

Welcome to our Spring newsletter



Firstly many, many thanks to all our members and other supporters who have contributed so generously to our research fund with hundreds of donations in the last few weeks. The response to our appeal for funding for the corvid research study being undertaken by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust this year and next has been magnificent and has exceeded all expectations. We will still need to raise further funding but the initial response has put this fund on a firm footing. The appeal has also attracted many new supporters and a strong groundswell of opinion that this type of work needs to be done.

You may have seen the article in the Times at the end of January by one of our Trustees, Nick Forde (reproduced in this newsletter). It pointed out that all the effort and money spent on trying to reverse the decline of farmland birds has been largely unsuccessful. The article drew attention to the doubling of predator numbers in recent years and questioned the quality of past research in this area. It called for a mere fraction of the countless millions now spent on conservation to be allocated to predation research. This article triggered a good deal of debate and further publicity and was picked up by Radio, TV and other newspapers. Nick Forde and I were interviewed on a number of BBC local radio stations as well as BBC World Service, Farming Today on R4, Anglia TV and debated the issue on Radio 5 Live. Several newspapers also mentioned the corvid study and inaccurately referred to it as a 'cull'. Corvid control is practiced widely in the UK by farmers, gamekeepers and large conservation organisations and is perfectly legal. The corvid experiment is designed to quantify the impact of corvid control on farmland songbirds at a localised level. Whilst one cannot predict the outcome of any scientific experiment this work may indicate the effectiveness of controlling local populations of magpies and crows which might be threatening endangered species. SongBird Survival is strongly against the wholesale culling of any native species and insists that any control should observe the highest levels of humaneness.

SongBird Survival also strongly refutes any suggestion that we are a front for any other lobby group. We simply do not have the resources to do anything but focus on the important task of encouraging quality science to deliver the optimum balance of species and to restore our biodiversity. A number of our Trustees have won major conservation awards for the

work they have done on their farms or land and have worked locally with the BTO and RSPB on various species recovery programs, including skylarks, stone curlews and other farmland birds for many years. Furthermore some do not shoot at all and those who do run their land in the most wildlife friendly way. It is well known in the conservation world that farms and estates that run shoots usually have much better wildlife and biodiversity than others.

An important voice in the academic conservation world for many years now has been Prof. Bill Sutherland who is the Miriam Rothschild Professor of Conservation Biology at the University of Cambridge. Last year he published an extremely interesting analysis of 20 published studies of predator removal programs from different parts of the world. It showed clearly that removing predators had a large positive effect on hatching success of target species and also increased significantly post breeding population sizes (i.e. autumn densities). The effect on longer term breeding populations was less clear and this may be due to other inherent characteristics of avian population regulation or ineffective predator removal and poor monitoring of prey populations. The full study is well worth reading and can be accessed via Prof. Sutherland's website.

After what seems a long winter, spring is finally in the air and as I write this the temperature is 14°C and I can hear skylarks singing!

Many thanks for your continuing support.

Michael Rankeillour
Editor & Trustee

Songbirds numbers down Predators up

*So... if we want to hear the dawn chorus,
we cannot avoid taking unpleasant action.*

By Nick Forde, **The Times**, January 2011

What has really happened to our farmland birds? Their numbers have fallen by 53 percent over 40 years even though we are now throwing £1 billion a year into conservation. Is this still due to a lack of money or to Man's destruction of the environment – or could it be because of a systemic failure?

There have been some notable successes, such as the large blue butterfly, water voles and some insects and flowers. Many farmland and other birds are doing very well with no help from us at all: crows, woodpigeon, wildfowl and most seabirds are flourishing. They benefit from mankind and they either have few predators or are themselves predators. The main birds that need our help are ground-nesters, waders and

most songbirds. Significantly the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust has just demonstrated that the productivity of ground-nesting birds and waders can be boosted by a staggering 3,400 per cent by carrying out predator control. The official reasons given for songbird decline are habitat loss and modern farming methods. These have undoubtedly had some effect. Yet this stance is becoming increasingly untenable. Population levels of all predators, such as cats, corvids (which include crows, jackdaws and magpies), raptors, grey squirrels, rats and foxes, are now at their highest levels since records began, many having more than doubled over 40 years.

More importantly new studies have shown that several songbird species have been suffering badly as a result of rising levels of predation. Population declines of the tree sparrow (down 89 per cent), bullfinch (down 56 per cent) and house sparrow (down 74 per cent) have all been blamed on the resurgence of the sparrow hawk in both



rural and urban areas. It doesn't need a scientist to note the frequency of the word "sparrow" here. This sort of scientific evidence is being ignored and quietly buried.

Laying the blame for songbird decline on habitat loss and intensive farming is misleading. Since the 1970s our habitat has actually been improving. Tens of thousands of kilometres of hedges have been planted and our broadleaved woodland cover has increased. Farmers are being paid £500 million a year to provide a paradise for wildlife. We should have seen a recovery in farmland birds, but this has not been happening. One reason is that we are producing a paradise for predators too. The numbers of songbirds taken by predators is truly colossal. Best estimates only exist for two predators: cats take more than 100 million songbirds and sparrow hawks about 50 million. Yet books and papers about the loss of our birds never even mention the word predation. The subject is taboo in the conservation world. We are told that there is "little evidence" that predation affects songbirds; but this view is based on only three or four papers claiming it as a localised problem or only affecting a couple of species. Last year the University of Reading cast serious doubts on the credibility of all these types of observational studies in the first-ever review of such research, classifying their methodologies as of the very lowest quality. Even the RSPB admits that these papers are out of date. That no fully experimental field study on songbird predation has ever been carried out in the UK is a serious indictment of our failure in this area. Most people in conservation work recoil from the very thought of having to control predators. And how many people would want to leave their money to a conservation charity that goes round killing birds and animals? But we cannot opt out of managing our wildlife. Urban areas are becoming vast reservoirs of predators and pest species. Increasing mechanisation means farmers can do less to help. The Government's commitment to reverse the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020 stands no chance of success until the predation issue is recognised.

