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SongBird Survival newsletter

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Welcome to our Summer newsletter

We are now fully established in our new office in Diss at
**Unit P2A, Forge Business Centre, Upper Rose Lane,
Palgrave, Diss, Norfolk, IP22 1AP.**
Tel: 01379 641715 .

**We also have a new PO Box No 311, Diss, Norfolk,
IP22 1WW.**

IT HAS BEEN AN EVENTFUL 3 months for SBS with the
announcement of Prof. Roy Brown's work for us on mam-
malian predation of mainly farmland songbirds. His conclu-
sions that both the Grey Squirrel and Feral Cats are the two
worst offenders and certainly do a great deal more damage
to nesting birds in the countryside than has been supposed
in the past. Charles Clover wrote a good half page item in the
Telegraph about this work that was also picked up by the
Express and Mail as well as by some local papers. Earlier
Richard Mabey had attacked SBS in the BBC Wildlife maga-
zine in April on the sparrow hawk issue and although they
allowed us a right to reply this was only in the form of a let-
ter deeply buried in the latest issue of the magazine, and not
a full article. They also edited the letter with a trite headline
to ensure that SBS is not shown in the best light. It is not dif-
ficult to see which side of the debate the BBC is on !

Both these items generated a certain amount of contro-
versy and incidentally , also generated a good number of new
members for us as well. Both these articles and the follow up
correspondence are included in this newsletter. Prof. Roy
Brown's full review of the mammal predation of songbirds
has just been published and has been put on to our website

for anyone who wants to print or download it. The associ-
ated press release about its publication is also on the web-
site and has been sent to around 200 journalists and many
other organisations and individuals, including MP's and mem-
bers of the House of Lords. Anyone without access to the
internet can have a full copy sent to them by the office and
there is also a shortened version printed in this newsletter.
Obviously in order to keep down costs we would prefer
people to obtain the full 20 page colour version from the
website. Please pass this on to any journalists or people in
public life who might be useful to us.

This is the first major scientific review of predation we
have published and I believe a very important one. However
we are also in discussion with other scientific partners about
new studies of avian predation of songbirds as well, and will
shortly be making an announcement about this work.

We are now well into this year's show season and the
Royal Norfolk Show was a great success with extremely
good weather and a good deal of interest in SBS. Our next
show is the 3 day CLA Game Fair, this year at Broadlands in
Hampshire, starting on Friday 28th July. All the remaining
shows that we will have a stand at this year are detailed on
the back of the newsletter. Please note the Wayland Show has
been cancelled due to the heatwave!

**Thank you for your continuing support,
Michael Hope
Editor and Trustee**

SBS MAMMAL REPORT IN THE NEWS

DAILY TELEGRAPH (INC PICTURE)

DAILY MAIL

EXPRESS ON SUNDAY

SCOTSMAN

METRO (INC PICTURE)

PRESS ASSOCIATION NATIONAL NEWSWIRE

FARMERS GUARDIAN (FRONT PAGE)

(NORTHERN EDITION INC PICTURE)

WESTERN DAILY PRESS

IRISH NEWS

BELFAST NEWS LETTER

DERBY EVENING TELEGRAPH

BBC TODAY PROGRAMME

BBC RADIO WALES

BBC RADIO SCOTLAND

SUMMARY OF PROFESSOR ROY BROWN'S WORK FOR SONGBIRD SURVIVAL ON MAMMAL PREDATION OF SONGBIRDS

Professor Roy Brown, School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1 7HX There is little doubt that some farm and song bird species have declined in recent years. Many factors are involved, including some 'modern' agricultural practices, although these have largely moderated through greater understanding and the development of agri-environmental management schemes. Other factors, such as the problems encountered by migratory birds, have been acknowledged but the role of increased predation has not been taken as seriously as research over the last 20 years suggests it should. There is the reality that current policies towards land use and selective species conservation have favoured the expansion of top predators at the expense of other groups. There is much current debate about the role of raptors, such as Sparrow Hawks, in the reduced success of smaller farm birds but the evidence that mammals have a major role to play has largely been overlooked, even though there is more quantified evidence for fur causing the feathers to fly rather than the feathers causing feathers to fly!

In April 2005 the charity SongBird Survival (SBS) requested the author to carry out a review of the evidence, much of which is as yet unpublished, of the impact mammal predation has on farm bird populations. The review was carried out against the background argument that increased predation, especially involving common farm active mammals, is a major if not dominant factor in the decline of farmland birds. However unpalatable the conflict between mammal and bird activity may be to some interests it is vital that all of the real causes of songbird decline are identified so that effective remedial action may be taken. The report was completed this year and this article is a brief synopsis of the main findings.

The general results are based on over 45 separate studies, falling into two groups. The first group of 22 studies consists of multiple theme investigations over set periods ranging from three to eight years. These were mainly set up to investigate the biodiversity impacts of different farming systems in England, Scotland and Wales. Data was collected from 90 farms within the 22 groups and many of these were paired to collect data on organic versus conventional (Good Agricultural Practice) Farms. The second group of 25 studies relates to single area assessments over periods ranging from 3 to 32 years and a number of these are still running. Individual studies were carried out to deal with specific issues, such as the direct impact of one species on another (e.g. hedgehog activity on the success of Wren nesting activity) and are not necessarily directly comparable with each other in terms of method. Information has been collected on the interactions between predatory/scavenging mammals, the target bird populations and background environmental data. Whilst some of the studies were based on observation of change others involved deliberate manipulation such as the control or encouragement of predators. Apart from actual population assessments by different counting and marking methods direct analysis of feeding remains and other signs of activity, using methods developed by the author over the last 40 years, have been used to quantify both predator and prey responses. In summary the effects of 10 common predatory/scavenging mammals on populations of 15 farm birds were assessed. Obviously not all species were involved in every component of the study. Three aspects, illustrated by the case studies below, were investigated. These were the effects of predation on adult birds, the effects on nesting/fledgling success and finally the impact of disturbance caused by intense predator activity.

An example of predation on adult birds

comes from a 7 year Mink and Reed Bunting Study. In two adjacent flooded flash areas the populations of Reed Buntings and Mink were monitored. One area was completely Mink proof, the other was open. In mid study Mink colonised the open area and the Reed Bunting population fell by 80%. There was no corresponding dip in the Mink exclusion area. The mink were controlled and the following year the open area Reed Bunting density was on a par with the exclusion area. The impact of predation on nesting success is illustrated by a 10 year assessment of Grey Squirrel and Blackbird activity. In a wooded/high hedgerow density area with low grade arable and pasture mix on over 700ha a series of Grey Squirrel density/Blackbird brood success studies were carried out. In the sectors where there were more than 4 Grey Squirrels per km² the average Blackbird brood success was less than 1 per km². Where Grey Squirrel densities were below 1 per km² the average successful brood number was 19 per km². One disturbance study involving frequency of late winter feeding visits by Greenfinches to fixed feeding stations and in the presence of different levels of Cat activity generated telling results. Over a 12 year period the intensity of bird activity, monitored by number of visits per hour, was recorded. Changing levels of 'cat presence' were also quantified. The first four years of the study saw an increase in cat activity, followed by a drastic fall as control measures were introduced. At the start of the study the average hourly Greenfinch visit rate was 15, but this declined to less than 5 by year four, the peak of 'cat presence'. Five years later with very low levels of cat activity the hourly visit frequency back to 18. Parallel fluctuations in Greenfinch populations on the two farms involved have not distorted the results. The factual summation of all studies is illustrated in tables 1 and 2.

