

BADGERS

Letter from SBS to Hilary Benn MP, August 2008

Dear Minister

We write to urge your department to take into account the depredations of the greatly increased badger populations on wildlife and biodiversity. Whilst your present pre-occupation is the serious threat from the transmission of Bovine TB, our charity is concerned that there is a huge amount of field observations and anecdotal evidence that rate badgers as being serious predators of nesting farmland birds and, almost certainly, are reducing the hedgehog population as well. A recent letter to you from one of our members (see last page of the newsletter enclosed) puts the situation very clearly. Badgers are increasing at a rate which is wholly detrimental to maintaining a balance of wildlife in the countryside and, without any natural predators of the badgers; a measured culling of some excessive populations is advisable and represents sound conservation policy.



Yours sincerely,

Keith McDougall, Policy Director, cc: Lord Rooker. The House of Lords

REPLY:

Dear Mr McDougall

Thank you for your letter of 6 June to Hilary Benn about the effect of badgers on wildlife and biodiversity. I have been asked to reply. The Government's vision is to secure a diverse, healthy and resilient natural environment, which provides the basis for everyone's well-being, health and prosperity now and in the future; and where the value of services provided by the natural environment are reflected in decision making. Badgers are protected, amongst other things, from wilful taking or killing under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. Although provision is made under s. 10 of this Act to allow the relevant authority to grant licences to allow otherwise prohibited actions, such as the taking or killing of badgers, these can only be granted for certain purposes. The conservation of wild birds is not one of these purposes. Therefore under the current legislation it would be unlawful to take or kill badgers for this purpose and it appears there are no provisions in the Act to allow licensing of such action. Defra has no plans to change the current legislation.

Yours sincerely

Julie Tucker, Defra – Customer Contact Unit

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Welcome to our Spring Newsletter

The 2008 Nesting Season

There seems to be increasing evidence that this year has not been a good season for songbird numbers or nesting success. There are many stories of dead birds being found in nests, presumably because something happened to the parents or because there was not enough food available at the critical time. The combination of earlier Springs and poor weather probably mean't that the supply of caterpillars or other insects came at the wrong time or was too small to feed the brood effectively. Timing is all important in the nesting cycle and small changes in the season or weather pattern can make a big difference.

Inside the newsletter you will find the results of the 5th year of the breeding bird survey undertaken on Blackmoor Farm in Suffolk. Highlighted in red are the bird numbers that have declined in 2008 compared with the average over the last 4 years. Some of these figures are very worrying. Even previously common birds on the farm such as Greenfinch, Dunnock and Blue Tit have all declined significantly. Of the summer migrants the Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat have also suffered big decreases. There are no Turtle Doves recorded this year either. The total number of breeding territories has also fallen more steeply than at any time in the last 5 years. Whilst one survey on one farm is not conclusive scientific proof on its own, I believe it does show a worrying trend given the previous 4 years figures. Blackmoor farm has many original hedges, plenty of trees, wide field margins with wild flowers and therefore good biodiversity so habitat is not the problem !

The Summer Show Season

Once again it has been a mixed season with difficult weather conditions at two of the Shows we attended,

The Game Fair at Blenheim and the Lowther Horse Trials at Penrith. The second day at Lowther, Sunday, was cancelled owing to the mud. At least the Game Fair went ahead this year after last years cancellation. For the first time we attended and had a very successful stand at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show and many new members joined SBS at the Show. But the 6 day Show was difficult and hard work to man and we are extremely grateful to all those who helped at this and all the other Shows. Our Administrator, George Bradley, has done a magnificent job throughout the summer not only manning our stand at various Shows but also preparing the display material as well. We are very grateful for this dedication to the job. The September Shows are still to come !

Research Fund

Our two research projects are continuing successfully but as you are aware we still badly need more funding to meet the total of £120,000 required. We are about half way to the target now and are very grateful for all the donations received so far. Please contribute whatever you can to this important work.

2008 Christmas Cards

During September we will be sending out to all members details of our Christmas cards for this year together with an order form. This year we will be offering four cards for Christmas. Once again several artists have kindly donated original work for us to create these cards. Please order as many as you possibly can as all the proceeds will go into our research fund.

Many thanks for your continuing support.