However, there are no votes in predator control and the Government must take account of the large body of mainly urban opinion that fails to understand the need for the control or culling of any creature. Only irrefutable scientific evidence could change this. Add to this conservation becoming inextricably entwined with the world of entertainment and the media: relentlessly sentimental wildlife programming is very popular and the broadcasters have no intention of straying from this highly profitable narrative. None of us wants to control predators but at least, if forced into it, humans can be humane. Most threats to our wildlife are man-made and we ignore the predation issue at our peril. When the science finally catches up let us hope that it will not be too late for many species. We do have a window of opportunity: the new Government, arguably more friendly towards the countryside than the previous one, is preparing a White Paper on the environment for the spring. Most large conservation organisations are neither structurally nor culturally capable of dealing with the issue of rising levels of uncontrolled predation: the initiative must come from Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Unfortunately Defra relies on these same organisations for advice. However, we can do something immediately. We just need to insist that a fraction of the hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money allocated to agri-environment schemes and conservation charities is spent on high-quality, peer-reviewed research on the impact of rising levels of predation. This will contribute to a consensus and a clearer way forward to restore our farmland birds.

Nick Forde is a trustee of SongBird Survival.

*Some
responses
from
The Times
overleaf...*

We are all concerned about the catastrophic decline of farmland birds, but so far most measures taken to reverse these declines have failed. We are keen to provide answers by carrying out a high-quality scientific study.

This is a small-scale experimental study designed to investigate whether their removal can improve the breeding success of some farmland birds. Populations of some avian predators have expanded dramatically – crows have increased by 300 percent in the past 50 years. We therefore need to discover whether their rapid increase is affecting other more vulnerable species. It is a question of balance.

Clearly this is a conservation question that we all need to resolve.

Professor Nick Sotherton, *Director of Research, The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust*

Nick Forde's comments on songbirds seem at best misguided. There is very little evidence to show an impact of predation on songbirds and even SongBird Survival's own study last year concluded as such.

The idea that legal protection for raptors should be weakened or public money wasted killing protected species, such as the sparrow hawk, based on very little evidence, is abhorrent. Efforts should continue to redress the underlying causes of the crashes of declining songbirds, primarily changes to their habitat.

We should continue to collect information on their numbers, without which so much good conservation work would not be possible.

Dr Mark Avery, *Conservation Director, RSPB*

I take issue with Dr Mark Avery's claim that there is "little evidence" that predation affects songbirds. The RSPB's own woodlark study in 2009 with the University of East Anglia found that woodlark productivity halved due to the doubling of predator numbers. This study has been quietly buried. The University of Reading last year found that no fully experimental study of songbird predation has ever been conducted in the UK. It cast grave doubts on the type of research that uses surveys, of which our own study was one. They are blunt instruments for studying the complex issue of predation.

SongBird Survival's proposal for an experiment using corvid control is perfectly legal, it is practised widely and by the RSPB themselves on their own reserves. We are following the advice of the RSPB paper 2007 which said more songbirds predation studies are needed, that predator removal experiments are the best and that previous studies are out of date.

SongBird Survival has been finding the level of past predation research to be self-serving and wanting. We merely seek the best to restore our biodiversity.

Nick Forde, *Trustee, SongBird Survival*

The predation prevalent today is insignificant compared with that which occurred during Victorian times. What we now refer to as songbirds and protect were regarded as pests and killed. They were a source of food for country people, and small boys were employed to catch them. A perusal of churchwardens' records attest to this in detail as a bounty was paid.

Magpies were generally regarded with favour except by gamekeepers, and sparrow hawks were also ignored. Our old gamekeeper, a well-known Sussex character, used to recall catching blackbirds and what he called greybirds with clap nets for sale as food when a small boy.

Alan Morriss, *East Sussex*

The sparrow hawk is often wrongly blamed for part of the decline in some smaller garden birds. In the UK approximately 300 million animals, of which 75 per cent are small birds, are killed each year by cats, compared with about 500,000 birds taken by sparrow hawks.

Sparrow hawks have no choice over their food, it's what they have evolved to catch and they need this food to survive and feed their young. By contrast, cats use their predatory instincts to catch birds yet rarely need to eat them to survive, having the choice of human-provided cat food. A significant number of garden birds also die as a result of hitting cars, large glass windows, succumbing to adverse winter weather conditions and more recently disease, which can be spread by bird tables that are not cleaned regularly.

Jemima Parry-Jones, *Director, International Centre for Birds of Prey, Newent, Glos*

At last somebody is waking up to the effect of predation on songbirds. We farm 140 acres of arable and pasture, well hedged and wooded, we use no pesticides and nothing we do is detrimental to birdlife. In the early 1990s it became obvious that our songbirds were in terrible decline; a springtime count revealed 12 resident pairs of magpie so we bought a trap and within ten days caught the lot. That year the total was 66. The total to date is now more than 300. The results have been astounding. Blackbirds, song thrushes, hedge sparrows, yellowhammers and finches have all boomed. Mistle thrushes, goldfinches and flycatchers have returned and bred successfully. The RSPB can save the trouble of a scientific trial; just come and see me.

Ian Smith, *Wilts*

RSPB admits predator control benefits birds

By **Will Finch**, *Shooting Times & Country Magazine, February 2011*

New research supports the idea that predator control benefits populations of waders.

A new RSPB report blames foxes and crows for waders' decline after attacking Songbird Survival predation study.

The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has welcomed a new study from the RSPB, which reveals a link between predator numbers and the decline in the number of upland waders, reports Will Finch.

Published in the scientific journal *Bird Study*, the RSPB's work looked at five wading bird species and examined population changes across upland habitats.