It is important to keep a perspective on

Table 1. Number of Bird Species Subject to different intensities of Mammalian Predation

	Hedgehog	Brown Rat	Grey Squirrel	Mink	Weasel	Stoat	Otter	Badger	Fox	Cat
Severe Negative	6	6	13	3	0	0	0	1	0	14
Negative	8	7	1	6	11	8	1	4	8	1
Neutral	1	2	1	6	4	5	14	10	7	0

Table 2. Number of Mammalian Predators severely affecting each species

Predator Species	Bird Species
5	Skylark, Meadow Pipit
4	Reed Bunting, Corn Bunting
3	Wren, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Chaffinch, Greenfinch
2	Dunnock, Robin, Whitethroat, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Yellowhammer

the different factors involved in Songbird decline, as with other ecological changes. The results of the review were not unexpected, but the severity of impact under some circumstances was. In terms of the impact there are a number of key conclusions.

Cats and Grey Squirrels are very widespread and have the ability to range over most habitats and nesting layers from treetops to ground level. Indeed, Grey Squirrels have been recorded pre-dating nests on the ground at over 500m above sea level and more than 3km from the nearest woodland/scrubby areas. These two are the main universal mammalian predators and their impact has increased dramatically over the last 20 years in rural and semi-rural situations. Farm and garden birds have suffered. Predation rates increasing.

- Stoats are moderate/heavy predators on several ground and hedge bottom nesting species. In the farmland context the impact tends to be localised.

- Hedgehogs are locally very heavy predators on some hedge bottom and

ground nesting species. Predation rates increasing.

- Mink and Weasel predate a range of species. Intense levels are localised, but may be devastating, especially in the case of Mink.

- Brown Rats are heavy/moderate predators on most bird species. Increasing Rat populations are impacting on nesting success of some species.

- Badgers are mainly scavengers as far as farm songbirds are concerned, but may have a major impact as predators on ground nesting birds on rough grazing/moorland edge.

- Otters may predate, but in the context of this study are mainly scavengers and their impact on farm song birds is largely neutral.

- Grey Squirrels have been recorded pre-dating 93% of all hedge and woodland edge nests in areas of intense activity.

- Intense combined Sparrow Hawk and Grey Squirrel activity may result in a

100% breeding failure of all perching bird species present with up to an 85% loss of adult birds.

The ratio of bird to mammal predation recorded in this review, being aware that raptor activity was recorded in some studies only and then as a secondary objective, ranged from 35:65 to 75:25.

On the basis of these ratios mammal activity accounts for between a third and three quarters of all predation losses. It is accepted that there are other factors involved in terms of songbird decline but the evidence clearly indicates that predation is a significant factor and that the impact of mammals has been largely overlooked, especially in the rural context as some work has been carried out in urban and suburban areas. The Conclusion is that increased loss of adults, nesting failure and general disturbance, linked to the arithmetic increase of both feathered and furry predators, are major factors in the decline of farm birds. A similar review to this needs to be carried out for the avian predators and then a programme



of experimental predator management involving all key interests and focused on both mammal and birds should be undertaken on selected holdings. It may be that predation is a minor element

overall, although the results so far suggest that is not the case. Without quantifying this and placing predation within the overall ecological matrix we do not have sufficient information to inform

future policy decisions designed to manage the balance of prey and predator (fur and feathers) on the rapidly changing agricultural landscape of 21st Century Britain.

SUMMARY OF DETAILED INTERACTION STUDIES CONTAINED IN 'A REVIEW OF THE IMPACT MAMMALIAN PREDATORS ON FARM SONGBIRD POPULATION DYNAMICS'

R W Brown – November 2005

Predator	Bird Species Involved
Hedgehog	Skylark, Wren
Stoat	Skylark
Mink	Reed Bunting
Grey Squirrel	Blackbird, White throat, Robin
Brown Rat	Blue Tit
Badger (scavenging)	Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Titmice, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Yellowhammer
Cat	Yellowhammer, Greenfinch, Dunnock, Blackbird, Blue Tit, Chaffinch

Did you see?

A collection of newspaper cuttings and letters from recent publications

Voracious grey squirrel 'is greatest threat to songbirds'

By Charles Clover, Environment Editor of The Daily Telegraph

The grey squirrel and the domestic cat are preventing the recovery of Britain's songbirds, which were devastated by intensive farming and the removal of hedges in the post-war years, says a new report.

The report says that in areas of high grey squirrel density, 93 per cent of small bird nests are raided

Of the two introduced predators, the grey squirrel kills more young songbirds than the cat.

The findings of the report, commissioned by the charity, SongBird Survival, are likely to challenge the received wisdom about the decline in songbird populations since the 1950s and what has prevented many from recovering over the past 15 years when farmers have been using fewer chemicals and participating in green farming schemes.

The author of the report, Prof Roy Brown, of Birkbeck, University of London, estimates that overall some 180 million adult songbirds, or their eggs and

young are killed by mammals every year - chiefly squirrels, cats and rats.

That is out of an estimated natural population of 260 million of the main 15 songbird species - blackbird, song thrush, blue tit, great tit, robin, skylark, meadow pipit, wren, dunnock, whitethroat, greenfinch, chaffinch, yellowhammer, reed bunting and corn bunting.

The report says that in areas of high grey squirrel density, 93 per cent of small bird nests are raided. Where this is combined with sparrow hawk activity, it can result in 100 per cent breeding failure and a loss of 85 per cent of adult songbirds.

Prof Brown, who reviewed a wealth of information on the causes of songbird deaths said yesterday: "It looks as if 60 per cent of all breeding activity is being knocked out by predation.

"I would say the problem is now predation - on a par with other factors that are still there."

Prof Brown accepts the results of the many research projects that have shown that the principle reason for the decline in the farmland birds over the past 40 years was agricultural intensification and

the removal of hedges.

Yet he believes that it is wrong to blame the failure of songbirds to recover over the past 10-15 years exclusively on agriculture, at a time when green farming schemes and lower pesticide applications have done much to improve the food available for songbirds. He wants predation, by both mammals and birds such as sparrowhawks and kestrels, to be studied as a possible explanation.

