

Please reserve \_\_\_\_\_ copies of the clothbound limited edition of 'A Special Kind of Light' at the publication price of £45.00 each post free. I enclosed a cheque to the value of £ \_\_\_\_\_

Please reserve \_\_\_\_\_ copies of the De-Luxe leatherbound edition of 'A Special Kind of Light' at the publication price of £150.00 each post free. I enclosed a cheque to the value of £ \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Post Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please make cheques payable to 'Roseworld Productions Limited', 8 Park Road, Solihull, West Midlands B91 3SU Telephone: 0121 704 1002 Email: enquiries@roseworldproductions.com (NO CREDIT CARDS)

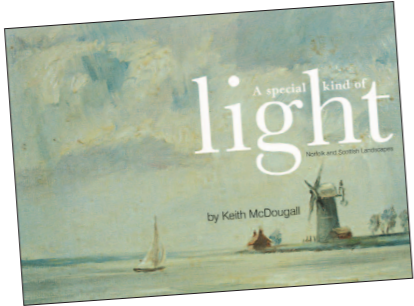
SongBird Survival  
**£10**



## A PANORAMA OF NORFOLK AND SCOTTISH LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

Keith McDougall's deep interest in conservation and his love of East Anglia's tall skies, tall churches and the tall hills of his beloved Scotland pervades his new book. Featuring a plethora of paintings blended with essays reflecting the artist's personal experiences and interpretations of the farmed and the wild environments. *A Special Kind of Light* is a delightful picture book for dipping into; for the guest's bedroom table or the coffee table. A treasure trove of one countryman's gentle philosophical approach to the natural world in paint and prose.

*A Special Kind of Light* is published in hardback (210mm x 297mm) with a full-colour dust jacket and an abundance of colour oil-paintings and watercolours, plus line drawings.



# A special kind of light

by Keith McDougall

STRICTLY LIMITED to just 450 clothbound copies and 30 de-luxe leatherbound copies. All copies numbered and signed by the author.

CLOTHBOUND: £45.00 post free

LEATHERBOUND: £150.00 post free

\*PUBLICATION DATE LATE AUTUMN 2009

By special arrangement with Keith McDougall and SongBird Survival the publishers (Roseworld Productions) will donate £10.00 to the SBS Funds for each book purchased by members of the SBS on completion of the coupon (alongside).

# DONATIONS

We can now accept online donations, including Gift Aid, from our website. Go to [www.songbird-survival.org.uk](http://www.songbird-survival.org.uk) and click the 'Donate NOW' link. This service is provided, free of charge, by Charity Choice. [www.charitychoice.co.uk](http://www.charitychoice.co.uk)



## The Elgeeco Patented Squirrel Trap & Bird Feeder



- New Improved Version
- The only trap designed specifically to catch squirrels.
- Does not catch and cause unnecessary distress to non-target animals and birds.
- Does not kill or maim and is safe and simple to use.
- The Elgeeco attracts and feeds tits and finch size birds and is a squirrel proof bird feeder when the doors are closed.
- Designed and hand made to the highest standard in the UK.
- Available direct from Elgeeco £26.98 each plus £5.97 packing & postage.
- An all metal 180mm peanut bird feeder is included.
- For more information visit [www.elgeeco.co.uk](http://www.elgeeco.co.uk).
- £2.50 from the sale of each trap will be donated to SongBird Survival.

**The Elgeeco is the essential tool for removing problem grey squirrels**  
To order Tel: 01962 885776 or E-mail: [sbs@elgeeco.co.uk](mailto:sbs@elgeeco.co.uk).

If you have any stories for our next newsletter please send them to us by email at: [dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk](mailto:dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk) or post to our address on page 1.

Printed by Redhot Colour 01603 404797



# SongBird Survival

incorporating Save our Songbirds  
**newsletter**  
A U T U M N 2 0 0 9

SONGBIRD SURVIVAL,  
P.O. BOX NO. 311, DISS,  
NORFOLK IP22 1WW  
Tel: 01379 641715.  
Email: [dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk](mailto:dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk)  
Web: [www.songbird-survival.org.uk](http://www.songbird-survival.org.uk)

### BRADFIELD HALL BIRD FOOD

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

This high quality bird food when ordered by SBS members earns us 10% of sales!  
Please call 01263 833200 for details and prices.

### Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter

#### Clive Sherwood, Trustee and Chairman writes:

After a successful show season resulting in a record number of new members it seems appropriate to reiterate what SBS is trying to achieve. Before doing that it must be made very clear that SBS is not and never has been an anti-raptor organisation and we do not, as an organisation, support illegal activities against raptors. Some of our members have nesting boxes for owls or kestrels and many have large resident populations of birds of prey safely living on their property. One trustee has the largest concentration of marsh harriers in the UK on his property. However, SBS does see predation, both mammalian and avian, as a major factor (currently largely avoided by the establishment) in explaining why some of our songbird numbers continue to decline or not recover. Whilst accepting there are many contributory and valid factors impacting negatively on songbird numbers, SBS believes predation is a significant issue which needs far greater attention than in the past. SBS has commissioned a detailed review of all predation research to date from the University of Reading. When it is published it is anticipated that it will expose the shortcomings of much of the low quality research which is so often quoted in an attempt to prove that predation is not a problem. SBS is currently identifying the key areas for future research projects



#### The Shows

George, our ever-enthusiastic Office & Shows Manager writes about shows in a separate article but at the six I attended from the Scottish Game Fair down to Bowood in Wiltshire there was no doubt about the public choice of arch villain; as regards predation on songbirds. Cats and magpies. It is of course utter nonsense to claim that magpies, which are disliked for their persistence in raiding nests, do not kill adult birds either. They do. I have witnessed it myself, a beak through the back of a hen blackbird. Nasty. Yet as I tell everyone I speak to at shows, we have brought much of the magpie problem upon ourselves. The increasing road traffic and the plentiful supply of fresh meat on roads throughout the year has contributed to magpie and other corvid numbers holding up through winter when many might otherwise starve. The spread of magpies into parts of Scotland hitherto free of them may be directly attributable to busy motorways providing a ready food supply. Unintended human interference on one side artificially boosting the numbers of these corvids requires counter measures on the other. The Larsen trap, or a gun (used legally) being the most suitable in checking an overexpansion in numbers.



**Membership Renewals!**  
Don't forget that renewals are due on 1st October. Please see the enclosed letter for details.

**Christmas Cards**  
Don't forget to order early! Details of this years cards and order form enclosed.

Clive Sherwood  
Trustee and Chairman

# Increase in predators threatens songbird populations

British Ecological Society /  
University of East Anglia Press Release,  
July 2009

Woodlark populations have faced an increasing threat from predators over the last 35 years, according to new research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA).

In this study, published online today in the British Ecological Society's Journal of Animal Ecology, researchers from UEA and RSPB examined the influence of local weather conditions on reproductive success, timing of breeding and survival in a population of woodlark in the Breckland area of Norfolk and Suffolk.

Woodlark were one of only two species recently moved from the 'Red List' of birds of conservation concern to the 'Amber List' because their total numbers have increased in the UK.



However, this new research suggests that populations would have done even better if there were fewer predators.

The findings show that woodlark can have longer breeding seasons when the weather is warm and start nesting earlier. They also showed that high rainfall can be damaging, affecting the number of eggs laid and the survival of chicks. However, these effects were not consistent over the 35 years and were minor compared to the increased rate of nest predation.

The study was led by Lucy Wright, a former PhD researcher and Paul Dolman a senior lecturer in ecology in the School of Environmental Sciences at

UEA. Lucy Wright is now a research ecologist for the British Trust for Ornithology. It is thought to be one of the very few studies of its kind in the world.

"For a ground nesting songbird of conservation concern, any benefit of warmer earlier springs from global climate change has been negligible, and much less important in the long term population trend, than a large increase in the rate of nest predation," said Dr Wright.

