



REMAINING SHOW DATES FOR 2007

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION
3-5 Aug	Lowther Horse Trials	Penrith, Cumbria
5 Aug	Wayland Agricultural Show	Watton, Norfolk
1 Sept	Moreton in Marsh show	Moreton in Marsh, Gloucestershire
2 Sept	Wychwood Forest Fair	Fulbrook Hill, Burford, Oxfordshire
9 Sept	Frampton Country Fair	The Park, Frampton-on-Severn, Gloucestershire
15-16 Sep	The Midland Game Fair	Weston Park, Shifnal, Shropshire T.B.C.

Grey partridges at Royston

Excerpt from the Game Conservancy's review of their partridge project area at Royston

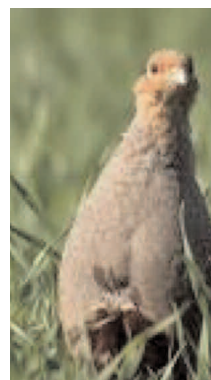
The spring 2007 grey partridge count on our demonstration area at Royston gave a density of 18.4 pairs per 100 ha (250 acres). This was a feather's breadth away from the target of 18.6 pairs per 100 ha that we had predicted when the project began, based on 'A Question of Balance.' This excellent result represents a six-fold increase over the starting density of 2.9 pairs per 100 ha in spring 2002. It was achieved through a combination of habitat management (provision of nesting cover, brood-rearing cover and over-winter cover) and legal predator control

(corvids, foxes, mustelids and rats). Many congratulations to Malcolm Brockless, our keeper, and to the farmers whose wholehearted co-operation made this success possible. By comparison, on the adjacent reference area, grey partridge density was 5.5 pairs per 100 ha. Other game has also done well, with densities on the demonstration area of 18.2 pairs of red-legged partridges, 17.5 hen pheasants and, based on winter counts, 87.8 brown hares per 100 ha. The corresponding densities at the start of the project were 4.9 red-legged partridges,

8.2 hen pheasants and 23.5 hares per 100 ha. On the reference area this year, the spring pair density of red-legged partridges (which includes the survivors of birds released for shooting) was 15.7 pairs per 100 ha and that of hen pheasants was 3.9; there were 10.5 hares per 100 ha over winter."

Ed: the above results are quite excellent and whilst no figures are given for other small farmland birds, we can assume that they benefit from this kind of sound wildlife management.

More details can be found at www.gct.org.uk



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dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk

or post to our address on page 1.



Regd Charity
1085281

SongBird Survival newsletter

S U M M E R 2 0 0 7

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Welcome to our Summer Newsletter

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Both our research projects into different aspects of avian and mammalian predation are now proceeding, as announced earlier this year. However the funding needed to support both projects over the next year is in excess of £100,000 and will require a major fund raising effort if our reserves are not to be totally depleted. So if any member would like to contribute or knows someone who would help it would be much appreciated. Unless we can build a case for a change in policy on how predation is managed in this country, we will not be listened to. The only way to do that is to gather science-based evidence and then present it in an effective way.

As members are aware, SBS can sometimes appear to be a lone voice crying in the wilderness. Except that no wilderness exists in the UK these days. All land is managed one way or another and wildlife has to fit in with our help and encouragement. The point here is that our view on the need for specific predation control is not shared by more powerful lobby groups; however we do have allies.

Our Membership is not drawn from single interest backgrounds – yes, we have farmers in our ranks but I am interested to note that SBS bird-lovers come from every walk of life and residential situation. Town dwellers are particularly observant as they see once common species in parks and back gardens disappear in the face of onslaughts from crows, grey squirrels, foxes and cats.

So, SBS is truly a multi-social mix of people who use their eyes and common sense and notice that all is not well in the way things are ordered at the present. The Wildlife and Countryside Acts are not serving the countryside well. They were born out of a different situation in the 1970s and times have changed. There is less pollution, more TV about wildlife (often educational but naïve in another sense.) There are fewer gamekeepers on farms. Farmers are being pressured simply to stay in business by low food prices; they have little time left to control predators. Our message is very simple really, and we will go on repeating it. Management lies at the heart of wildlife conservation in

the UK. This applies to all flora and fauna, even (especially) nature reserves have to be managed, wardened, maintained and, yes, predators have to be dealt with if they become too numerous.

What is needed is a national re-think on how the public is encouraged, both to accept the need for careful, measured predator control programmes; and to accept that existing legislation is out of date.

Wonderful wildlife programmes bring into our homes scores of big cats roaming, killing and eating their prey on African plains which teem with ungulates; all in balance with one another. This is a scenario which does not translate to the overcrowded, farmed and gardened British Isles.



Our message is to Government and their agencies; help us to help our birds. Common sense is apparently not enough, so SBS is embarking on a series of research studies to demonstrate that what we know is happening is backed up by sound scientific data.

To this end we will need your continued support and let it be said now, more funding. More on this in our next Newsletters but there are serious plans afoot!

Michael Rankeillour – Editor and Trustee

Songbirds at Loddington – from the Game Conservancy Trust Review of 2006

Key findings:

- Abundance of BAP songbird species has declined by 30% since our keeper left.
- For species such as spotted flycatcher and song thrush, our results suggest that increased nesting success resulting from predator control may contribute to changes in winter abundance.
- For other species, winter feeding of game may have greater benefits. We are currently investigating this.

