

Welcome to our Summer newsletter

This Newsletter comes at a particularly important time for SBS. On the inside pages you will find the results, in summary, of four different research studies. Two undertaken on our behalf by the BTO and University of Reading, one carried out by the GWCT (the upland predation Experiment) and lastly a study carried out by Dr Christopher Bell and others from Cambridge University into the role of the Sparrowhawk in the decline of the House Sparrow.



All of these studies look at various aspects of predation and its effects. They are all peer reviewed scientific studies which have now been published in various scientific journals and therefore cannot be dismissed as either unscientific, anecdotal or of little significance. Any impact of predation is often dismissed as 'there is little evidence' or only 'a local effect'. These comments from the conservation establishment are becoming harder to sustain as more and more hard scientific evidence becomes available. They are

doing their best, of course, to play down these results. It is also clear from the study carried out for us by the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research at the University of Reading that the most effective studies are fully experimental rather than purely correlative analyses of observational data. So to this end we have commissioned the GWCT to carry out a large scale corvid removal experiment to examine the impact on farmland bird productivity. A pilot study to validate the new methodology is currently underway.

Thanks to many generous donations we have been able to successfully finance the two completed studies but as we go forward into further work, as outlined above, we will need further financial support. So all donations will be gratefully received! We have successfully increased our membership over the last two years and we are now getting a higher profile in the media as a result of the scientific work already undertaken.



BRADFIELD HALL BIRD FOOD

Bradfield Hall are not affiliated to any association or bird charity.

This high quality bird food when ordered by SBS members earns us 10% of sales!

*Please call 01263 833200
for details and prices.*

SUMMER SHOW SEASON

The new Show Season is just about to start and the list of Shows that we will have a stand at are listed on the back page of this Newsletter. If you would like to help us in any way at one or more of the Shows, please contact Georgina Bradley in the office. Contact number and email address shown at the top of this page.

Many thanks for your continuing support.

Michael Rankeillour
Editor and Trustee

Research

Four groundbreaking studies have recently been published on the impact of predation on birds. SongBird Survival has commissioned two of these. The first one was the long awaited analysis of the BTO database carried out by Dr Stuart Newson and the University of St Andrews.

BTO / University of St Andrews project

This was our first major research project and it was felt appropriate that it should examine the main BTO databases; the Common Bird Census and Breeding Bird Survey which are the largest databases of birds in Europe. It investigated the impact of eight predators on twenty nine prey species.

The study found a significant negative effect of the sparrowhawk (right) on four species, in particular the tree sparrow (left), whose numbers fell 97%. It is worrying that in our heavily managed environment one native species could be threatening another native species with extinction. The paper also raised concern on the effect of the kestrel on several species. However it was unable to detect an impact either of corvids or on twenty two of the prey species and the Reading University study, published subsequently, does highlight the limitations of this type of research.



The Upland Predation Experiment

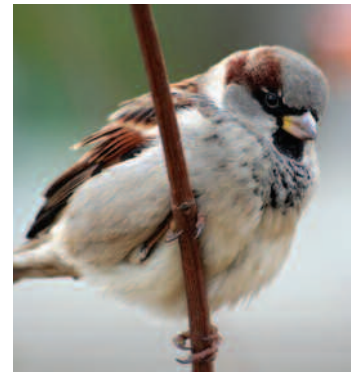
This high quality experiment was conducted by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) over nine years and demonstrated that when the numbers of predators were controlled upland wader species like curlew, lapwing and golden plover were three times more likely to raise chicks. Interestingly the BTO study has also showed a significant negative impact of sparrowhawks on lapwings. Although waders are not songbirds this experiment provides overwhelming evidence that predator control can deliver a massive improvement in prey numbers.

The role of the Sparrowhawk in the decline of the House Sparrow

This study was carried out by Dr Christopher Bell and a team from Cambridge University. It clearly shows that the decline in the house sparrow (right) has been driven by intense predation pressure from resurgent sparrowhawk populations both in the rural and urban environments.

Sparrows have tended to disappear from the more affluent parts of large cities while continuing to thrive in the less well-off areas. The leafier suburbs have provided safe nesting places for sparrowhawks whereas in the poorer districts no such nesting opportunities occur.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that with sparrowhawk numbers at all time highs they are causing severe problems for any bird with 'sparrow' in their name. It begs the question what other species could be affected by predators, all of whose numbers are at the highest levels since records began.



Review of Predation Research by University of Reading

This is the first ever review of the quality of all avian predation research in the UK to date. It casts grave doubts on the credibility of past research into the impact of predation on songbirds. We at SongBird Survival have for a long time harboured such suspicions and this study entirely vindicates our concern.

The review was carried out for us by Dr Malcolm Nicoll and Professor Ken Norris from the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research at the University of Reading. They showed that a study's outcome was strongly influenced by the quality and quantity of the data on predators upon which it was based. The study confirmed

that the best studies are fully experimental and highlighted the limitations of correlative analyses of observational data bases. Dr Nicoll also confirmed that no fully experimental study of songbird predation has ever been carried out in the UK.

Summary

These four studies provide substantial evidence that the impact of predation on songbirds cannot be ignored nor it can be dismissively claimed that there is 'little evidence' or that it may just be a local problem. They have shown us that we have been misled by the limited methodologies of previous research. They have also revealed that some prey species have been seriously affected by growing levels of predation. We have also been made aware of the priorities for future studies.

