

Welcome to our Winter newsletter

One important question comes to mind as 2010 draws to an end. Are we at the beginning of some fresh thinking on biodiversity and conservation in the UK or are we going to struggle on with the same unsuccessful policies that are presently in place? All your Trustees and many members sincerely hope so now that a new government is in place with hopefully a new approach to this question. Because one thing is very clear that the current agri-environmental schemes available to farmers, on which the take up has been very good, are not working as far as increasing the number of farmland birds is concerned. Not only is this clear on a national scale but we have just received the results of an ongoing breeding bird survey that has been undertaken for us every year for the last 7 years on a Suffolk farm. This clearly shows an overall decline of 20% in breeding bird numbers over this period. Despite extensive wild flower margins in some fields and sympathetic hedge management, this has not increased the numbers of breeding birds. Some species such as turtle dove and mistle thrush have been lost entirely and the only new bird arrival has been the common buzzard. More deer are present than in the past and this has opened up undergrowth in boundary woodland and may well have resulted in bird reductions.

NEW GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER

A new government white paper on the environment and biodiversity will be published next year and submissions from interested parties had to be lodged with DEFRA by 30th October. We put a strong submission together with a covering letter suggesting new ways to approach this question. Our fundamental message was that the numbers of ground and avian predators have greatly increased over the last 20-30 years and no government body or major conservation organisation ever mentions this fact or takes any action to address it. As can be seen

from the example, even with good habitat restoration in the last few years, it alone has not reversed the decline in farmland bird numbers. We have met with one of the new DEFRA ministers and plan to meet with others as well.

NEW CORVID REMOVAL STUDY

During 2010 a pilot study was carried out for us by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust to test the methodology to be used to assess the impact of corvids (Magpies and Crows) on the survival of fledged broods. This pilot has clearly shown that the method used for this assessment worked well and we have therefore agreed to go ahead next year with a full study conducted on our behalf by the GWCT. As many of you will know they have an extremely good reputation for first rate research work which has already shown the effect of predation on certain bird species. This continues our planned scientific research programme which we feel is so important to the future of SBS.

This work will of course cost money! So we are seeking as many donations as possible to cover this research work and will be launching a major fund raising exercise at the beginning of 2011.

Many thanks for your continuing support.

Michael Rankeillour
Editor & Trustee

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Director's Notebook

By Keith McDougall

Members will, I am sure, now understand that the policy of SongBird Survival as set and pursued by your trustees, is to initiate, follow through and publish sound scientific work to prove that predation – both avian and mammalian – is having a devastating impact on a whole range of prey species, especially songbirds and other vulnerable species. The endless anecdotal reports from experienced country people and town dwellers as to the toll taken by corvids, raptors and foxes is simply ignored or brushed aside by people who are in positions of influence and, yes, political power.

I don't want to say that all sections of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act (and its amendments) are worthless. But the UK is now in a crisis of its own making, as is most of the EU, from skewed legislation. Wildlife law has been driven by idealists who simply are too remote from reality. Having reiterated that, SBS has found research into evidence of predation effects wanting.

I would not like to underrate the many anecdotal examples reported by distraught individuals on our stands at the summer shows we attended. People unburden themselves, often in a state of distress. There was the lady in Speyside who saw a skylark being snatched out of the air by, yes, a Red Kite, and then dropped before going on to his next one. The Welsh member who counted 36 Buzzards (yes, 36) circling. The farmer who has lost 12 breeding pairs of Woodcock on his farm almost certainly he thinks to badgers. Countless tales of Magpies, Jackdaws and Crows attacking and killing fledglings in gardens. The decimation of fragile Grey Partridge populations being nurtured by West Country farmers in Somerset and the Cotswolds by Sparrowhawks. (40,000 pairs – no shortage these days!) And of course we still have the Sea Eagle introduction saga rumbling on in East Anglia. Natural England has dropped its involvement but the RSPB seem to want to continue the release of some 60 eagles over some of the most precious bird sanctuaries in the UK. Local expert conservationists are outraged. The hierarchy at RSPB simply will not listen to reason – cash flow and PR seem to be their priority.

Fortunately, SBS has friends and allies. They exist in towns and the countryside and we detect signs that some academic departments are waking up to the paucity of past research into predation effects. Our University of Reading project, now published, has thrown quite a large brick into a hitherto complacent pool.

A combination of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust published work on the Northumberland moors and their research farm in Leicestershire, combined with SBS sponsored

research (and several other studies on Woodlarks, Grey Squirrels and farmland birds which are seeing the light of day), are starting to challenge the conservation "establishment". Consumed as they may have been by climate change, habitat losses (by no means as serious as claimed) and the great Satan "agricultural intensification", we can at last hope that the control of some predators will be given proper attention.

The new government is hopefully more receptive to what is needed and environmental schemes may yet be modified to allow incentives to control predators on the general list, and even some which are currently enshrined unnecessarily, with blanket protection orders. We are in for a long haul but there is much members can do to spread our message. Contact your MP for example, sign up new members and if you are able, contribute to our research fund.

Help wanted for turtle dove research

East Anglian farmers are being asked to help scientists work out why turtle doves are disappearing from the countryside. Turtle dove populations have fallen across England and Wales by 88% since 1970.

In partnership with Natural England, the RSPB has begun a three-year project, with trial plots of seed-rich crops being sown on farms across East Anglia from this autumn. Birds will be monitored and radio tagged as part of the project.

The project is looking for 16 farms in East Anglia, which already have at least two pairs of nesting turtle doves. Half will host 2-hectare (4.9-acre) trial plots and half will regularly monitor nests and feeding habits, as well as radio tagging birds, with farmers compensated for the space taken out of production.