"We found that between 1971 and 2004 nest predation doubled and breeding productivity halved. There are many more predators in the countryside now than there used to be and more of a mix we think - not just foxes, but possibly hedgehogs, stoats and kestrels, as well as scavengers such as crows."

Co-author Dr Paul Dolman, said the effects in Norfolk might be more noticeable because of changes in land management and use over the years, but added that an increase in predators could be seen across much of the UK.

"We don't have the same level of game management on the large estates, we've got busy main roads killing animals and providing food for scavengers such as crows, and we've got urbanisation," he said.

"In Breckland the forests are now more diverse providing a greater variety of habitat for a greater variety of predators. There is a lot of concern that many of our woodland bird species have declined in Britain and we don't know why. We've shown that, at least for woodlark, there has been a complete change in nest predation and this might be relevant to other woodland birds."

Dr Wright stressed that none of the work would have been possible without the dedication of Ron Hoblyn, a former forester with the Forestry Commission, who has collected data on woodlark in Breckland for 35 years.

"This study shows the crucial importance and immense value of long term monitoring studies, combined with quality science, analysis and modelling, if we are to understand how species will respond to environmental and climatic change. It is important to have people like Ron, who are not necessarily scientists, collecting this valuable information if we are to monitor bird populations and understand what could happen to them in the future."

The identity of the predators remained a mystery in the original study, but Paul



Dolman is now leading further work using infra-red nest cameras to identify which species are responsible for predated the nests of woodlark, and another ground nesting bird, the nightjar.

Also involved in the study were Bill Sutherland (now at the University of Cambridge), Rhys Green (University of Cambridge and RSPB), Chris Bowden (RSPB) and John Mallord (another PhD researcher from UEA, now working with the RSPB.) The research was funded by the Natural Environment Research Council, with some of the data collection funded by the Forestry Commission and RSPB.

The study; *Importance of climatic change and environmental change in the demography of a multi-brooded passerine, the woodlark Lullula arborea* was published online on July 6, 2009 in the Journal of Animal Ecology. ■

## Did you know?

There are more pairs of Binoculars (per head of capita) in the UK than anywhere else in the world?

## Director's Notebook

There is an expression which has been quite widely used in recent years. It is the reference some conservationists and politicians make in their pronouncements on 'good science.' I confess that I always had the idea that science was, by its nature, 'good.' To indicate that some was good begs the question that some may not be so good?

In the case of SBS, our approach to the research we have financed and the future work we intend to support has to assume that we try to choose



Goldfinch: Doing well

projects which are up-to-date, unbiased and relevant.

The key issue is one of unbiased truth and rigorous independence. We will hope to achieve this when we come to select new studies on the effects of predation as a key factor in helping songbirds.

The 2009 show season has now finished. Our hard-working Manager, George (Georgina) has hustled around the country showing the flag for SBS as indeed have many of the Trustees and members. Thanks are due to all their hard work. But the upbeat news is that we found huge support on all the shows; even more than last year.

There has been a big increase in media comments on bird populations and, it must be said, the role of large conservation organisations whose policies have been criticised. This includes Government Agencies which wield great power under the law – both UK and EU legislation. Some of this needs careful scrutiny and revision. Wildlife conservation priorities change, bird populations fluctuate and farming wildlife schemes need constant examination.

Our good bit of news is this Government's decision (in the face of opposition from Natural England and the RSPB) to introduce voluntary set-aside schemes for farmers rather than a draconian compulsory

one. Farmers need to be trusted more – lack of trust breeds conflict. Why can't Larsen traps be included as part of the farmers environmental points-earning agreements?

Corvids (the crow family) are, by general agreement, far too numerous and must be controlled.

I am not going to refer to climate change, not because it could be a factor but because I personally believe the evidence is mixed - and mixed in politics. In my last notes I referred to the 3-legged stool; weather, habitat & predation as being the main determinants of bird survival in viable populations. It is worth keeping the analogy in mind.

At the moment there is a huge blockage in the minds of some ornithological 'experts'. They seem to think that the pressure of predation is irrelevant.

We in SBS are perfectly clear that this leg of the stool needs bolstering and that we need properly focused science to demonstrate that our duty is to intervene when certain predators of songbirds threaten prey populations to the point of their loss from the British list. It could happen.

The fact that some species (goldfinches, chaffinches and tits for example) are doing quite well must not obscure the desperately low level others have sunk to.

Keith McDougall

## Do Squirrels eat birds?

from Yahoo answers

I specialize in nest searching and monitoring and have seen squirrels depredate nests firsthand. There are also MANY scientific papers written specifically about squirrel depredation on nests. Squirrels are opportunistic feeders and are going to eat a nest if they find it. It is not going to sit there deciding how desperate for food it is and decide..."oh, I am not so hungry today.. think I will leave these eggs/chicks here". I believe my own eyes and the research by ornithologists rather than some website that tries to make squirrels look cute

BirdGirl



"The RSPB have, for years, been feathering their nest with a cosy deal with Scottish and Southern Energy in which they get paid for every customer they sign up to so-called 'green energy'." Bob Graham, chairman of Highlands Against Wind Farms, speaking to the Press and Journal after the RSPB announced its support for wind farms.

# Time to challenge the RSPB

By Jonathan Young, *The Field*, August 2009

The RSPB is calling for all English and Welsh game-shoots to be licensed, ignoring its remit and alienating itself from those who do most for conservation – the shooting community. Charities in the UK are subject to scrutiny by the Charity Commission. If the charities act outside their remit, the commission is obliged to investigate and it can, if necessary, remove an organisation's charitable status.

This is the remit of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), as laid down by its Charter: "The Objects of the Society shall be:

- To conserve wild birds and the wider environment on which wild birds depend, maintaining bird numbers, diversity and natural geographic distribution.
- To conserve natural and semi-natural habitat and to re-create habitats.
- To encourage others to practise the conservation of wild birds and habitats.
- To promote knowledge of conservation through education and research."

But there is another clause which binds the RSPB: "The Society shall take no part in the question of the killing of game birds and legitimate sport of that character except when such practices have an impact on the Objects of the Society." In recent years the RSPB has taken little notice of this clause. Using its great wealth it has bought up prime areas of foreshore and marsh and then banned wildfowling. Dr Mark Avery, its conservation director, told *The Field*, "There are places where wildfowling still happens and we wish it didn't. If the shooting rights come up for sale and we acquire them, shooting will stop on our land." Taking a piece of marsh that is good for wildfowling and then banning the sport does not help conservation; the marsh remains unchanged and the duck and waders continue to visit.

Now the RSPB wishes to pursue a policy that would affect every shooting man and two thirds of rural England and Wales. In an extraordinary display of arrogance it has called for all English and Welsh game-shoots to be licensed, presumably by it or by those advised by it. This demand appears in its document, *Advocacy 2009*, its annual wish list published to influence politicians and public opinion.

It expands the point on its website. "An improvement on licensing individuals would be to license game-shoots. We believe that game-shoots should adhere to a set of commonly agreed standards, including compliance with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. We have called on DEFRA to assess the merits of introducing a compulsory licensing



work? that shooting men and women. An independent report in 2006 found; "Two million hectares are actively managed for conservation; shooters spend 2.7million a year on conservation." In what sense is mandatory licensing of game-shoots supposed to encourage us to carry on this massive conservation work?

scheme for all game-shoots – both upland and lowland – in England and Wales. Failure to adhere to agreed standards, including legislation governing the protection of quarry species and birds of prey and use of lead shot, should result in courts having the option to withdraw a shoot's licence to operate."

The "justification" for this is its obsession with birds of prey, particularly hen harriers. It says, "In 2007, the RSPB received 262 reports of shooting or destruction of birds of prey across the UK – the highest number of reports ever received." It does not say how many of those resulted in a conviction. To counter these supposed deaths, it would have every shoot in England and Wales licensed and monitored, an untold expense to the taxpayer. And how many shoots are likely to hold hen harriers? It is wildly disproportionate and flies in the face of two of the RSPB's charitable remits; to remain neutral on shooting; and to encourage others to practise the conservation of wild birds and habitats.

