Seal of Approval for Civil Air Support

Monday 22 November, 2021

Civil Air Support (CAS) does not typically provide private charter flights for VIPs returning to their homes, but when the passenger is a rare Arctic Ringed Seal found hundreds of miles from his native land, the aviation charity are happy to make an exception.

Named ‘Hispi’ by his carers at the Scottish Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals (Scottish SPCA), the pup had strayed 1,000 km South of the Arctic Circle. When spotted close to Aberdeen, the seal’s visible abrasions and lethargic behaviour brought him to the attention of the British Divers Marine Life Rescue.

As Ringed Seals are such a rare sighting in UK waters, Hispi was initially thought to be a common seal pup when he was brought to the Scottish SPCA for treatment. Once his identity had been confirmed and his health restored, a plan was devised to release Hispi as far North as possible, to give him the best chance of returning to his natural habitat.

With a track record of supporting environmental aid projects, CAS has a history of transporting wildlife and aquatic mammals. When the Scottish SPCA contacted CAS with a request to fly Hispi from its National Wildlife Rescue Centre at Fishcross to Shetland, it was ‘business as usual’ for Operations Manager and Pilot Graham Mountford’.

“*Preparing the cabin environment to accommodate a marine mammal with unpredictable behaviour together with a team from the Scottish SPCA was just the first part of the challenge. Contending with the weather conditions which were forecast around the scheduled flight times added a further level of interest to the mission!*”

Having repositioned the twin engined Cessna from its Northamptonshire base to Inverness, winds gusting to 45 mph threatened to render the planned rescue flight impossible. A weather window opened though, and Graham was able to get the team and their flippered friend airborne for the 75 minute flight to Sumbergh Airport on Shetland from where Hispi was taken to Hillswick Wildlife Centre. After a night spent recovering from his airborne journey, the young seal was released into the North Sea to continue the second leg under his own navigation.

The Scottish SPCA’s National Wildlife Centre Assistant Manager Sarah Beattie was quick to acknowledge the critical support provided by CAS.

“*We would like to say thank you to our volunteer pilot Graham Mountford from the Civil Air Support charity who flew Hispi and the team to Shetland.”*

Collaboration between agencies and authorities is always the key to success in these missions, as acknowledged by CAS Operations Manager David W Brown who coordinated flight operations.

“*Not only were landing, handling and parking fees waived by Highlands and Islands Airports Limited at Sumburgh and Inverness, we even had an offer from the Fire Service at Sumburgh to help transfer the seal from the aircraft to ground transport”.*

With demand growing for airborne services in support of environmental and humanitarian causes, CAS expect its pilots, observers, support staff and fundraisers to be busier than ever in the coming months.

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