More information Email Dr Jenny Dunn at jenny.dunn@rspb.org.uk

GAVIN MORRIS

Everyone at SongBird Survival was saddened to hear the news that Gavin Morris had died on September 25th 2010. Gavin was a dear friend and founder member of SBS, he will be sorely missed. Without Gavin much of our work would never have started. Our deepest condolences to his family and heartfelt thanks for asking for donations to SBS in his memory.

Number of blue tits plunges by 42% as experts warn modern feeders are threatening species

By **David Derbyshire**, Daily Mail, September 2010

Its colourful plumage and industrious personality has made the blue tit one of Britain's best loved garden birds. But according to a shocking new study, the once common species is vanishing from the UK's bird tables and feeders at an alarming rate. Over the last 40 years, the number of blue tits on bird tables and feeders has fallen by 42 per cent, wildlife experts warned.



The fall is so rapid that the creatures are now only occasional visitors in parts of the country. The latest British Trust for Ornithology's Garden Bird Feeding Survey also reveals perilous declines in the number of starlings, song thrushes and house sparrows.

Tim Harrison of the BTO said the decline of the blue tit would astonish many bird lovers. 'People see blue tits all the time and it's quite a surprise to find out it's happening under our noses,' he said. 'The survey reveals that blue tits are declining in gardens while other BTO surveys hint at a downturn in their population. In gardens, changes in bird feeding could be responsible. Once the supple dexterity of the blue tit meant it would have been king – allowing it to feed on monkey nuts threaded on a string, peanuts in a mesh feeder and coconut shells stuffed with fat. But modern foods and feeders mean that blue tits face stiff competition from others species. The growing popularity of bird feeding means the birds may be spread out over more gardens'.

In the winter of 1970-71, blue tits were seen 5.3 times on average in British gardens every week, according to the BTO. Last winter, they were spotted

just 3.1 times.

The survey has also shown a fall in starlings and song thrushes by 75 per cent over the same period and drop in house sparrows of 70 per cent.

After a rise in the first three decades of the survey, the number of collared doves has also fallen – down by more than a quarter in the past 10 years.

The survey also revealed some winners. Birds have been badly hit by changes to farming and woodland management and the increased use of pesticides which have robbed them of seeds and insects.

Fuelled by the growing sales of niger seed and sunflower hearts, goldfinch numbers have multiplied more than 25 times over in the past 20 years, while long-tailed tits have increased tenfold. Four times as many Great Spotted Woodpeckers now dart into gardens than at the start of the survey, hammering and probing their bills into a wide variety of foods.

Around 15 million blue tits are thought to spend the winter in Britain. Over the summer the population goes up to between 20 and 44 million.

SONGBIRD TRUSTEE WINS TOP AWARD

Colin Strang Steel, SBS Trustee, who farms at Blainslie in Scotland, has won the all-Scotland 2010 "Nature of Farming Award".

This is sponsored by BBC Countryfile, Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife, RSPB and EU "Life"

We congratulate Colin and his team on their outstanding achievements.

Subjective impressions of bird population changes in the Cotswolds since the 1983-87 survey

(An extract reproduced by permission from "Birds of the Cotswolds" – a new Breeding Atlas (Iain Dain, Dave Pearce, and Tim Heath) on behalf of North Cotswold Ornithological Society. Published by University of Liverpool – price £25.)

The survey measured distributions, not population densities, of birds that breed in the Cotswolds. The two are of course interrelated, and it is useful to precede the quantitative results of the new survey with a brief qualitative description of changes in the numbers of some species since the end of the 1983-87 survey, as judged by members who took part in both surveys. These notes are written in autumn 2008, i.e. one year after the end of the new survey.

The species that has increased most obviously is the Buzzard. In the early 1980s it was a scarce bird, usually requiring a visit to Wales to be sure of spotting one. They did occur in the Atlas recording area, but only in a few scattered locations and, perhaps because of their scarcity, they were rarely seen in the territorial displays that are now familiar. For many years in the 1980s we waited for Buzzards to take up residence in the hills and valleys of the Cotswolds, just as we anticipate the arrival of Red Kites today. Buzzards now appear to be as common in the east of our area as in the west, and to breed throughout the area.

Following the Buzzard in becoming a familiar, if less common, breeding bird is the Raven. Having not been observed at all in the earlier survey, gradually Ravens in flight (regarded as non-breeders) were recorded in the Stroud Valleys, and now most 10km squares probably hold several breeding pairs.

There are few other species which have increased in numbers, but four are worth mentioning, namely Woodpigeon, Blackcap, Greenfinch and Goldfinch. Woodpigeons, while numerous in the 1980s, have become so common and familiar (particularly urban) that they could give the impression of being the area's most abundant bird. They certainly must have increased markedly over the years and, because of their size and year-round song, feature very

prominently in any survey.

Blackcaps also appear to be doing well, even if heard more often than seen. They seem to be far more common in their prime habitat of deciduous woodland, and are moving into tall hedgerows and gardens. Winter visitors from central Europe have also become familiar garden birds, so that this species is now commonly seen throughout the year.

Greenfinches appeared to be almost entirely urban in the 1980s. Now they can be encountered in hedgerows and conifer plantations far from human habitation, a sign of increased numbers. By contrast, although Goldfinches have also become more common, it is in suburban gardens that the biggest expansion has been seen, possibly aided by the increasing pastime of feeding garden birds.

Unfortunately, many more species appear to have declined than increased, some quite dramatically. Those that have suffered major declines include Lapwing, Grey Partridge, Corn Bunting, Willow Tit, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Nightingale, House Sparrow and Tree Sparrow.

Lapwings still breed in some open arable areas, perhaps benefitting from set-aside practices, but 20 years ago they were widespread, nesting regularly in spring-sown cereals and other crops. Two other species of open country in serious trouble are Grey Partridge and Corn Bunting. Calling Grey Partridges were once a familiar Cotswold sound, but now, despite apparently having large areas of suitable habitat, they are rarely encountered. Corn Buntings, although still fairly common in the high ground west of Stow-on-the-Wold, have declined dramatically outside this core area.