No one does more for conservation

The underlying message is clear. The RSPB no longer appears to be neutral on our sport, contrary to its charitable objects. It is time it was challenged. Write to the Charity Commission, Charity Commission Direct, PO Box 1227, Liverpool. L69 3UG.

**Britons snub countryside**  
*Shooting Times and Country Magazine, April 2009*

According to a new survey by Travelodge, more than half of Britons think the countryside is boring and many of them are unable to identify common animals and plants. A third of people who were asked said they had never considered visiting the British Countryside. The survey also found one in 10 adults could not identify a sheep, 44 per cent could not identify an oak tree and 83 per cent failed to recognise a bluebell.

# Last-ditch attempt to save declining tree sparrows

By Emily Dennis, *EDP*, Summer 2009

A Suffolk farm is at the centre of a last-ditch bid to conserve the areas largest breeding colony of rare tree sparrows.

Graham Sayer and his 14 year old son, Aaron, have been working with Suffolk Wildlife Trust to try to boost numbers of the birds at their home at Flixton, near Bungay. With support from the Trust's Steve Piotrowski, the pair are providing much-needed bed and breakfast for the tree sparrows by putting up nest boxes and providing them with food.

The Sayers' farm is home to nine breeding pairs of the birds, making it east Suffolk's largest breeding colony.

Tree sparrows have suffered a 96pc decline in numbers since the 1970s and Mr Piotrowski says there are only about 12 such colonies left in Suffolk.

The decline has occurred at the same time as a decrease in the numbers of other farmland birds which share the tree sparrow's diet of grass, wildflower seeds and some cereal grains. Components of agricultural intensification are also likely to have contributed.

This is the first year of the Trust's tree sparrow survey which will involve working with landowners to identify flocks and put up nest boxes.

Mr Piotrowski, who heads the Trust's survey, said that the Sayers' home provided an ideal location. "This is a bit of an oasis in an arable desert," he said. "Aaron and his dad have been feeding the birds all year round and have made nest boxes for them. "We hope, by preserving this little haven, we can focus on the birds that are left. This is a last-ditch effort, but we may already be too late." Mr Piotrowski is urging people to keep a lookout for the birds around their homes.

Tree sparrows are smaller than a house sparrow and have a chestnut brown crown and nape, and white cheeks and collar with a distinctive black cheek spot. They are shyer than house sparrows and both sexes are identical.

Tree sparrows nest in holes in trees, thatched buildings and old orchards but readily take to nest boxes. They form loose local colonies and where these are supported with nest boxes and ample seed supplies, local populations can be stable and increasing.

Suffolk's remaining tree sparrow colonies are generally in mixed farming areas with access to small wetland patches and artificial nest sites or old/pollard trees.



However, there are others which thrive in isolated gardens surviving solely on supplementary feeding.

To report tree sparrow sightings call the Suffolk Wildlife Trust on 01473 890089. In other areas, contact your local Wildlife Trust (01636 677711) or visit the online sightings reporting site:

BTO BirdTrack:  
<http://www.bto.org/birdtrack> ■

# Dogs and damage to wildlife

The negative effect on wildlife of dogs being allowed to run amok by some walkers still seems to get little attention. It isn't only the wildlife that suffers. Here by Rutland Water the local newspaper headlined how 14 sheep were killed by dogs earlier in the year. This is despite signs asking walkers to keep dogs on leads at all times. But many do not and the results are that not only the sheep, but nesting birds are disturbed.

On our display posters used at shows, SBS features cats as the main threat to songbirds, quoting the generally accepted minimum figure of 55 million killed annually. Whilst our research may well indicate the true figure killed by cats is higher than this, the damage by dogs gets no mention. Dogs do kill birds. For example, a family member's Yorkshire terrier has killed three blackbirds, a woodpigeon and several collared doves this year alone. Quite an achievement for something quite so small. With a dog population estimated at over 7 million

the total number of birds killed, though much less than those killed by cats, may be of some significance. The number of nests which are deserted due to dogs, thereby leading to unsuccessful breeding, must be quite substantial.

At a recent dinner an otherwise sensible fellow guest described how his Labrador had killed a young partridge. "Its part of



nature", he said. But it certainly isn't argued. Neither dogs, cats, grey squirrels or other introduced or domesticated species "belong" and all can be a threat to our bio-diversity. Now we have the right to roam and as more and more paths and trails are introduced, scant attention is paid to the tremendous damage to wildlife caused by the introduction of dogs to areas from which they have been excluded previously. Most of the impact is indirect in scaring ground nesting birds away so they desert their nests, but there is a direct negative effect too. I believe it is high time the problem of irresponsible walkers letting their dogs run loose rampaging through woodland, farmland and moorland and digging into hedges and so forth is recognised. Stronger appeals need to be made to the minority of irresponsible walkers to be considerate of the unseen wildlife that may be disturbed.

Clive Sherwood

# No longer the song of the skylark - killed by predators and bogus sentimentality

By Robin Page, Daily Mail, July 2009

Sixty-six years ago I was born on a sunny May morning when the sky was full of lark song. Back then, skylarks flew and sang their charming song over much of Britain. They were part of our countryside and culture, and had been celebrated for centuries in our nation's music, poetry and art. Shamefully, however, the skylark has vanished from the skies over vast swathes of the British countryside, brushed aside by industry and factory farms - its song replaced by the Mediterranean chirruping of grasshoppers and crickets. Yes, crickets. According to wildlife experts at the UK's Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, crickets can survive winters more easily as our climate warms and they have colonised the South, East Anglia and are moving into the Midlands. Over the past 20 years, populations of Roesel's Bush cricket and Long-winged Conehead cricket have increased by as much as 600 per cent. Who would have thought it: the skylark silenced and drowned out by a little, green, foreign bug?

It was about 20 years ago that I first noticed something was desperately wrong in the countryside. I was walking around our small farm, still with its grass meadows and hedges, and soaking up



Charming: But the skylark's numbers have plummeted 90 per cent in 30 years

the experience. But then I spotted something was missing. At first, I couldn't work out what it was. Then suddenly it dawned on me - I couldn't hear a skylark. I was horrified!

There's no doubt that the decline of the skylark is a tragedy. Its numbers have plummeted 90 per cent in just 30 years. If Shakespeare had been around today, he may not have penned 'Hark, hark! The lark at heaven's gate sings,' and Vaughan Williams would perhaps not have written his wonderful piece of music *The Lark Ascending*. I doubt they would have written about crickets instead.

I remember as a small boy being taken through the fields by my mother and being amazed as she pointed to the tiny speck high up in the sky producing such a clear and beautiful song.

My teacher at the little school in the village where I still live would also take us on 'nature walks'.

There was no such thing as a rigid syllabus then - if the sun was out on a summer afternoon then off the whole school would go, along the farm tracks and driftways. It was magical. 'Listen,' my teacher would say. 'The skylark. And there, that's the song of the yellowhammer. And look, there's a bush with a linnet in it.'

What a time, what countryside and what memories. Alas, these days, in most places, the yellowhammer, the linnet and the landscape they once inhabited have gone the same way as the skylark. Times are indeed changing.

Strangely, in those days of symphonic bird song, there were three other birds that were rarely seen: the magpie, the carrion crow and the sparrowhawk. Magpies were so uncommon that if we saw one, we would touch our collars for luck. Months would pass between such touches.

But to follow that same custom today would give most people arm ache in a single morning. Magpie numbers have increased by 96 per cent in the past 30 years - to 600,000 pairs.

In the days when I walked along the village High Street to school, nearly every house had a garden with a few free-range hens at the back, which meant that foxes and magpies, as predators, were not tolerated. Plundering magpies stole both eggs and chicks, while foxes ate everything in sight, including the hens themselves.