The RSPB stated: "Declines in lapwing numbers were greatest in areas dominated by heather. For this species, links to predation were also identified. Regionally, lapwing populations fared better on areas with more intensive grouse moor management (a management practice involving predator control and heather-burning) and worse where there were high crow numbers."

The study also stated that golden plover suffered the greatest declines in areas where grouse moor management was more intensive.

However, the GWCT claims that its findings from the recent nine-year Upland Predation Research project at Otterburn indicated, for the first time, that the control of common predators significantly improved the breeding success of curlew, lapwing and golden plover.

Professor Nick Sotherton, director of research with the GWCT, said, "We welcome this RSPB study, as it reinforces the message that predator control on grouse moors benefits declining species of birds, especially where crows are removed. It would be sad if we lost a significant fraction of our bird life through want of necessary wildlife management."

Among its results, the RSPB's study found a greater decline in the number of golden plover and snipe in upland landscapes with more forestry in surrounding areas.



Though the study concludes: "The exact causes of this relationship are not known, it accepts that forestry is often beneficial to nesting crows or foxes, the main predators of upland waders. It goes on to suggest that, as waders breed on the ground, and are vulnerable to predation, afforestation might be one reason for the dramatic decline in wader numbers."

Professor Sotherton noted: "The evidence from our research is that such losses are not inevitable and the north Pennine area, which is almost entirely managed for grouse shooting and hosts high concentrations of waders, stands as a testament to the difference game management can make to conservation in the uplands."

"Contrary to the RSPB's study, we found that golden plover breed best on grouse moors and that survival rates are lower away from grouse moors. Indeed, our study found that 75% of golden plovers produced young on keepered plots, compared with only 18% where predators were not removed."

The RSPB's Dr Murray Grant said: "The decline of upland waders has been a cause for concern for a number of years. This new research provides useful indicators on which factors might be important in driving declines in these splendid birds."

Earlier this month, the RSPB was critical of Songbird Survival's planned experimental study in conjunction with the GWCT to examine the impact of avian predators on farmland songbirds.

Songbird Science – *the latest*

Many factors have contributed to the decline of our songbirds. Farming methods and habitat loss usually get the blame but loss of insects and other food sources, increased levels of predation and pollution are amongst others that are likely to have played a part. The problem is that nobody is anywhere near to quantifying the impact of any of these factors.

Priorities

With limited resources available SongBird Survival has to prioritize its research effort. At the moment we are particularly worried by the potential impact of greatly increased levels of predation on songbirds and that is where our research effort is focused. However, another area of some concern is that the over-releasing of game birds on some commercial shoots is detrimental to songbird populations and we believe that more research needs to be done in this area. We acknowledge though that responsible, sustainably managed shooting is beneficial for songbirds and biodiversity.

We are starting to accumulate evidence not only that our strategy is on the right track but also of the sheer complexity of the subject of predation. In our last newsletter we highlighted four peer-reviewed studies. The University of Reading review cast doubts on the credibility of research which use surveys, particularly those which use poorer quality predator data. Whilst the BTO study could find no evidence of an effect of corvids on songbirds it found that the sparrow hawk could be implicated in the near extinction of the tree sparrow. Similarly Dr Christopher Bell and the University of Cambridge found that the decline of the house sparrow in both rural and urban areas is probably due to the resurgence of the sparrow hawk population. It is good to see the return of the sparrow hawk after previously depressed levels but when all other predators are at all time highs we need to know



what this means for our songbirds.

Finally the GWCT Upland Predation Experiment demonstrated that predator control delivered a staggering 300% uplift in the productivity of ground nesting birds and this has been reinforced by a very recent RSPB project. Previously another RSPB study in conjunction with the University of East Anglia in 2009 had examined the impact of climate change on the woodlark. It found that climate change had a negligible effect but did find that the halving of woodlark numbers was due to the doubling of its predator populations.

A complex subject

It is clear that the removal of one predator can just result in others taking over and it is the effect of



overall predation pressure that needs to be examined. Added to this predators are either avian or mammalian and those with wings can move quickly to areas with more prey. Yet another complication is that most predators are generalists and opportunists and it is difficult to ascertain the number of songbirds in their diet. The sparrow hawk is one of the few specialists, for example, with a diet made up of 97% birds making its study relatively easy. The impact of invasive alien species like the grey squirrel and the domestic cat is constantly growing. Racoons have already been sighted in this country and we should be aware that 500,000 of them have already devastated songbirds in Germany.

Signs of a change in thinking

In 2007 the RSPB said that more research on songbird predation needs to be done, that predator removal experiments are the best and that much existing research is out of date. SongBird Survival agrees and is following this policy. An important new review of research worldwide was carried out last year by Dr Rebecca Smith and Professor Bill Sutherland of the University of Cambridge. Significantly this found that predator removal is an effective strategy for the conservation of vulnerable bird populations although most of the studies were of ground nesting birds. It is very interesting to note that this contrasted with the conclusion of the definitive review Côté and Sutherland 1997 which found that predator removal did not have a significant effect on breeding populations, a study about which we have always had reservations.

SongBird Survival is currently funding the corvid experiment being conducted by the GWCT. This will be the first multi-site study to examine the impact of corvid removal on farmland songbird productivity. It will use a proven technique involving brood counts. This has been chosen instead of nest cameras which are expensive and have their limitations. They tend to be sited near the nests which are most easily found by both humans and predators and the mere siting of a camera can also make the nest more vulnerable to predation.

Of course one needs to be aware that with all experiments their outcome is uncertain and can sometimes disappoint. It is encouraging that more



attention is being directed towards high quality research on predation even though the subject is still in its infancy. However experimental work is expensive and much more work needs to be done on the methodologies employed.