It seems curious that several woodland species also come into the declining category. Although many woods appear to be in the same condition as they were in the 1980s, and new woodland has been created, they appear to support fewer birds.



Buzzard



Willow Tit



Spotting a Willow Tit has become likely in only a few well-watched areas, whereas previously most broad-leaved woods would support a pair. A similar situation applies to the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which was once found in a variety of woodland habitats, but has now become one of our scarcest breeding birds.

Perhaps our biggest loss, though, is the Nightingale. In the 1980s, several could be heard singing in Cirencester Park and woodland north of Moreton-in-Marsh. By the 1990s these had disappeared, but we still had a healthy population in the Vale south of Broadway. Sadly these may have now gone, and the Nightingale, along with the Hawfinch, may well have the distinction of being one of only two species to have become extinct as breeding birds in the North Cotswolds since the 1980s.

Several other species appear to have fared badly. Turtle Doves were not uncommon in the 1980s, often occupying the same habitat as Tree Pipits – uncultivated slopes with some trees and new plantations. The Turtle Dove has almost completely

disappeared while the Tree Pipit is mainly now found along the high and hilly reaches of the scarp.

The escarpment around Cleeve Common (*above*) has probably achieved the distinction of being one of the few areas Cuckoos are regularly found. It is sad that a bird so familiar to all now requires a special journey to hear it.

In the 1980s the Starling and House Sparrow could be described as abundant. They are now decidedly scarce in many rural areas. Starlings have abandoned most woodland sites and there are now villages without breeding birds. Tree Sparrows have suffered more serious losses and now have a very localised distribution in the Cotswolds.

Many of these changes could not have been forecast, and we hope that this Atlas will serve as a new benchmark for the distribution of the breeding birds in our region. With a changing climate, and the series of harsh snowy winters during the early 1980s now only a distant memory, the future could bring even greater changes.

Member's SPOTLIGHT

Mr Eddie Bullimore recently found SongBird Survival and has thrown himself into the cause with full force. He has personally signed up 5 new members and has been setting our leaflets in garden centres and such all over north Norfolk for us.

On top of all this wonderful work he also organised a sponsored walk covering 12 miles between Themelthorpe to Aylsham in north Norfolk. I hear Eddie still has blisters on his feet!

A staggering £524.10 was raised overall, of which £362 was eligible for gift aid, so SBS will be able to claim a further £101.36 making the total raised £625.46!

Further fundraising events are being planned, including a table top sale in the new year.

Well done Eddie and friends, and thank you from everyone at SBS for your wonderful effort.

If any other members would like to try helping to raise funds for SBS then please contact us in the office for guidance, forms and advice.



From left: Julie Woodhouse, Robert Freeman, Tim Bullimore, James Freeman, Eddie Bullimore

A nightingale sang... on its trip to Guinea-Bissau

By **Tara Greaves**, Environment correspondent, EDP June 2010

A missing link which could help stop the decline of a much celebrated songbird has been discovered by Norfolk scientists who used the latest technology to track a single bird on its 3,000-mile annual migration.

It has long been known that British nightingales, which are slightly larger than the European robin, spend the winter months in Africa but, until now, it has not been known exactly where. Now, for the first time, a nightingale has been tracked by scientists from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), based at Thetford, on its migration from its nesting territory in Norfolk, to the site where it spent the winter.

The bird was caught in April 2009, near Methwold Hythe, and fitted with a geolocator – a tiny device which tracks its position – that it wore throughout its route to Africa and back to Britain this spring.

Dr Chris Hewson, research ecologist at the BTO, said: “Because of this one bird, we now know several orders of magnitude more about where British nightingales go in Africa than we have found out from 100 years of bird-ringing. If we want to find out if things going on in Africa are affecting nightingales and other birds, we need to know where they are going. Otherwise we don’t know what particular changes are happening to the area they’re going to, and what the particular threats are.”

The British nightingale breeding population has undergone a dramatic decline, so it is vital to look at the pressures these birds face on migration and during the winter months.

The male nightingale, codenamed OAD, left Britain on July 25 last year and had made it to France in mid-August before heading onwards, through late August and into September to northern Morocco, where it stopped for about three weeks.

By late October and into November it had continued south with a possible stop over in the Western Sahara then onward into Senegal. From mid-December into late January, it spent its time in Guinea-Bissau, one of the poorest countries in the world, before beginning the return journey in February this year.

Although the locator failed when it left its winter



home, the bird continued on its northward migration and was once again caught 50 yards from where it was captured last year.

Dr Hewson, who carried out the work with Chas Holt, also from BTO, added: “We may now be able to relate population declines of birds in different parts of Europe to the different parts of Africa where they spend the winter.”

The BTO, a leading bird research organisation, has been working in Africa to better understand the pressures many of the declining migrants face there.

Rat extermination to save rare island birds

Daily Telegraph, October 2010

The RSPB is to drop poison bait from helicopters on to a remote Pacific island in a £1.7 million project to exterminate the rat population and save rare birds.

Henderson Island, which is 3,000 miles from New Zealand but part of the UK, is home to more than 55 species found nowhere else in the world and is the only known nesting place of the endangered Henderson petrel. Every year, rats eat 25,000 seabird chicks, threatening many species with extinction.

It should take just over two weeks to kill the 30,000 rats, which will be left to die in their burrows. The RSPB is making plans for the project to take place next year providing it can raise an additional £600,000 in donations.

Tim Stowe, international director, said: “Non-native Pacific rats, which were introduced by Polynesian settlers, have been ravaging the island’s wildlife. Four of the island’s unique bird species have become extinct and the island’s remaining species are vulnerable to extinction unless we remove the rats”.

