

THE BIOMASS WORKING PARTY ON BIRD ECOLOGY

Most Southern Hemisphere seabird researchers and enthusiasts will never have heard of BIOMASS (Biological Investigations of Marine Antarctic Systems and Stocks) or of its Working Party on Bird Ecology (WPBE). BIOMASS is an international programme of scientific research into the Southern Ocean ecosystem under the main sponsorship of SCAR (Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research) and SCOR (Scientific Committee for Oceanographic Research). It was established in 1976 and has conducted two major integrated multi-ship projects, FIBEX (First International BIOMASS Experiment) in 1980-81 and SIBEX (Second International BIOMASS Experiment) in 1983-84 and 1984-85. The details of the actual research programmes have been organized by a number of working parties, of which the WPBE is one.

With BIOMASS ship-based projects, the main seabird-related research has involved work on the distribution and abundance of seabirds at sea, chiefly through the completion of "10-minute" recording cards. For FIBEX, and particularly for SIBEX, great efforts were made to ensure compatibility of recording techniques amongst the observers of the participating nations, and to facilitate the integrated analyses of the results.

Co-ordinating such work, although time-consuming, is only one part of the role of the WPBE. Knowledge of the breeding distribution and abundance of the main seabird species is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of the Southern Ocean ecosystem. In 1978, when the WPBE initiated the International Survey of Antarctic Seabirds (ISAS), directed mainly at penguins, knowledge of the location of colonies was fragmentary and information on colony size mainly nonexistent. The progress made by researchers throughout the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic in synthesizing existing knowledge and in organizing and undertaking new census and survey operations, is summarized in a recent compilation by G.J. Wilson (1983, *BIOMASS Sci. Ser.* 4:1-46).

Another WPBE initiative, designed to assist the work of seabird biologists, has been the sponsorship of comprehensive and authoritative bibliographies of the literature on penguins and albatrosses. The first of these, incorporating about 2 000 entries, covering all the world's species of penguins, has been produced by A.J. Williams, J. Cooper, I.P. Newton and B.P. Watkins of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, and C.M. Phillips of British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and will be available from BAS later this year. The albatross bibliography nears completion.

Of perhaps more direct assistance to field researchers has been the development of a scheme for co-ordinating the information on bird banding, and especially the use of colour bands in the Southern Ocean region. The data bank for this is being maintained in the office of SAFRING (the South African Bird Ringing Unit). A summary of information contributed to the data bank is the subject of two papers in this issue of *Cormorant*.

The annual meetings of the WPBE have also generated ideas for many smaller-scale projects and activities (including the

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compilation of published and unpublished data on the mass of southern seabirds) but its main function has been to promote projects involving a broad range of international interests and activities. In doing this it was acting to further the aims of its predecessor, the SCAR Subcommittee on Bird Biology. Now that the BIOMASS programme is coming to an end most of the Working Party's activities will once again revert to the sponsorship of SCAR through the reconstitution of the Bird Biology Subcommittee.

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