Michael Rankeillour - Editor and Trustee

Directors Notebook

As you read these notes the breeding season for birds will be all but over. One can only guess at the overall figures as to whether our songbirds' numbers continue to nosedive in gardens, parks and farmland. The show season is nearly over but the litany of gloom we heard from visitors to our stands leaves me in some kind of depression. I am sorry if this sounds gloomy. Several stories remain in mind. The friend who lost five pairs of oystercatchers on his small farm in Scotland ...relentlessly preyed by buzzards as the young became vulnerable just before they could fly. The farmer who asked me "When did you last hear a flock of house sparrows "chirruping" on your roof?"

The astonishment from East Anglian bird lovers that Sea Eagles may be let loose over Terneries, Bittern Marshes and Avocet breeding sites?

And still our hedgerows and woods fall silent as the relentless build up of Sparrowhawks appears to wipe out fledglings. And now Goshawks! What next? Time and time again we are told there is no scientific evidence that predation is an issue. It is simply staggering that large organisations will not accept yet that raptor populations combined with burgeoning corvid, grey squirrel and badgers are out of control. They say science is not there yet! Wide field experience and observation is

simply side lined. Of course, where estates and farms employ keepers (let's call them wardens) and are in Government stewardship schemes, things are better. But the UK is only covered by a small percentage of kept land.

At the Game Fair in Scotland, in July, I heard that Edinburgh parks are swarming with Grey Squirrels (especially its wonderful Botanic Gardens) and its official City Pest Control Office is specifically banned from controlling them or magpies. What madness has taken hold of those blinkered councillors and local government employees? Even Natural England actually licences the release of captive grey squirrels!

However, there is a glimmer of hope, and SongBird Survival is part of it. Three strands of scientific research may, within two years, come together to point up where the conservation "establishment" has gone seriously wrong. Our own two projects at the BTO and Reading University are designed to force policy makers to face up to the real predation effects on our small birds. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust is finalising reports – one on the effects of predation on moorland species in Northumberland (under peer review right now) and their Leicestershire farm work on farmland birds which clearly shows that where predator control is stopped farmland bird numbers drop significantly (Skylark Newsletter.)



Coming from three directions, surely "the powers that be" – now dreaming their dreams about nature finding its own nature balance – must sit up and take notice. If they fail to do so and DEFRA and legislators do not amend this protection order now doing so much damage to our wildlife, they will be responsible for nothing less than a catastrophe on a national scale. SongBird Survival may only be a small charity comprised of committed and experienced bird lovers, but we are determined to push our message – hopefully before it is too late and several highly vulnerable species disappear from the British list. It could happen unless there is a change at the top.

Keith McDougall

Rumble of traffic in cities threatens to kill off the dawn chorus

By Laura Clout, summer 2008

Rush-hour traffic could kill the dawn chorus, experts fear, because urban birds are being forced to sing at night in order to be heard.

Research suggests that noise pollution in cities is drowning out their chirping. In response, some birds are changing the way they communicate, while others have given up singing at their traditional times altogether, a report in the New Scientist magazine claims.

A study in Sheffield found that robins nesting in areas that were noisy during the day were more likely to sing at night than those in quieter regions. The shift had previously been attributed to light pollution, but the analysis suggested that the creatures altered the times at which they sang to be heard above the city din. Richard Fuller, of Sheffield University, who lead the research, said: "This shows that there are subtle effects of urbanisation

and that birds are adapting to overcome some of these problems." He warned that the birds may also become more stressed if they are forced to spend the night singing rather than sleeping. Birds sing to warn of danger, attract a mate and mark out their territory. A study of the dawn chorus of nightingales found that birds in Berlin sang up to 14 decibels louder than their counterparts in the forest. The highest volume occurred on weekday mornings. Another group found that treat tits in European cities sang at a higher frequency so that they could be heard above the low-frequency rumble of cars, lorries and industry. It is feared that some birds may not be flexible enough to cope with the urban clamour. Research has linked noise pollution to a drop in the number of orioles, cuckoos, great reed warblers and even the house sparrow.



In the battle of the birds, whose side are we really meant to be on?

By Simon Jenkins, Guardian, May 2008

Flourishing, protected populations of raptors are wreaking carnage on Britain's songbirds - and ripping apart the RSPB

The best bit in the television series Planet Earth had a snow leopard chasing a goat across the frozen Himalayan wastes. Up hill and down they went, with the camera in dogged pursuit, as the frantic goat leapt, dived, first escaped and then was run to death. Hurrah at nature red in tooth and claw, the viewer was invited to shout. Score one for the snow leopard and naught for the boring goat.