Many answers still needed

Many questions still need to be answered. If domestic cats (numbers doubled since 1975) alone account for over 100 million songbirds and sparrow hawks another 60 million, what is the total number of songbirds taken by all predators every year? What level of attrition is sustainable or 'natural', given that songbirds are still declining? We are still a long way from conducting research to ascertain the optimum levels and balance of species in this country and must bear in mind that our ecosystem has not been self regulating since we emerged from caves. There is plenty of work still to do.

Director's Notebook

By Keith McDougall

We can draw a deep breath and, in spite of a spate of publicity in the National press, feel that the next rung in the research ladder planned by SBS is going to proceed with the GWCT corvid control experiment. That it has attracted animosity and not a little rant and hostility from people who should know better is something we have learned to live with. Your charity is not anti-raptor, how many times do we have to repeat it. All our indigenous bird species are precious, beautiful and need to be looked after in our urban dominated country. But I am always amazed, when I sit down to think quietly, at the superb farmed landscapes we still have in the third most over-populated country in the world. There is much to be thankful for.

But to preserve what we have; countryside, shore-line, moorland, city parks and all the wildlife which we share these things with, requires hard work and often, hard decisions. A lot of our approach to problems has to sometimes be firmly expressed to those whose lives are based on urban myths about rural life.

All of us have the right to fantasise and dream. But the time honoured realities of rural life are the responsibility of those on the ground who "know their patch"; are aware of the inter-play between food production and nature conservation, and who, whilst adopting many good environmental schemes from government, in the end, are the people who manage wildlife because they live with it night and day. And when it comes to helping or hindering species of birds to keep the balance, then they must act within the law based on sound scientific evidence.

The campaign for the farmed environment which is a "bolt-on" to existing environmental schemes in England is something we strongly support. The NFU, CLA and Natural England are to be congratulated on this initiative. The RSPB support it as well. In Wales serious problems have

arisen surrounding a proposed scheme for farmers which rewards them for a range of very complicated initiatives. Hill farmers are not in a position to adopt over-bureaucratic conditions with inadequate reward. Scotland is still in the throes of developing their environmental policies but again they would be well advised to be guided by people on the ground with experience of wildlife management – mammals, birds or habitats.

In my experience (working for many years with Natural England and the Wildlife Trusts), nature reserves are things we do very well in the UK. They are vital repositories of rare birds, flora and fauna – I managed a prime SSSI for over 25 years and signed one of the first management agreements. I didn't have a problem with some of the essential designations to protect and establish refuges. Norfolk is particularly well endowed with precious bird reserves. The Wildlife Trusts do an excellent job. RSPB reserves are well managed. Much good work continues. But, in the end, it is the farmers, gardeners, in-shore fishermen, estate owners and park keepers that have to manage, control and lovingly care for the reservoir of song birds which share habitats under pressure, and predator levels which sometimes have to be controlled, based on good science and common sense. SBS is at the core of this debate and will single-mindedly pursue our research programme to give government the best advice possible - if we are allowed.

SBS has now worked with the British Trust for Ornithology, The Centre for Agri-environmental Research, The University of Reading, and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust now with the current Corvid project. These are serious steps in an area of research shamefully neglected by much larger well endowed organisations. With your financial support we will aim to get predator effects better understood and solutions found.



Extract from SBS Submission to Defra

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Songbird Survival is a UK wide charity dedicated to restoring our declining songbird populations. It is focused on commissioning high quality peer reviewed research in this area. The charity is not involved directly in the debate about Bovine TB but is deeply concerned about the likely effect of the large recent increase in badger populations on farmland birds. We believe that the increased levels of badger predation on birds could provide a powerful additional justification for controlling the badger population.

In the last three years Songbird Survival has commissioned three studies on the effect of predation on songbirds. Two of these have been peer reviewed and published so far providing us with a greatly enhanced knowledge base on the subject of predation. With regard to badgers it is quite clear that relatively little is known about the predation effect of our largest mammal predator which has not itself been at risk from larger predators for hundreds of years. While studies of stomach contents and faecal remains have indicated a diet of up to 11.6% consisted of birds it is not known how much of this was carrion.

We have however noted one very significant finding in a study conducted during the SAFFIE project (Sustainable Arable Farming For an improved Environment) in 2006. On page 597 it details a nest camera study of 29 skylark nests. It reported that eight were predated and of these five were predated by badgers, the remainder by stoat, weasel and brown rat. It noted that badgers ranged throughout the entire field and predated nests up to 120m from the boundary.

There is also a wealth of anecdotal evidence that over the last 40 years the 400% plus increase in the badger population has had a serious impact on hedgehogs and bumblebee nests as well as the nests of ground nesting birds and this is quite feasible given that badgers are now more numerous than foxes.

We are concerned that the campaign against controlling badgers highlights one of the key conflicts within the conservation world. Both the media and numerous celebrities have been mobilised to prevent any control of this charismatic and attractive species irrespective of the potential damage it may be doing to our ecosystem and our farming community. Amongst the extensive list of consultees listed, which includes many of our most prominent conservation organisations, two notable absences include the RSPB and the BTO. It begs the question whether these bodies would prefer not to be consulted in case any negative comments about the possible impact of badgers on birdlife could endanger their membership and legacy income. Meanwhile it is a cruel irony that our farming industry is entrusted with the task of preserving our wildlife but that its livelihood and our biodiversity can be threatened by excessive public devotion to one species.

Agri-environment schemes are already costing taxpayers half a billion pounds a year yet delivering little measureable improvement in biodiversity. This sum dwarfs the £63 million cost of compensating farmers for Bovine TB. Therefore the trustees of Songbird Survival strongly urge Defra to take into account the potential benefits to wildlife of controlling badgers as well the benefits to taxpayers and the farming community.

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The Vocal Yokel

The Shooting Times, 26th January 2011

Squeezing out our nature

Conservation groups want more space for wildlife, but where are they going to find room for it, asks Robin Page.