SHOW SEASON 2010

By Georgina Bradley, Office & Shows Manager

We started the show season early this year with a wet March visit to the British Leisure Show in Windsor. Unfortunately, a poor stand position meant a quiet weekend for me and my valiant helpers.

The Cornwall Spring Flower Show in April was again blessed by beautiful weather and many visitors; many thanks to the Cornwall Garden Society for organising a marvellous event. We were pleased to welcome current and many new members to our stand.

My heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in helping to produce our new literature, membership forms, newsletter, posters, flags, displays, stand furniture etc. I apologise for harassing and harrying all those involved but we ended up with really stunning and eye-catching displays.

Armed with our new show equipment Keith trekked all the way up to the Scottish Game Fair where we were beset by unsettled weather; bright sunshine then gale force winds and torrential rain! Our enthusiasm was not dampened and our thanks to the organisers for, yet again, a wonderful show. Congratulations to all those that braved the weather to bring us up to date with all the Scottish goings-on! It was nice to put a face to names and meet so many new people too.

Next it was off to the Great Yorkshire show where we had a lovely stand which was very busy on each day with much interest shown. The weather was fair during the day but I am sure it was trying to drown me in my tent every evening!

I managed to stay dry and warm enough to go straight off to the Royal Welsh show next where we had a wonderful week with lots of visitors, interesting presentations and generally discover more about what the people of Wales want for their countryside. Although we really must do something about that large puddle that always forms in front of our stand there every year...



CLA Game Fair 2010

Then it was straight from Wales to the CLA Game Fair at Ragley Hall in Warwickshire, a new venue for the CLA and what a lovely one too. Stunning views and wonderful weather brought out the crowds and we were kept extremely busy all weekend.

With the mad rush of July over the next show was the Fenland Fair at Stow-cum-quy near Cambridge. My grateful thanks to the organisers there, but with gusty winds wrecking our stand half way through the first day I de-camped back to the office that night; upset to miss the second day and those who came to see us there, apologies to all.

Our last show this year was to a new venue for us, the Berkshire County Show at Newbury. We all decided this was a really lovely show, with something for everyone and not too big or small. The Conservation area we were in was extensive and fascinating. We had a wonderful weekend there and congratulate the organisers on such a successful and well run show. As an added surprise, SBS were awarded the 1st prize (with plaque and engraved trophy) for the best Conservation stand; for which I, embarrassingly, had to go to the ring and give a short presentation on SBS. This was a really wonderful way to finish our show season and the awful picture of me below will keep us smiling until next year's season begins (*see back page for proposed 2011 show dates.*)



Newbury Show 2010

My sincere thanks to all the Trustees, staff, members, volunteers, show organisers and volunteers, printers, designers, couriers etc etc without whom I would never be able to run any show stands. You are all wonderful, especially those of you who volunteer to help on the stands. It is hard work, but very rewarding and we do have fun too!

If you too would like to come along and help us at shows and events, or would like to plan a presentation, guided walk, fundraising event, or anything then please contact me at the office.

Why deer can be bad for birds

By **Brian Martin**, Land and Business, June 2010

With constant global threats from extreme weather combined with ever-changing species success, we are never going to be totally victorious in the war against habitat destruction and degradation.

However, as undisputed top dog, man can and must win most battles, not least in the closely interrelated fields of shooting and conservation. Two recent reports illustrate the need for firm, decisive action.

First the bad news. A British Trust for Ornithology study has shown how deer browsing affects the distribution of woodland birds. Paired plots of coppiced Suffolk woodland were created, with deer excluded from half. The density of nightingale territories in deer-free areas was 15 times greater than in the paired sample plots. And looking at the woods as a whole, it was found that nightingales spent 69 per cent of their time in the 6 per cent of deer-free woodland!

But while this report brings welcome attention to a widespread problem it is no great surprise. The shooting community has known for decades that the typical rich and complex woodland understorey of

plants has long been an insect-rich feeding nesting habitat for a host of species, ranging from songbirds to gamebirds, from nightingales to woodcock, quite apart from its value to orchids and innumerable other plants.

I know local woods where the nightingales have disappeared over the past 10-20 years, along with many species of plant and butterfly, because the growing deer population has eaten them out of house and home. With no significant natural predator since the demise of the wolf, deer will continue to multiply and spread until man takes seriously the need to cull.



ELS 'not working' as UK farmland bird population reaches record low

By **Alistair Driver**, Farmers Guardian, August 2010

Figures showing farmland bird populations have fallen to their recorded lowest levels have prompted claims that England's flagship agri-environmental scheme is failing to deliver. The overall farmland bird index for England fell by 5 per cent last year, taking it to an all-time low of 53 per cent below its 1966 starting value. Figures published by DEFRA also show a long-term five-year decline of 10 per cent.

RSPB Director of Conservation Dr Mark Avery said: "It's difficult to draw any hard and fast conclusions from a short one-year timespan, but this certainly makes for some depressing reading." He acknowledged the cold winter before last could have impacted on birds' ability to find food, but suggested the abolition of set-aside in 2007 was also a factor, removing 'valuable foraging and nesting habitats for wild birds'. He said the five-year decline was a 'real cause for concern', indicating the Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) scheme 'which covers 56 per cent of farmland in England, was 'not working as intended''. But he said the Higher

Level Stewardship scheme was achieving 'some great results' in protecting threatened species such as the lapwing, but it currently covers just 1 per cent of farmland and is under threat from DEFRA budget cuts.

NFU countryside advisor, Dr Andrea Graham, said the numbers were 'disappointing' but insisted the 'reasons behind the headlines are complex'. "Bird populations vary incredibly between species and from region to region, and can also be affected by factors such as harsh winters and an increase in the number of predatory birds and other predatory species." She said farmers were working hard to improve the number of farmland birds by, for example, increasing the uptake of ELS options tailored specifically at helping farmland birds thrive – something actively encouraged through CFE.