The same moral unilateralism was on display this week in Worcester, where there was only one show in town. A pair of peregrine falcons had migrated from the cathedral to nest in neighbouring St Andrew's steeple and hatch four chicks, giving new meaning to living "on a wing and a prayer". Forward control units of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds raced to the scene. The fire brigade was alerted. Webcams were put in place. The authorities put up marquees and camera sites, and awaited the twitching hordes. If the peregrines of Derby cathedral were anything go by (a quarter of a million webcam hits), this will be a tourist bonanza. When wild comes to town, town goes wild.

Peregrine falcons are not blue tits but ornithological F-16s, the fastest creatures on wings. They can spot prey a mile distant and boast a diving speed of 150mph. Lithe of limb and fearsome of countenance, they besport a grey helmet and black handlebar moustache that would win them a role in any first world war Red Baron movie.

Peregrines, like other British birds of prey, came near to extinction as gamekeepers struggled to protect their grouse moors and pesticides infected the food chain. Then the passage of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 proved a spectacular vindication of conservation law, to the fury of moor-owners and the regular imprisonment of those weird hobbyists, egg collectors. Only in jail-mad Britain is bird-egg collecting an imprisonable offence.

Legal protection of raptors brought back to the skies not just peregrines but ospreys, red kites, hen harriers, goshawks, buzzards, golden eagles and sparrowhawks. There are now believed to be 200 breeding pairs of hen harriers in Britain, and 1,402 pairs of peregrines, many nesting in the towers of office blocks, cathedrals and even London's Tate Modern. The arrival of an osprey

guarantees a torrent of cars and caravans, lenses and camcorders. The RSPB has a million members and the currently fashionable raptors are big-time leisure.

Needless to say, to every action there is a reaction, but in this case it is one that poses a real moral dilemma. It has split ornithology between the raptor and the songbird lobbies. The RSPB is the only place where hawk v dove is no cliché.

The harsh truth is that birds of prey are what they say, and the prey is mostly other birds. You name it, they eat it, with a taste for lapwings, finches, plovers, curlews, skylarks and oyster catchers, many killed on the wing. Nor do they turn up their beaks at duck, pigeon, seagull, grouse or ptarmigan. Even as Worcester was cossetting its avian terrorists, the authorities warned owners of racing pigeons to keep them indoors. Long gone are the days when killing a pigeon was like shooting a postman (which is what the pigeon often was).

Peregrines are relatively choosy. Their preference for pigeons and seagulls has made them welcome to many towns infested with these pests. But kites, which can be seen wheeling over the M40, are reportedly devastating the Chiltern small mammal population. Hen harriers wiped out Scottish grouse moors. As for sparrowhawks, I am told that they consume at least one songbird a day, not least those belonging to a chagrined Prince of Wales. When Queen Victoria complained about birds befouling the Great Exhibition, the Duke of Wellington replied briskly, "I suggest sparrowhawks, ma'am." The letters columns of the Times have leapt predictably to life. KC Murray, of the songbird party, complained this week that the RSPB had "fallen into the hands of extremists who are obsessed only with birds of prey, and who wish to use my and other members' money to promote policies that lead to the death of other bird species".

He cited the genocidal carnage unleashed by raptors on redshanks, goldfinches, bullfinches, chaffinches, sparrows, dotterels, golden plovers, curlews, skylarks and meadow pipits. Worse, goshawks were stemming the return of that furry favourite of the north, the red squirrel.

Murray's RSPB is clearly a place riven between raptor and songbird factions, between leather-booted, bomber-jacketed bikers racing round the corridors and Laura Ashley-dressed maidens warbling lark song by the water cooler. There was

no way the raptor lobby was going to stay quiet in the face of Murray's attack.

Ernest Garcia duly dive-bombed Murray at 150mph out of the sun. Claiming to have been twice as long in the RSPB, he roared that "the often-voiced lament that the bad birds are eating all the good birds has more basis in sentiment than in science". Murray was apparently nothing more than a tit-loving wimp. The rising number of raptors, wrote Garcia, could only be due to a rise in the prey population. This Malthusian ornithology cannot be correct. It is like saying grouse numbers must be increasing or there would not be more hen harriers to eat them. Anyway Garcia wants to lay off the raptors and concentrate on cats, which he hates. "Predation by cats has a very large effect on songbird populations. Unlike wild cats, domestic cats occur locally at densities far above what could be possible in nature, since they are supported by food handouts at home. In effect, they are subsidised predators that kill millions of small birds and other animals every year."