He said: "If you've got somebody who is sick, who is diagnosed as having cancer, diabetes and a mild form of anaemia, you've got to deal with the cancer first, but if you don't deal with the other two the patient won't get better."

Prof Brown said the grey squirrel has adapted to the British environment and there is a very wide range of food it will take compared with the vegetarian red squirrel.

He said: "I've raised some questions which need to be looked at much more closely. If predators are having as bad an effect as that, then the answer is to look at doing something more systematic to restore the balance, certainly with mammals and possibly with birds of prey."

His study is likely to re-focus attention on the Government's abandonment of widespread programmes for controlling the North American grey squirrel, which has pushed the native red squirrel into extinction across most of mainland England.

Grahame Madge, of the Royal

Society for the Protection of Birds, said: "Grey squirrel predation is something we at the RSPB - and the British Trust for Ornithology, English Nature and the Forestry Commission - are beginning to think is a problem.

"We know the problems for some birds - such as the corn bunting,

yellowhammer and grey partridge is very specific to do with agricultural change and pesticides.

"But for hawfinch and a number of other species, the grey squirrel is one factor that has been identified as part of the problem."

SBS DIRECTOR IN A TWITCH

For some years now I have been in the habit of "twitching" not, I might say, in the manner of many who devote weeks to travelling around desperately trying to add to their "tick lists". In my case, with two very old friends with whom I meet up in some pre-chosen part of the UK for a 24 hour bird spot - and yes, it is fun. We do not take ourselves or our scores too seriously. The idea is to do a 24 hour bird count from midnight to midnight. We have "done" Norfolk, Suffolk, the Lake District, Outer Hebrides and this year, 2006, Hampshire was due for our undivided attention. The party consists of a retired civil servant, a Suffolk farmer and me - a retired farmer from North Norfolk. A lavish mid-day lunch is de rigueur and considerable jollity in the evening with quite a lot of leg-pulling - "Three Men in a Twitch" Call it rather childish but we enjoy ourselves.

So far Norfolk holds the record - 100 species in 24 hours. Could Hampshire compete? Incidentally, the Hebrides, though fantastic for quantity and ornithological drama, was never likely to be species rich - too much unvaried habitat of bog, rock, sea coast and water! Suffolk ran Norfolk pretty close; the Lake District respectable but not in contention.

Predators 'biggest threat to bird life'

From Farmers Guardian 02 June 2006

OUT-DATED supposition about farming practices are threatening targets set by agri-environment schemes to reverse declines in farmland birds.

Findings from a report, commissioned by the charity, SongBird Survival, have revealed that increases in the numbers of predators such as grey squirrels and domestic cats are the biggest threat to farmland bird populations.

But, long-held beliefs that agricultural practices are responsible for a decline in

So Hampshire it was on 6th May, a little early perhaps and the weather forecast was bad - rain! HQ was established at Bill's cottage near Winchester. Reveille was at 4am! Out in the car and a quiet stop to get the owls and early cock pheasants, then a dawn dash to watercress beds and a local lake. Lots of useful spots but the elusive grey wagtail refused to be spotted. Then on to the high arable rolling farmlands on the chalk to put farmland songbirds "into the bag". Yours sincerely (not the best of birdsong hearers, something to do with suffering from "Norfolk Ear") managed to find the cirl bunting - much needed as a matter of pride (cirl buntings no longer frequent Hampshire - they need small fields and warm, south-facing rough hedgerows).

A hasty cooked breakfast and then we plunged into the New Forest. What a wonderful mix of habitats: heath, forest, ponds, mire - goldcrests, all the tits (except the cole tit, which eluded us strangely), buzzards, snipe, ????? - the usual you would expect but with the rain now falling, dartford warblers proved elusive, hiding in the bottom of furze and refusing to perch as they usually do. Infuriating!

songbirds on farmland have resulted in unachievable targets being set for Government green farming schemes.

There are now concerns that the agri-environmental schemes such as ELS and HLS, targeting a reverse in the declining songbird population by 2019, will fail unless action is taken to control predators.

The report identifies feral cats and grey squirrels as the main mammalian predators of songbirds because of their ability to reach habitats and nesting layers from tree top to ground. It says that high grey squirrel densities have resulted in up to 93 per cent decrease in woodland and hedgerow nesting species.

The mid-day picnic was consumed with gusto - noting, while we relaxed, the huge quantity of carrion crows endlessly patrolling the forest, doubtless decimating songbird nests. Why can't the new squire of the National Park train its "rangers" to operate Larsen Traps? But, as always, the public would, I suppose, interfere and object. What a tragedy that conservation bodies do not make a better job of education in this respect.

We then dashed down to the salt-marshes and Solent coast at Key Haven - gulls, terns, even eider duck added to the list and, the spot of the day, an Arctic Skua moving off-shore - late, heading north on migration. Cetti's warblers, reed and sedge warblers - no reed tits, but a nice mixed bag to round off our day. Run back to a jolly dinner where 2 bottles of claret were demolished and three tired twitchers rolled into bed.

The score? 93 species, respectable but not beating the Norfolk total of 100.

Never mind, please make your suggestions for next years expedition, to the SBS office, and we'll report next year. What about Wales and that ornithological welcome in the valleys!

In addition, the threat of predators is highlighted by the fact that while farmland bird numbers have fallen by 45 per cent, woodland bird numbers have fallen by 75 per cent and upland numbers by 90 per cent.

Songbird Survival spokesman Robert Middleditch said groups such as the RSPB were ignoring the issue of predators: "It is too easy to blame farming. A lot of people have felt they had good biodiversity but were still losing a lot of the songbirds on their farm. We can now see clear evidence that increased levels of predator activity have a negative impact on songbird and other farm bird populations. And a much bigger factor

than farming, which has been unfairly blamed," he said.

Mr Middleditch also dismissed theories about a natural balance within wildlife. "We've never subscribed to the natural balance theory because increases in the numbers of feral cats and the introduction of grey squirrels have upset any natural balance we had," he said.

DAMN THESE TREE RATS!

by Esther Rantzen 15th June 2006

PREDATOR: The grey squirrel is not the cuddly creature it's made out to be. How quickly love can turn to hate. I remember once thinking that grey squirrels were sweet little things, animated cuddly toys, their dark, oval eyes, pricked ears and fluffy tails.

I loved to see them bounding through the autumn woods, or nibbling nuts in the children's zoo. That image was based on a distant relationship, across a park or behind a fence. Not any more.

As I sit at my desk today, I am glaring eyeball to eyeball at a grey squirrel crouched on my sill, his nose pressed to my window, unafraid, challenging me to a personal duel.

He knows he's safe, so he pays no attention when I clap my hands and stamp my feet. He has the Government and the RSPCA on his side, and he knows he's won.