Now most people get their eggs from the supermarket and the egg and chick thieves have a free rein. Their numbers are booming.

There is another problem, too. Once upon a time, many predators and scavengers - such as magpies and crows - died in winter through lack of food. But now, with 32 million cars prowling in Britain, road kill provides them with food throughout the year. Again, the balance is being upset, changing the age-old face of our rural areas.

There is no doubt that modern farming methods must take some of the blame for changes in the British countryside. In many parts of lowland Britain,

traditional methods have been replaced by factory farming. Hedges and woodland are bulldozed and fertiliser and agrichemicals are used to control weeds and bugs. This leaves nowhere for wildlife to live. By the time spring comes, crops planted in the autumn are too dense for

The rise in predators during the past 35 years is startling - buzzards up 515 per cent; sparrowhawks up 108 per cent; magpies up 97 per cent; and carrion crows up 80 per cent. It has been estimated that Britain's 40,000 pairs of sparrowhawks eat more than 2,000 tons of birds a year; the equivalent of more than 88 million sparrows or 25 million skylarks. No wonder they are falling silent.

Bizarrely, nor will the RSPB condemn the damage being done to woodland birds, including the nightingale, by grey squirrels - another benefactor of a changing Britain. However, everyone freely admits that Britain's burgeoning deer population is causing havoc. Through browsing and grazing, deer stop woodland regenerating by eating young seedlings and saplings, and devastate the nesting habitat of woodland birds. Thanks to films such as *Bambi*, we are sentimental about deer, but they must be better controlled.

But it's not all doom and gloom. After missing the sound of skylark, I joined a group of friends and launched the Countryside Restoration Trust, a charity concentrating on farming and wildlife.

We wanted farmers to work with wildlife, not against it, and we believed that we could only achieve this by changing our own farms. Through donations, we have recreated Lark Rise Farm, more than 400 acres in the middle of Cambridgeshire's cereal prairie land. A whole landscape has been restored. There are grass margins around every field, we have planted traditional hay meadows on the flood plain of the local brook, and volunteers have put in 1.5 miles of new hedgerows.

The amount of wildlife to return in the last ten years has been beyond my wildest expectations. We have otters, brown hares, harvest mice, badgers, and grass snakes by the thousand. Yellowhammers are up 50 per cent, linnets by 50 per cent, and English partridges by 300 per cent. Even skylarks are tentatively returning, increasing by 33 per cent.

This proves there is no need for the destruction of our countryside and the wonderful wildlife that relies on it. But we all must make the effort.

For if we don't, the song of the skylark will be blown away on the breeze forever, to be replaced by the monotonous drone of the cricket. ■

• The Countryside Restoration Trust, Barton, Cambs, CB23 7AG. Telephone 01223 262999.



ground-nesting birds such as skylarks and English partridges. As for the yellowhammer - which needs scrub and hedgerows - tidy farmers just mow their habitat away.

Modern farm machinery also poses a threat. Grass cutters slice through foliage at ground level and move at running speed. Skylark chicks and leverets (young brown hares) don't stand a chance.

Combine harvesters are also huge - and getting bigger. At the Royal Show this month, I saw a combine with a 35ft cutter that can harvest 80 tons of wheat an hour - and, without a completely alert driver, an awful lot of wildlife.

But while the factory farmers have a lot to answer for, politically correct conservationists must also take much of the blame. They have completely ignored the rise in numbers of predators and their impact on the countryside. Indeed, they refuse to admit the link between an increase in predator numbers and the fall in the number of prey species - from thrushes in the garden to skylarks in the field.

Predator: The number of buzzards has increased by an incredible 515 per cent in the last 35 years



Taking over: Some cricket populations have increased by as much as 600 per cent in the past 20 years

# The Plight of the Bumblebee

By Janice Cassidy, Scottish Rural Property and Business Association Policy Officer  
Landbusiness magazine, June/July 2009

There are currently 24 species of bumblebee in the UK. Six of these species are relatively common. However, six others are designated UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) priority species, in recognition of their need for conservation action. The remaining 12 species have declined to varying degrees in recent years. Experts have warned that some species may face national extinction unless urgent landscape-scale action is taken. Bumblebees should be a conservation priority, but at present, not enough is being done to help them.



## Why Conserve the Bumblebee?

### Ecological reasons

Bumblebees are keystone species, meaning that there are numerous other species that are dependant on them and their disappearance would initiate significant changes in an ecosystem. They are major pollinators of wildflowers and if they continue to decline, these plants will set less seed, therefore causing significant changes to the countryside. It may become dominated by a variety of different plants and could lose its mosaic of colour. There is also the possibility that many rare plant species could disappear and there is evidence that this is already under way. These changes will have significant impacts on other species dependant on these plants.

### Economic reasons

Bumblebees are also important economically because many arable and horticultural crops depend on them for pollination to varying degrees. For example, broad, field and runner

beans and soft fruit crops are all dependant on pollination by bumblebees. Without the presence of bumblebees, there would be little or no crop to harvest. In total, the value of Europe's insect pollinators is estimated at 14.2 billion. In some regions where fields are large and there are few hedgerows (in which queens forage in spring and build their nests), crop yields are already falling.

### Action Required

Work has been carried out on nature reserves to conserve the bumblebee. For example, the British Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland have jointly created a 20-acre bumblebee friendly meadow beside Loch Leven in Perth and Kinross. It was originally a field of grass, but was ploughed and sown with a wildflower seed mix which was funded by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH.) Now the meadow produces perennial wildflowers which are extremely beneficial for bumblebees. However, bumblebee nests are large, containing up to 400 sterile workers, each travelling about 1km from the colony in search of suitable flowers. Each nest needs many hectares of suitable flower-rich habitat to support a healthy population. Therefore, nature reserves alone are insufficient and it is essential that the wider farmed countryside and gardens are managed in a bumblebee sensitive way. Bad weather or inbreeding can quickly wipe out small populations.

### What do Bumblebees Need?

Bumblebees are relatively simple creatures, requiring two main things:

#### 1. Food (nectar & pollen)

From March through until September bumblebees require high-quality pollen to feed their young, which they can only get from certain plants – clovers, vetches and trefoils are particularly important.

#### 2. Nesting sites

Some species prefer to nest above ground in thick vegetation, so hedgerows and areas of tussocky grass are valuable. Others nest underground, often using disused rodent holes, and can be catered for by leaving areas where rodents can create burrows (for example, dry ditches or banks of earth).

### How Can Land Managers Help?

Unfortunately, none of the RDC SRDP (Rural Development Contract, Scotland Rural Development Programme) measures currently on offer are designed specifically to help bumblebees. However, it is possible to use other RDC measures in order to indirectly provide benefits for the species, for example, "creation and management of species rich grassland" and "management of species rich grassland."

### Funding Boost for Pollinator Research Announced in April 2009

Up to £10 million, including up to £500,000 from the Scottish Government, will be invested in a new project to help identify the main threats to bees and other insect pollinators. The funding will be made available to research teams across the UK under the Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) partnership, a major initiative by UK funders to help the UK respond effectively to environmental changes. This is a joint initiative involving the Scottish Government, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (NERC) and the Wellcome Trust.

### Further Information

The Bumblebee Conservation Trust's website ([www.bumblebeeconservation.org](http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org)) provides a wealth of information about the bumblebee and there is a section dedicated to providing advice to land managers. The SRPBA urge you to visit this website and find out more about what you can do to avoid the loss of this ecologically and economically important species.