The big question is whether anyone will take note of this important change in knowledge about the fate of our songbirds. More quality research needs to be done to quantify the impact of many other predators. The issue of whether and how some predators might need controlling also needs to be addressed. There are many vested interests keen to maintain the status quo: careers, cash flow, ideology and sentiment can all be involved. It must be clear now that if we want to avoid extinctions then something must be done.



Our latest research project

We have commissioned the GWCT to carry out the first ever large scale corvid (magpie, above) removal experiment to examine the impact on farmland bird productivity. A pilot study to validate the new methodology is currently underway. This project is a logical next step following these recent research findings.

The total cost of this project will be in the region of £50,000. With generous help from members and other benefactors we have already raised £11,000 for the pilot study but we urgently need to raise funds for the balance.

Nick Forde
Trustee

Silent Auction

Reproduced below is the famous Chaffinch painting by East Anglian artist, Melanie Dodd.

Now we are offering members the chance to bid for:-



The Original Painting
(framed ready to hang)

(You may recognise it from our Christmas card reproduction)

This most beautiful original watercolour is offered by Silent Auction in support of the SBS Research Fund. Please be generous and bid briskly!

The Reserve Price is £300.

What you have to do:-

1. Decide to bid.
2. Send your sealed offer to our office as follows:-
**Songbird Survival
(Sealed Bid),
PO BOX 311,
DISS
IP21 1WW**
3. Envelopes will be opened on Thursday mid-day on September 30th 2010 (at the end of the financial year).
4. The lucky bidder will be informed and have it delivered to his/her address.

Robin Page, *the Vocal Yokel*

The Countryman, May 2010

To write this article I tiptoed to my computer in trepidation. The subject is important, but it may irritate one or two people as it is not politically or conservationally correct. I am writing it because over recent months I have been irritated. I have seen a report that suggests that grey squirrels have no effect on woodland birds. How can three million grey squirrels have no effect? I have read other reports that tell me that predators have little influence on bird populations. How can the huge increase in the number of crows, magpies, buzzards, sparrow hawks, foxes, and badgers have no effect? People, including scientists, may want to do nothing about our burgeoning population of assorted predators – but it defies logic and simple observation to say that they have no effect.

The simple truth is that, when I was a boy, foxes, magpies, crows and sparrow hawks had controlled populations. At the same time the populations of garden birds, farmland birds and birds in general were far higher than they are today. Now the population of predators has rocketed, while numbers of once-common songbirds and farmland birds have plummeted. Yet somehow, many scientists and “conservationists” fail to connect the two.

It is very strange. When North American mink started breeding in the wild and were spreading over much of Britain, it was obvious to many of us living in the country that these beautiful but savage animals could cause an immense amount of damage to our indigenous wildlife. When we reported moorhens and water voles disappearing and kingfisher numbers falling, we were told this was just anecdotal evidence, and that the mink had simply filled a niche and could fit into Britain’s wildlife quite harmlessly and easily like numerous other species.

Sadly for the scientists the anecdotal evidence turned into scientific fact and the mink, although doing well in many parts, is very unwelcome, and most conservation bodies now trap mink, although some of them do it surreptitiously in order not to offend those of their membership who have been Disneyfied.

Sooner or later the penny will drop about the damage done by other predators too. Between 1970 and 2007 the magpie population of Britain increased by 96%, carrion crows by 81%, sparrowhawks by 995% and buzzards by

an astonishing 545%. During the same period, lapwing numbers fell by 45%, curlew by 54%, skylark by 53% and spotted flycatcher by 85%. I mention the spotted flycatcher specifically because scientists say that grey squirrels – all three

million of them – do not adversely affect bird numbers, although admitting that they may eat eggs and fledglings. Sorry, but a colleague, Nigel Housden, photographed a grey squirrel with not one spotted flycatcher’s egg in its mouth but two, and spotted flycatcher numbers are tumbling. Another bird in steep decline is the lesser spotted woodpecker, with only 2,200 territories now occupied. A farmer on the Cambridgeshire/Essex border knows a wood that once had a plentiful population of these beautiful but now extremely rare woodpeckers. He is convinced they were cleared out of his wood by sparrowhawks, and he found several heaps of black and white feathers to prove it.

Again the scientists state that sparrowhawks do not impact on bird populations – without actually explaining how they can make such a claim. The facts are that there are about 40,100 pairs of sparrowhawks in Britain; it has been estimated that each pair needs 121 lb (55kg) of fresh bird meat each year to allow them to live and breed. This means that our native sparrowhawks need 4,852,100 lbs (2,202,853 kg) of wild birds a year – or 2,166.1 tons. This translates into the equivalent of 88,220,000 sparrows or lesser spotted woodpeckers, 24,060,000 blackbirds,



4,411,000 pigeons, 2,426,050 curlews or 9,704,200 lapwings.

Interestingly, the sparrowhawk did not receive protection until 1962 when its population was being devastated by pesticide poisoning. Before that time, as a boy, I hardly ever saw one. It was quite right to ensure the survival of the sparrowhawk, as it is our other predators – but is it sensible to encourage so many, putting various vulnerable species at risk as a direct result?

My biggest fear is for the lapwing, an iconic bird of the British countryside. At one time pairs nested in virtually

every field in my parish and during cold weather the winter flocks were counted in thousands. Now they no longer breed, and in winter a flock of twenty is considered large. Their eggs and chicks are easy meat for foxes, badgers, crows and magpies, and the adults themselves are often targeted by sparrowhawks.