Chris Stoaie

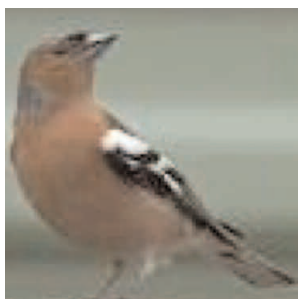
Our management at Loddington has essentially gone through three phases (see table 1) and during each phase we have mapped the breeding territories of songbirds across the farm (1992, 1998, 2001 and 2006.) We also have bird abundance data from transect counts carried out each year. Our PhD student, Patrick White, is also analysing the nest survival data that John Szczur has collected since 1995, and in the case of blackbird, most years since 1992

Table 1

Changes in game management at Loddington since we inherited the farm in 1991

	Up to 1992	1993-2001	2002-2006
Predator Control	No	Yes	Yes
Habitat and set-aside management	No	Yes	Yes
Systematic winter hopper feeding*	No	Yes	Yes

* There was reduced winter feeding in 2001/2 and 2001/3, but this was restored in subsequent years.



Overall songbird abundance at Loddington shows that numbers have increased in response to game management from 1993, but declined in the first two years without a keeper. Habitat, predator control and winter feeding affect the different species in different ways and some species have continued to increase while others have declined. For the seven Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species, the territory mapping data suggest an overall decline of 30% (see Table 2) and transect data also reveal a decline in recent years relative to the numbers on another local farm (see Figure 1.) For some of these species, such as the migratory spotted flycatcher, winter conditions at Loddington are unimportant. Song thrush, bullfinch and linnet tend not to take wheat from the feed hoppers, whereas we know that tree sparrows do.

Table 2

Numbers of breeding territories for key songbird species at Loddington

	1992 (base year)	1998 (habitat & predator control)	2001 (habitat & predator control)	2006 (no predator control)
BAP species				
Skylark	36	36	37	33
Song thrush	14	48	64	34
Spotted flycatcher	8	11	14	6
Tree sparrow	3	0	7	11
Linnet	10	21	25	17
Bullfinch	6	11	12	6
Reed bunting	3	3	3	5
Total	80	129	162	112
As percentage of 1992	100%	161%	203%	140 (-30% on 2001)

Other study species

Dunnock	46	86	144	97
Blackbird	66	143	143	98
Whitethroat	25	44	45	48
Chaffinch	135	178	229	161
Yellowhammer	57	55	54	46
Total	329	396	615	360
As percentage of 1992	100%	120%	187%	109% (-41% on 2001)

One way to shed more light on these changes is to look at nest survival over the periods with and without predator control. These data show a significant difference in nest survival between years with and without predator control for the four species we have analysed so far (see Table 3.) This may have contributed to the changes in abundance that these species have shown over the same periods.

These results suggest that, for some species, predator control could contribute to the restoration of breeding numbers. However, other game management practices such as habitat and winter food supply also contribute and the importance of these other factors differs between species. Winter feeding is an important and widely practiced component of game management for shooting and we need to understand better the possible contribution this makes to songbird conservation. We are testing this at Loddington by stopping the use of hopper feeders and continuing the monitoring of game and songbird numbers. Monitoring of a small number of remaining hopper feeders will also provide more information on which species use them and which do not.

Table 3
Daily nest survival rates (\pm se) for four study species at Loddington

	Keeper	No Keeper
Blackbird	25.7 \pm 3.0	8.9 \pm 2.3
Chaffinch	28.1 \pm 5.6	14.4 \pm 4.2
Song thrush	23.6 \pm 4.5	11.6 \pm 4.0
Yellowhammer	32.3 \pm 7.4	16.9 \pm 5.5

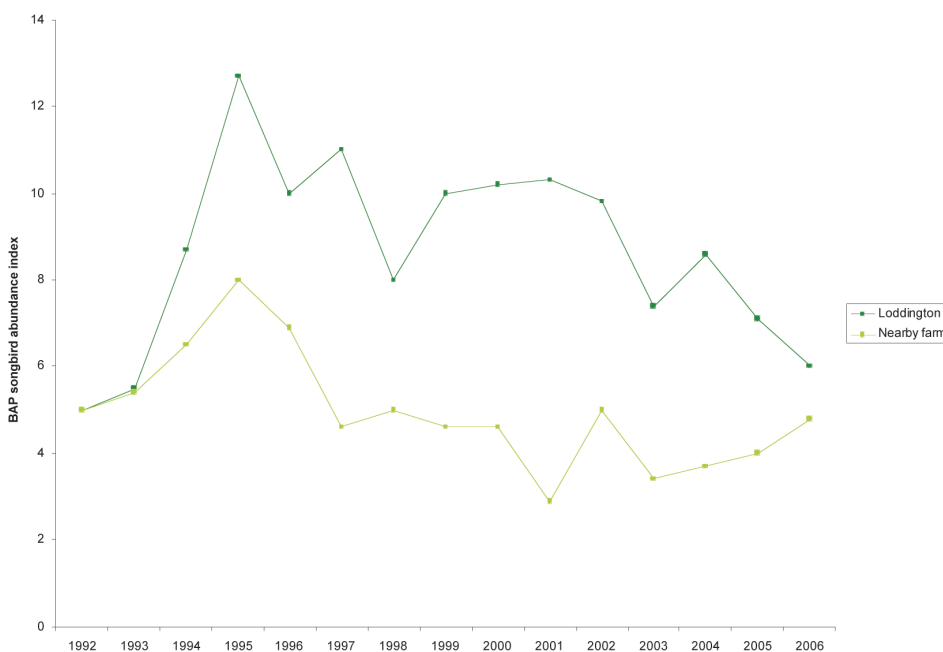


Figure 1

Abundance of BAP species of songbirds at Loddington compared with a nearby farm



NATURE RESERVES AND THE OPEN COUNTRYSIDE

There are some fundamental differences between nature reserves, and open, farmed countryside. Mark Avery of the RSPB was reported as saying (to Marco Pierre of restaurant fame) that farming practices and pesticides are the main causes for the drop in small bird numbers, and that if he wanted to see birds then we should visit an RSPB reserve.

Dr Avery is frankly right. Nature reserves are set up and managed specifically for birds and wildlife. The Wildlife Trust reserves are also wonderful places and able to demonstrate how wild habitat, well managed, can attract an inspiring range of wildlife. Long may these reserves flourish and be supported by the public. But for the RSPB to go on endlessly blaming farmers and land managers for not having the same quantity of birds is ridiculous.