The only moral of this story is that human intervention is everywhere. I cannot see how a subsidised predator is a greater offence against nature - or this law of the jungle - than a legally protected predator. Perhaps the government should introduce cat-eating condors.

The lesson of the natural history bombardment at present is that managing the planet, especially our crowded corner of it, involves painful choices, as between snow leopards and goats and hawks and sparrows. The RSPB's current pro-raptor line is that bird of prey densities are below the "carrying capacity" of their habitats. In other words, live and let die. Besides, the legally encouraged return of raptors is popular after centuries of persecution.

I accept that the sight of kites and buzzards wheeling in the sky over the Welsh mountains is thrilling. But the arrival in British towns of these cannibals, however majestic, is a heavy price to pay for the loss of songbirds. I also loathe the uncontrolled seagulls, magpies and Canada geese that infest the places where I live. They are the grey squirrels of the air.

If I must express a preference, it will always be for song over spectacle. The sight of a bird is a delight, but its song is the very music of heaven. So keep the raptors in their place. And I promise to keep the cat under control.

Fear the raven

by Patsy Hunter, *The Scottish Farmer*, summer 2008

Killer birds attack lambs and ewes

Flockmasters have to battle against severe weather, disease and foxes at lambing time – but now they are also having to cope with the growing threat of big black killer birds scouring the landscape and devastating lamb crops.

During the past week alone, many newly born lambs have been viciously attacked and pecked to death by Scotland's hugely increased raven population, particularly in Invernesshire, but also throughout much of the country.

A growing number of ewes have also had to be put down because they have had their eyes or insides torn to pieces by the sharp beaks and talons of this aggressive bird. The RSPB claims the raven is mainly a scavenger, but it now appears to have developed a taste for 'live prey'.

Farmers are now calling for the raven population, which has been protected by law since 1954, to be controlled.

"I've lost seven lambs in four days and I've only started lambing a few of the early lambers", Jimmy Mills, farm manager at Dunmaglass Estate, Daviot, told *The Scottish Farmer*.

"Three lambs were taken within five hours and they were just ripped to bits. We've never had a problem with ravens before. Normally, they're further up the hill – but this year they've even been attacking the ewes. I had one prolapsed ewe and they pecked the eyes and the back-end out of her in no time, and she was still living."

Backing up these statements, Alastair Cameron-Mackintosh, who farms 1000 Blackface ewes at Morile, Tomatin, said he had lost 10 lambs and had to put six ewes down because their eyes and stomachs had been picked out so much. "This is the first time we've ever had a problem with ravens – and they're far worse than the hoodie crows. They walk over the ground just waiting for their next victim, and peck the lambs to death," he said.

Fortunately, Mr Mackintosh was able to apply for a licence from SEERAD to shoot just two birds, which took a week to come through, but he had to apply for another licence to shoot another four, before he could stop the birds killing his young lambs.

Speaking for the Scottish Gamekeepers, its vice-chairman, Davy Thomson said: "There is no need for ravens to be protected. Raven populations have increased 1000% over the past 10 years and it's an absolute nonsense that we can't control them. Buzzards are much the same. "Ravens will gobble up every songbird and small mammal there is, starting at the top of the hill and working down. They'll clear dotteril, golden plover, ptarmigan and grouse populations, but all ground nesting birds are affected."

However, Mr Thomson stressed that it was not breeding pairs of ravens that caused the greatest problems, but immature birds, which habitually scavenge in large packs. "I've seen several hundred birds roosting together and all they do is hunt one side of

the hill and then move on to their next food source. Ravens are communal birds, they talk to one another and hunt in packs," he said.

Keith Duncan, local area officer of SNH, covering much of the Cairngorms, said that he was sympathetic to the pleas of farmers, but insisted the birds were only recolonising ground lost from the past. He also predicted that the number of lamb killings would fall when the weather picks up. "Ravens have traditionally always been a problem in the west, but they are now spreading eastwards where farmers don't have any experience of them," he said.

Instead, Mr Duncan urged farmers that are affected to be extra vigilant and to be "out on the parks as much as possible, in particular first thing in the morning as they are very much opportunist feeders." If large numbers of lambs are being killed, he said that farmers had to apply for a shooting licence from SEERAD.