I am sitting in front of my computer with steam coming from my ears. I have a problem: I am an elected member of the National Trust (NT) Council and I went to one of its meetings recently, where we were supposed to be discussing nature conservation, but all I heard was eco-waffle.

Can any Shooting Times reader give me the correct name for politically correct wildlife management-speak that says nothing? I am still fuming. It was a farce. The NT's most iconic and endangered species, the red squirrel, was hardly mentioned, and when it was, the comments were upbeat – the opposite to reality.

With the countryside under threat to an unprecedented degree, I saw crocodile tears shed by the litre for Britain's vanishing wildlife. The solution, it seemed, was "more space for nature". Space, in the world's third most densely populated major country – does anyone understand that? I don't. Thank goodness I've lost two stones in weight, otherwise my blood pressure would rocket and I would need beta blockers. Instead, I will make do with a bottle of Cornish Rattler Pear Cyder.

It is simple: overpopulation, tumbling food security and burgeoning predator populations are creating a situation in which there is too little land and too much pressure on that land – pressure that is growing and will continue to grow. Unless those in charge of land-use policy (including huge landowning organisations such as the NT and the RSPB) become more open and honest, those of us who are trying to help the countryside might as well pack our bags and move to New Zealand or Montana, in the US, where there is still space and real countryside.

Consequently, wildlife must depend on the

amount of land available to it already. Most of this is farmed land, which we must use in a way that produces both food and wildlife. Clearly, the fringe habitat created for hunting, shooting and fishing does this already, but then comes the third major problem that the large conservation bodies will not acknowledge – the damage being done to wildlife by predators.

Unfettered predation

You do not have to be the winner of Mastermind to work out why, when I was a boy and the only predators I saw were kestrels, barn owls and tawneys, the birds of woodland, garden and farmland were prolific, from song thrushes to grey partridges, and lapwings to the common snipe. Now, things have changed drastically, yet still scientists and "experts" say that predators have no impact and blame the declining state of our wildlife on farmers and gamekeepers – it is a scandal. It seems to me that this is either self-delusion or misinformation.

How can anybody not understand the damage being done by grey squirrels? I tire of telling these people that with three million grey squirrels trashing at least 10 bird's nests each per year, 30 million nests are trashed and



possibly 120 million eggs and fledglings are eaten. Add to this the tally knocked up by crows, magpies, foxes and so on, and it is hardly surprising that farmland birds are in decline.

Interestingly, a few years ago, the Countryside Restoration Trust was given a wood in Yorkshire that was crawling with grey squirrels. In the spring and summer, the wood was silent – there were no birds or birdsong. Now, it has cleared the area of squirrels and erected squirrel-proof nest boxes. The wood has become alive and melodic, full of both birds and birdsong. Scientists, of course, consider this to be anecdotal evidence. I regard anecdotal evidence as science without well-funded research grants.

And where did all this come in the NT's great debate on nature conservation? It wasn't mentioned. Prior to the meeting, I asked the NT's press office how many grey squirrels were taken out of the Lake District in the past year by the trust, as grey squirrels spread squirrel pox, which is fatal to reds. The trust could not tell me, yet it owns 25 per cent of the land in the Lakes and squirrel pox is threatening England's most vital refuge of the red squirrel. Astonishingly, the trust also said that the population of grey squirrels is "beyond effective control". I simply don't believe this. Grey squirrels are out of control because there has been no will to control them – it is as simple as that.

The NT and the RSPB seem reluctant to engage their members or to educate them about the real issues and what needs to be done. Recently, I spoke to an RSPB group in Bishop's Stortford, in Hertfordshire, and the substance of my talk has gone into this article. Not one person walked out, or asked a hostile or loaded question, and most spent the evening nodding their heads in agreement. In fact the next day, the branch secretary emailed the Countryside Restoration Trust asking for a group summer visit to its Lark Rise Farm.

Sadly, it seems to me that the conservationists are helping to kill the countryside by ignoring what is actually going on there. By doing so, the NT and the RSPB are underestimating the intelligence of their members.

If SongBird Survival members quote the code CFE SBS when ordering either KCAM1 Campaign Mix or KCAM2 Campaign Mix South from Kings, a 10% donation* will be made to the Charity.

*10% of the total product value.

Campaign Mix was launched in 2010 to assist with the requirements of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment. This popular mixture is a viable alternative for maize and sorghum crops with many growers planting it either alongside or as a replacement for some of their existing game cover plots. Suitable for all regions this mixture is a useful break crop where kale has previously been used.

New, for 2011 Kings have created Campaign Mix South which is suitable for sowing in Southern regions (south of the Humber) and contains dwarf and intermediate sorghum (in addition to the other ingredients) to give the mix added robustness.

Where applicable both these mixtures can be managed agronomically to reduce challenges from a broad spectrum of weeds.


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YOUR LETTERS & EMAILS

Many thanks for the SongBird Survival newsletters and Membership application forms which I received this morning. Please find enclosed completed membership form with cheque. I will put the membership forms in the following locations:- doctor's surgery, garden centre, specialist fruit shop, library, etc and anywhere else I can get them! I have already distributed some membership forms and a newsletter to potentially interested neighbours! It might be useful if you could send me a few more newsletters and membership forms!

It would be interesting to read an article on reducing predation by sparrow hawks in gardens. I hope I achieve this by sitting my feeders in an area where there is (A) plenty of cover for birds to escape into bushes and shrubs (B) where there is a lot of branches round the feeders so that any attaching sparrow hawk has to "bob & weave" round the branches and hence give the little birds warning and time to dash for cover. I also hope the grey squirrels are doing less damage which my near neighbour and I destroy humanely and over the past two years, I have had more than 120 squirrels through my trap!