Last week, in Sprowston in Norfolk, pensioner Roy Hill was threatened by his local RSPCA inspector for daring to take on the squirrels that infest his garden.

He had been humanely trapping these revolting pests and taking them to local woodlands, when an inspector turned up on his doorstep and warned Roy that if he caught and released any more grey squirrels, he'd be prosecuted and could be liable to 'an unlimited fine'.

What on earth was the poor man supposed to do? Invite the wretched things in for tea and biscuits? Does the RSPCA know what a nuisance these little blighters can be?

My own loathing for grey squirrels goes back seven years. It was early spring, and I was admiring a crab apple tree at the end of our garden. Each April, it was covered with pink and white blossom, and by September it was covered with scarlet fruit.

That spring I noticed a grey squirrel

"With the fall in gamekeeper numbers since the Second World War, no-one is controlling the predators anymore," he said.

Responding to the report's findings, The RSPB said predators were not a threat to farmland birds: "There are some concerns about grey squirrel predators affecting woodland birds but not

farmland birds," said RSPB spokesman Grahame Madge.

"There may be one or two isolated cases where control of predators maybe needed but generally, the best way to reverse the decline in numbers is through land management techniques," he said.

climbing through the branches, pausing at each fat bud, and busily chewing. Could it be eating the spring leaves and blossoms even before the poor things had unfolded?

I had always thought squirrels ate nuts; they certainly did in Beatrix Potter stories. But Potter's hero, Squirrel Nutkin, was a red squirrel — a British squirrel with genteel British manners.

Grey squirrels are a brutish, raucous North American import, and it seems they eat buds, shoots and bulbs. They my crab apple tree — its branches were bare all summer and it never recovered.

I should have declared zero tolerance then, because a criminal ignored is a criminal encouraged. So it proved.

Next spring, the squirrel moved from the end of the garden into our territory and dug up the bulbs on our terrace.

This was during the dark days of February, when only the promise of crocuses and daffodils keep hope alive. One evening we found upturned pots and scattered earth, but no bulbs left.

My late husband, Desmond Wilcox, declared war. He bought a humane trap, baited it with peanuts and put the cage beside the pots. It worked: in the morning, we found a raging squirrel inside. Interestingly, its fluffy charm had disappeared. Now it was all shrieks and bared teeth.

Desmond put on gloves and carried the trap to the boot of his car. Then we set off for a family Valentine's dinner at an elegant restaurant, so smart we were in evening dress and black tie.

To reach the restaurant, we had to drive across a park several miles from our home. Desmond stopped, got out of the car and went round to the boot.

There was a squirrel shriek and a baritone howl. Desmond had opened the trap and the squirrel took two steps out, turned, and with a light of fury in its

eyes raced back towards him and ran up his sleeve.

Desmond hopped around shaking his arm violently, the squirrel let go and trotted away. Desmond's tuxedo never smelt the same again.

It was at this point we realised there is something demonic in the grey squirrel's DNA. But at least we'd got rid of it.

For the next year, we were squirrel-free. Then they came back, bringing their friends and relatives. They've now killed two more trees in our neighbour's garden, a gorgeous magnolia and a laburnum. Laburnums are famously toxic, so I hoped for revenge, but squirrel stomachs, it seems, are hardy.

My wisteria, which every year bears thick clusters of bloom, was naked this May. I wasn't surprised. All April, that blasted squirrel had run up and down its boughs, pausing at a bud, nibbling and moving on.

Each time I saw it, I banged my window and shouted, but was it bothered? Not a bit of it. It sat there, utterly unfazed, like some teenage delinquent.

Then came the final straw: We were burgled. By a squirrel.

This week, on the hottest day, I opened our kitchen door to create a draught. My daughter was sitting at the table, reading. A squirrel walked in, jumped up to the fruit bowl, grabbed a peach and strolled out again.

But what could I do? After this week's RSPCA case, I couldn't get our old trap out again.

So I tried the official route. I contacted my local council and asked if they'd pop in and deal with my vermin, but they said they could do nothing unless there is an official squirrel epidemic and they announce a cull.

That, now, is our only hope. We have plenty of supporters for a cull. In March, Lord Peel in the House of Lords revealed the damage done by the grey

squirrel to the diminishing red squirrel population and to woodland birds.

Grey squirrels don't just steal peaches, they eat birds' eggs and nestling birds. They also carry a pox to which they are immune but which is caught by red squirrels and kills them.

Sadly, for our cause, Lord Bach, acting for the Government, disputed the evidence against the grey squirrel which he said was purely anecdotal. He should come and sit in my kitchen.

Lord Peel is undeterred. He has Europe on his side. In the past two years, he has asked nearly 30

Parliamentary questions as part of the ESI (the European Squirrel Initiative).

He hopes 'to encourage the Government to take firmer and more effective action to deal with the problem of the grey squirrel'.

And for once, Scotland is on our side. The MSP Murdo Fraser popped up on Radio 4's Today programme this week to argue for a cull, suggesting a bounty of £2-£3 should be placed on the head (or rather, the tail) of each grey squirrel caught and shot.

Inevitably, that roused the animal lobby. Andrew Tyler, of Animal Aid, was horrified, calling it an 'ugly and demented scheme'. Clearly, Mr Tyler has never

been threatened by an ugly and demented grey squirrel.

But I feel the tide is at last moving in my direction. So come on, gardeners. It's time we buried any sentimental thoughts about little grey cuddly toys with big round eyes and fluffy tails.

Grey squirrels are tree rats, no more, no less. They spread disease, they kill red squirrels, they nick my peaches and kill my trees — it's time we took up arms.

And if we can't trap them without risking a visit from the RSPCA, I say shoot the lot of 'em. What do you think? Are grey squirrels a menace or a

Cuttings from Shooting Times

04/05/06 – 06/07/06:

Follows article by Robin Page 04/05/06

Going for a Songbird

Robin page is right to say populations of many wildlife species are under threat because the Government and conservation bodies are unwilling to take the necessary action - control of predators ("Killing the countryside with kindness"! 4 May). But there is one wildlife charity, Songbird Survival, that has been advocating exactly the principle he so aptly describes. It also recognises the benefits shooting brings to the countryside through sound habitat management and predator control. Through the work of that organisation many more people now wish to see positive action through measured control of predators, rather than the "leave it all to nature" policies of the major wildlife societies.

For details visit www.songbird-survival.org.uk or tel 01379 641715

G. Morris

Suffolk

Follows ST Debate, Tony Jackson/
Dr Mark Avery

Songbird Deception 30/06/06:

Writing in defence of sparrowhawks (time to control sparrowhawks, 22 June), RSPB director of conservation Dr Mark Avery mentioned three studies that seem to show that predation by sparrowhawks does not affect songbird numbers.