Commenting on the raven situation, James Reynolds, of RSPB Scotland, said: "There has been no dedicated census, but according to the latest edition of *Birds of Scotland*, published by the Scottish Ornithologists Club, there are thought to be between 2550 and 6000 breeding pairs in Scotland.

"Their diet is varied and is mostly carrion - road kills, dead sheep and deer - but they will also take rabbits and other small mammals and sometimes this will include lambs."



The Songbird Survival Blackmoor Survey

The Purpose of the Survey is to monitor the breeding bird population on a typical arable farm, which has entered into the new agri-environmental schemes and to see if the uptake of these schemes results in a very marked increase in the breeding bird territories.

With past results showing a marked increase of 15% per year, being mainly attributable to the Wren, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Blackcap but other species showing little change. The current year shows an overall drop of 15% with marked decreases in House Sparrow, Green Finch, Blue Tit, Black cap and

Whitethroat with fewer Yellowhammers and Dunnocks too. Other species produced the usual figures and it seems to have been another very good year for wrens.

The year's figures are below, compared with those of 2004-2007:

Numbers of Territories or Breeding Pairs on Blackmoor Farm, 2004, 2005, 2006 & 2007 (Summer Migrants in Italics)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2004-07 Avg	2008 (decline in Red)
Kestrel	0	0	0	0	0	0
Buzzard	0	0	0	0	0	1
Mallard	3	c. 5	c. 5	c. 5	4.5	5
Red-Legged Partridge	8	10	8	7	8.25	6
Grey Partridge	1	0	0	0	0.25	0
Pheasant	10	c. 8	c. 10	6	8.25	8
Moorhen	3	4	2	2	2.75	4
Wood Pigeon	15	16	18	26	18.75	15
Stock Dove	1	1	1	0	0.75	0
Collared Dove	1	1	1	1	1	1
Turtle Dove	2	2	1	1	1.5	0
Barn Owl	1	1	0	0	0.5	1
Little Owl	1	1	0	0	0.5	0
Green Woodpecker	1	0	0	0	0.25	0
Greater Spotted Woodpecker	1	2	1	0	1	2
Skylark	4	5	3	2	3.5	2
Swallow	4	4	3	3	3.5	3
Jay	0	0	0	0	0	1
Jackdaw	0	0	1	0	0.25	0
Magpie	1	0	0	0	0.25	0
Great Tit	9	13	15	13	12.5	13
Blue Tit	14	18	21	16	17.25	9
Long-Tailed Tit	5	2	3	2	3	3
Wren	15	24	20	30	22.25	32
Nuthatch	0	0	0	1	0.25	1
Mistle Thrush	1	1	1	0	0.75	0
Song Thrush	2	2	7	6	4.25	3
Blackbird	18	19	17	19	18.25	18
Robin	15	18	16	16	16.25	19
Blackcap	6	11	8	7	8	3
Lesser Whitethroat	14	15	10	16	13.75	5
Whitethroat	3	6	5	4	4.5	8
Chiffchaff	1	4	1	3	2.25	2
Dunnock	12	16	16	11	13.75	9
Pied Wagtail	1	1	1	1	1	1
Greenfinch	11	10	8	12	10.25	5
Goldfinch	3	1	4	2	2.5	1
Linnet	2	0	2	3	1.75	1
Bullfinch	2	0	1	2	1.25	1
Chaffinch	48	53	47	41	47.25	40
Yellowhammer	6	8	12	12	9.5	6
House Sparrow	12	12	c. 15	c. 8	11.25	5
Total territories/pairs	257	294	284	278	278.25	233
Total breeding species	37	32	33	30		33

Further details of this year's results will be posted on our website: www.songbird-survival.org.uk

Semi-detached life makes some odd friends

Rex Hancy, *In the Countryside, EDP, June 2008*

Dennis Woodrow tells the strange tale from Catfield of unusual neighbours living next to each other in what appears to be perfect harmony. He had built an odd bird box or rather pair of boxes joined like semi-detached houses. Each was the standard dimension adopted for small birds. The only difference was that one had an entrance hole larger than normal. Both were occupied, one by a pair of bluetits the other by robins.