P Croot

Rising levels of uncontrolled predation are ignored, yet. I am convinced this being the biggest cause of songbird declines today and the reason why despite so much money and good intentions going into environmental schemes etc so many bird species are still on the decline with the exception of what I call "coarse" type predators, in particular Sparrow Hawks, Magpies, Grey Squirrels and most sadly to say Badgers too plus others as well, the countryside is so unbalanced though it can still look nice on the surface. I still have quite clean memories right back to the early 40's and war years and remember my area those days and which I still live and help out my son on a busy dairy farm of 170 acres with round about 50 fields with many hedges, pastures and three small woods. We boys at the local village school near all collected birds' eggs and surprisingly were allowed quite a lot of freedom to roam around the local countryside! We were interested and learned about so much of the ways of the countryside! It was the days of the Home Guard, small mixed farms, many more working on the land. We had a land girl too who wrote to us for years afterwards at Christmas. It was different then – lots of birds – more species and richer pastures. But without doubt and most importantly; far less of these predator species which are now doing such massive damage to the balance of our countryside, because of their excessive numbers and combined weight of numbers. I am certain near all of the real country people of those years and before would say much the same, because then they were all kept under control, especially any "rogue" ones, it was in their instincts to do so.

So much I could tell you about the past seventy years! But not now, just to say I am glad for what you are striving to achieve – it is difficult to convince those well meaning "conservationists" with their "flawed" ways of thinking, but some also with their lack of practical experience of the real truth about all the goings on in the real countryside.

You mention Corvid research – but please do not ignore the Sparrow hawk which I rate even worse than the Magpie! It would seem to me that even if Corvids are controlled many bird numbers will never properly recover if Sparrow Hawks are around and this will be seized upon by some "conservationists" that numbers of Corvids have a "weak link" towards bird declines!

We all hope for a better future!

L. W. Short

I have been aware of the decline of songbirds for many years now, particularly because as part of my 40 years of coarse fishing I spend some twenty or more nights each year beside lakes and rivers and can clearly remember 20 or 30 years ago being woken at dawn by the chorus of songbirds – yes it was actually loud enough to wake you up! Sadly the dawn chorus these days, whilst still enchanting, is a poor reminder of earlier days.

Since my wife joined SongBird Survival I have taken to trapping and shooting corvids and grey squirrels on our smallholding and in the last four years have accounted for more than 300! In that time we have seen an increase in the number of songbirds visiting but more importantly nesting in our vicinity. Last year we even had Yellowhammers on our bird table – a species I've not seen in gardens since my childhood!

A Grant

Songbird numbers have in our area declined for the year 2010 to date. We have seen 1 Song Thrush in our garden 2-3 Magpies (over flying), 10-20 Jackdaws in our area, 2-4 Carrion Crows. We have a good number of Blackbirds in the garden and on my allotment. Please let me know the results of the research although this will take 1-3 years or longer.

J Rowson

PREDATORY BIRDS – JAYS AND MAGPIES

I have in my garden a very old apple tree, which has various knots and holes in it. Over the years the small songbirds, mainly the Blue Tits use these to nest in.

On more than one occasion I have seen a Jay pull a small chicklet out its nest, and fly off to another tree to devour the poor helpless chick, only to return to the nest and repeat the exercise, until all the chicks were either dead or eaten.

On other occasions I have seen Magpies following the same routine. Nothing stops them; as soon as your back is turned they swoop down and continue raiding the nests.

M Williams

I have lived in the same house, adjacent to farmland for nearly 29 years. In that time, one of our large local farms has gone organic and have plantings especially for birds. The other has hugely improved the wildlife-friendly aspect of his farm with better hedges and margins.

Nevertheless, the population of songbirds has declined horrible in that time.

We are overwhelmed with predators: Grey Squirrels, Magpies, Carrion Crows (not here when we arrived) Sparrow Hawks (taking every sort of bird before our eyes) and now we have Buzzards that are taking the young Rooks, and the Rooks are the only birds that take on the Sparrow Hawks. It's all disastrous! We now have no Thrushes, hardly any Blackbirds, no Sparrows, and fewer of every bird except Tits.

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Over recent years on my farms alone I have witnessed not only the songbirds' destruction but also Lapwings and Partridges and Pheasants – and I don't mean just poults. The culprits here are Sparrow Hawks and particularly Buzzards, save the owl families. Those that make the rules should take the "Blinkers" off.

We farmers get most of the blame for the modern ways etc, but I can tell you a lot more would be done to protect if we didn't see so much a waste of time. I could not be more for SongBird Survival.

John Heywood

FARMERS ARE NOT TO BLAME FOR DISAPPEARING STARLINGS

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is at it again, blaming farmers for chopping down roosting grounds for Starlings. Could developers and others not be responsible for the perceived damage?

Hedge planting and management has been considerable over recent years, and woodlands are being created rather than destroyed by farmers. A large number of farmers now plant areas with seed-producing plants to provide feed for birds over the winter and also with nectar-producing plants to sustain bees and butterflies in the summer.

Ever since the war, farmers have had a very good record of implementing the demands of politicians, many of which were compulsory but wrong.

Years later, when problems arose, it was farmers who were blamed. Perhaps the RSPB could give a little more credit to the dedication of many of our farmers, who are trying their utmost to provide the right habitats for our wonderful and varied wildlife.

M Dugdale

Your recent analysis of population fluctuations of UK raptors from the early 1970s to today is interesting. The reintroduction success stories appear to be confined to the larger birds of prey. What then of the smaller species such as the "Common" Kestrel known to be in serious decline? The Handbook of British Birds stated not so long ago that 64.5% of Kestrel diet was small mammals such as field mice, voles etc. If, as I suspect, these species are in decline, Kestrels have had to look elsewhere. Their favoured technique for mouse hunting has been by hovering and often hunting singly.