The issue of too many predators is real and putting many of our well-loved species at risk. Surely it is time for an honest and open discussion on the threats? The issue should not be about political correctness – it should be about biodiversity and real conservation.

Control now needed in our unnatural countryside

Percy Trett "In the Countryside", Eastern Daily Press, April 2010

Late last Sunday, I sat in the car in a gateway looking out over the marshes by the River Bure, as John Bowles had noticed how small groups of magpies gathered there until they formed a flight of about 40 birds, before flying off to a communal roost in the nearby wood for the night. I have seen this happen before in years gone by, but never as late as this in April. I suppose our unusual weather pattern this year has confused them.

This behaviour became noticeable at the turn of the century (the year 2000, that is), when we had a rapid increase in magpie numbers, which has declined somewhat now. After spending the night together, come the dawn they gradually disperse and fly off to their various territories. Why they should do this I do not know, but during the day you will see them in pairs, or singly, foraging for food. If the old country-folk notice gathering of magpies, they would remark on them as birds of parliaments. But in those days magpies were very scarce indeed, for the Victorian gamekeepers, whose very job depended on them being able to put a good number of pheasants and partridges over the guns on shooting days had to protect their game chicks from predators, especially of the crow tribe, and shot, trapped and poisoned them. To my mind, magpies and jays are the

most handsome and intelligent of the crows. Often they will sit quietly watching the comings and goings of other birds, and let them betray the location of their normally well-concealed nests. Then, in an unguarded moment, they will raid the nests and eat either the eggs or the chicks. Unfortunately there is no doubt about it – they are terrible killers of young birds.

At the present time, our declining numbers of the common birds of our gardens and woods cannot stand such predation and some form of control has to be exercised in our countryside. The late Michael Seago told me how, at the turn of the century, he had watched 600-plus magpies go to roost in the 700-acre wood at Sotterley – an alarming concentration.

Now, having pointed out the black side of their nature, I must mention one kept as a pet which had been brought up by a farming friend's wife. It was free-flying, but never strayed far away and loved coming into her kitchen looking for any hens' eggs, usually kept in an open basin on the dresser there. Of course a hen's egg was too big for the magpie to take away, so, steadying the egg with one foot, he quickly chipped away the shell and ate the contents. Incidentally, the outdoor farm cats hated him and eventually killed him, which was a pity, but cats are rather like that.

Country Diary

Paul Jackson, Countryman, June 2010

New research claims there is compelling evidence that the decline of house sparrows in Britain has been caused by intense predation from resurgent sparrowhawk populations.

Sparrowhawks were wiped out over much of Britain in the 1950s because of the effects of organochlorine pesticides, but since these were banned in the 1970s the number of sparrowhawks has quadrupled, and they started to colonise cities for the first time in the 1980s.

Urban sparrows were easily picked off because of their bold behaviour, which had developed in the absence of a significant threat from an aerial predator, the research reveals.

Dr Christopher Bell, and independent ecologist with over twenty-five years of experience studying bird behaviour, led the research. He says: "The study shows that variation in the timing of the disappearance of sparrows from gardens across Britain can be explained by variation in the year that sparrowhawks began to be seen hunting birds in the same gardens. This overturns previous assumptions about the effects of predation on bird populations, and exposes flaws in studies apparently showing that sparrowhawk predation has no effect."

Several puzzling aspects of sparrow decline are explained by this research. It reports that urban sparrows have tended to disappear from the more affluent districts of cities such as London, Bristol and Norwich, while continuing to thrive in less well-off areas, such as large council estates.

This is because the affluent parts of cities provide safe nesting places for sparrowhawks in the large gardens of grand houses, and in private grounds and restricted areas of parkland, whereas fewer nesting opportunities occur in poorer districts.

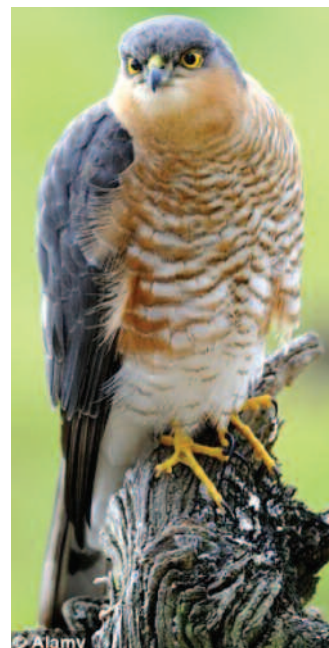
The results also explain why sparrow decline happened later in the cities than in the countryside. Sparrowhawks re-occupied most of the British countryside during the 1970s, coinciding with the decline of rural sparrow populations, but only started to move into urban areas in the late 1980s and 1990s, which coincides with urban sparrow declines.

The results emerging from this study are potentially embarrassing for those organisations involved in sparrow conservation which have consistently denied that increasing numbers of sparrowhawks and other predators can affect populations of wild birds. Instead they have promoted the idea that food shortage caused by changes in agriculture and urban development is behind sparrow decline.

Some conservation organisations have also promoted measures known as 'agri-environment schemes' to reverse the supposed effects of agricultural changes on wild birds. Farmers are now required to implement these measures to receive their subsidies under EU legislation.