Both species can be aggressive. Robins engage in ferocious contests with rival robins. Bluetits see off birds much larger than themselves after taking possession of our bird food feeder. The double box had been placed in a dense honeysuckle which may give an answer to my first query. Robins tend to nest in secret places not too far from the ground whilst bluetits prefer a somewhat higher situation. Could

the honeysuckle be on the borderland between the contrasting preferences? Watching the two species here on feeding forays clearly demonstrates that there should be little conflict when on such important missions. The tits stay well out of the way looking for caterpillars and other small invertebrates in the trees while the robins are generally on ground level. That is a very important point. The establishment of specific feeding grounds for a nursing pair of birds is top priority. The bird box neighbours could easily ignore each other on their ways in and out because their destinations were totally different. I wait to hear the final outcome. I have to admire the initiative demonstrated in making such an odd pair of boxes. Until such an unlikely sounding construction is set up, we have no idea of possible outcomes. Robins really ought to

read the "Robins' Book of House Building" very carefully. Last year along this row we had three sensible sites in garages. With a minimum of help from the human occupiers they were all safe from predators. The more traditional storybook nest in a hanging watering can will deter raiders including our local bane, the magpies. This year the garden next door has a nest in a low leafy border plant which does make us all feel rather edgy. The hollow space under the arching leaves must have looked like a suitable site to the building pair. The hole in a bank, the decayed space in an old stump would be a natural choice. Failing that, the space under the plant seemed ideal for the pair. Perhaps. What if a predator finds the eggs? What happens if a prowling cat sees the entrance? If the young hatch they will certainly give the game away.

Country Diary

The Countryman, Paul Jackson, August 2008

In last month's Woodman's Book Tony Grace eloquently as ever described the balance of life in his wood where the sparrowhawk sits on top of that particular food pyramid. Outside of this ancient, isolated ecosystem however, the increase in sparrowhawk numbers and other predators are a cause for concern.

Tony's piece prompted Keith McDougall, director of Song Bird Survival, to contact me to say, "Even obvious country lovers sometimes fail to think through the consequences of the huge increase in sparrowhawks in recent years" He adds: "The official BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) figure is 38,000 sparrowhawk pairs breeding in the UK with, probably, an

equal number of unmated juveniles. Their toll of small birds is well over 100 million a year. Yes sparrowhawks are dramatic and dashing predators which have a valuable place in our ecosystem. The RSPB warden at Blean Woods, Kent (one of England's most ancient forests) wrote and article in the Independent in April this year stating eight species of birds have become extinct in that particular area. "The RSPB Repeat Woodland Bird Survey (RWBS) registered in order of decline magnitude are: tree pipit, hawfinch, willow tit, willow warbler, lesser spotted woodpecker, lesser red-poll, wood warbler, redstart, garden warbler and spotted flycatcher.

"All of the above are heavily predated by sparrowhawks whose cumulative effect must be serious. It is important to face up to the need to manage predation levels." Solutions to such problems are difficult to find and human intervention in all things natural often only produces conflict or imbalance somewhere along the line. Who is to decide whether a sparrowhawk is more or less important than a redstart? Would you agree to a cull of predators? What are readers' views on this touchy subject? Please send your thoughts to me by mail to The Countryman at the usual address or by email to editorial@the-countryman.co.uk

The Bearded Tit

The Broads Society Journal, Summer 2008

In Spring 1994 Steward Linsell of Norfolk wrote about the Bearded Tit. A lovely account of this little gem of a bird, beautifully written (shortened version).

"This surely is the most beautiful and entertaining of Broadland's marshland birds. Where expansive areas of reed and sedge occur so will "The Broads faire ornament and Heaven's glorie). Both male and female are clad in russet plumage, which tones with the dead reed stems. The male is at once distinguished from the

female by his lavender-grey head and long black moustaches. Beneath a sunlit sky, or a clouded sky, so their appearance alters quite dramatically from a rich teak colour to a dull greyish-brown. They are great acrobats as they play up and down the reed stem using their tawny long tail as a balancing pole.

Writing early in the present century that famous Broadland naturalist Miss Emma Turner, claimed so truthfully: "When Nature made the reed-beds, she evolved the Bearded Tit on purpose to play in them." Certainly the best way, and best time, to see this gorgeous bird to perfection is to sit, or stand, in a punt tucked away up some remote dyke in Spring. During my many years as warden

at Hickling I would occasionally do this somewhere around the Broad or Heigham Sounds, and I found that even standing tall on a wooden box never caused the birds any alarm. Often a family party would come swinging through the reeds to within a few feet of me, calling noisily as though a lot of coins were being struck together. It is a bird that thrives in warm, sunny and windless days when it is best seen and heard to advantage.



