell sent a note of thanks to Hudson.

"The generous donation of the main bait by Bell Labs was a significant contribution to the Isles of Scilly Seabird Recovery Project and we could not have proceeded to the proposed timetable this year without your bromadiolone bait. Bell Labs was the only bait manufacturer that could offer bait that was still available for general use in the open as required in this conservation project," Bell wrote.

"Your support definitely helped WMIL get the bait situation sorted in advance. I found our face-to-face meeting very valuable and constructive especially in regards to what other assistance Bell Labs could provide."

Besides CONTRAC BLOX, Bell Laboratories supplied the project with tamper-resistant PROTECTA Bait Stations, T-REX Rat Snap Traps and DETEX BLOX with Lumitrack for use in monitoring.

"Bell Labs has been involved with many island conservation projects and we were happy to support the dedicated work of these exceptional conservation groups," Hudson added. ■

Project successfully removes every rodent from the island.

At a cost of £7.5 million, the stakes are high but the work of a dedicated international team of specialists, who call themselves Team Rat, has already completed two of three baiting phases.

In the first pilot phase in 2011, a team of 11 experts, aided by a restored Bolkow-105 helicopter once owned by Jacqueline Onassis, aerially broadcast some 48 tons of Bell's pelleted conservation bait over 128 sq. km, one-tenth of the infested area. They also handbaited structures in the old whaling station.

Following that success, Team Rat returned in February 2013 for phase two, this time employing three helicopters to spread 200 tons of Bell's pelleted bait over 580 sq. km of the island. Flying in some of the worst weather in decades, the 25-member Team Rat successfully reached its goal on May 18, literally minutes before icy winter conditions closed in.

With seventy percent of the rodent-infested areas now baited, the team expects to complete the remaining 30,000 infested hectares in 2015. Project manager, Professor Tony Martin of the University of Dundee, said "If SGHT is successful, the island will once again become the safe haven for wildlife that it was when Captain Cook discovered it in 1775."

Produced by Creative Direction (Worldwide) Ltd and marketed by Pobjoy Mint Ltd, the stamps and first-day cover are available from the Falkland Islands Post Office, www.falklandstamps.com, or in wholesale quantities from Pobjoy Mint by e-mailing John Smith at jcs137@pobjoy.com. ■

Isles of Scilly *Continued from page 3*

In the weeks leading up to the actual baiting in early November 2013, the team laid a bait station grid across the island for the 180-day ground-based baiting operation.

Staff members, along with six or eight volunteers, distributed 3,000 kg of CONTRAC BLOX, donated by Bell Laboratories, across the island in more than 1,000 bait stations, marked by bamboo canes. During the first few weeks of baiting, they checked stations daily, recorded bait-take and refilled stations. Trapping rats with Bell's T-REX Snap Traps went on concurrently during the early stages.

As bait-take subsided, the project moved into the monitoring stage in mid-November with the team putting out 2,100 non-toxic chocolate wax blocks in bait stations and between every bait station.

"We were mostly sure all the rats were successfully targeted by the CONTRAC BLOX by the first week of December," Bell noted, adding, "We had some funny stories about the baiting and the locals wanting to know whose bait stations had the most take."

“It's important to have fun and join in the everyday life on the island.”

- Elizabeth "Biz" Bell, WMIL

Additionally, all local vessels, tripper boats and service vessels coming to the island also have bait stations aboard.

It will be two years without signs of rats



before the islands can be officially declared rat-free. And, although the project team will disband after five years, the community will continue to carry on the work.

"Correct waste management, biosecurity on boats coming to the islands, and instilling vigilance in the community and visitors to the presence of rats (*rattling on a rat*) will help to protect the islands' seabird heritage," Pearson pointed out.

As for teams working on similar projects, Bell advises, "It's important to have fun and join in the everyday life on the island." ■

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