Not so long ago I was mowing a small Set-Aside field watched by a single Kestrel perched in a hedgerow tree. Then it flew behind the tractor and eventually caught a mouse close to the tractor cutter bar. Then it followed the tractor as gulls follow the plough. Now Kestrels have lost the Set-Aside as they have lost banks of the motorways. Many of the latter have been tree planted and trees have spoil the habitat for Kestrels and their prey. Incidentally I cannot understand why Local Authorities have planted so many timber like trees so close to busy motorways – presumably they have forgotten the big storm (was it 1987?).

This year I have had two sightings of Kestrels hunting in pairs. One was over recently cut pasture and both birds were perched on big hay bales. I watched this from a farmhouse window and both birds had some hunting success. The second sighting was flushing two Kestrels from a pigeon carcass on a small country road. Its mangled state suggested that they were eating carrion. None of the books studied mention that Kestrels will eat carrion.

In the past Kestrels have been bred successfully in confinement and released into the wild. There is no reason why this should not be done again by the RSPB or whoever but will they? The Kestrel is remarkable for its hunting technique of hovering which it has perfected more than any other species. The Sea Eagle may look impressive soaring at a great height but on the ground it has been compared by some authorities as being more similar to a Vulture than to an Eagle. No, I would rather watch a Kestrel and cannot help concluding that size means more than anything to the RSPB and their supporters.

M Litton

A pair of Oyster Catchers nested in our garden last year, as they have done over the last five or more years. Last year however the Kites came for the first time repeatedly flew over our garden. The Oyster Catcher parents left the nest to mob the Kites and scare them off. Meanwhile the Crows killed the chicks.

J Clark Maxwell

The dawn chorus here used to be a fantastic experience. Also the evening one. It upsets me so, to know over the fairly recent years how the great chorus has diminished so much.

In the last few years, there have been very few birds at all. We suspect the main culprit is the Grey Squirrel which are increasingly difficult to control! I have seen them with eggs, young birds and last year frogs in their mouths. We now see more Jays, Magpies and Sparrow Hawks. The Sparrow Hawks do have many pigeons though which is good.

Good luck with the project.

S Florance

How many of your members own a Cat? Because that is the biggest killer of our songbirds, but are they too afraid to admit it? To them Tiddles is something that twines around their legs and purrs on the sofa. But in-fact it is the biggest killer of Songbirds.

But over the years the feral Cat population has been on the increase for a number of reasons. 1) is the recession. Cats are being dumped on scrubland and in forests, when they can no longer be fed. So the transition from Domestic cat to Feral is a natural progression and takes no time at all. 2) Is once that playful, furry fluffy creature has lost its attraction, it will be dumped, so it must hunt to survive. 3) Many Docks, Civil and Naval, have a cat problem caused by cats being taken aboard to kill rats on the wooden ships, then when times and ships became safer, the cat was left to fend for itself, hunting mice and rats, or small birds, to survive.

I live on the outskirts of Portsmouth, my back garden opens out onto Countryside and until recently was a haven for songbirds. We have had Blackbird chicks in a box lined with hay on the window sill inside the porch, allowing mum and dad access through a small window to feed their brood, after their nest was destroyed by a cat. Not a Carrion Crow or a Bird of Prey, but a CAT. I have chased cats from my Holly and Pine trees, when they have climbed both in search of fledglings to kill. We have even lost Doves from a Dove cote, all killed by a neighbour's harmless domesticated Cat, That has turned my garden into nothing more than a desolate bird free Cat's toilet.

People don't understand that when Tiddles goes out at night, he is in fact hunting the hedgerows and forests, for anything that can be caught. Cats have killed every Field Mouse, Vole, Shrew, they even dig up Moles to kill. They have killed all the birds that I have been feeding and coaxing into my garden for the past twenty years.

We had one young Blackbird that would peck at the kitchen window to let my wife know he was there waiting for his meal worms. Or the Robin that waited on the garden bench, or the Song Thrush that gave us a song while it sat in the tree waiting for its raisins.

But all have been killed by Cats, even big Wood Pigeon and Collared Dove have been killed by cats.

So if you want to understand why our Songbird population is decreasing, use the £88,000 to do something about the Cats and watch the Songbird population increase.

I love to watch, even encourage the Songbird into my Garden, but not if it means certain death as it will all the time Cats are allowed to retain this PERFECT PUSSY STATUS, when they are nothing more than DOMESTICATED KILLERS, of all animals wearing feathers and fur.

But until narrow-minded owners who are blind to the fact and will never admit that Tiddles is capable of such wanton slaughter, we will always have a Songbird decline.

C Goodall

Email to SBS

from Safewings Wildlife Conservation Projects

There is no doubt that many species of once common birds are in decline and over 40 species are on the red endangered list.

It is reassuring to learn that SongBird Survival is funding the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust to undertake a project to determine the direct effects of Corvid predation on farmland birds at a cost of £88,000 over a 2 year period. It is claimed that certain Corvids have increased over the past 40 years with Jackdaws up by 114% and Magpies up by 88%.

This is obviously having an adverse effect on declining species such as Skylark, Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting and perhaps plays a part in the decline of the House Sparrow which is down by 74% in just one generation.

There are other key factors that have played a part in the decline of so many bird species and they range from habitat destruction, certain farming practices and the increase in predation by raptors, such as Sparrow Hawks.

These problems certainly need addressing but sadly some of the key contributors to species decline are ignored or seemingly taken as taboo and not mentioned.

The facts are all too clear that domesticated cats kill in excess of over 275 millions animals a year with a conservative estimate of over 55 million being birds. Many of which are our regular garden visitors including seriously declining species such as Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush and House Sparrow.

But not even the publicly funded bird charity the RSPB appear to take cat predation seriously perhaps because of the outcry from the cat loving public if their pets are called to book.