An early-morning muse

Shooting Times, July 2008

The sad loss of an inspirational collared companion reinforces John Humphreys' Conviction that the RSPB is not doing its job properly

Now here's a pretty kettle of fish. The companion of my early-morning scrivining is no more: dead, defunct, passed over, gone to a better place, deceased and gone before, as moribund as Monty Python's dead parrot. Early mornings are now a tad lonelier, only me by myself alone and no little friend to observe and cheer me through the double-glazing. It was the collared dove, you see, a demure little lady who nested on the Sky TV dish on the house opposite.

Rising at dawn in summer, for I work better when the brain is clear as liquid mud rather than molten tar, I soon get stuck into the hot screen. I raise my head and there she sits, sharing the dawn birdsong with me, prim in her nurse's uniform, the neat collar with boot-button eyes gazing straight back at me. She

wiggles about on her eggs getting comfy and settles down, leaving the nest only to snatch a scrap of breakfast off the bird table where the old man joins her. I glance at her and find inspiration – my little friend. I never mention her hearing that I shot the first one of her kind to appear in Cambridgeshire in 1954 and paid a small fortune to have it stuffed. We all do things in our youth that we regret but, had she found out, I hope she might have forgiven me.

Then disaster. I staggered into my den at 5am, dressing gown flapping, coffee slopping, eyes bleared. I fired up the steam-driven computer and looked out to say good morning to my chum. She was not on the nest, and sitting on the grass surrounded by a mat of feathers was a sparrowhawk. Firmly gripped in her talons were the remains of my pal. For two quite small pins I would have taken my bundook and exacted revenge. In my rash youth I would not have hesitated but now conscience and the law makes cowards of

hover as low as our top windows of our house over the garden. I think they are beautiful birds but are harming our wildlife with their great numbers and pack behaviour.

Bill Pound

Its not the Kites that need a cull its the people feeding them. If they stopped, the birds would be forced to travel further for their food and the Kite population would spread to other parts. Please don't let this topic give excuses to the Morons who love to shoot and kill our lovely wildlife. But I would support a cull of the ever growing groups of thugs and thieves that prey on our Country as this would be a good solution to over-crowding in out prisons.

Pen Lack

What is it with people? Why do humans think they have more right to live on this planet than birds or animals do? Yes, red kites will go for small mammals and birds but they are no different to buzzards and other birds of prey. It's part of the natural ecosystem of the world. It's taken years to re-populate the red kites after being wiped out by humankind (kind we're not!) so how dare it be suggested that they should be culled again!!!! LEAVE THE RED KITES ALONE!!!! They have just as much right to be here as we do and it's about time that idiots in this country stop illegally poisoning and trapping birds of prey!!! It's totally scandalous and unthinkable that people can be so cruel!!!! Yours, an angry birdwatcher and lover of nature!

us all and it would have meant draconian penalties.

Sparrowhawks have killed our handful of house martin chicks, demolished a brood of kingfishers on the fen and killed the pair of golden orioles that tried to nest in the farm poplars along with many tits and songbirds from the declining population in my little garden.

The RSPB thinks this is acceptable - none so blind as those who won't see. Cuckoos, thrushes, turtle doves, corn buntings, peewits, house sparrows, yellowhammers and skylarks – there is a long list of once-common birds that have collapsed to half their old numbers. For all its arrogance and bottomless purse the RSPB responds with indifference, blaming other agencies and acts of God but never itself. What is it doing? It is the self-appointed custodian of our birds and, despite its oft-flexed muscles, is failing spectacularly. What it is good at is protecting with the full rigour of the law every raptor that kills endangered species, spouting its discredited mantra about "the balance of nature", hating the whole shooting community and bullying anyone who disagrees with it. We and the birds deserve better.

Colin

Before humans upset the natural balance of nature everything was in harmony. If anything should be culled it should be humans, starting with those who do not appreciate nature.

Andrew

Anyone who advocates a cull of these magnificent birds needs culling themselves! For too long they were just clinging on in a tiny area of Wales - we should be celebrating this amazing local success story. I can't believe I'm hearing the notion of a cull - it's preposterous! Kites are natural scavengers, so the behaviour you mention is in their genes. But they are spreading and dispersing and populating further afield. Let's continue to watch and guard these wonderful birds to ensure that the whole of England is soon re-colonised as it once was before so-called enlightened mankind wiped them out.