What farmers and gardeners are, in the main, doing these days is to continue their productive roles as growers of food with a hefty slice of conservation management. As explained in the last SBS newsletter (article by Ben Aldiss) virtually every farm is now involved in some agri-environmental scheme and in addition, very many farmers have always farmed with an eye to encouraging their wildlife. The naming and shaming of British farmers by the RSPB as being responsible for dramatic losses of song and other birds is now out-of-date; the

RSPB should accept advice from farmers who live by, and with their wildlife day in day out. And they are perfectly well aware of what predation levels can do to populations of their resident farm birds and can act accordingly.

Then there is the interesting question of what goes on at many, if not all, top bird reserves – RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and National Nature Reserves. The answer is quite a lot! And I am referring to predator control! This is not referred to by the organisations that fear some sort of back-lash from their paying Members and visitors.

The truth is that the very best wardened nature reserves take steps to keep foxes, corvids, mustelids and gulls from excessive marauding; particularly in the breeding season. It has to be done; wardens, like farmers, know the truth about managing a balance that allows vulnerable species of birds to breed, feed and flourish.

So let's do away with hypocrisy and face the facts. Let there be more open recognition by the RSPB and other conservation bodies that the best way to look after our songbirds is to step in

and help (or hinder) when necessary; to create and preserve habitats in the open countryside, and not equate specialised nature reserves with the needs and constraints of farming, where the business of growing food has to prevail; albeit with every opportunity to look after our bird and wildlife populations.



And let it be said, there must be very few competent farmers now who do not appreciate their duty of care for wildlife. The same goes for gardeners, of whom we have many as Members of SBS who love their garden birds and will go out of their way to protect them.

Christopher Hanson-Smith

TWITCHING

I am not a real 'twitcher', but I do indulge in a special bird-watch usually once a year with two experts. Normally we visit a nice area of the UK but this year it was Spain! Three men in a 'twitch'.

As your Policy Director winged his way (via Madrid) to central Spain (La Mancha) and tried to forget his carbon footprint, an object of his devotion was winging its way in the other direction; back to the UK, an exotic Bee-eater!

After 3 glorious days in Spain (yes, 150 species spotted in total) we returned home to find 200 bird watchers assembled on the driveway of daughter and son-in-law's farmhouse next-door. A Bee-eater sat on the telegraph wire. Cars, 4x4s, a forest of telescopes, woolly hats and jostling birders virtually prevented us from picking up our front

door key. Meanwhile, son-in-law tried to edge his vehicle through the throng: grunts and frowns all around, never a smile or apology. The twitchers, behaving like a football crowd, were not in the mood for polite concessions. Bee-eaters come first!

A year or two ago, in the same area, a Pallid Harrier appeared on our marshes. The local Nature Warden estimated 10,000 bird watchers visited the area clogging up farm tracks and rushing around the roads, telescopes and binoculars at the ready.

Now, I have views about twitchers. They are usually delightful people, indulging in a healthy and rewarding hobby. But it can get out of control, and the sheer competitive element can, in fact, result in some unfriendly side-effects. Perhaps



somebody or some organisation can do something about it – what about the RSPB for starters?

Keith McDougall

Footnote: Bee-eaters are now nesting in the UK. But I am not telling where! At least one bird watcher sympathises with local farmers and residents!

Protection or Persecution?

I have long since been silent with the pen but have voiced my views on the loss of songbirds on many occasions to those who might want to listen.

I have had a lifetime of interest in the bird life in this country. My first introduction to the dawn chorus was with my mother in the years just after the war and how magnificent it was. We lived on a fully kept estate where vermin control was a priority. Since then I have lived in various parts of this country and abroad, finally settling back to Lanarkshire. We are surrounded here by farmland and have a good relationship with the neighbouring farmer who has a fully organic farm. Three years ago the field adjacent to the house was cultivated and seeded. Nesting in the field were Curlew, and Oyster Catcher and several pairs of Lapwings, all of which I could observe with field glasses from my window. All hatched – and all young were taken by one Hawk or another within a day of hatching.



At a Game Fair a couple of years ago I met with two gentlemen from the RSPB and explained to them how the Sparrowhawk was killing the House Martins. This I don't think they believed. What happened was the young would perch on the overhead electric wires, the hawk would come in from behind and knock the young to the ground, then returned to take the carcass. The dawn chorus here is no more. We have no

Thrushes and very few Blackbirds. Four years ago I phoned my friend, the ringer with the BTO, that I had six nests ready for his inspection. When he came and I took him around the site, the young in all the nests were dead and traces of the adults spread around the area. The nesting sites are all within our woods and shrubs and hedging that I have planted. It is an oasis in the centre of farmland. I am going to rename the property the Raptor's Larder.

Last year the first Spotted Flycatcher that arrived was hovering in the drive outside the kitchen window when round the corner came the Sparrowhawk and it

was gone. Two pairs of Spotted Flycatchers did succeed in hatching five young each. As usual, I called my ringer friend. Five of the young were starving as there was only one parent left alive attempting to feed the young on its own. However, the other five were ringed and as far as I know successfully left the property.

I am sure we must all agree the birds of prey are magnificent looking specimens, but like all predators they have now reached plague proportions. The RSPB, when it was set up, had good intentions and carried out great work. Unfortunately, they will never negotiate or agree with the real conservationists that culling is obviously necessary. They should change their name to the Royal Society for the Persecution of Birds.

T Wilson, Biggar, Scotland



BTO launch their new survey for the Atlas of Birds in Britain

'The BTO are conducting a new Atlas of Birds in Britain (the plan is to continue with an Atlas every 15 years.) Its aim is to plot both the distribution and the abundance of birds over the whole country – this is to be done for both summer and winter. The project will start this coming November 2007 and will continue through 2011. This is the first time that the BTO have conducted both winter and summer atlases during the same 5 year period.