The woodland studies, doubtless Wytham Wood and Bookham Common, have been effectively

debunked by Songbird Survival, there being no fewer than 13 scientific objections to the RSPB's conclusions on the first-mentioned. It is similar with Bookham Common, where, for example, the study is based on good records of songbird numbers, but only very sketchy references to sparrowhawk sightings. The Songbird Survival leaflet, *Have we been misled?*, details the manifold faults in these studies.

Those who are familiar with the elusive nature of sparrowhawks will immediately see the weakness of Dr Avery's third example, a study by the British Trust for Ornithology. Here the field information depends totally upon whether the observer saw, or did not see, a sparrowhawk once during 10 visits in early summer. The assumption is that, if recorded as "present", it is causing significant predation; if "absent", there has been no predation. The field data was fed into a computer then received statistical manipulation to yield the results mentioned by Dr Avery.

Commissioned by Songbird Survival, Professor Roy Brown's recent survey into mammalian predation of songbirds, gave very interesting results. He found that, where there is a high grey squirrel density combined with sparrowhawk activity, this can result in 100% breeding failure and loss of 85% of adult birds. Squirrels do not kill adult birds, so it is surprising that sparrowhawk numbers have declined in view of the food scarcity that the bird has caused?

Copies of "*Have we been misled?*" can be found at www.songbird-survival.org.uk or tel 01379 641715

Gavin Morris

Songbird Survival

Predator Problems 06/07/06:

The Scottish Raptor Study Groups take issue with Tony Jackson's views on licensed control of sparrowhawks (ST debate, 22 June.) For a start, what criteria would Mr Jackson use in deciding how many sparrowhawks should be killed, where it should occur and in what circumstances?

All serious studies of sparrowhawk predation of which I am aware have shown the sparrowhawk to be a classic example of a species whose numbers are governed by numbers of its prey and not vice versa. In many (perhaps most) situations, if bird populations are to remain stable many individuals must die - from whatever cause - between one breeding season and the next. In essence, a consequence of sparrowhawk predation is that, instead of dying mainly in winter, from food shortage, for example, potential prey species die during all seasons and largely from predation.

In linking sparrowhawk predation alongside that of grey squirrels and cats, Mr Jackson goes against basic precepts of biodiversity conservation. These precepts would aim for reduction or elimination of predation by two introduced species (grey squirrels and domestic/feral cats) but would allow that by native species (the sparrowhawk) in its rightful place in the natural scheme of things.

Patrick Stirling-Aird

Secretary, Scottish Raptor Study Groups

Richard Mabey Column in BBC Wildlife Magazine, April 2006.

Sparrowhawks are often blamed for the decline in songbirds, but such views show no understanding of predator-prey relationships.

I got the news purely by chance: a barn owl was roosting at my old lodgings, down in the valley. We found the barn floor covered with pellets, in that strange, dark lacquering. And three vole skulls in each pellet. From some intuition, or too many hems spent in thrall to these birds, I knew where it would be hunting. So at last light, in the rough paddocks by the river, I put up my glasses, and there it was, hunched on a fencepost. It was a beautiful bird, so gingery we promptly named it Orlando. It also proved to be a mercilessly successful hunter.

Barn owls haven't wintered in this stretch of Norfolk valley for decades, and I hadn't lived that close to one since I was a child. But back home the day went sour. Our paper had as its letter of the day news of a new threat to the owls: they'd become, so the writer complained in graphic detail, the latest victim of that avian hooligan, the sparrowhawk. I felt affronted - not because of any imagined danger to the owls, but because (though they're predators themselves) they'd been dragged in as hapless stool-pigeons in what is an increasingly insidious campaign of demonisation of birds of prey.

When this began back in the early 90s, it seemed a rather sad joke. I remember the Duchess of Devonshire famously proclaiming that 'sparrowhawks use my bird table as if it were the snack bar at the Ritz' (a hint of the kind of possessiveness that has come to mark the campaign.) Now it is a fully fledged movement, organized under the banner of SongBird Survival. Its argument is that spar-

rowhawks are vicious killers, parasites on people's generous feelings towards small birds and responsible for critical collapse in their populations. Their proliferating numbers must be 'controlled' to stop that decline becoming reversible.

I understand the feelings of stewardship that people have towards the birds that grace their gardens. When martins used to nest on my house, I would jump and scream whenever hobbies came near. But I never felt that the predator as doing something wrong, or should in some way be prevented from going about its natural business. Witnessing these ancient and dramatic transactions between out native birds seemed more like a privilege.

The Songbird Survival campaign is not only an indirect threat to our birds of prey, but a chilling example of the way that dangerous myths develop, especially those that scapegoat the 'Evil Intruder' - a process we need to be increasingly alert for against the back round of avian flu. The fact that sparrowhawks and songbirds lived in a dynamic balance for thousands of years before the invention of bird tables and gamekeepers is ignored. 'Balance' must be created by human intervention. The farming writer Robin Page, for instance, argues that the 'normal' population of hawks was once very low, because hen-keepers routinely shot them. But the authority Leslie Brown (*British Birds of Prey*, Collins 1976) estimates a historic population of 75,000 pairs. This plummeted to about 5,000 pairs because of pesticide poisoning in the 1950s and 60s, but has now recovered - though currently declining again - to about 30,000 pairs (*British Trust for Ornithology figures*)*

But mythic victimization has never been much influenced by evidence. The assumption on which Songbird Survival's whole case rests - that there has been a

massive, general slump in songbirds - goes right against the BTO's censuses over the past 40 years, the period of sparrowhawk recovery. Of our 20 commonest songbirds, 10 have increased, including the chaffinch, robin and all the garden tits. Eight have declined, including the skylark and house sparrow. But of this eight, four including the song thrush and Dunnock, have increased over the past ten years. Year by year fluctuations reflect weather conditions here and in Africa, changing agricultural (and gardening) practices and, of course, local predator pressures. But sparrowhawks couldn't drive their food species into irreversible decline without becoming terminally starved themselves. That is the iron law of supply and demand in nature.

I don't personally think that the distress of Songbird Survival members has much to do with the endangerment of species by predation. If so, they would worry about the impact of robins on rare invertebrates, of course that omnivorous bird table favourite, the great spotted woodpecker, on its lesser spotted cousin, of the barn owl on the vole. I think that at its deepest level it is revulsion against trespass. For centuries we have kept the wilderness at arms length, allowing it in only on our terms, clasping the prerogatives of life and death like Roman emperors. Then, at our breakfast tables, this sudden intruder, the barbarian with the incandescent eyes, reminds us that the whole exquisite intricacy of life - ourselves included - depends on the consumption of one organism by another. We would do better to marvel and reflect than judge.