# Green woodpeckers and wood ants in my garden

Last year when I wrote on this topic the inclement and often miserable summer weather had depressed the wood ant activities as well as making it one of the worst ever years on record for butterflies. This year has been markedly different and as a result many insects including butterflies, have flourished. The wood ants have been enormously active setting up daughter colonies and providing an easy source of food supply for the woodpeckers and other birds. Although green woodpeckers usually excavate their holes high up in trees, the ones here nested just five feet above ground level and as the three youngsters grew up one could look in and see a menacing beak pointing back. All the young survived and whilst I only ever see two together either on the lawn or near the wood ant mounds or on the side of trees pecking at the ants, one hears them several times a day. The only possible threat I can see to this symbiotic relationship comes from the vast increase in numbers of harlequin ladybirds which feast on the aphids from which the wood ants obtain "honeydew" and feed upon. I have quite

a lot of elderflower .....which by now is usually covered in aphids tended by hundreds of wood ants.



Earlier in the year there were many harlequin ladybirds. Now for the first time there are no aphids visible on the elderflowers. I tried to see if the wood ants were partial to harlequins, but even after dropping some on top of a very

busy wood ant nest, the thousands of ants simply ignored the harlequins. The potential threat to our indigenous species from harlequins still seems to be being largely ignored. Many of our songbirds pick off the aphids and if these

are greatly reduced it may possibly have a deleterious impact on their food supply; for their young in particular.

**Clive Sherwood**

# Bird-brains who undermine our farmers

By Charlie Brooks, Telegraph, July 2009

*When it comes to conservation, landowners can be trusted to make the right decisions?*

Britain's embattled farmers have a new, and formidable enemy: birds. Or rather, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which has seized on a report about habitat protection to unfairly and selectively lambast the agricultural sector. The European Union Habitats Directive has claimed that some 90 per cent of the UK's threatened habitats are "in poor shape and therefore not supporting the range of wildlife they should do," prompting a sadly predictable response from the RSPB.

Dr Mark Avery, the director of conservation, claimed that it was "further proof that the Common Agriculture Policy" - and thus, by extension, farmers - "remains a key threat to our wildlife." If that is really the case, how come species such as the goldfinch and the whitethroat, which live on farmland, have increased by 39 per cent and 31 per cent respectively since 1994? And why have the populations of greenfinches, jackdaws and wood pigeons expanded by over 20 per cent during the same period? Have 17,000 kilometres of hedge rows miraculously re-instated themselves since 1987, and have 11 per cent more ponds spontaneously oozed into being between 1998 and 2007? No. All of that happened because of the actions of our farmers.

Moreover, the very welcome improvements in bird numbers have been achieved in spite of any number of the following: dog walkers straying off footpaths and disturbing wildlife; vastly increased numbers of protected, TB-riddled badgers feasting on the eggs of ground nesting birds; birds of prey released into the wild to eat as many smaller species of birds as they can get their talons on; pet cats devouring garden birds; urban pollution and climate change, which Dr Avery grudgingly concedes is "a rapidly emerging cause of habitat

destruction." He is more reticent on the other causes.

For example, the RSPB doesn't dare mention that rambles crashing around all over the place might be more damaging to wildlife than farmers. The public has access to 566,300 hectares of mountains, moors, heaths and downs in the UK. They probably shouldn't. Because although there may be areas where rambles and walkers don't do any harm, there are also other areas where they cause erosion and are a general menace to wildlife. But the charity no more wants to have a crack at the rambles as it does at the charming old ladies, who own so many of the cats who eat so many of our birds. It needs their financial support too much to risk alienating them.

A rare, sensible decision on habitat protection has, however, emerged from Hilary Benn, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. At Stoneleigh's final Royal Show, he announced that he had decided to let farmers be the best judge of which bits of their land they dedicate to nurturing wildlife by voluntarily setting it aside from

food production. It was remarkable, and welcome, that Mr Benn came to the conclusion that he did not know better than each individual farmer, and so did not need to issue a compulsory edict. Our farmers have indeed proven that they should be trusted to balance the need to produce food with a respect for nature.

Needless to say, many of our European cousins do not take any notice whatsoever of the 17-year-old EU Habitats Directive, which is behind the report. This is presumably because they treat a recommendation to take more care of their environment in the same way that they treat many other European recommendations: by ignoring them, whilst we become slaves to them. The report points the finger in particular at Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Portugal, who all indicated that the status of half of their most important animal and plant species was 'unknown.' In other words they don't care, while British farmers, despite the rhetoric of pontificating bodies such as the RSPB, do. 🌱



Farmers have brought hedgerows back to life Photo: PA

journalism on countryside issues for a very long time. To cut a long story short here there are two main villains which are currently having a massive impact on birds: Raptors and Corvids. On our 1200 acre farm, every year we leave an area of ground which we manage for ground nesting birds particularly Lapwings. Admittedly we are paid but that is not the point, from my experiences I will continue to do this regardless. Back to my main point, I have seen lapwings

successfully hatching a healthy brood of chicks to then be completely wiped out single handedly by Buzzards. I have sat and watched and experienced it first hand. It doesn't just happen to small chicks, I have seen buzzards regularly taking half grown hares. With regard to corvids, the damage they cause is of unimaginable proportions, although we control them, not enough people do. The managers of a nearby RSPB bird reserve deny the use of Larsen

traps for controlling corvids despite the fact I have actually seen them making them. Talking to my grandfather, raptors never ever existed in the numbers which we see them today, regardless of the use of DDT. Hilary Benn's announcement that farmers are the best placed to decide on their own individual environmental issues was a welcome one. We are the ones which experience environmental issues on a daily basis, not some pen pushing policy making jobsworth. Well done Hilary Benn and well done Charlie Brooks.

**Anthony Henman**

So you grow all your own food then? And never drink tea, coffee, milk, beer, wine or spirits? And you don't wear anything made of cotton, linen, wool, leather or viscose? You don't have any objects made of wood or fabric on your house or car? Really? There's no point condemning all farmers out of hand when you take what they produce for granted.

**MelanieA**

This is pure politics and misrepresentation of a selective number of facts. Farmers have not re-instated hedgerows out of a sense of common good, this work along with the most other habitat creation has come about as a result of Environmental Stewardship Schemes. Look at what happened the minute set aside payments stopped, pretty much all of the land available went back immediately into food production despite not been required (there was no 15% sudden increase in population that I'm aware of). Farmers have to make a living and will understandably put this first, that is precisely why government should legislate in order to ensure a balance of interests are met.

Also I would be interested to know which birds of prey have been released to 'get their talons into as many small birds as they can eat' if there is anyone out there who can positively claim that they have watched an Osprey, Red Kite or Sea Eagle catch a small bird in their garden please enlighten us.

**Alan Tilmouth**

Another reason for the demise of urban wildlife (especially birds) is the quest for instant gardens, which can be laid firmly at the feet of the likes of Alan Titchmarsh. Established gardens abundant with shrubbery for insects and nests are ripped out, in goes gravel, stones, potted trees, decking, and crass artwork. After this destruction, and the multiple drops from garden centres and builders merchants the owners have the temerity to call it a green space.

**Martin**

Oh come off it Robin - songbirds are being wiped out by magpies, really? It's quite amazing that they've managed to co-exist for thousands of years then, isn't it? Isn't there a tiny bit of you that wants to acknowledge that the huge developments in the way we as a society are running the countryside has had an impact on bird - and other wildlife - habitats? There have been magpies and songbirds for thousands of years, but combine harvesters, block cropping, pesticides, fertilisers and mass drainage are all relatively new. And they've given us cheap, plentiful food for which we're all grateful. Let's stop squabbling about whether people standing up for birds are more evil than people standing up for farmers, and get on with working out how we can have both the food and the wildlife - yes, including magpies!

**Paul Lorimer**

Charlie Brooks' article is an important one. It's all about Birds' habitats that have almost been wiped out by developers; especially those near the cities. Farmers, with expansive cultivation of lands, add to the habitat-degradation problems and challenges.