So what is required from field workers? The BTO are asking that a minimum of 8 tetrads (but preferably up to all 25) are covered for each 10km square. It is required that each tetrad will have 2 surveys of 2 hours each during winter plus the same for the summer. This is to gather 'abundance' data, and it is also for making meaningful comparisons with previous Atlas surveys. Once this procedure has been completed for a tetrad, it is considered done and you

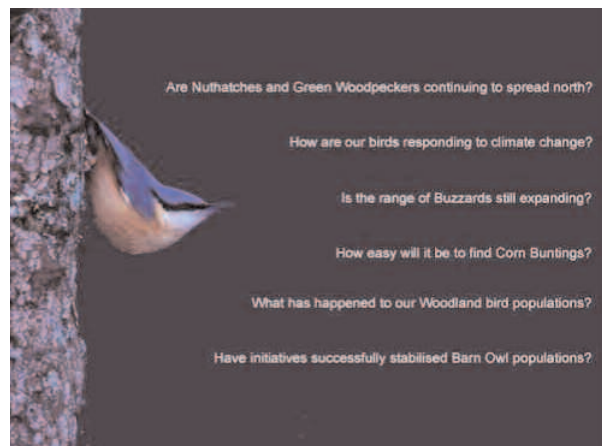
move on to the next tetrad (it does not have to be repeated each year.) Also, 'Roving Recorders' will be needed to cover the whole of each 10km square. This is to map distribution, and the object is to prove breeding of as many species as possible within the winter and summer periods at your leisure, and recording birds seen there.'

Individuals and teams of birdwatchers will be out in all weathers helping to answer these questions and more:

Courtesy of BTO

Nuthatch by Tommy Holden

If you would like to take part, either choosing to survey a number of tetrads or be a Roving Recorder for a 10km square then please contact the BTO on 01842 750050 or visit www.bto.org/birdatlas/index



Director's Notebook

SHOWS & EVENTS

On a warm overcast May evening after an afternoon of sun and moderate wind, our party of 25 enthusiasts gathered at Wheatfen Broad, Surlingham for a guided walk with David Nobbs, the resident Warden, and David Griffin his leading volunteer. We observed, in the main, warblers flitting from branch to branch in their safe marshy haven and listened to their song; in particular that of Cetti's Warbler. The old oak woods were alive with their sounds. Of interest were the marsh plants and beetles and other insects that provide an ample larder for the huge variety of birds that come to breed there. Our thanks to Michael Rankeillour, who organised the visit and provided refreshments afterwards.

The first Foray for SBS at the Suffolk Show in May was a great success; the stand was fully manned (squeezed between the Environment Agency and Butterfly Conservation in the FWAG marquee.) We had a steady stream of visitors and were kept busy both days. Our new re-designed displays were not yet ready so we used the old ones and hoped that no-one noticed! Being right next to the Countryside ring was entertaining, especially with the chainsaw demonstrations while trying to speak and hear! We look forward to the rest of the show season and Suffolk again next year. Our thanks to Robert Middleditch for his organisation and support.

Over 30 SBS members (including some new recruits) climbed up onto trailers for the Euston Park visit in June. The weather was dubious and the birds seemed reluctant to show themselves but our guide, Matthew Hawthorne, the Assistant Estate Manager was quick to turn our attention to the other areas of interest. The tour included views of the house and grounds and on to the parklands, chapel and woodlands. We were shown some of their farming methods including examples of potato and carrot cropping as well as the cover strips for the pheasant shoots. A very interesting and enjoyable evening with good company; the heavens only opening when they saw we were safe back in our cars! Our thanks to the Duke and Duchess of Grafton for allowing us to visit their beautiful estate and to Robert Middleditch, Jenny & Geoff Grover and Michael Rankeillour for organizing the visit. Our new displays, used for the Royal Norfolk Show in June, were much appreciated and admired. We had an excellent position (again near the Countryside ring) and a steady stream of visitors including an RSPB Warden who left the stand with a handful of literature and a keen interest in our work! New members were signed up and in spite of the doubtful weather (although the rain held off most of

the days) our presence was much to the fore.

SBS presence at the Scottish Game Fair at Perth was of great importance after the merger with Save Our Songbirds. Members of both charities joined together at this popular event to show the flag and meet each other, many for the first time. Three full days (with rather wet weather) could not stem the continual flow of visitors to our attractive stand and many new Members signed up. Predation in Scotland, as a countryside issue, is (if anything) more of a problem with the Common Buzzard a growing menace – especially where the rabbits are absent. We have in Scotland an enthusiastic team of loyal supporters who worked on our stand and more than pulled their weight. Our thanks are due to John Haddington, Fiona Dalrymple, Lewis Heriot-Maitland, Angus Sinclair, Ginny Stewart and Maggie Scott in particular as well as Clive Sherwood, Chairman of SBS Trustees.

Scone was followed by our first ever attendance at a major flower show – the Tatton Park RHS show in Cheshire. This five-day event was very enjoyable and despite the inclement weather, there was much interest and a large new awareness for our cause. Our administrator (Georgina Bradley) gallantly camped in the mud near the showground whilst invaluable help came from Nicholas Bankes, Alex Biggin and Richard Challoner. Thanks for all of their sterling help; it was, with the weather, quite a challenge!

Next was the Holkham Country Fair in Norfolk. Again, one day was wet but Sunday dawned bright and huge crowds surged past (and into) our stand. Trustees were kept busy signing up new members and discussing many aspects of our work and research projects.

But it was not over yet! The Royal Welsh Show took place for 4 days at the end of July. Again, the weather played havoc with car parking and walking. But the SBS stand looked bright and welcoming, with our brand new banners and excellent display boards showing John Pugh's (SBS Trustee) hill farm in Wales and the incredible range of wildlife it contains. A continual stream of visitors (many with dismal tales of excessive predator problems) poured into the stand, many becoming members.