CLA president William Worsley said while the results 'do not make great reading', many farmers and land managers have seen 'positive results on their land through Environmental Stewardship'.

Farmer's grants fail to halt drastic drop in birdlife

By **Johnathan Leake**, Environment Editor, Sunday Times, July 2010

Farmers are claiming millions of pounds a year in taxpayers' money to protect wildlife while allowing farmland bird populations to slump to a new low, researchers claim.

Five years ago the European Union, at Britain's instigation, redesigned agricultural grants to pay farmers for protecting wildlife rather than to just maximise production. Now, according to Natural England, there are 60,000 contracts in place covering 69 per cent of England's agricultural land and earning farmers £446m a year.

In these areas, farmers must maintain grassland, hedgerows, ditches and other features. The aim is to encourage a wider range of native plants, insects, animals and birds. However, two new studies have found that the opposite is happening.

One, by the British Trust for Ornithology, looked at the entry level stewardship schemes that account for most of the grants. Its researchers focused on 19 farmland bird species, all of which have already suffered long-term population declines because of intensive farming and heavy use of chemicals on the land.

The study found that the declines had mostly continued between 2005 and 2008, including once common species such as skylarks, yellowhammers and grey partridges. Measures under the environmental stewardship scheme made no difference. Gavin Siriwardena, the report's author said: "So far, farmland birds have not benefitted."

His findings are confirmed in a report by Stephen Tapper, Policy Director at the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. He found that the grants were

poorly structured, meaning farmers were given payments for measures that were easy to implement but had no real benefit for wildlife. He said: "Farmers can choose options like maintaining hedgerows which often fail to meet the needs of wildlife in that area. What's more, the intensification of farming is so great it often overwhelms any benefits anyway."

Tapper also found that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) carried out few checks on whether its grants really were boosting wildlife.

A new consultation on biodiversity by Caroline Spelman, the environment secretary, begins tomorrow. A Defra spokesman said: "Our schemes provide benefits when managed well, but improvements are not seen overnight."

Spelman said biodiversity was vital to economic growth, adding: "Our natural environment is not just beautiful landscapes and rivers but the foundation upon which our economy is built."



DONATIONS

We can now accept online donations, including Gift Aid, from our website.

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This service is provided, free of charge, by Charity Choice. www.charitychoice.co.uk



Predation of Garden Songbirds

By Tina Walker, SBS member from Leeds, June 2010

I have an average-sized suburban garden, which over five years has become wild-life friendly, and is filled with wild flowers, organic lawn, and shrubs. I am also a keen gardener and have encouraged birds, and other wildlife, for the last five years. I participate in the BTO Garden Birdwatch survey and am also a member of the RSPB. I have read many books on bird behaviour and ecology.

Over the years I have got to know the local birds very well, many of the blackbirds are quite tame, some of them come across the threshold of my side-door and eat from a dish in the lobby. I can identify some of them by behaviour and colouration.

I thought you would be interested in my personal observations and experiences I have had regarding the predation of the songbirds.

The three main predators of birds in my area are (in order) 1) Magpies, 2) domestic cats and 3) Sparrowhawks. The details of these three main predators are as follows:-

MAGPIES

Magpies have a territory which includes my garden and are the main predators of eggs and nestlings during the breeding season. During the five years of my observations the depredations of these corvids have increased considerably. We have pairs of blackbirds and dunnocks in the front garden, the back garden and a neighbouring garden, with three or four other pairs which come for mealworms to take to their young, giving me the opportunity to gauge their nesting success.

Each year the magpie has taken the contents of both blackbirds and dunnocks nests (if they nest close to the blackbirds) not just one or twice but four, five, or even six times in a season. They often re-use nests that have been predated, only to have their clutches or young taken again.

Last year the blackbirds that nest in our garden were actually followed by the magpie as they were prospecting, causing them much stress and abandonment. In the end they suffered with premature moulting and no fledged young.

This year the blackbird's first nesting attempt was in a conifer, which the dunnocks also nested in, and, after hearing their screams, I inspected the nest and discovered two nestlings had been taken so I placed some wire around, which put the magpie off but after a few days it found a way in and took the remaining two young, and The dunnocks' four young.

The blackbirds then built their second nest in a hedge next door, and the nestlings were again taken. For their third attempt, they re-used the first nest, and I placed a cc camera on it to monitor it. After the female had been incubating four eggs for four days, one morning I turned the camera on and discovered the nest had gone! When I checked, the nest had been pulled out egg-shells lay scattered. I suspected that it was a cat this time.

For their fourth attempt, they re-used the second nest in the hedge next door. At this time the magpies were involved in disputes with a carrion crow over the magpies building a nest in a tall tree which overlooks our garden. Instead jackdaws were hanging around, and the blackbird became upset, dive-bombing the jackdaw, chinking a lot. I noticed a gradual slowing down of feeding their young, as I have observed when magpies take one nestling a day, then finally they stopped. Though I cannot be certain, I suspect it was the jackdaws.

This happened to the blackbirds in neighbouring gardens too, I saw them taking materials and building a total of five failed nests.

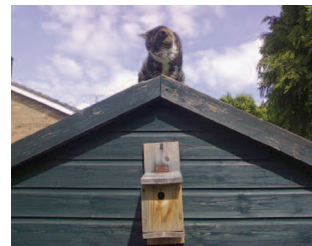
I thought you should note that the magpies, despite taking this large



number of eggs and young, were not laying eggs or feeding young themselves. Also they raided nests for a full four months from March to the middle of June. I can only assume they took many more nest contents than this. I could even guess when they were predating nests in gardens further up the road, by the alarm calls, and the magpies' absence from their tall tree...