Birds and many endangered species need trees, shrubs, grasses and wetlands for them to survive. Insects need some of these habitats to survive. They are all important in biodiversity and inter-species survivalism in the global ecosystems. Birds, bees and other insects are important for pollination of flowers that play key roles in plant reproduction that feed and sustain human and animal life. So, there must be a system to maintain these balance of forces. Human beings, societies and communities, along with suburban dwellers are not, often willing to do it by themselves--set aside land for preservation of wildlife. So, government and multinational organizations like the United Nations and European Union have stepped in for coordination and regulations to achieve balance and biodiversity where all these species can co-exist in the global ecosystem. It's a part of the climate-change struggle by nations and humans to make the Planet Earth a safer and better place to live in. This is how the European Union Habitat Directive came into place--a treaty developed and initiated in 1992 directing all member nations--now 27--to set aside certain areas around many locations for preservation of wildlife and wetlands. This covers 216 kinds of habitats and 1,182 species (usually considered to be endangered). The Habitat initiative is seen as the most comprehensive of EU biodiversity regulations. These areas, habitats and species enjoy legal protection.

And, according to the Habitat Treaty, every six years, a report must be delivered to the EU Commission through the (Environment) Commissioner Stavros Dimas to access progress of the habitats and species; in accordance with Article 17 of the EU Habitat Directive. The current report is for the 2001-2006 cycle; according to the EU Habitat web site and January 15 UPI-Yahoo News bulletin. All these are part of the Natura 2000 program. A total of 22,000 sites are affected in the whole confederation. But, Great Britain is more hard-pressed in the EU Habitat Directive compliance because of a heavy population and scarcity of land. Which is why Hilary Benn, Secretary of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, DEFRA, has more challenge than most of his EU counterparts. It will be hard for Great Britain to comply without liberalization. So, a balance or compromise is needed.

**Igonikon Jack**

This shows just how much the RSPB understands the interaction between birds and humans. Forever, the Lelant estuary was used by sea anglers to dig bait. The estuary is also a refuge for wild birds. Start digging and within a few mins one is surrounded by ducks, geese etc. Most of these fed on the turned over ground but some were there right at your feet and were often faster at spotting the worms...gulp! and it was gone. But there were enough worms to go around so who cared. Then the estuary was 'given' to the RSPB. The first edict they offered...the banning of bait digging under the headline, 'It disturbed the birds'.

**Bryan Phillips**

These so-called bird protectors are the very reason why rural enterprises are going to dwindle, buy your food from overseas or move there?

**Rick**

It seems to me there is an awful lot of choosing between species that we like or don't. Magpies are a successful and beautiful bird. If they are doing better now than ever it just might be because there are increasing numbers of other birds for them to feed on. We have all been encouraged for years to feed garden birds through winter but if rats feed on the leftovers it's a disaster. Once again, we humans interfere and then interfere again to rectify the first interference! Leave things alone to find their own balance and put the RSPB out of business overnight.

**Duncan Jones**

# SHOWS AND EVENTS 2009

What an amazing show season SBS has had this year! Special thanks go to all our wonderful volunteers, without whom we wouldn't be able to attend any of these events.

The season started early this year with a last minute entry to the Cornwall Garden Society's Spring Flower Show at Boconnoc (April 4th & 5th.) The weather was unseasonably warm and we were blessed by record crowds. The organisers gave us a warm welcome and excellent stand. Thank you to SBS Trustee, David Griffith, for arranging the show for SBS and for valiantly manning the stand over the two days (I wasn't much help having caught a stinking cold the day before!) Boconnoc is a truly beautiful place, the show being near the house and overlooking the grounds – well worth a visit, perhaps we will see you there next year?



SBS stand at Boconnoc

We returned to our usual spot near the Countryside Ring at the Royal Norfolk Show (1st & 2nd July.) It was lovely to see so many SBS members there. Thank you to SBS Trustees; Robert Middleditch, Michael Hope, Nick Forde and Fred Ingrams and volunteer, Ivan Woodrow who helped me man the stand in the incredibly hot, dry weather.

Immediately following the Royal Norfolk, SBS were very pleased to again have a stand at the Scottish Game Fair, at Scone Palace (3rd-5th July.) Our third year! Another very successful event with many new members signing up, positive contacts made and encouraging response from visitors. Grateful thanks to Keith McDougall, Policy Director in particular



Clive, Keith & Colin at Scone

and SBS Trustees; John Haddington, Colin Strang Steel & Clive Sherwood and staunch volunteers; Angus Sinclair, Joanna Burrows, Ginny & Sandy Stewart and Maggie Scott.

Without a moment to breathe we were at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show (6th-12th July.) We were given a marvellous position, right outside

the floral marquee entrance. After some fighting with the stand curtains I gave up and had the Danco contractor come and remove them entirely – many thanks to him! The weather was rather questionable, but we managed to stay dry for most of the week - despite no curtains - although wellies were new fashion accessory on many of the visitors!

We had a record number of new members sign up at this year's show – nearly twice as many as last year! Perhaps this was due to the attention

our Larsen trap, complete with decoy magpies (Charlie & Chaplin), brought. Many of the visitors to the stand asked if they were real and many more were educated in the reasons for and correct use of the trap. Thank you to SBS Trustees; Nick

Forde, David Griffith, Clive Sherwood and Michael Hope for helping on the stand, but the real stars were our volunteers; Marlene Hayter, Bill & Margaret Hookey, Alex Biggin, Jill Leeming, Wendy Watmore, Zara Robinson, Mike Troy, Vicky McDougall, Joanna Burrows & Teresa Trisolino. The RHS is such an insane and hectic week, the long hours, hard work and often arduous journeys these volunteers put in is invaluable to SBS (and life-saving for me!)

During the RHS week SBS had another stand to run, at the Tendring Hundred show in Essex (11th July.) SBS thanks the THFC for inviting us to the show where SBS volunteers Geoff & Jenny Grover had a very successful stand. Many important local contacts were made and some new members too!

Only one day back in the office and we were off again, this time to the Great Yorkshire Show, Harrogate (14th-16th July.) After missing out on a space last year, we were very pleased to attend for our first year. Wow, now that is a huge show site! I did not get there until the second day and being a bit late I was parked in one of the last fields, some distance from the showground. In fact, I couldn't even see the showground. It took 20 minutes of hill-climbing across car parks and I found the edge of the showground. 30 more minutes of fighting through huge crowds I found our small but wonderfully placed stand. SBS Trustees Keith McDougall & Clive Sherwood, volunteers; Tim Smeeth, John Naylor, Alex Biggin and I had a really productive show. We spoke with many enthusiastic visitors, signed up new members and made good local contacts. SBS will definitely be applying for space at next year's show!

SBS stand at Hampton Court



Again, only one day back and the Holkham Country Fair (18th & 19th July) was upon us (I cheated and took the weekend off!) SBS was very pleased to meet many visitors and sign up new members over the two days. Many thanks to Keith McDougall and SBS Trustees; Michael Hope, Nick Forde, Clive Sherwood and volunteers Struan McDougall and George Lynne for running the stand so well.

Immediately after, the Royal Welsh Show (20th-23rd July) started with SBS in the usual place in the Countryside Area. Although the weather was appalling there were huge numbers at the show and many visitors to the SBS stand. I'm told that the rain was so constant that we had a large pond form in the entrance to the



SBS at the Royal Welsh

stand – perfect for the rubber ducks! Another record number of members were signed up and many local contacts made, mainly due to SBS Trustee, John Pugh's careful planning. Thanks also to SBS Trustee, David Griffith and volunteers; Mrs Price, Bill & Margaret Hookey and Dela Astbury for their invaluable help on the stand.

No time to rest, on to the CLA Game Fair (24th-26th July) this year at Belvoir Castle, near Grantham. Having never been to that area before I was astounded to find the castle on a massive hill! And rather wonderfully, we had a great view of the castle right from our stand. Hot dry weather, interspersed with thundery showers kept us on our toes, along with the thousands of visitors, many of whom visited our stand. Again, another record number of members signed up and many organisations contacted. Many thanks to Keith McDougall, SBS Trustees; Nick Forde, Clive Sherwood, Michael Hope and volunteers; Alex Biggin, Joanna Burrows, Struan McDougall and Mike Troy for all their help.