We are fobbed off with poorly based opinion such as: "There is comfort in knowing that evidence suggests that cats tend to take weak or sickly birds. It is a fact that of the millions of baby birds hatched each year, most will die before they reach their breeding age. It is likely that most of the birds killed by cats would have died anyway from other causes before the next breeding season. Only if the predation of cats was additional to these other causes, was it deduced that predation by cats might have a serious impact on bird populations".

What a negative viewpoint considering that garden nesting birds such as red listed Song Thrush and House Sparrows are regular victims of cat predation. Parent birds are more vulnerable in the winter and throughout the breeding season as they forage for food for their fledglings and many are reliant on being fed by people in their gardens which in many cases puts them directly in contact with cats. A parent Blue Tit killed by a cat does not only kill the adult bird but also most certainly the young birds left orphaned in their nest box. Furthermore scientific evidence is showing

that tricomoniiasis is now killing many small birds such as Greenfinches and that salmonellosis is also playing a serious part in killing thousands of garden visitors due to contaminated rotting food that is left on and around food stations.

I founded Safewings in 1966 and have worked in the field of wildlife rehabilitation and conservation for over 40 years and handle up to 4000 animals a year so can speak first hand in regard to what is the greatest contributor we see to injury to birds and orphaned fledglings. The main contributor is without question the cat which sees many cat mauled birds die from septicaemia and shock or be permanently disabled due to the cat seriously damaging a wing or leg. Over 70% of our wild bird intake is cat related and considerable time and expense is made in hand rearing and fully rehabilitating the many fledglings we handle each year due to cat predation. It is not only the hand feeding and intensive care but the prolonged period of time where all imprinting must be removed and the bird placed into a seclusion aviary environment to break all human bond and to be assessed as to when the bird is fully adapted and ready to be re-released back into its original habitat, whenever possible. This is though becoming more difficult as hedgerows now are not cut and laid as they once were, they are now flailed and ripped up by machinery so hedgerows are declining which causes a serious problem for all too many species.

Farming practices have in some areas improved but there is always room to help and advise landowners of ways to improve areas for a wide diversity of species. Animal rights pressure has seen even pest species become protected with land owners having to deter pest species such as wood pigeons as opposed to shooting them. Sadly this has led to the increase in pesticides and rodenticides that has brought about an increase in secondary poisoning which is killing species such as Barn Owls, Little Owls and Kestrels which although being raptors are on the endangered lists. Whilst the big picture is ignored those dedicated to helping protect our native species will only scratch the surface and many of our once common beloved species will face certain extinction. It is time that these and other concerns are raised with the Government and fully researched in a bid to redress the damage caused solely by mankind's ignorance and greed.

"The Wildlife and countryside of today is not ours to dispose of as we please. It is held in trust. We must account for it to those who come after".

Andrew Meads
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Animadversor's diary

The Third Bird

It was the first of July and the day seemed set to be overcast with occasional showers so I resolved to have a day indoors to catch up with the tasks that one tends to put on the back-burner when the longer daylight hours offer more rewarding activities.

About mid-morning, sitting at my office desk, I was suddenly aware of movement in my peripheral vision which was instantly accompanied by a soft thud. Out to my right I was just in time to see a greenfinch drop to the ground by the greenhouse apparently unconscious, clearly having flown into the glass. By the time I had run out into the garden however it was sitting up and obviously was going to recover. Within half an hour it had flown away and I'm sure was none the worse for its escapade.

At lunchtime my wife returned from a shopping trip with an elderly lady to say that while at the friend's house a little chaffinch had stunned itself against the conservatory window. We remarked that there seemed to have been a lot of this happening this particular year, a point emphasised by the outstanding need to clean the end window of our conservatory which held the dust impression of a pigeon where one had impacted a few days previously.

The adage that things come in threes was yet to be demonstrated before the day was done. For much of the previous week we had been graced by the presence by a great spotted woodpecker and its youngster as they performed stylish gymnastic feats devouring peanuts from the feeder hanging among the branches of one of our Bramley apple trees. Shortly after four o'clock I found the young woodpecker lying on the patio having collided with the open door of the conservatory. It was still very warm so it had only just happened. A few spits of rain heralded the start of a shower so I placed it in the shelter of the Cedar tree in a shoe-box lined at the bottom with polystyrene to eliminate heat loss to the ground below. I was hopeful also that the walls of the box would limit its loss of body heat in the breeze that had sprung up to signal the arriving shower. Unfortunately within the hour the little woodpecker gave up its quest to live, leaving me wondering why we had witnessed so many cases of birds flying into windows in a single day. Perhaps it



was connected with the miserable weather conditions?

Although the colourings of the youngster did not possess the radiance of its parent's plumage it was nevertheless quite a handsome little bird and a sudden thought made me put it in the freezer. My brother-in-law was about to take a salmon he had caught to a taxidermist so I offered it as something that might be suitable for mounting. The taxidermist naturally required me to send details as to how a protected bird had met its death and that to me was the end of the episode.

Not quite however. Later in the year when I received a Christmas parcel from my brother-in-law I found to my surprise that little woody - The Third Bird - had returned home, mounted on a piece of drift-wood to provide a frozen moment in time illustrative of his proficiency in scaling the branches of the Bramley tree in the summer.

Since then he has gathered a little dust but we forgive him that. Occasionally we clean him with a very soft brush and replace him in his favoured position in the lounge, as he enters his second decade.



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Georgina Bradley (George), Office & Shows Manager

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5-10 July	RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show , Kingston-on-Thames
12-14 July	Great Yorkshire Show , Harrogate, North Yorkshire
16-17 July	Holkham Country Fair , Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk
18-21 July	Royal Welsh Show , Builth Wells, Powys
22-24 July	CLA Game Fair , Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire
17-18 Sept	Royal County of Berkshire Show , Newbury (TBC)

Full details about the shows can be found on the website: www.songbird-survival.org.uk



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