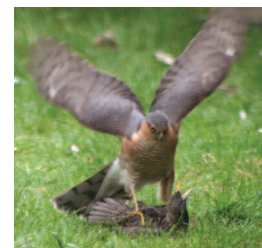
CATS

Cats are becoming more numerous in our area and are responsible for predation of nests, especially fledglings and adult birds (especially when foraging for food in the breeding season). My postman told me of a cat that took a fledgling blackbird from a shrub and he also found a dead male adult bullfinch in the same garden. I have witnessed a cat take one of my sparrows out of a border. Last year, I saw a cat with its jaws clamped on a woodpigeon in my garden and I rescued it, but it suffered severe shock and had to be put down.



SPARROWHAWKS

Sparrowhawks are regular visitors to my garden, due to the many birds feeding and nesting here, and though they take many birds I do not consider them to the threat (in my case) that cats or magpies are, though they visit more numerously than I consider reasonable. They do take a heavy toll on young sparrows as they can easily flush them from a bush. They have also taken many blackbirds, especially in winter. I once rescued a starling from a sparrowhawk and took it to the vet, but it had to be put down.



This huge predation on the garden songbirds has spoilt my enjoyment of the garden birds. This year there have been no fledgling blackbirds in my garden.

I personally believe that heavy predation is only a part of the reason why songbirds are declining, and a combination of factors is the cause, but witnessing the local effect predation has had on the birds in my area, I feel that it will be similar everywhere. Corvids are numerous, including jackdaws, crows and magpies, and because they have few natural predators, their own numbers are not controlled. Sparrowhawk catches have reduced slightly over the last two years, and I consider them to be less of a problem than magpies and cats, though they could be 'the straw that broke the camel's back', as regards bird conservation.

By ignoring the part that predation plays on songbirds any attempt at conservation of Red Listed species is doomed to failure.

The raptor population is healthy, contrary to doom-laden RSPB reports

By Alasdair Mitchell, Shooting Times & Country Magazine, September 2010

We are used to hearing that “raptors are only now returning to something like their former numbers” and, of course, many members of the public equate “protected” status with “rare”. In truth, however, many protected species are common. Take the badger, for instance, which is protected, but perhaps twice as populous as the fox. It gets even trickier when you realise that populations are always fluctuating. How many brown hares do we have, for instance? Well, it depends when you count them. There must be many more in early autumn, with all the new leverets about, than at other times. When it comes to raptors, robust figures have only been kept for, perhaps, the past 50 years or so, as far as I can tell. But there can be little doubt that we have more raptors now than at any time in living memory.

I looked at an RSPB publication, *Birds of Prey in the UK: on a wing and a prayer*, dated May 2008, which collated figures for the 15 species of diurnal hawks, falcons and eagles that are generally thought to be native to the UK. A chart in this report summarises the status of these 15 species. Under *population trend*, the trend of the species over recent years is shown. Nine species are listed under *increase*, five are under *stable*, and only one – the common kestrel – has shown a *decline*.

Some of the increases are dramatic: 447 per cent over 15 years for the red kite, for example. Interestingly, the UK hen harrier population recorded a 30 per cent increase between 1998 and 2004. But it is the overall numbers that I wanted to delve into. Some are clearly out of date. The common buzzard, for instance, is cited as being 31,000 to 44,000, whereas I have seen more recent research suggesting that today’s buzzard population could be as high as 61,000 pairs. Nonetheless, even if we take the lower figures quoted by the RSPB and add them all up, we come to a total population for the 15 diurnal raptor species (no owls, remember) of about 120,000 pairs. That means 240,000 individual birds.

But even then, that’s not the total UK raptor population – it’s only the sum total of the breeding birds. As with brown hares, then total number of individuals must be much greater at certain times of the year. In the winter, the UK’s relatively mild climate must attract an unknown number of

migrants from Scandinavia and the European mainland (hen harriers come to mind). And then there are all the non-breeding younger birds. Buzzards, for example, don’t breed until three years old, so there must be plenty of young birds winging around in addition to the breeding pairs. Finally, in late summer there must be all the newly-fledged birds of that year. In the case of buzzards, which generally get a couple of chicks to the flying stage, the population must at least double at that time. In fact, given the 240,000 breeding pairs of raptors listed in the RSPB report, it might not be unreasonable to speculate that, at the optimum time of year, the real UK raptor population must be well in excess of half a million individual birds. How many of these die of natural causes?

Many wild bird species suffer heavy first-year mortality. Something like 40 per cent of songbirds, for example, don’t make it to their first birthday. I haven’t seen any detailed figures for raptors, but they are relatively long-lived and I guess their natural mortality levels are a fair bit lower than that for songbirds. Nonetheless, given the sheer numbers involved, it must be true to say that many thousands of young raptors die each winter of natural causes.

Interestingly, the police National Wildlife Crime Unit has recorded a grand total of only 216 confirmed cases of raptor persecution over a recent two-year period. I am not excusing raptor persecution – only trying to put it into perspective.





YOUR LETTERS & EMAILS

Global warming/ Alien species

Two topics for conversation that have been troubling me lately. Firstly the presence of introduced species and their impact on our native wildlife (including habitat impact) and secondly global warming and its effect on migratory birds. If as some pundits profess indigenous species can 'make way' for introduced species without adverse effect why (I could quote several instances but I will make just one point) are deer numbers causing such mayhem to the understory of woodlands and its inevitable effect on ground nesting birds and woodland flower species etc. I refer of course to fallow, muntjac, sika and Chinese water deer.

My second point concerns global warming. Has anyone looked at the number of migrants that may be 'stopping short' in countries such as France, as we are told the Sahara is getting bigger. Perhaps some of our migrants just simply see the channel as a step too far? It would be very interesting to compare the records of say the LPO (league pour la protection des oiseaux) with our own BTO records. It may already have been done, but perhaps the results have not been widely published.