And breathe, 5 whole days before our next show, which was our annual trip to the Wayland Show at Watton, Norfolk (2nd August.) This was my first visit to this small fair – which I found out is the



The parade of champions at Wayland

oldest country fair in the UK. We had a rather stuffy and airless stand in the craft marquee but I had lots of help from Geoff & Jenny Grover, Stephen Brown and Barbara Bradley (my Mum) so we all had a chance to look around the fair and get some air! The highlight of the show was the parade of champions where the prize bull decided he had had enough and charged full-pelt out of the ring dragging his handler along like a puppet on a string behind him. He jumped the ring railing, onlookers went flying in all directions and that was the last we saw of him. Luckily, no one was injured, except maybe the handler's pride!

SBS then made our second visit to the Wiltshire Game & Country Fair at Bowood (8th & 9th August.) Last year the heavens opened and a very soggy time was had by all. The Lowther Horse Trials (normally held on the same weekend) was so damaged by last year's bad weather and thousands of muddy boots that it was cancelled this year entirely – SBS should be back there next year!



Bill & Keith at Bowood

This year the weather was better and the SBS stand was excellent. Grateful thanks to Keith McDougall, Policy Director for organising the stand, SBS Trustee, Clive Sherwood and volunteers; Sarah Potter, Bill & Margaret Hookey, Gillian Oldfield and Joanna Burrows for their hard work over the weekend.

I have now just returned from our last outing of the year, the Fenland Country Fair at Stow-Cum-Quy, Cambridgeshire (30th & 31st August.) I had a little bit of trouble when we arrived when our marquee broke under the gusty winds. The organisers very kindly loaned us another marquee and gave us a prime position on the main arena. Despite the wind, the weather turned out warm and pleasant bringing out many visitors –

keeping us on our toes all weekend. Grateful thanks to staunch volunteer, Bernard Hunt and SBS Trustee, Clive Sherwood along with volunteers Joanna Burrows and Barbara Bradley for their help manning the stand. Although we did not gain many members, we had much interest and many promises of future help. Many thanks to Malcolm Hall and the other organisers for their invitation, excellent organisation and kind help over the weekend.

To cheer you all up I can confirm that this year is the first year that SBS has actually made any excess money on attending shows. We ordinarily go to these shows to meet members locally, give face-to-face advice and information, meet other organisations, sign up new members and generally advertise who we are.

As with most advertising, the immediate response can be very poor, but this year we had such a tremendous response from visitors that the membership subscriptions, sales, sponsorship and donations actually outweighed our costs for the first season since I joined SBS.

This is due to the planning for the shows and the input from SBS Trustees, not forgetting they are not paid for their work! But also the monumental effort of our volunteers is the main reason we have been so successful. Their drive and enthusiasm is often electric, very infectious and key to the positive response from the general public.

We have a very complex message to explain and a very small team to put it together; so the extra help, work, input and encouragement of our wonderful volunteers is simply invaluable. My heartfelt thanks to you all.

**George** (Georgina Bradley)

*Me in deep discussion at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, Gold star to Margaret Hookey for snapping this – I do my best to never be caught on camera!*



# Members' Observations

Many thanks for the many responses to my request for views on the changing populations of breeding birds. I am very pleased to reproduce some of your responses here. Michael Rankeillour, Editor & Trustee.

## Magpies

I saw a magpie enter wall shrub (winter flowering jasmine) and emerge with a blackbird fledgling which it dismembered and ate on top of the wall. Eventually it also got the other 3. I have a wire Larsen trap with side entrance but it doesn't seem to have done any good.

T Clegg, Cheshire

## Swallows

Yesterday it was misty with low clouds on the hills but some two dozen swallows were so happy to be flying amongst our herd of 60 organic British Friesians; eating the flies – alone with them I was happy too. Does seem that swallows at least have done quite well around us with 2 broods reared in a tool work shed, even with plenty of human activity! Lovely birds are swallows, not quite as many these days. There used to be sometimes near 200 swallows and martins collecting n the electricity lines, some years ago now. The martins peaked at some 15 active nests under our eaves, then slowly the sparrows took over their nest and they too have declined, for other reasons. Greater spotted woodpecker took out a lot of the martins' nests on a nearby farm. Sparrowhawks and other smaller hawks have steadily increased and surely take an increasing toll of so many protected birds; themselves under increasing pressures without the added burden of now widespread predation by hawks and magpies in particular. But rats, mink, grey squirrels, jackdaw cause many problems together with badgers also. Good habitat, organic farming and so many nice gardens both small and large are of course so helpful for birds but the predators mentioned above also thrive in this environment. The damage they do is extensive, sometimes disastrous, yet still denied by those who are misguided in their ways of thinking.

W Short, Devon

## Sparrowhawks & Barn Owls

I wanted to send you this comment I received on my website <http://birdtablenews.com> It is from someone who lives near Spurn Point in East Yorkshire. "Sparrowhawks are a nightmare in the garden. We had 6 pairs of blackbirds & the sparrowhawk had the lot, plus a pair of thrushes. We also had 22 collared doves & it had every one. When it has cleared the garden out it just leaves - to find another

garden to decimate. We have tried to grow things around the bird table, & put obstacles up so the sparrowhawk cannot just swoop in & take feeding birds - these vandals have to be checked."

I then wondered - could the sparrowhawks be killing the type of prey that the Barn Owls usually get?

Also, the same person said that a large barn owl chick that looked big enough to leave the nest was found on the ground. It was half starved and died. There is a drought in the area and some people also say there are too many barn owls / or not enough food for them. The area is out of balance. Could a drought affect Barn Owls?

P Lawty.

## Experts?

Like so many others I have been shaken out of my lethargy by personal experiences. Earlier this year we had the usual mix of songbirds in the garden (we farm and the garden is surrounded by fields.) Sparrows, blackbirds, a robin, a pair of pied wagtails, wrens, finches and a little owl. A few months ago a pair of buzzards moved into the trees across the field and at around the same time a sparrowhawk began visiting. Now the garden is empty apart from a much reduced sparrow population.

People tell me we are lucky when I mention that within ? mile of our house there are 2 badger sets and we have daily sightings of red kites. On the farm we have the obligatory entry-level areas and we grow winter bird mix on all the margins. Yet when we walk around the farm it is like a ghost town. The plovers have gone and there is no sign of the partridges, fewer skylarks and even the bumblebees' nests have been raided and I have not seen a hedgehog for ages. Why do people who set themselves up as experts and 'care' for the countryside keep introducing and protecting predators without a thought for their prey?

E Wilkinson, Peterborough

## Golden Orioles

This week the Tibenham W.I group received a presentation from a warden from Lakenheath Fen. The worrying feature of his talk was the admission that much of the land was originally given over to mature poplar trees which had been planted for the match trade. The original plantation hosted upwards of 16 pairs of golden orioles, which I would have thought was most of the UK breeding population. It appears that the majority of the trees have now been removed with the emphasis being on encouraging bitterns etc, to a land now turned into wet lands. This year only two pairs of orioles nested. Obviously these facts need substantiating but if true this to

me is a dreadful situation.

To sacrifice one very rare and localised species in favour of the bittern I think is close to criminal. The warden was pleased to say that they now have marsh harriers on site, what joy.

K Weeks, Norfolk

## More Magpies

We received today the acknowledgement of my mother's recent donation and are delighted to see the use to which it will be put. My wife and I left the RSPB in protest at their absurd and illogical attitudes towards corvidae many years ago. We arrived in Sheffield 13 in October 1975. Our garden abounded with songbirds. There were a fair few cats locally and only one magpie - and that was a pet. Today, almost all the songbirds have gone although blackbirds and sparrows do tolerably. The cat population has remained the same or possibly has fallen.