*** Editors Note:** The actual figure on the current BTO website is 40,000 breeding pairs. It is also generally accepted that there are an additional 30,000 unpaired birds.

17th May 2006

The Editor, BBC Wildlife Magazine

Dear Sir

Richard Mabey's attack on SongBird Survival could hardly have got it more wrong. SongBird Survival is most definitely neither anti raptor nor anti sparrowhawk and a brief visit to our website confirms this. Our growing membership is made up of disillusioned bird lovers who believe that the attitude of much of the conservation establishment has contributed to the decline in songbirds.

The aim of this charity is to draw attention to the steep decline in the songbird population over the last forty years, to fund research in this area and to lobby for changes in the law where necessary. We acknowledge that there are a

number of causes for this decline and they all merit investigation.

In particular, though, we believe that the issue of predation in songbird population dynamics is being deliberately avoided by the conservation establishment. The reason is simple. Proof that predation is a problem would inevitably require a strategy for management or control. At present most organisations could never condone this. For decades they have prospered by exploiting the sentimentality of the public and dread losing support or antagonising people, who can be much more realistic than they think.

SongBird Survival refutes Richard Mabey's so called 'iron law'. We have never subscribed to the fantasy that nowadays predators and all prey in this country achieve a balance. This is just wishful thinking and an excuse to do noth-

ing. In our wholly man-made environment pest species proliferate and some species become much more vulnerable. One could even say that we are the acceptable face of animal rights, standing up for their rights, not against man, but against other species which are becoming too dominant.

SongBird Survival believes that our biodiversity is being threatened by the vested interests of some of the conservation bodies. Thanks to our increasing support we are starting to produce evidence that science and good management rather than mere sentiment are needed to save our songbirds.

Yours truly

Nick Forde Trustee, Songbird Survival

TIME TO CONTROL SPARROWHAWKS

For the motion: Tony Jackson, Former 'ST' Editor

In this debate, let me make it absolutely clear that I do not believe there is a case for abandoning, wholesale, the present moratorium on sparrowhawks, but I do suggest that there is sufficient evidence to implement some licensed control.

Why? Well, by the RSPB's own admission, a wide range of song, hedge and field birds are in severe decline, and while a handful of species such as chaffinches, wrens and greater-spotted woodpeckers appear to be enjoying a resurgence in numbers, others, including house sparrows, tree sparrows, starlings and skylarks, are in modest or severe decline.

Even more alarming is the fact that many migratory species, mainly coming to this country from Africa, have shown a persistent pattern of falling numbers. Of the 121 migratory species, making up a high proportion of our species, including birds such as warblers, tree pipits, wheatears, swallows and flycatchers, some 54% are in freefall or even extinct.

It is acknowledged that the decline of so many species of our birds is largely due to changes in agricultural policy, the use of chemicals on the land and the loss of cover. And, in the real world, if we wished to improve the welfare of song and garden birds, every effort would be made to eliminate or at least reduce the causes of mortality.

The RSPB claims that sparrowhawk populations are self-regulating and will decline or increase in relation to the amount of prey available. As its latest figures disclose a 20% decline in sparrowhawks over the past decade, one must assume that this is a sure indication that their prey, normally two birds per day, is also in severe decline.

SQUIRREL THREAT TO SONG- BIRD NUMBERS

*from western Daily Press website
09:50 - 19 July 2006*

It is not just red squirrels that their grey cousins threaten with extinction. According to a new report, grey squirrels are also hurting songbird populations. The study, carried out by Professor Roy Brown for wildlife campaigners SongBird Survival, shows squirrels, cats

Small birds and game birds have to contend with magpies, crows, grey squirrels and adverse farming practices. With a population largely in decline, they surely do not also require the additional slaughter inflicted by sparrowhawks. A decade ago, the British Trust for Ornithology estimated a sparrowhawk population of 34,000 pairs and an equivalent number of single, unmated birds. The total number of birds killed by sparrowhawks was around 107 million annually. Even allowing for a 20% drop in the hawk population, this is still some 85 million sparrow-sized birds. Add this to the 55 million birds killed by cats and there is a sizeable problem.

Turning a blind eye and claiming that populations will self-regulate is the line of least resistance. It is one which is no longer acceptable.

Against the Motion: Dr Mark Avery, RSPB Director of Conservation

Let's start with some facts – sparrowhawks aren't increasing anymore. In fact, there has been a 20% fall in the UK over the past 10 years. While sparrowhawk numbers are thankfully still in much better shape than they were in the dark years of pesticide poisoning 1960s, there is no room for complacency. The last thing they need is calls for culls based on a tissue of little more than prejudice.

Sparrowhawks are specialist bird predators, yet several of the species that they depend upon have stable or increasing populations; robins have been increasing since the 1970s and have increased by 15% in the past 10 years; similarly chaffinches are on the up and woodpigeon have doubled since 1970.

There are, of course, many songbirds

and other mammals may be largely responsible for the falling numbers of songbirds in the countryside. In areas plagued by squirrels, up to 93 per cent of small-bird nests are raided by the rampaging rodents.

This helps explain the dramatic decline in songbirds over the last 30 years, with numbers of bull finches, song thrushes and skylarks falling by between 50 and 75 per cent. In the past, concerned conservationists have blamed

in steep decline, particularly long-distance migrants and farmland specialists. There's an overwhelming amount of evidence collected by a range of organisations including the Game Conservancy Trust, to show that the changes in farming in the second half of the 20th Century were responsible for these losses. Game managers are playing a positive part in restoring some of these farmland habitats.

No major peer-reviewed scientific study has shown that sparrowhawk predation has had a significant impact on bird population trends. A huge study looking at nearly two dozen species of songbird in several hundred places over three decades found no evidence that trends in songbird numbers were influenced by sparrowhawks (or magpies.) Two other studies looked at the impact of sparrowhawks on woodland songbird populations and showed that these remained the same whether sparrowhawks were present or not.

Totting up the number of individual birds killed by sparrowhawks produces a large number, but doesn't even go close to solving a problem for bird populations and avoids acknowledging that predation is part of nature. Many species have evolved over generations to cope with high levels of predation. To the game manager, predation appears as a much bigger problem because his aim is to produce high numbers of birds for the shooting season.

Most of our birds of prey have been on the brink too often in the past. Now is the time to put an end to this sterile debate, condemn the desire to kill them and work together to fix the many genuine problems our wild birds face.

changing farming methods and the use of pesticides.

The charity's Vice-Chairman Robert Middleditch said the study proved that "it is not just modern agricultural practices that are to blame.

"This review provides overwhelming evidence that the population of farmland birds is very sensitive to the levels of some mammal predators, especially where control has ceased."

Host: In the topsy-turvy world of animal lovers, everyone loves Rufy while wanting to wipe out his grey cousin Tufty. I have heard grey squirrels referred to as rats with bushy tails and they have long been accused of threatening reds but scientists, some scientists, now believe they are also having a detrimental affect on our songbirds.