Magpies, sparrow hawks and goshawks even have always been present since time immemorial, and we mustn't lose sight of the ball in the quest to ensure our own natural species survive extinction. I am certainly not against locally culling any species to save another species from extinction (i.e. the hedgehog cull on some Scottish islands.) But several things must be wrong for the current situation to exist.

Some people refer to the good old days when gamekeepers mercilessly destroyed every creature with predatory tendencies it is no wonder there were more small birds then! It is a shame we do not have pre-gamekeeper records of the population densities available. I fully believe the research that SBS is doing is the way forward in the understanding of the plight of our songbirds and I also believe many of our animal, plant and insect species will be beneficiaries as well (or I wouldn't be a member.) I for one will continue to encourage the valuable research that the trust is undertaking which is paramount to the future of our beautifully diverse wildlife.

Bernard Hunt (*wildlife contractor for 40 yrs*)
Suffolk

Kestrels thrive with the right habitat management (Telegraph)

"Sir – Kestrels are still a familiar sight on London's Hampstead Heath and can be seen teaching their young how to feed ("Farming blamed as kestrel numbers dive by third", report, July 19). As guardians of the heath, we have a number of policies to promote biodiversity on the site, including retaining dead and dying wood in situ – which is helpful to kestrels when looking for nest sites – and letting grass grow longer, which helps kestrels hunt."

Michael Welbank
Chairman

Hampstead Heath Management Committee, London

How to keep sparrowhawks in check?

In your excellent magazine you talk about the need to keep sparrow hawks in check but how? Ignoring the legal situation for a moment, how would you catch or shoot them, for they are so quick. They take the songbirds as they fly on to our feeder. In one quick flash they have taken the life of another little bird. Busy bird feeders are easy pickings for them so what can we do? I never see them sitting on a fence. In fact I never see them until it's too late. What did the gamekeepers do?

A friend of mine has a pet crow which is allowed to fly free and like all the crow family is very clever but what surprised us, is that this well fed pet, would hide in the hedge and ambush full size sparrows which it then partially eats. I knew they took fledglings but I was not aware they took full size birds too. Is this general?

My experience of bird boxes is that any box with only a wood front leads to tragedy. Squirrels, but especially wood peckers, will soon be inside and eating the fledglings. They must have a metal front that goes right down the front as the woodpecker just makes a hole underneath the smaller metal squares; or better still there are some German designed concrete ones on the market that work well.

Roger Kendall
Guildford

RSPB and Kestrels – *Interesting to see in the latest CLA September magazine to quote:*

RSPB Clarifies its position on Vanishing Kestrels

... "We wish to emphasise that the RSPB does not blame farmers or farming practices for the recent decline of the Kestrel population recorded in the Breeding Bird Survey. There is simply no evidence to substantiate such a claim, as our original press release states. On the contrary, the RSPB recognised that environmentally (sic) practices of many farmers has helped to curtail and sometimes even reverse the decline of many farmland birds, as has happened in the case of the Cirl Bunting and Stone Curlew".

SBS comment – *It is refreshing to see RSPB making their point in favour of farmers.*

Sarah Potter
Oxfordshire

Mainly Magpies

My main frustration is the increasing number of magpies and the perilous position of blackbirds etc. as a result. We journeyed to Paris last month and the only bird I seemed to see on the entire journey – and on the lawn outside our hotel window – was the magpie.

I can only console myself with the knowledge that I, and others like minded, are using our Larsen traps at every opportunity. I have put up nest boxes and made ledges in sheds on our allotment where blackbirds and robins have made their nests.

Sonia Noble

No place for huge predators (EDP)

"Further to the letter from Mr Boggis (March 17) regarding the introduction of sea eagles to our area, we must speak up before it is too late and this becomes yet another 'done deal'. Every country person knows the damage to wildlife caused by predators. I myself have stood just 10ft away from a sparrow hawk tearing a pigeon apart: not a pretty sight. Imagine being confronted by the 8ft span of a sea eagle as it swoops on a newborn lamb. This can and will happen. I shall cancel my RSPB membership if this plan is foisted upon us."

Mrs Grapes
Suffolk

SBS wrote to Mrs Grapes and include part of her reply to us:

"I could scarcely believe that the RSPB are complicit in this (sea eagle introduction in East Anglia) and I believe all bird-lovers, as well as country folk, should be aware that this may happen. The EDP did cut my letter considerably, but perhaps the fact that I described a sparrowhawk ripping a pigeon to pieces in front of me – and would not leave it – was a bit much for the squeamish..."

I live in this very pretty village and am fortunate to back onto farmland, so I've been able to feed and attract a good number and variety of birds. My worst predator here is my neighbour's cats, which recently destroyed my robin's nest. However, my son who lives outside the village and has about 2 acres has many visitors, all kinds of birds and animals. The worst there are magpies, jays and rooks/crows, all bent on 'taking over'. I'm a (very old) country girl, daughter of a farmer in Norfolk, and am well used to the fact that there has to be a balance in the countryside. The very idea of bringing in this large predator which needs wide open spaces such as the wilds of Scotland, to an area of conservation, is unbelievable. I hope we can bring awareness to more of the general public.

I enclose a completed membership form and cheque. Big trees from little acorns grow... Thank you for contacting me."

Intensive Farming (Telegraph)

"Sir – The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has again targeted "intensive farming" as the reason for a decline in the kestrel and sparrowhawk populations.

Yet I have seen a huge increase in the number of these birds since the 1950s – a period of intensification in farming. When good news is reported, such as the increase in numbers of goldfinches or collared doves, is that also due to the activities of farmers? Most of the credit in those cases goes to the RSPB. Numbers of any wild species will always fluctuate."

Richard Lutwyche
Cirencester

The RSPB (*my view!*)

On RSPB I was as keen as mustard;
Supporting Grebe and Giant Bustard,
But now I'm feeling rather bitter
Because of birds that twitter.