Finally, we can record, with huge regret, the cancellation of the CLA Game Fair, due to be held at Harewood House, Leeds. A tragedy caused by the appalling weather. We send our commiserations to the organisers. It is also a severe loss of an important SBS event this show season.

We still have a few more dates in our show calendar this summer, so please do come along and visit us. We enjoy meeting our Members and hearing their news and views; and it is always good to put some faces to names! If you have a guided walk or other event in your area that you would like to

organise for SBS, please let the office know and we will help in any way we can.

HARD DECISIONS

Whether it be politics, in the conventional sense of the parliamentary scene, or the rural scene, when so many organisations vie with each other to attract Members (and thereby an income stream to pay for their activities) there often comes a moment when hard decisions have to be made. But the siren voices warning that some sizeable number of subscribing members/voters might object, so often means that good intentions get shelved.

Jobs are at stake, large offices and publicity built up over years could be cut back. We all know this can happen and does.

Fortunately SBS was founded on a different premise. We saw a flaw in the argument, and felt there was a body of country lovers out there who needed to have their views put forward. And those views are evident, our wildlife needs constant management, and that such management had to include hard decisions. If predation was being ignored by some large organisations and the Government, then it was the duty of some of us to point out the risks to songbirds and farmland and moorland species.

Our Membership may be relatively small (it is growing steadily) but the message we have for conservation bodies is 'face up to the hard facts and be true to your principles.' Of course, that is easier said than done when you face entrenched views that reach into millions of homes and institutions; when you have a publicity machine honed to pump out the message; have talented staff, genuinely committed to the cause and where there is, indeed, much excellent work that might be cut back if funds from members dried up.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental issue at stake. The challenge is: how best to preserve and enhance our wildlife and how it can continue to flourish within highly managed urban and rural environments. Shareholders expect results from companies in which they invest. Likewise, bird lovers expect organisations to which they send money to deliver results. SongBird Survival cannot claim to be in charge of large tracts of land, big offices or teams of employees. Our remit is to question and highlight both the principles of good wildlife management and the worst effects of some situations in which the country now finds itself in.

One such effect is the disastrous toll being taken on our small birds as a result of excessive predation by some mammal and avian species. 'Intensive farming' (that much overused expression) has been a factor in the past. It is rapidly being superseded by uncontrolled predation, and an unwillingness to take hard decisions.

Keith McDougall

Magpies create a killing field

Rex Hancy 'In the Countryside'
from the EDP May 2007

When Alan called round to tell me a pair of Robins had taken over a watering can hanging from a branch in his evergreen, we all rejoiced that spring had begun. When a bird, animal or plant behaves strangely, naturalists tend to say it has not read the book.

The Robins had definitely read their primer on Robin construction work and built in perfect, defensive, picture book fashion. Aware as we were of the predators in the district, we still expected a successful brood. Days passed, the young fledged and prepared to leave their galvanised fortress to brave the dangers of the outside world. At the same time, Robins were building inside Alan's garage, another safe haven.

All the time we had been watching pairs of Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Blackbirds, Blue Tits and Collared Doves collecting nest materials. Song Thrushes shyly called in but never seemed to be doing more than taking more than a few pecks and a sip of water. The joyful sound of collective song was a true delight.

Then came the supreme moment when Long-tailed Tits which had chattered round us for weeks began to weave their typical masterpiece of nest construction out of webs and bits of lichen. Lucky are they who see one of these nests tucked away in as secret a corner as nature allows. Our pair had chosen a difficult-to-



see section in Alan's line of evergreens. Sadly, we had to face up to a serious problem. The whole district seems to be filled with Jays which admittedly have been fun to watch but are a serious menace to young birds and eggs. Even more disturbing are the visits of Magpies. Our joy over the success of the Robins was tempered by the trepidation we felt over the prospects of all those nesting in less protected situations. The only mitigating circumstance was the fact that Grey Squirrels are rare visitors at the moment.

The first sign that our fears were justified was the sight of a Collared Dove in

furious pursuit of a Magpie. The scene was repeated at the same time of day on the following two days. The Doves left. There is little doubt that as eggs were laid they were taken. All the small birds have ceased their activities.

The only pair with any chance of success is that of the Wrens which nested inside an old hen coop. The wire mesh would allow them through but not a Magpie. The balance is definitely out of kilter here. As for the Long-tailed Tits' nest, the same trashed remains on the ground. Please do not try to convince me Magpies do not make a difference!

The Jackdaw,

by Percy Trett,
taken from the Birds of Britain website

Jackdaws and magpies have always fascinated me. They may be rogues, but they are intelligent rogues and I always suffer pangs of conscience during vermin control when they have to be shot.

Until recently their numbers were controlled by the gamekeepers with the result that shooting and kept estates always had a greater number and variety of other birds on it than countryside allowed to run wild.

The corvines - crows, rooks, jays, magpies and jackdaws - are relentless stealers of other birds' eggs and chicks. During the nesting season they nest in medium-sized colonies of 20 or more birds, using church towers, mills, etc, indeed anywhere there is a cavity for shelter and shade, from where they will sally forth on foraging expeditions.

Often they brave the noise and bustle of our cities, including Inner London, in order to watch and raid the pigeons' nests on such buildings as the British Museum and the National Gallery.

I have had several friends who have hand reared jackdaws, and all have found them characters who have not shown the least fear of human beings. And, strangely, though free flying, they have never attempted to join the flights of wild jackdaws winging their way home to roost during the late afternoon.