The report says, however, that despite the fact that over two-thirds of farmland in England is now managed under agri-environment schemes, bird populations show not signs of recovery, suggesting that predators may be the real reason behind bird declines in the countryside.

More information on this research can be obtained at www.cpbell.co.uk, and on this study in particular at www.cpbell.co.uk/home/House-Sparrow-Decline.



New study reveals flaw in predator research

Shooting Times and Country Magazine, May 2010

Research for Songbird Survival reveals the impact of predators on birds may have been underestimated.

The charity Songbird Survival commissioned the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research at the University of Reading to examine how recent studies into the impact of predators on songbirds dealt with predators. Its recently published findings have revealed that in many studies the quantity and quality of information on predators was poor. Clive Sherwood, chairman of Songbird Survival, said: "This important review highlights our concern that limited methodologies may have generated a misleading perception of the impact of predators on songbird populations."

The widespread decline of UK bird species in the past few decades has corresponded with dramatic increases in various predator species prompting concern that higher rates of predation may be contributing to the loss of songbirds. However, several relevant studies have found no evidence to support this assumption.

The commissioned research concluded that such findings are likely to be the result of poor information on the exact numbers of specific species of predator in a particular study. Dr Malcolm Nicoll from the Centre for Agri-Environmental Research explained: "We should be sceptical about studies that use limited predator data, particularly if they are claiming to have found no evidence of an impact of predation on prey population trends. The burden of proof should be on these studies to show that the data on changes in predator abundances were entirely appropriate for the predators concerned. This is particularly relevant for many of the studies that examined the impact of predation on songbird populations, but failed to detect and impact."

The University of Reading research highlights the need for further well-designed studies with higher quality information on UK predator species. The findings will



aid in gathering such information by helping conservation biologists and wildlife managers to identify current knowledge gaps and provide suggestions as to how future studies might be improved.

Dr Nicoll continued: "The review shows where we lack a credible, scientifically-based understanding of the impact of predators and hence their potential role in the observed declines of many UK birds, particularly songbirds. It is important that future studies focus on rectifying this, through carefully designed studies on a range of predator species."

The study is available online at www.methodsinecologyanddevolution.org

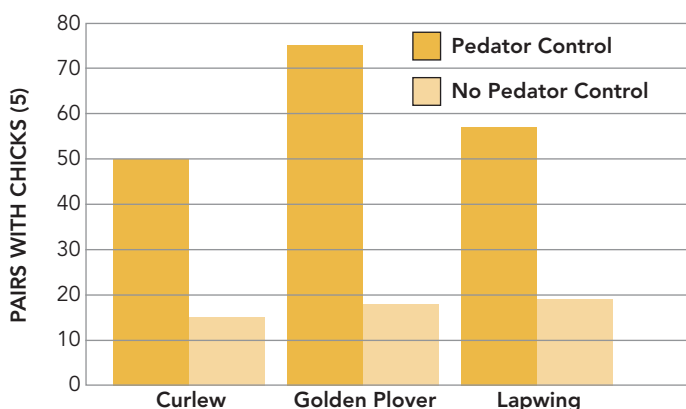
Keepers welcome wader and predator study findings

Keeping the Balance, magazine of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, Summer 2010

THE GAME & WILDLIFE CONSERVATION TRUST'S (GWCT) nine-year study at Otterburn shows, unsurprisingly to keepers, that crow and fox control helps the recovery of curlews, lapwings and golden plover.

This important peer-reviewed research, published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology*, looked into the effects of predator control on the breeding success of threatened moorland wading birds. It was undertaken on moorland in northern England and was one of the longest running studies of its kind.

The research showed scientifically for the first time that controlling common predators such as crows and foxes significantly improves, by more than three times, the breeding success of curlew, lapwing and golden plover – all species of conservation concern. The results have important implications for the future of bird conservation in the uplands.



The percentage of waders that bred successfully on areas with and without predator control. A successful pair is one that rears at least one chick. Data taken from all years and all four study areas.

Dr Stephen Tapper, Head of Policy and Public Affairs with the GWCT, explained: "If we want to reverse the decline in some bird populations, we need to do more than simply improve countryside habitats. Agri-environment schemes on their own, without predator control seem unable to give rise to an abundance of breeding waders or even bring about a significant improvement in sparse populations. Foxes and carrion crows were scarce in many parts of the country 100 years ago, now they are very common and ubiquitous. Waders flourish on grouse moors because they are protected from the relentless predation by carrion crows and foxes during the breeding season. In the uplands, we cannot expect to maintain populations of vulnerable species like lapwing and curlew without reducing numbers of some predators."

Populations of common opportunistic predators such as foxes and crows are at an all time high and this research shows that they are hampering the recovery of many much-loved and vulnerable bird species. The fox population for example, is estimated to be some



240,000 adults and since 1961 the carrion crow population has risen to 1,158,000 breeding adults.

Dr Kathy Fletcher, a senior upland scientist with the GWCT and an author of the study, said: "Gamekeepers routinely reduce the number of predators on grouse moors and this is essential for boosting the red grouse population. Our work shows that this also benefits species like lapwing, golden plover and curlew as well. In our experiment we were able to exclude the effects of other moorland management, such as patchwork heather burning (muirburn), so we can be confident our results were attributable solely to predator control. It would be very sad if we lost a significant fraction of our bird life through want of a little wildlife management. The evidence from our research is that such losses are not inevitable and the North Pennines, 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".