RSPB like too many raptors.
Never mind the finches and warblers.
Bring in the hawks, falcon and kite,
Let them kill sparrows with all their might.

Who gives a tit about thrushes and swallows
And little wren's living in hollows?
Re-introduce an eagle or two
Help the buzzard and sparrowhawk too.

Magpies and Squirrel take your pick,
Eat eggs and babies 'til you're sick.
The RSPB will help you along
Never mind the little birds of song.

Don't tell me Kite eat only carrion.
I've seen live prey in their talons.
What rooks and crows do to poor old sheep
While they're lambing would make you weep.

When RSPB get more country wise
And not leave songbirds to their demise,
Controlling predators as before,
I'll resume paying my subs and more.

By Ann Waldock

Sparrowhawk Study

in 20sq km of Suffolk Farmland 10th Year 2010

By **Reg Woodard**, Debenham, Suffolk

Thanks again to all the landowners for allowing me to continue this study on their land, also for allowing a trainee 'ringer' to come with us, helping him to learn his craft.

Eleven nests were found, six in Spruce, four in Scots Pine and one in Field Maple. Four nests were within the main 20 sq km study area; in fact the nests were all in an area of about 2½ km diameter with a fifth nest just outside the area. Five nests were in other woods where nests had been recorded in previous years. The eleventh was found by the trainee ringer (*mentioned above*) in a small group of broadleaf trees about twenty paces from the front door of his bungalow! A twelfth nest was checked.

That had been refurbished after a successful brood last year, but no eggs were found this year.

Twenty eight young were ringed from seven nests. Four nests were found rather late with the young too far advanced to ring; there is a risk that although unable to fly, they would leave the nest, flutter to the ground and be very difficult to find and return to the nest.

Fledged young were seen flying and heard calling around all active nests and no dead young were found.

A total of 214 young have now been ringed with 16 returns.

Prey Species of the Sparrowhawk recorded May 1999 – September 2009

Prey found throughout the year mainly on local footpaths and my garden		Prey found on or near nest sites during the breeding season	
Blackbird	45	Blackbird	105
Woodpigeon	12	Woodpigeon	58
Chaffinch	7	Chaffinch	34
Greenfinch	15	Greenfinch	36
Goldfinch	3	Goldfinch	17
Dunnocks	24	Dunnocks	12
Song Thrush	6	Song Thrush	9
Blue Tit	8	Blue Tit	8
Collared Dove	13	Collared Dove	9
Starling	12	Starling	4
Robin	10	Robin	3
House Sparrow	7	House Sparrow	1
Linnet	1	Linnet	4
Bullfinch	1	Bullfinch	4
Green Woodpecker	1	Green Woodpecker	1
Turtle Dove	2	Turtle Dove	1
Great Tit	2	Great Tit	2
Mistle Thrush	1	Mistle Thrush	2
Fieldfare	8	Yellowhammer	2
Lapwing	1	French Partridge	3
White Dove	1	Skylark	5
Wren	2	Pied Wagtail	5
Long Tailed Tit	1	Tree Creeper	1
Stock Dove	1	Cuckoo (juvenile)	1
		Kingfisher	1
		Pheasant poul	1
		English Partridge	4
		Moorhen (juvenile)	1
		Swift	1

NOTE:- With the exception of Cuckoo, Moorhen and Pheasant, I have not separated juveniles, fledglings or nestlings from adults. Having seen very small Blackbird nestlings taken; found naked Woodpigeon squabs being eaten, and remains at various stages of growth, it appears that many species may be taken at any stage of development. I have not attempted to record remains/feathers of prey where identification is uncertain.

Animadversor's diary

It was nearly half past seven on a spring morning as I was making an early morning cup of tea in the kitchen when I heard the characteristic thud of a bird that had flown into the conservatory window and looking up I saw several small feathers floating slowly to the ground. It was a young greenfinch and was lying with its wings spread-eagled in a fuchsia plant.

The day was chilly so, picking it up and holding it loosely in my hand, I brought it into the warm kitchen where with my free hand I prepared some sugared water although at this stage I was very doubtful that it would be required. After a while it showed initial signs of life, blinking its eyes and moving its head a little and occasionally it would grip slightly with its feet.

I thought it best to continue holding it to conserve its heat so I sat in the conservatory and tucked my hand just inside my shirt-front while I read the daily paper.

After about forty five minutes I was able to dip its beak into the sugared water although it tended to shake it off rather than drink it. Nevertheless it was now showing more signs of life and after just over an hour I gave it the option to fly.

However it was quite content to sit on my finger which it did for another ten minutes.

Eventually at a quarter to nine, over an hour and a half since it had knocked itself unconscious it suddenly gave itself a little shake and flew off to the far end of the garden.

It was very rewarding to have nursed the bird back to full health. Almost certainly had I not been on hand it would have died due to loss of body heat. I regarded it as time well spent and I have adopted the same policy since in events of this nature. It was also comforting to note that the bird exhibited no sign of stress at any time.



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dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk



SHOW dates for 2011



These are the shows and events we are planning to be attending next year, depending on whether we are granted a stand.

A big thank you to all the Staff, Trustees and Members who help at shows and volunteer their time and services. Without their help we would not be able to attend any shows at all. If you would like to join in and are able to come and help us man the stand at any of the shows then please contact me in the office.

Georgina Bradley (George)

10-11 April **Cornwall Spring Flower Show**

25-26 June **Irish Game Fair**

1-3 July **Scottish Game Fair**

5-11 July **RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show**

12-14 July **Great Yorkshire Show**

16-17 July **Holkham Fair**

18-21 July **Royal Welsh Show**

22-24 July **CLA Game Fair**

17-18 Sept **Royal County of Berkshire Show**



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