This happens despite the wild birds uttering their loud staccato calls of "jack" or the nasal "kaar" and also occasionally indulging in acrobatic tumbling in the air. The social unity of a wild jackdaw colony is very strong, as was evidenced several years ago when Mr E Kingdom, the stationmaster of Nelson, Glamorgan, was one evening walking along the line and noticed a very young jackdaw hopping about. He picked it up and immediately

the flock of jackdaws flew down from neighbouring trees and attacked him with persistent ferocity, causing him to run for the protection of the station buildings.



Your letters to SBS...

Dear Sir

Thank you for your letter, your group is new to me, and an excellent idea. But I am 86 years old now, and belong to four nature societies and the National Trust and frankly I think I am past it now.

You have seen my notes in our parish magazine. The previous writer was, I am afraid, a very technical person and I felt that his style intimidated the ordinary person. When they asked me to take over I used a light, chatty approach for the uninitiated.

It has had a good effect, it seems, and people stop me in the street to tell me things, often very useful. I feel it is important to make the 'lay' residents feel they can be interested.

I find younger people today living in the country are completely 'urbanised' and oriented to television and computers. I met a man recently, local born and nearly 40, who did not know if the animals in the field were cows or bullocks.

They also pass the blackberries in the hedge to buy some in a supermarket. So I feel I am merely a primitive relic.

N Sillman, Suffolk

Dear Editor

I've been watching parts of the London Marathon on TV but took my stick at 2pm and it is quite amazing how far along footpaths & across some four 'Chardstock' fields one can travel at a steady pace in 2 hours. Lots of native bluebells – not a soul did I pass, most fields look nice, some meadow foxtail, plenty of sweet-fennel – some hedges 'let go' and gone too far, tumble down old hedge banks, some just gone to woodland – there have to be people looking after the countryside producing food for the masses – were they to really go hungry then those few who still farm and prevent the countryside becoming a complete and utter mess would be better appreciated.

Tadpoles in a newly dug pond (not ours), interesting, and willow warblers sing nearby, Chiff Chaffs and Blackcaps about, plenty of Robins, Blackbirds, Chaffinches – but I am not happy overall. I worry a lot about it; there is not the balance there used to be.

They were wise, the generations of land workers before my own – who started to think they knew better and got a little greedy. Only now are we coming around back to the so sound principles of those who had the instincts and principles and understanding of farming the land and sympathetically and keeping a balance of wildlife which we do not have today. We are still in a muddle and do not agree with each other, in particular regarding the huge numbers of Sparrowhawks and Badgers which I am convinced are doing great damage to nature's balance.

Their numbers are well above pre-DDT days, years ago the farmers would never have allowed these top of the chain predators to build up to such numbers – man was then an essential part of the balance of nature, but some think we must stop right out of it, all will balance itself, just get the habitat right and it all will come good! I cannot agree with this way of thinking. Overall in the past 10 years on our organic farm with good habitat, bird numbers of many species have declined most markedly, whilst Sparrowhawks have steadily increased throughout the area.

Gone are our Mistle Thrushes, Song Thrushes, Goldfinches, Spotted Flycatchers, Nuthatches, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers to name just some. I have seen so much visible evidence that Sparrowhawks are the most obvious cause of serious losses to these species. We all like the old Badger, in modest numbers, but do people realise just what so many hungry Badgers get up to at night times?

We still have to learn from our ancient forbears. I do worry so much what is

happening, so many are not aware, think all is 'moonlight and roses' – in truth, we are still deeply in trouble. Looking back since the 40s we have lost so much. I have not done enough, and have cheated on our wildlife, that's how I feel.

B Short, Devon

Nesting Boxes

Regarding the letters sent to the press over whether Blue Tits have got fatter and are having a problem entering bird houses I would like to make comment that our regular fed Blue Tits do not have a problem entering bird houses but out of the twelve bird houses erected around my property only three were used this year and by Blue Tits. Wasps have driven birds out of these on occasions and the main culprit for stopping my birds using these boxes in recent years is the growing population of the Greater spotted Woodpeckers. If food isn't out for them to feed their young they go straight to a nesting family of Blue Tits and not only destroy the hole of the box but have been seen to make new holes on the side of a box to get at the chicks.

Even with food out I have seen a baby Tit being taken off a tree to be taken to their young.

Sparrowhawks are giving us a rest at present due to nesting but Woodpeckers aren't. We have a pair and two young coming for food.

H Wooldridge, Worcestershire



Habitat?

Not sure if this is relevant, but there have been several pairs of house sparrows seen on our stud, after being absent for some years.

I mentioned this to our builder and he'd also heard reports of returns.

The studlands at Newmarket are unusual in that stocking is at a low level, grass is often mown and there are plenty of wooden fences. As an example we have lots of yellowhammers.

J Miller, Cambridgeshire

Does this letter strike a chord?

At the moment I belong to the RSPB, but am thinking of leaving them and joining your Trust.

I live on a fairly isolated farm and have been feeding the birds year in year out for quite a few years. I am concerned that Magpies should be regarded as vermin. I do set a Larsen trap each spring and usually catch around 13 magpies.

This doesn't seem to make much of a dent in the magpie numbers and I have seen how they watch the songbirds and then raid their nests. It has to be said that the magpie is a very intelligent bird! Until there is legislation to allow for the widespread culling of magpies I do not think the songbirds have much hope of increasing their numbers significantly. I also feel there is too much emphasis on the support of the red kite. There is a feeding station not far from where I live and in the middle of the afternoon there must be around 80 red kites (if not more) waiting to be fed. Near there is a farmer who tries desperately to help the lapwings when they are nesting but he is fighting a losing battle because of the red kites raiding the young chicks as they hatch early in the mornings.

I would like to see a realistic approach to keeping a happy balance between the different birds. We also have a large population of sparrow hawks. There have been three dove kills in my garden in the last 10 days and, on 1 of those occasions, a second female sparrow hawk tried to chase the first one off of

her kill. I have taken photos of her eating her prey under the hedge in my garden.