Lindsay Waddell, NGO chairman, welcomed the study's conclusions, saying: "This is without doubt the most important piece of work the GWCT has done in the uplands with reference to predators. It highlights, without a shadow of a doubt, just how important gamekeepers and predator control are to the survival of the fragile upland wader assemblage, and it has been set out in a very easy to understand manner for all to digest.

WADERS ON THE FRINGE

The GWCT has published a report entitled *Waders on the Fringe*, which contains details of the Otterburn research and what it means for conservation. For a free copy, please contact Jane Bushnell, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Fordingbridge. SP6 1EF; tel: 01425 651060; email: jbushnell@gwct.org.uk; or download it at: www.gwct.org.uk/waders

Director's Notebook

May 2010

In scanning various official publications sent out by large wildlife organisations and government agencies, it is interesting to note how the dreaded “P” word is treated. Yes, the word “predator” is used (Usually in a taxonomic scourge), but “predation” is avoided or air-brushed out of the narrative. It is almost as if the word “predation” conjures up in the minds of some conservation luminaries the awful spectre of land managers and farmers going on the rampage – killing and poisoning, trapping and eradicating all predators willy-nilly – which of course is total nonsense. A grown-up attitude to the facts of uncontrolled predation is long overdue.

I would not suggest that every single researcher into biodiversity is trapped in a mind-set. But we do need to help change a culture which holds back progress. Most people are quite willing to engage in open debate about controversial issues such as climate change, urban change, farm chemicals, over-fishing etc without becoming polarised. I'm afraid conservation in the UK should involve a willingness to accept the need to control predation levels when they are threatening the very existence of some species. Intervention in using legal and humane control measures needs more scientific acceptance.

SBS knows that this mental log-jam is a hindrance to getting our countryside back to what it was in the 1950s – 60s; a countryside full of songbirds. A tall order? Yes; but with new research (some funded by SBS) and new agri-environmental schemes (which are being taken up widely), we can hope for change.

If this message is explained clearly and openly, the large number of recreational bird watchers and garden bird lovers will rally behind sensible control measures. SBS is determined to be a voice for the truth. We are not alone (thank goodness!). But there are vested interests that have to be overcome and fresh thinking brought to bear.

With the show season hotting up – will it be another “barbecue summer”? – Your trustees and staff look forward to meeting members on our stands at the shows. It is good to meet faces behind the data-base details and hear your views.

Members will have read in the last Winter Newsletter of the furore in Norfolk and Suffolk occasioned by plans by Natural England and the RSPB to release Sea Eagles along the coast (costing £600,000). Such has been the opposition

to the idea from country people and leading conservationists it has been shelved for 1 year. Even a well attended meeting of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust came out 70% against the plan. The main objections revolved around the large numbers of free-range livestock and poultry now being farmed in



the area and the imposition of yet another top-end predator over the string of precious bird reserves which the area has: perhaps the most valued in the UK if not Europe. This whole scenario is indicative of the gulf between conservation theory and practice as dreamt up by some well-meaning but impractical people. The Sea Eagle plan is deferred – not cancelled, but the idea is deeply flawed and Norfolk and Suffolk have a reputation for obstinacy! There will probably be a sequel to all this – hopefully cancellation.

Another on the same subject of farm stock predation and of moorland birds notes the Scottish response to a report by the University of Aberdeen scientists who (incredibly) issued an out of date study trying to prove that Ravens (population up 400%) do not predate ground nesting birds. In the immortal words of the trade unions; “it beggars belief”. Ravens are protected but licences for control are theoretically available from government. And what Ravens do to new-born lambs and up-ended ewes I prefer not to describe in an SBS Newsletter.

Keith McDougall
Policy Director

NEWS JUST IN...

Natural England have just announced that they are withdrawing from the White Tailed Sea Eagle introduction programme in Suffolk which they have been leading up to now. Shortage of funding is given as the reason...

(June 2010)

A vaccine for squirrelpox

Squirrelpox is a potentially fatal disease affecting the red squirrel population in some areas of GB and is caused by a poxvirus. It is believed that this is a significant factor in the decline in the red squirrel population over recent decades. The clinical signs are wet, discharging lesions around the eyes, mouth, feet and genitals and affected animals become increasingly lethargic and may die as quickly as 7 days after signs appear. Grey squirrels are known to become infected by the virus but seem to be relatively unaffected by it, rather acting as a reservoir of infection for red squirrels. There is no treatment.

As there are already well-known successful examples of vaccines against poxviruses e.g. smallpox in humans, which has been eradicated largely by vaccination and Orf (contagious pustular dermatitis) in sheep, it was considered that development of a vaccine against squirrelpox might be feasible. The Wildlife Ark Trust has been successful in raising money to fund the first phase of development of a squirrelpox vaccine and the work has been commissioned at the Moredun Research Institute, Edinburgh under the leadership of Dr Colin McInnes.

In order to maximize the chances of success, three separate scientific approaches are being taken to develop a potential vaccine candidate. These are:

An attenuated (weakened) live virus vaccine,

A specific gene-deleted live virus vaccine; the gene deletion renders the virus safe and unable to cause disease while retaining its ability to protect against disease.

The identification of specific 'immuno-dominant' genes which are responsible for conferring immunity and which could be delivered in a viral vector, several of

which are already in clinical use.