Grey squirrels are now moving in but cannot be blamed for past depredations as they were entirely absent until about 4 years ago.

Habitat loss? - Negligible.

Pesticides? - Hardly, in an urban area, There is only one identifiable factor: This postcode and the ones adjoining are now wall to wall magpie territory!

The local council refuses to cull although the officer himself for this area has told me privately that he wants a massive cull of magpies.

L Arnott, Sheffield

## North Wales

1. Not a single cuckoo heard from this house this year, for the first time.
2. One dead lesser spotted woodpecker, newly killed by probably a Sparrowhawk, on our drive (Mar 09)
3. A woodlark's nest with 8 eggs (May 08) hopefully hatched!
4. Seldom do we hear Tawny Owls. 10 years ago we were surrounded.
5. All our swallows nesting in the car park, as usual, were devoured by magpies (May 08). Both nests, and including parents, killed. Nothing but a few feathers on the car roof (not cats!) One nest and brood raised and flown this year.
6. Too many bullfinches! In April 09 eating fruit buds and yesterday eating poppy seed heads in the garden.

H Cadogan, North Wales

## Rubbish!

We are on an organic farm with near 10miles of hedges. I have lived all my life in this area and on this farm and have always taken an interest in birdlife right from my schooldays in the 40s and we were ➤

➤ encouraged to help keep the magpies and hawks down. Around this area birdlife kept up remarkably well until the very late 80s. Starting slowly at first but sadly now there have been so many decreases in numbers of many species and the last 5-10years have been the worst of all; enough to give me heartbreak.

Why should this be so when farming has become probably more habitat friendly than was so some 30years ago. What are the reasons for these declines?

For nearly 50years now, and for good reason, hawks and also badgers are protected by law but now their numbers are many times in excess of those in the 40s and 50s. Together with other predators the damage they do is shocking and disgraceful and vast.

I have seen so much; I mention just one: the Song Thrush. We used to have so many. Sparrowhawks and magpies have had them all. Bunches of feathers all over the farm. Lack of food, nesting sites and chemicals the 'experts' tell us – Rubbish! Bumble bees, wasps and hedgehogs – all the things with low down nests; all due to far too many badgers. They won't listen; they don't want to listen to us ones who see it all out in the fields everyday. Anonymous.

## Crows and Rooks

My personal observations regarding predation fall totally in line with those of SBS, with a couple of exceptions; the Carrion Crow and the Rook. Yes, of course a crow or rook would certainly pick off an egg of fledgling from open ground or easily accessible nest but they do not, however, systematically and intelligently work through hedgerows and bushes raiding nests in the same way as other members of the crow family; namely magpies and jays.

I whole heartedly support the call for an urban cull of magpies (I exclude jays because of their relative low numbers) but not crows or rooks – they do more good than harm.

T Wilson, Essex

## Big Birds?

I was marking an exam paper when I heard a terrific hullabaloo from two swallows frantically flying around my study, trying to fend off a young magpie. It flew away a short distance on my arrival – probably to seek shelter with its siblings in their noisy nest.

Every year two swallows nest in my stable and produce at least two broods. This year the pair arrived in April and set about the nest – I have neither seen, nor heard any young birds yet (June 09.) When I checked the nest last night the female was sitting on it and I have even left the horses inside to deter the magpies from entering the stable. Magpies are breeding healthily on my land and I believe have lived off the eggs of most of the smaller species because the only

fledglings I have seen are sparrows – and these nest in the barn which cannot be accessed by the 'pies.'

My garden used to be full of robins, finches, tits – you name it. But they have either been driven away or have bred unsuccessfully. I have invested in feeders with protective surrounds and would be glad of any advice on how to get rid of big birds. Would it help to cut down trees to hedge size to prevent them nesting?

D Astbury, Wales

## South Lakeland

Up here, in our corner of South Lakeland, we haven't had a single sighting of that elegant acrobat, the swift, this year.

Throughout our 25 years in the Lake District the swift has been an unforgettable part of village life especially in the late summer when family parties would streak through the narrow byways, screaming like packs of excited school children freshly released from the classroom. House martins and swallows are also well down in numbers – as they were last year – whilst the curlew, usually here in dozens, is sparse. As far as the latter are concerned I lay the blame at the door of the deadly chick - stealing raptors – buzzards, peregrines and sparrow hawks. However all is not doom and gloom. Unlike many parts of the British Isles we do host a thriving house sparrow population. When we moved to our present home, 10 years ago, I fixed three fibreglass house martin nests under the eaves of the house. These were instantly claimed by feisty spadgers who belligerently refuse to leave throughout the year. More good news is that blackbirds have had a hugely successful spring with two broods commonplace. The Dawn Chorus alone makes a visit to Hawkshead worthwhile – provided you can hear it above the jackdaws' racket! Reducing this latter pest's numbers is a problem. My teenage son, with air rifle, and the family's Siamese cat do their best but we have literally hundreds. However, I hastily add that I never want to see this species with its smart grey cape and stunning aqua marine eye approach the endangered list.

Re. the Siamese. Please don't be too horrified. So far he has slaughtered only his larger prey, those which are likely to give him a battering like Jack. Smaller creatures he presents whole and they can be rescued and released unharmed. But why, I hear you cry, ever contemplate a feline? For starters, Siamese are wonderful companions and secondly the unsavory truth is, like all rural locations, our village has its resident rats, even if seldom seen. Charlie Moon – that's our four – legged exterminator's name – is the ultimate deterrent. I note that one of your reproduced articles suggested bell collars for cats. This is something we've used but they have only lasted days before mysteriously disappearing so we must try this also mentioned "sonic alert", whatever that is. Answers to the editor please.

E Miller, Hawkshead

## Predators have won

Due to a serious medical condition I am giving up fighting for what needs changing in this country and in the case of declining songbirds, farmland and woodland birds all I can say is that predators have won at the end of the day here.

Most of the birds bred well this year but predators soon made a serious impact upon numbers and it wasn't just the young birds being taken but nesting mothers. Rook numbers have trebled here and there is no sign of any management. There certainly needs a cull of these birds as there isn't enough food around for them, only smaller birds, frogs and boglife. I forgot cherries off large old trees. Magpie numbers have increase also and they need a partial cull as do buzzards and sparrowhawks. Grey squirrel certainly need a cull as they breed like rats. Last year visiting mallards didn't do well with the loss of the older male with the dislocated beak. This year the female had fourteen ducklings under the heather at the back of the bungalow. When taking than to the pool they were soon pounced upon by several rooks. The next day all were gone. It isn't a trap that I need to cut their numbers down, but a machine gun! When writing to Natural England over the rook problem here; I get no reply. Jim Paice, Shadow Minister for Agriculture agrees that rook numbers are a problem. For the first time in 3years we heard the cuckoo not too far away. I was pleased to find some swallows nesting close to my fields here whilst at my other field in Bewdley three nests in the shelters were the same as last year.

However, there seemed a lot of young flying over this field. Chaffinch numbers were down but many had the foot virus. I believe long tailed tits do well as they move around and don't get picked off so much. For the last 3years starlings have nested nearby in order to get food here and then move on. Treecreepers, wrens and nuthatches have not been successful with breeding this year. The blackbirds did well but few remain. The pair of jays had one young as did the greater spotted woodpeckers. The pair of thrushes disappeared but they may have been short of snails and slugs as the tow hedgehogs have come here to live and have been trapped on a few occasions eating the fat balls in the traps. The hedgehogs have been walking about in the daylight – probably after food.

On the squirrel issue, we definitely need a cull of these. We have been infested with them in recent years. In the last few months we have dispatched 40. Over the last 6years we have dispatched 250. They breed like rats and do considerable damage to the trees, bulbs and of course, nests. The RSPCA condemning culling squirrels is not on as our economy is in a bad state to waste millions on producing a vaccine and what about a vaccine for TB in cattle. This is more important.

H Wooldridge, Worcestershire