J Hodges, Ceredigion

SongBird Survival article, Scottish Countryside Alliance, Newsletter 15, Summer 2007.

Dear Sir

Congratulations on producing such a wonderful and revealing article on the very important issue of small bird survival. Despite the (seemingly) best efforts of some 'conservation bodies' to lower the numbers even further, there is still an outstanding case for a balanced approach. It is good to know that there are people like yourselves around who are not afraid to stand up and be counted. Such people who see the wider view, recognise 'cause and effect' and who are willing to publicly counter the propaganda put out by political easy riders.

When an eminent wildlife broadcaster stated on his TV programme last week that he did not know that barn owls are at risk of being killed by buzzards, it made me wonder if such people are too biased to even talk to wildlife managers such as gamekeepers.

Copies of the article should be framed on the desk of every politician and environmental civil servant in the UK. Is it possible to access it as a web-page? I would love to send it to a few acquaintances.

K Pipes, Scotland

Ed: please go to www.songbird-survival.org.uk to see the article in full.

Magpies

Dear Sir

Until 3 or 4 years ago Southsea had few Magpies. They've now arrived in force to the detriment of the smaller birds. There are very few nesting sites, and these large aggressive newcomers have taken over. I have just tried to rescue a

young Song Thrush to no avail after its thorough beating up.

We used to have a splendid variety of garden birds but due to this uncontrolled predation their numbers are worryingly down. The Magpies can find food easily in town so I doubt their numbers will reduce when their songbird prey has declined/disappeared. What can be done?

P Drew, Hants

SBS CAR STICKERS

SBS has new car stickers available f.o.c. to our members and supporters at this summer's events. Please do ask for one if you visit the SBS stand at any event over the coming months.

Car stickers are also available direct from the Diss office. If you would like one, please send a stamped addressed envelope to SongBird Survival, PO Box 311, Diss. IP22 1WW.

LOOK OUT FOR OUR NEW CHRISTMAS CARDS!

Last year we produced a delightful card from a painting very kindly donated to SBS by the artist Johnathan Yule. Plans are now being made to expand the selection for Christmas 2007.

Members will be invited to place their order by invitation from the office – So watch your mail!



Recent letters in the press..

The Point of no return?

*Letters from the Countryman,
May 2007*

Following Robin Page's article on predation in February there were interesting letters from Peter Wheble and H Wooldridge in your March edition on the same theme. Science has proved Mr Page's views on the loss of hedgehogs to badgers. A study by Oxford University, published in the *Journal of Animal Ecology* (1994 63pp 851 860) concluded that legal protection of Badger 'may have serious consequences for the survival of the Hedgehog in rural areas. Badgers and Hedgehogs both make extensive use of pasture fields to forage for invertebrate foods but Badgers are able to eliminate Hedgehogs in areas where they encounter them.'

From being an uncommon and treasured part of British wildlife the Badger population has reached pest proportions in some areas. Not only are they carriers of Bovine TB but they also burrow under country roads and farmers' fields, damage ancient monuments and trash crops and gardens. They are now a serious threat to bumblebees and ground-nesting birds. The problem has arisen because the Badger population is no longer controlled by more powerful natural predators – Wolf, Lynx and Bear – which formerly existed above them in the predatory hierarchy, and now they are no longer controlled by man. Similarly, the Sparrowhawk suffers no serious predation in lowland Britain and is causing great losses among those songbird species which are particularly vulnerable to its hunting methods. Just as the reintroduction of Wolf, Lynx and Bear would be unacceptable in lowland Britain, so would Goshawk, Pine Marten and Eagle Owl be unwelcome for the natural control of the Sparrowhawk. These major predators would pose a serious threat to small farm animals and domestic pets – and in some circumstances to man. The conclusion must be that Badger and Sparrowhawk numbers should be limited in a sensitive and humane manner, by man. As Peter Wheble put it: 'how long can excessive predation be allowed to go on before other species pass the point of no return?'

G Morris, Suffolk

Carrion Crow took live prey

In my garden the other afternoon, I heard a loud noise of agitated squawking from starlings. About 30-40 birds appeared and flew towards the ridge tiles on my neighbour's bungalow. Then I saw a Carrion Crow perched on the roof with a live starling, flapping frantically, in its beak. The other Starlings mobbed the Crow, creating as much noise and disturbance as possible, obviously hoping that the Crow would drop the unfortunate bird. The Crow flew off and I wasn't able to see whether it had released its victim. I wasn't aware that Carrion Crows took live prey. A couple of days later I saw what I presume was the same bird on the patio, maybe waiting for an unsuspecting smaller bird to come down for the food I leave out for them. Has anyone else witnessed such behaviour before or is it a 'new' trick, and if so will it become common behaviour among Carrion Crows?

H Marchant, Wymondham

All Crows will take live prey

Hazel Marchant's witnessing of a Carrion Crow taking live prey is no 'new trick'. All corvids take live prey. Crows, Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies, Jays, all cause huge damage to song birds in spring, taking both eggs and young.

The Carrion Crow is yet another effective predator that has increased hugely in recent years. Add to these Grey Squirrels, Foxes and Cats, and a fast growing Badger population; the outlook for our songbirds is not good.

With the lack of gamekeepers on vast areas of land today, everyone should do what they can to control these pests. If you can't do it yourself, get in touch with your local field sports community who already do much work in an effort to control the numbers of vermin species.

B Flaxman, Brumstead.

We're only fattening up the prey

Letter to the Countryman, July 2007

In our area of Aviemore, my wife and I delight in feeding wild birds in our garden and had masses of visitors until Sparrowhawks put in an unwelcome

appearance. Now we have no more Sparrows, Siskins or Tits, very few Finches, only two Blackbirds and even the Collared Doves are no longer to be seen. It's totally useless for the RSPB to ask for wild birds to be fed. What for? As food for the raptors? Until the RSPB stops its support for these Hawks, wild birds and especially Sparrows will decline further in numbers.