The funding is already secure to cover the first 2½ years of this 3 year initial phase of the programme, which is scheduled to be complete by December 2011. At that time, the most promising of the three possible methods, will be selected for further development. This means that the prototype vaccine has to be shown to be both safe and effective in the laboratory situation.

The next step will be to test the most promising candidate(s) in the field i.e. in red squirrels in their natural habitat. This immediately raises many practical challenges including how to administer the vaccine to a wildlife species and urgent consideration is being given to these issues.

Secondly it will be necessary for the vaccine to be fully authorized for release into the environment by the appropriate regulatory agencies, and initial consultation is now being sought with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate which is one of the government agencies responsible for these matters.

It is hoped that within 5 years from now a safe and effective squirrelpox vaccine will be in widespread use to combat this fatal and devastating disease.

A R Peters, Director
Arpexas Ltd,
18 Petrel Way
Hawkinge
Folkestone
CT18 7GZ
www.arpexas.com



Returning lost species raises tough questions

Grace Corne "In the Countryside", Eastern Daily Press January 2010

“Returning lost species raises tough questions...”

Farmers are always looking over the hedge. They know exactly how not only their own farm is progressing but also those of the surrounding farmers, and they make a formidable information network, with contacts all over the country. This is extremely useful for learning the real truth about the countryside.

One of the more recent discussions concerns the introduction or re-introduction of species. It is common knowledge that coypu and mink, both introduced for the fur trade, did an incredible amount of damage. Until recently, mink had caused a dramatic fall in the water-vole population and coypu had destroyed river banks. Might we therefore consider it strange that the beaver has been reintroduced to some areas? It is a successful re-introduction, with the animals lopping trees exactly as expected and making their dams. Has it been appreciated that when larger streams are blocked the smaller watercourses suffer, as do the creatures which depend on them?

Introduced foxes are, of course, a perennial problem, and farmers are sometimes shocked to find that foxes which have been captured have actually been micro-chipped. These animals have been brought up by humans. Releasing them into the countryside is unspeakably cruel for they will not be able to fend for themselves.

When farming became extremely difficult there was a request for farmers to diversify. Some turned part of their land into fishing lakes. Love angling or hate it, it is a lawful pursuit. Considerable efforts have been made to produce the lakes, stock them with fish, landscape the surrounding areas and provide the necessary facilities. There have been various grumbles about the activities of cormorants, but there is now a much worse threat.

Otters, spreading through the countryside, are attracted like magnets to these quantities of captive fish. They kill and kill again and again, frequently eating only the brains of their catch. What is the farmer to do?

The suggested re-introduction of the sea-eagle is an extreme worry. A much smaller seagull can cause extraordinary damage to free range ducks or chickens. A sea-eagle would cause havoc amongst these, small pigs, lamb, cats, bitterns and other open-water birds. An observation by a farmer is perhaps worth a mention.

“We are told that sea-eagles sometimes appear here form elsewhere. If East Anglia is as good and suitable for them as it is supposed to be, why haven't they stayed here?”



Don't prey on songbirds

Daily Mail, March 2010

The RSPB's Mark Avery professes to be a bird lover, but wants people to love the sparrowhawk, the biggest butcher of songbirds.

Perhaps he likes seeing a sparrowhawk eat a songbird, which takes half an hour to die as it is gradually eaten away. The hawk holds it down with its talons while eating the flesh and the prey can't get free. I've seen it from my window.

Why does the RSPB not protect songbirds as it does birds of prey? Songbird populations are down by as much as 90 per cent, while every bird of prey species is at the highest known levels since numbers were recorded, with the possible exception of the kestrel.

The RSPB took the parakeet off the protected list "because it was damaging crops". Or was it because they discovered it could take the leg off a sparrowhawk with its nut-cracking beak when attacked?

The day the RSPB starts protecting songbirds is the day I return to its membership, but it spends its millions on rearing sea kites, sea eagles, peregrines, goshawks, sparrowhawks, buzzards, etc.

We see TV coverage of pick-up trucks loaded with poultry offal being shovelled out daily to feed kites, which would die if they weren't fed because there isn't enough carrion in nature to sustain their numbers.

Peregrines are brought into cities to nest in custom-built boxes on high-rise buildings because there aren't enough natural coastal cliffs to house their needs.

Goshawks are brought to farming locations, near chicken and pheasant-rearing farms, to provide food for their young.

The "almost extinct" corncrake breeding Island of Islay was purchased for the RSPB, but after daily disturbances by the charity's staff, the birds decamped elsewhere.

Sea Eagles failed when brought to Mull, so now they are being brought to Suffolk. They tried Norfolk, but farmers threatened to shoot the lot for their lamb-killing habits.

Lapwings are now in small numbers, but who cares? Farmers do. The RSPB? Not likely, they don't have talons or hooked beaks. It lobbies Parliament to have the law changed to protect predators, but songbirds? No way.

W Cowell
Wincanton, Somerset

Excerpt from letter to SBS

May 2010

"You may like to urge research into birds dying as a result of ticks attaching themselves to the head, neck and eye of small song birds. I first noticed this when finding a dead wren, then a dying finch and two or three other small song birds.

I rang the RSPB and they told me what I had seen was a growth NOT a tick. Well, I do know a tick when I see one! They were not interested. I wrote to the EDP and received two responses from people with similar experiences. I have just seven days ago picked up a dead finch with two ticks – one above its eye and one behind its head.