Now, Professor Roy Brown is in our studio. Professor Brown, what do you think they are actually doing?

RB: Well, they are doing two things. They are predated directly sometimes on young birds and they are also raiding nests, and the intensity of activity where you get high populations can be very disturbing to the birds as well. So there are two affects, basically.

Host: So, during the nesting periods, when the birds have either got chicks or eggs, the squirrels are going in there and taking them?

RB: Yes, but not everywhere, I just want to clarify that, because it is quite important, I don't want to give people the impression there are hoards of grey squirrels wiping out the entire population! But where you get intense activity, as with a lot of other small mammals that are predatory, or scavenge, they're having a really big impact on bird populations.

Host: The impact on bird populations, is it just the grey squirrels?

RB: No it's not. There are a whole series of other mammals and other predators (of the feathered kind as well) But, no, there are a whole range actually, things like brown rats, cats and so on that can have a very big impact.

Host: What do you reckon ought to be done about it?

RB: [sigh] This is where we do get into dangerous territory! What I am really advocating, because I've been looking at this for over 30years, and my report is based on a lot of material collected over a number of years and I am conscious that there is, in fact, a variable pattern, and I think what's happening is that mammals in many places are helping to hold

back the recovery of songbird populations. So really what I am asking for, what I'd really like to see is some more detailed work done, and, if need be, perhaps a more open-minded attitude towards predator control.

Host: We hope to bring Professor Stephen Harris of the University of Bristol into the programme shortly. But that's interesting; you are saying that in sites-specific, if there is a high level of grey squirrels, you sometimes get this problem? And it might actually lead people to think 'OK, we might have to reduce the number of grey squirrels?'

RB: To be fair, having said it is site-specific, what I am anxious to do is not to give the impression that this is the only factor involved. I am not trying to take the poor old grey squirrel in isolation or any other specific mammal but there is no two ways about it, from a very wide range of studies, the affects of some of these predated mammal species, particularly grey squirrels and cats, can be very significant and on a pretty wide basis as well, geographically.

Host: I think we have got Stephen on the line now. Stephen, what do you make of Roy's findings?

SH: Well, I haven't heard what he has said because I got cut off but I have read the report and frankly not very much at all actually. I think all the scientific work shows quite the opposite to what's being said here. And I think it is also important to remember that this is greatly the study of impact of grey squirrels and other predators in habitats such as farm land, woodland, gardens and the answer is actually grey squirrels are not known to have an impact on any species except two very rare species. And they are the Hawfinch and the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Now that's what the experts say and that is the British Trust for Ornithology and the Royal society for the Protection of Birds and much of my own work in urban Bristol shows exactly the same.

Host: Would urban Bristol fall within the sort of Bailiwick of what you have been talking about here Roy? Would the popu-

lation density be high enough to have the affect you think you have been seeing?

RB: Yes, probably in some places and I think, coming back to what Stephen has just said about scientific work, this is very much based on scientific work and, obviously, one of the issues is that there are a large number of scientific studies in very specific areas. I have had 35years in this area, and we talk about experts! My training is as a tracker and a signer, which means I can pick up on things that other people miss out on and this is just my work. It is based, as I say, on very nearly 30years of research by different groups of people. I am absolutely one hundred percent sure that the findings from my report I am prepared to stand by. There is an impact, and when you look at it on a very wide basis, which is what I have been able to do because of the width of the review and the material available, I think the results are unequivocal.

Host: Stephen, you are not saying that the research material so far has been definitive; I mean it is quite possible that Roy has found something new?

SH: I've read the report. I don't think there's anything in here worth publishing frankly. And I am looking for lists of species that he thinks are threatened by grey squirrels here and again, we can go and look at areas where there has been a great deal of work done by other people on a variety of species over large areas of Britain on very extensive data-sets and find there isn't an affect! So he is one off, out of kilter compared to all the other scientists, including me! We've looked at a lot of these things in urban areas. Two years ago the British Trust for Ornithology put out a report saying just how many birds are doing well in gardens where there is high densities of both squirrels and cats and Roy is now telling us that they are actually being affected by them and that is just not true!

Host: Well, Stephen Harris and Roy Brown, thank you both very much for that. If anybody has got any personal observations about this and I know there are people out there.....

From Edward Wilde, Denbighshire

I was delighted when a pair of robins nested in one of my open-fronted boxes in an ivy-covered tree opposite my house.

To my horror I looked out one morning to see a male sparrowhawk

had just killed one of the robins and was plucking its feathers out. With the help of a supply of mealworms, the single parent raised four chicks and they were lined up on my garden wall being fed in turn when the sparrowhawk swooped and took one. In the resulting panic

another chick hit the lounge window and died instantly. A cat from the village had the other two.

Predators 5 – Robins I.

I long for the days of good kept estates where hawks and cats are non-existent and songbirds plentiful.

LETTER TO FARMERS GUARDIAN APRIL 28 2006

The future of biodiversity in the farmed environment in the British Isles lies largely with the continuation of mixed farming with livestock.

Virtually all newly hatched birds, especially songbirds, require a high protein diet of insects, their larvae and soil nematodes.

Beetle banks and unsprayed headlands help, but where farmers still maintain a sheep or cattle enterprise, with leys and permanent pasture, insects abound and the soil is nurtured.

If farmers cannot make a profit from their livestock, the continued disappearance of flocks and herds will have a serious affect on wildlife populations, especially small birds.

Environment schemes should underpin

crop rotation using the age-old principles of wide rotations with grass breaks – grass has to be grazed or conserved. Hay meadows are certainly recognised as superb wildlife havens.

Britain's livestock industry is at the heart of good conservation.

Keith McDougall

Hill House

Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk.

GREAT OUTDOORS

County Diary by Robin Page

This has been another lapwing free spring and I am beginning to wonder whether I will ever see any lapwings breeding on the farm again. At one time they nested on virtually every field – whether cultivated or grass – but they have now been absent as a breeding bird for about 30 years. In my father's time he would note where nests were, and as he ploughed or harrowed he would move the eggs to safety, and soon the females would resume sitting as if nothing what happened. In those days, the winter flocks on East Anglia's farmland were huge, counted in thousands, yet during this last winter I saw no flocks at all on the farm, and there were few others locally, the largest numbering only about 20 birds.

As the lapwing's numbers have plummeted, so the myths surrounding it have flourished, many of them emanating from conservationists, presumably urban-reared specimens with degrees in "environmental studies". The first fantasy is that the lapwing has declined because it is a wetland bird and the amount of wetland has been reduced. It is true that the lapwing does like wetland and can still be seen on many wetland nature reserves, but it is also very happy in dry fields.