C Boardman, Invernesshire

Predators destroy countryside's richness

Letter to Western Morning News, Sept 2006

We used to roam the fields and woods as schoolboys in the 1940s, sometimes collecting bird's eggs, even having a pet Magpie. We learnt about the countryside, which was rich in balanced wildlife. Birdlife was abundant in numbers and species; the dawn chorus was tremendous.

Many more worked on the land, with their understanding of all its ways and traditions. Predator control was widespread, and without doubt numbers of Foxes, Badgers, Magpies, Crows, Grey Squirrels and Sparrowhawks (near the top of the chain of predators) were in far fewer numbers than today – which, together with a healthy countryside, was the reason for such richness in birdlife and wildlife.

Sixty years on, changes in farming methods there have to be, but the principles still apply.

It just saddens me, as I still do my much more lonely travels, to see the lack of understanding of the seriousness and extreme danger of extinction some bird species face; they have no chance with the lethal cocktail of predators – tolerated and even protected by law today. Hungry Badgers have dug out all the Bumblebee and Wasps nests; so many Hedgehogs have been killed. In the 1940s Peewits (Lapwings) used to nest in the fields. They would have no chance today – Badgers, Foxes, Hawks and Crows would kill the lot.

True, the countryside looks good to many, but the problems are deep. There are responsibilities to be faced up to – not ignored.

B Short, Axminster

Raptor Rage

Here, until about three years ago, my garden was alive with Greenfinches, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Dunnocks, Chaffinches and the like but now there are none to be seen. Sparrowhawks are regular visitors and I deplore the RSPB's protection and encouragement of these birds and other raptors.

N Titley, West Sussex

Fumes for Plumes

*Letters to Daily Telegraph,
June 2007*

Birds picking up discarded Cigarettes and using them to fumigate their wings for parasites (report, June 2) is not that unusual.

In 1956, in a chapter "The Remarkable History of Bird Anting" in his book *Animal Legends*, the British zoologist Maurice Burton noted: "We have recorded instances of birds that will pick up a lighted cigarette from an ashtray and hold the smouldering end to the underside of the wings."

R Peece, London, Ontario

Consumerism is to blame for our silent spring

Letters to the Times June 2007

Sir, The decline in farmland birds identified by the European Bird Census Council and publicised by the RSPB is attributed to the intensification of agriculture, with which few would argue ("Farming is blamed as birds take flight", June 7). But in blaming the Common Agricultural Policy for this intensification, the RSPB is far adrift. If the UK had not joined the EU in 1973 and had retained its deficiency payments support system, the trend towards intensification would have been unaffected.

The blame should be laid at our own doors. We buy our food at supermarkets, are prepared to devote less and less time to preparing and cooking food and are consequently buying more processed, packaged and convenience foods. Food industry and retailer buyers are looking for larger volumes of standardised produce and only the larger, more mechanised farms are able to meet this demand. The trends are the same in New Zealand, which scrapped its complex farm

support system in the mid 1980s.

Tesco's turnover is equivalent to the total agricultural budget for the 27 EU countries. To achieve meaningful changes in husbandry, such as a return to the spring sowing of cereals, a substantial CAP budget increase would be required. It is extremely unlikely that such an increase would be agreed by European governments.

If we would like to see a recovery in the number of birds we must seek voluntary action from the food industry rather than looking to Brussels for a solution.

GUY FAULKNER, Tunbridge Wells

Sir, without cultivating the land, many species wouldn't be in the UK in the first place. How can we explain the resurgence of the ciril bunting, after farming practice was blamed for its decline, with the present collapse of the corn bunting? Both favour the same habitat, which is subject to environmental support under the newly reformed single farm payment scheme. Agriculture was blamed for the decline of the house sparrow, but a government report moots the idea that the introduction of unleaded petrol brought on a decline in urban sparrow populations due to reduced insect numbers during the breeding season.

The countryside is far from ruined and many farmers realise that they must sustain it as a living entity.

ROB YORKE, Brecon

Sir, to blame intensive agriculture alone is the easy option for conservation bodies to take. Over the last 30 years British farming has not changed much in intensity, and the pesticides used now are less toxic and less residual than those previously applied. One change in farming practices that must have had a huge impact on bird numbers is the relatively new requirement for grain stores to be vermin-proof. Grain stores were an open pantry for birds over the winter; farm yards were full of sparrows.

Thirty years ago larger predators were much more controlled; in this area sparrowhawks, magpies and buzzards were rarely, if ever, seen. The badger population has also exploded. Badgers account for a huge number of ground nesting birds' eggs and chicks. If badgers and squirrels were ugly, rather than soft-

toy-cute, we would be encouraged to cull them. Bird numbers will not recover until conservation bodies tackle the problem of predators.

*D. G. JAMES,
Director, Willoughby Farms Ltd, Lincs*

Country Matters

(The Week 06/05/06)

A tiny bird called the Dartford Warbler may have done serious damage to John Prescott's plans to relive Britain's housing shortage says *The Independent*. The Deputy Prime Minister wants to build up to 580,000 new houses in the overcrowded south-east of England over the next 20 years, and at least 20,000 of those were supposed to be in and around the stretches of heath land to the west of London. What Prescott hadn't foreseen was that the land where he wants to build his houses is adjacent to several designated Special Protection Areas (SPAs), where the rare Dartford Warbler as well as nightjars and woodlarks are wont to build their nests. According to EU law, SPAs must be defended against any change that is likely to have a 'significant effect' on the species for which the area was selected, and this, the wildlife agency English Nature has decided, includes a rise in the numbers of people likely to be walking their dogs.

So, following English Nature's advice, 11 local authorities in Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire are now insisting there must be 5km exclusion zones around each SPA. If that happens, an area of some 300 square miles will be out of bounds to Prescott and his planners.