Ticks must be causing a lot of damage and possibly go unnoticed and therefore not worth research. But I think it would be. I hope your trust can provide this, if you agree with me".

Andrew Cuthbert
Holt, Norfolk

Letter to SBS

May 2010

I do believe that the protection of certain species is leading to the loss of many small birds. When a nest is destroyed or a bird with young is killed and this is happening faster than they can breed, it leads to extinction.

Wildlife programmes are watched on TV but this is achieved by remote cameras or zoom lenses, one whiff of humans and they would not be seen. As farmers we see wildlife as we go about our work that the general public would be lucky ever to see. We cannot capture these things as it is impossible to carry camcorders or cameras in our pockets but we do not go round killing everything.

N S Hadfield
Butterwick, W Yorkshire

P.S. I enclose a poem I wrote some years ago. It might explain where missing birds go.

The Missing Birds

*Where have all the swallows gone?
Years ago we had hundreds, this year we had 21.*

*Is this all down to climate change,
Or the interference of man?*

*A squirrel was wrecking a bird's nest,
I will have to do what I can,*

*I rattled the hedge and shouted shoo,
And away the squirrel ran.*

*The hawk hunts its prey with zeal,
Any bird up to pigeon will do for its meal.*

*The London sparrows, there were thousands back in 1952,
Now Bill Oddie says the only few left live in London Zoo.
The badger roots about the ground to see what it can find,
Wasp and bee nest, small mammals or ground nesting birds,
With a few slugs and snails to them these taste good.*

*You ask, where have all the wild birds gone?
The Media blames the farmer but I don't think they should.*

Winging it

Matt Ridley, Prospect Magazine, May 2010

To protect birds, conservation charities should invest in gamekeepers, not nature reserves.

To walk the Pennine Way in the early morning in spring is to enjoy a symphony of the best bird song imaginable. The woodwind crescendo of the curlew, the piccolo refrain of the golden plover, the zither diminuendos of the peewit, even the violin glissandos of the dunlin—moorland waders fill the air with exquisite sound. Yet a walk over other hills – in Wales, the Lake District or Dartmoor – will yield no such result. The reason has almost nothing to do with pesticides, farming, habitat management, legal protection, or even climate change; the usual villains of animal charities. Instead, wading species thrive on Pennine moors because of an unlikely friend: the gamekeeper.

All such birds see their eggs and chicks eaten by the crows and foxes gamekeepers keep at bay. An unusual experiment near Otterburn, Northumberland, designed and run by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, whose findings were published in March, proved the point. For nine years the breeding of curlew, lapwing and golden plover were studied on plots either untouched or managed by gamekeepers. The results were startling, ranging from a tripling to sextupling of breeding success when the gamekeepers were around. Meanwhile, another long-running experiment at Loddington in Leicestershire has shown that gamekeepers double the probability that song thrushes and yellowhammers will successfully rear their chicks.

Gamekeepers, of course, receive no subsidy to help plovers and curlews. The good they do is a side effect of protecting the red grouse that hedge fund managers like to shoot. But the Otterburn study has still been greeted with embarrassed silence by the charities and government agencies that together form the conservation establishment. The vast sums they secure for habitat schemes for waders and the purchase of nature reserves look likely to have been wasted.

Go to Lake Vrynwy in Wales, a bird reserve that is overflowing with lovely habitat, and you will struggle to find more than a few meadow pipits to watch. But there is just one patch in the bird-rich Pennines where waders are scarce: Geltsdale, an area managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds since 2000. It has since become something of a black hole for waders, victims of the RSPB's soft policies on crows and foxes.

So what does the RSPB blame for the decline of upland waders? Climate change of course. "Warmer weather pummels plovers," said a 2009 RSPB press release. Warm summers are drying up bogs, it explained, leaving fewer daddy long legs to feed the birds. "This is the most worrying development that I have found in my scientific career," said James Pearce Higgins of RSPB Scotland at the time.

Oddly, the study of Peak District golden plovers on which this research was based found declines neither in golden plovers, nor daddy long legs. Rather its conclusion was based on mathematical models of future temperatures, predicting the extinction of golden plovers in the area if temperatures rise by six degrees Celsius – an outcome many decades away, even on the most alarming forecasts.

Meanwhile, recall the lesson of Otterburn: you can hugely increase the breeding success of golden plovers just by killing off crows and foxes. Truth be told, the RSPB knows full well the importance of predator control, learning the hard way that the quickest route to extinguish ground nesting birds is to make a

protected area around them and leave nature to take its course. For many years it has been quietly killing predators, while trying to avoid telling its members that it does so.

But all of this is to disguise the real problem facing wild birds in Britain, one often ignored by charities keen on nature reserves: "subsidised predators", or those provided with extra food by humans. Take the case of the tortoises of the Mojave Desert in California. In the late 1990s their numbers started dropping, largely because of a huge increase in the population of predatory ravens, fortified by the remains of Big Macs from nearby landfills.

The same is now happening in Britain. Carrion crows are thriving as never before, now one of the commonest of all birds. Their numbers, along with rooks, jackdaws, magpies and gulls are sustained through the winter by human activities – road kill, litter, or landfills. The newly numerous crows are especially menacing, with their habit of eating the eggs of ground nesting birds in the spring.