Friends recently started a chalk grassland restoration project on their farm eight miles away, and the first breeding bird back on the dry chalk was the lapwing. Chris Knights – farmer, wildlife photographer, conservationist and vice-chairman of the Countryside

Restoration Trust – has a flourishing breeding population on his dry, sandy soil in the Breckland. So has the lapwing declined because of a reduction of wetland? The answer has to be no.

The next myth is that modern farming has created too many difficulties for the lapwing, and so it is modern farming that is to blame. The same reason was recently and bizarrely given for the demise of the hedgehog.

The only problem here is that even where very traditional farming remains, the lapwing has also disappeared, and so there must be another more important reason.

Sadly there is, and it is a reason that many of us living and working on the land can see clearly but which, for the sake of political correctness, many conservationists will not accept. One of our most attractive birds on farmland, wetland and moorland is being wiped out because of a huge increase in the number of predators killing adults, eating eggs and scoffing young. In today's modern conservation climate, in which the world of Bambi has replaced reality, few people are willing to put their heads above the parapet to describe exactly what is happening. The facts are simple; the countryside – and the lapwing – are being killed through kindness, as the bunny-hugger who help to fund conservation turn a blind eye to what is taking place.

Fox, crow and magpie numbers have increased over the past 30 ears as dramatically as lapwing numbers have fallen. Ground nesting birds such as the lapwing (and the curlew) are particularly vulnerable to their habit of eating eggs and

young. Sparrowhawks are an additional problem – adult lapwings make easy targets while numbers are low – and some conservationists will always oppose the control of birds of prey, even when more endangered species are put at risk because of them.

The proof of the damage caused by predators can be seen on farms and estates where predator control takes place. Chris Knights has a healthy population of breeding lapwings because he is a gamekeeper, which also explains why he has the highest density of breeding stone curlews in the country. Chris is convinced that without fox, crow and magpie control his entire stone curlew population would have gone within a few years.

But there is another problem, which Chris does not suffer from, because his soil is so light. The explosion in the badger population is having a serious effect on ground-nesting birds. I recently visited a farm in north Shropshire on which all the breeding curlews, as well as lapwings, have gone because the high badger population hoovers up the eggs. Interestingly, many country people believe the demise of the hedgehog has also been caused by the booming badger population, as badgers love eating hedgehogs. It is as simple as that.

As it is, some of our best loved wildlife will continue to decline until political and conservational correctness is replaced by honesty, and good conservation is preferred to the world of Walt Disney.

Raptor Persecution

From GCT Magazine, May 2006

LAST MONTH, the RSPB launched a new report (Peak Malpractice) about raptor persecution in the upland Peak District. The report declares that it "does not lay the blame at any particular door", but grouse moor interests and their gamekeepers feature prominently.

The evidence is mostly circumstantial so it is difficult to establish the veracity of the claims. Also the RSPB's argument is undermined by some rather misleading information. Take the merlin. The report suggests that irresponsible burning by gamekeepers is adversely affecting the breeding of these birds, citing two examples of where burns have upset their nesting. Actually grouse moor management favours merlin and Special Protection Area (SPA) designations highlight this. On the grouse moor dominated Pennines and North York Moors SPAs, there are nine pairs of merlin for every four pairs that there are on the bird reserve dominated

Berwyn Mountains SPA.

Publication of the report was followed by an adjournment debate on the subject in the House of Commons led by local MP Angela Smith. Fortunately, this gave us the opportunity to brief the Minister for Rural Affairs, Jim Knight, on the broader picture and point out that, nationally, most species of raptor are doing very well. We made the point that it is in fact the grouse moor management along the Pennines and on the North York Moors that has created the best conditions for upland breeding waders anywhere in Britain. This is in stark contrast to other moorland areas where waders are scarce, still in decline and, frankly, where even the creation of bird reserves is failing to help them.

Let us be clear, the illegal killing of birds of prey is always a matter of concern. But the reasons why it can occur need to be properly understood. Basically, there are two reasons: first, most raptors have become more common so conflicts, understandably, have increased; and second, some raptors, hen harriers in particular, can do so

much damage to a grouse stock that they can close down a grouse moor enterprise, jeopardising the livelihoods of the gamekeepers.

In addition, we question the logic when the RSPB says: "... time is running out to demonstrate that the current land management is good for wildlife". Its own surveys indicate to us that abandoning grouse moor management in the uplands would lead to a drop in the numbers of breeding waders by between 50% and 80% depending on the species. This would certainly jeopardise the status of these areas as European SPAs and would put the Government in an awkward position if it had to explain to the EU Commission why it chose to close down the very land-use that brought these SPA designations into existence in the first place. We believe that grouse moor management has proved its value to wildlife and will continue to work to persuade the Government, the RSPB and other organisations of the very real conservation benefits that good grouse moor management brings.

KILLER SQUIRREL THREAT GROWS

Metro, Thursday July 20 2006:

They may look cute and cuddly but marauding killer squirrels are devastating Britain's wild bird population.

The grey squirrel has wiped out thousands of songbirds and ranks alongside the domestic and feral cat as the top killer of farmland birds.

The species was introduced here from North America in the 19th century

and has no natural predators.

It is an expert climber and can reach the high branches of trees where birds like to build their nests.

This should serve as a wake-up call... squirrels are a major problem

The squirrel has an insatiable appetite and, if it comes across a chick or eggs, it gobbles them up.

Prof Roy Brown, of Birkbeck University of London, said yesterday: 'In areas of high squirrel density, more than 93 per cent of small bird nests are being

raided.

'When this is combined with sparrowhawk activity, it can result in 100 per cent of breeding failure and a loss of 85 per cent of adult birds.'

Prof Brown carried out the research as part of a project for wildlife charity SongBird Survival.

A spokesman said: 'This should serve as a wake-up call to all those who do not believe or want to believe that squirrels are a major problem.'

MOUNTING TOLL

Letter from Robin Arculus, Warren Row, Berks:

Sir – R L Williams (Letters, June 1) claims a splendid record on magpies and grey squirrels.

However, I would like to trump his figures with 29 magpies trapped in August–November 2004, since when we have had very few in evidence, and 49 grey squirrels trapped or shot last winter, including two caught by the cat. There is still one squirrel, but he keeps his dis-

tance. Interestingly, squirrels trapped are largely female and those shot principally male – is there a moral here? Our sparrowhawk comes and goes, but his depredations are minimal in comparison and it is magnificent to see him at work.

REMAINING SHOW DATES FOR 2006

● **Lowther Driving Trials & Country Fair**
Saturday 5th and Sunday 6th August 2006...

● **CLA Game Fair, Broadlands, Romsey**
Friday to Sunday, July 28th – 30th

● **Aylsham Show, Norfolk**
Monday, 28th August

If you have any stories for our next newsletter please send them to us by email at:
dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk