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# SongBird Survival

PRESS RELEASE

## New Study Exposes Predator Threat To Songbirds

- **Grey Squirrels and cats the top mammal predators**
- **Uncontrolled predation to blame, not just farming**
- **Conservation bodies ignore problem**
- **Biodiversity is suffering**
- **More research and systematic approach needed**

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**Registered Charity No. 1085281**

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# New Study Exposes Predator Threat To Songbirds

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THE GREY SQUIRREL is having a devastating impact on our songbird population. It ranks alongside the domestic and feral cat as the top predator of farmland birds. This is just one of the findings of Professor Roy Brown of Birkbeck, University of London, in a new review carried out for the wildlife charity SongBird Survival.

*“Many factors have been blamed for the decline in our songbirds in recent years. The debate about raptors has raised the issue of predation but mammal predation had largely been overlooked,”* says Professor Brown. The review shows that the true impact of this predation is much worse than expected.

Professor Roy Brown’s report reveals that in areas of high squirrel density over 93% of small bird nests are predated. When this is combined with sparrowhawk activity it can result in 100% breeding failure and a loss of 85% of adult birds. He says *“I am not blaming the lazy, often overfed domestic cat so much as the deadly feral variety. Both cats and grey squirrels are very widespread and range over habitats from treetops to ground level.”*

The Professor assessed the effects of ten common mammals on the populations of fifteen farmland bird species. He investigated predation on adult birds, on nesting/fledgling success and disturbance caused by intense predator activity. The study clearly shows that cats and grey squirrels predate severely on virtually all the songbirds in the study and increasing densities of these mammals can cause the complete cessation of breeding in many species. He also finds for example that increasing rat populations impact a wide variety of species and uncontrolled numbers of stoats can wipe out local populations of Skylarks.

The review is based on a large amount of data from multiple theme studies and single area assessments, much of it as yet unpublished, covering 115 farms and other areas in England, Scotland and Wales over set periods ranging from three to thirty two years. Professor Brown found that mammals account for between one third and three quarters of all predation losses of songbirds.

Professor Roy Brown says that a similar review should be carried out on the impact of avian predators followed by a programme of experimental predator management to establish the total impact of predation in the environment. Only then, he feels can we have sufficient information to make future policy decisions on the balance of our wildlife and biodiversity.

The project was commissioned in April 2005 by SongBird Survival. Vice-Chairman Robert Middleditch says *“SongBird Survival is a small but fast growing wildlife charity. Our aim is to draw attention to the plight of our songbirds, to fund research into the causes of their decline and to lobby for a change in the law where necessary.”* He continues *“As a farmer I know that it is not just modern agricultural practices that are to blame. Habitat is actually improving with new agri-environment schemes along with increases in tree and hedge planting. We must look at all the possible causes of decline and that includes predation.”*

*“We selected the subject of mammal predation as our first project because it is easier to evaluate than avian predation which is the next major area we intend to fund. This review by Professor Roy Brown provides overwhelming evidence that the population of farmland birds is very sensitive to the levels of some mammal predators, especially where control has ceased. Furthermore, he has proved that the grey squirrel is having a disastrous impact on our songbird population, something which many of us have long suspected. It could be threatening the extinction not only of the red squirrel but also of some of our songbirds.”*

Mr Middleditch goes on to say that Professor Brown’s review should serve as a wake-up call to all those who do not believe, or more importantly, do not want to believe that increased predation is a major problem. *“We have never subscribed to the popular view that predator and prey achieve a balance; that is pure wishful thinking. We realize that it will only be as a result of genuine scientific evidence that the government can be persuaded to take the necessary steps to restore our biodiversity in general and the population of our songbirds in particular. We hope that the findings of Professor Brown will draw attention to the work of Songbird Survival and encourage more members to join us and help to secure the future of our songbirds.”*

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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**The full review can be downloaded from the website:  
[www.songbird-survival.co.uk](http://www.songbird-survival.co.uk)**

## NOTE TO EDITORS

SONGBIRD SURVIVAL is a UK registered charity which aims to draw attention to the plight of our songbirds, to fund research into their decline and where necessary to press for changes in the law. It warns that uncontrolled predation threatens our biodiversity and that mainstream conservation organisations avoid the issue. Its membership is drawn from a wide range of bird lovers, conservationists, farmers, gardeners and people from town and country across the UK.

PROFESSOR ROY BROWN is the Visiting Professor in Biological and Chemical Sciences at Birkbeck, University of London. He has held three chairs in countryside management at other universities and has published and broadcast widely on the tracks and signs of mammals and birds in Europe and the US. He has served as Senior National Park Officer for the North Yorks Moors, developed many agri-environmental schemes and advised government departments on biodiversity policy and organic farming. He is also a leading expert on heather and bracken management and on ticks in Scotland.