Today, Britain's 1.5m breeding crows and 1.1m magpies far outnumber our peewits, curlews, golden plover, red grouse and black grouse. The government has a legal obligation (under the EU Birds Directive) to do something about the retreat of these latter birds. But its response has been to set up new "special protected areas", something the Otterburn research shows is futile and irrelevant.

Conservationists in general prefer to castigate gamekeepers, largely because of what the allegedly do to birds of prey. Historically, gamekeepers were one of the reasons some birds of prey died out, and others became scarce, in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, the RSPB demands on its website that gamekeepers "stop the killing now." Yet at least three species of falcon, three of harrier, two of hawk, two of eagle and one each of buzzard, osprey and kite are today far more numerous than in the 1970s. Only kestrel, which gamekeepers never kill, has declined. There is a rich irony that the conservation establishment reckons a few rogue human predators can threaten raptors, while a million and a half crows cannot threaten golden plovers.

Clearly, a compromise is called for – one brokered by a sudden eruption of common sense at government bodies like Natural England, and charities like the RSPB. It is here where the Otterburn experiment could do the most good, for an obvious pact indeed suggests itself: the more gamekeepers foreswear the killing of birds of prey, the more conservationists should step up their killing of crows and foxes. If Westminster politicians can do it, why not the conservation establishment too?



Easy prey: Curlew eggs and chicks need protection from crows and foxes.

Animadversor's diary

I awakened rather later than intended and snatching up a dressing gown hastened downstairs to the conservatory.

Two young blue tits, with mixed emotions of adventure and fear, were being fed by a parent at the hole of the box in the silver birch tree which had given them protection for the last twenty days. Predictably, within ten minutes, one took the irreversible step and fell to the ground like a Newtonian apple despite the frantic flapping of wings. Even before it landed a magpie swooped silently down from the nearby cedar tree and only my rapid appearance from the conservatory foiled the attack.

The magpie repeatedly came in for a closer look at the flower pots behind which the youngster had sought cover. Each time I frightened it away and several times the parent blue tits took over in an impressive display of bravery to chase the predator into a neighbouring garden.

I took a few minutes off to get dressed, returning at 7 o'clock just in time to witness another little face appear at the hole. A second magpie had now joined its mate. They were very determined and often refused to be perturbed by my hand clapping and would retreat no further than to the garden next door in eager anticipation of more breakfast. Clearly word had not reached them that I can be resolute in pursuing a cause that I perceive as righteous.

Eventually, at quarter past ten, two more youngsters plummeted to the ground in quick

succession. We were now entering the most vulnerable phase. I use "we" deliberately because the two parents and I had now developed something akin to a true team spirit. I took all my meals in the conservatory with the door wide open, ready for a quick exit to chase off any predators that had not recognised the futility of waiting around any longer.

The afternoon passed reasonably smoothly and long after the setting sun had cast shadows past the silver birch with its now vacant accommodation, one of the youngsters struggled up into the relative safety of the yew tree while the other two had received orders to lie low in the flower bed where they received their final feed for the day at five past nine, exactly four minutes after sunset. The calm of the evening brought relaxation and reflection on our day's achievement. Pensively I ran my fingers round my chin only to be reminded that I had yet to have a shave!

Footnote: The second day demanded my continuous attention again and it was not until the third day that all three had developed the power of flight.



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Now, where DID that woodpecker go?

Bird plays hide and seek with sparrowhawk

Daily Mail, June 2010

Desperate to avoid the hawk-eyed gaze of his enemy, the woodpecker clings to a fence post, absolutely motionless.

The smaller bird has already had one rather too close encounter with the claws of the sparrowhawk, and now just one involuntary flutter of a wing would be enough to give the game away and turn him into dinner.

Astonishingly, however, while the predator perched on the post swivelling its head from side to side, it never looked down.

And after more than a minute of failing to spot its prey, it lost interest and flew off.

The drama was caught on film by wildlife photographer Robert Fuller in his garden at Thixendale, near York.

He had seen the sparrowhawk with the woodpecker in its claws and waved his arm to frighten off the bird of prey. That allowed the woodpecker to fly to the sanctuary of the fence post, but ten minutes later the sparrowhawk returned.

Mr Fuller, 37, said: 'It landed on top of the very post where the woodpecker was.

'I know that sparrowhawks hunt by movement so as long as the woodpecker remained absolutely still he would be safe.

'In the end the sparrowhawk moved off and the woodpecker lived to see another day.'

Close call: A woodpecker clings on to a wooden pole as it hides from a preying sparrowhawk

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SHOWS

dates for 2010



30 June - 1 July

Royal Norfolk Show, Norwich

2-4 July

Scottish Game Fair, Scone, Perth

10 July

Tendring Hundred Show, Essex

13-15 July

Great Yorkshire Show, Harrogate

19-22 July

Royal Welsh Show, Builth Wells

23-25 July

CLA Game Fair, Ragley Hall, Warwickshire

29-30 August

Fenland Country Fair, Cambridge

18-19 September

Royal County of Berkshire Show, Newbury

The show season has started well with successful trips to Windsor and Cornwall and we look forward to a busy Summer ahead. Unfortunately, we were not awarded a stand at either of the RHS shows this year and we will be very sorry to miss these shows.

We still need volunteers to come and help at all of the shows. So, please, if you can spare a few hours or the whole day then please contact me in the office for full details.

Georgina Bradley, Office and Shows Manager