Helen O

With the greatest respect, I am dumfounded you can even suggest a 'cull' on a reintroduced protected species. These birds are fully protected by law. For your ridiculous musings to ask if we have 'too many kites' is laughable. What do you mean by 'too many'? May I respectfully suggest you contact either me or my colleagues who monitor these birds, so that you can at least learn a little about these birds, and the role they fulfill here in the Chilterns. www.redkites.net

A KITE TOO MANY

The 'Bill' Board!

BBC Oxford, June 2008

The reintroduction of Red Kites in the Chilterns has been a great success. Last Sunday I counted 58 kites during a ten minute drive between Stockenchurch and West Wycombe.

Now you may even be able to get 'up close and personal' with a pair of Red Kites raising their chicks. "Nest Watch," organised by the Chilterns Conservation Board, is experimenting with CCTV equipment and hoping to beam live pictures of a nest with baby chicks into the coffee shop of the Studley Green Garden Store on the A-40. But can you have too much of a good thing? A friend of mine reported that a Kite raided a nest in her yard and killed the baby birds. Many argue that Kites, despite their size and appearance, are primarily scavengers and no threat to other wild life. However you pick the bones out of that argument, the question remains: do we have too many Kites now? Is it time to curtail their numbers? Would you support the idea of a controlled cull?

Listener's Replies:

Jess

Yes, ridiculous how many there are over Buckinghamshire. I counted 15 this morning in one small area over Marlow. They are scaring away other birds, and they are getting much too brave. They

Flight of the birds: Alarming decline of many of our favourite species

By David Derbyshire, Daily Mail, July 20087

It was once as much a part of a country churchyard as the yew tree, the unkempt tombs and the creak of the lych gate.

Flitting from gravestone to gravestone in search of insects, the spotted flycatcher - sometimes known as the 'parson's bird' - were found in every village in the land.

But according to a survey, the once common birds are vanishing fast. In the last 14 years, numbers of spotted flycatchers have dropped by 59 per cent, while in many English counties they have disappeared completely.



On the edge: A spotted flycatcher snatches a meal out of thin air, but it's species has dropped in numbers by 59 per cent.

Wildlife experts say they are one of a host of woodland birds being devastated by changes to the countryside and the ways that forests are being managed.

They include the willow tit - whose numbers are down 77 per cent, the wood warbler - down 57 per cent and the pied flycatcher - down 54 per cent. 'We are really concerned about the spotted flycatcher,' said Graham Madge of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

'These used to be seen in almost every churchyard and vicarage garden. They are woodland birds, but they love large open gardens where they can feed on the wing. They are in very severe trouble.'

'The fact that woodland birds like this are vanishing is disturbing. These have more claim to be British birds than any others because they have been living in our woodlands since the end of the Ice Age.' The decline is highlighted in the latest Breeding Bird Survey published by the RSPB, the British Trust for

Ornithology and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

The survey is based on sightings from nearly 3,000 volunteers. Last year they counted more than a million individual birds and 220 species.

Experts are unsure why woodland birds are suffering, but believe changes in tree and forest management are partially to blame.

Birds do best if woods have a diverse range of environments - from airy glades of young saplings to dense areas full of ancient trees and dead timber.

Modern woodland managers remove dead wood - which provides a home for the insects that birds feed on. There has also been a sharp rise in the number of

grey squirrels and deer, which quickly strip out saplings and young bushes.

Farmland birds, such as the turtle dove and grey partridge, are also in decline.

However, some birds appear to be thriving. Since the first survey in 1994, sightings of stonechats have soared by 278 per cent. The birds are year-round residents and have benefited from a decade of mild winters.

The number of buzzards is up 56 per cent after a successful campaign to stop gamekeepers killing them.

The biggest success story is the red kite. After coming close to extinction, a re-introduction programme has seen numbers rise to 1,000 breeding pairs.



WINNERS

■ Red kite - up 337 per cent

■ Stonechat - (pictured above) up 278 per cent since 1994

■ Nuthatch - up 71 per cent

■ Buzzard - up 56 per cent



LOSERS

■ Willow tit (above) - down 77 per cent

■ Spotted flycatcher - down 59 per cent

■ Wood warbler - down 57 per cent

■ Pied flycatcher - down 54 per cent

Recent letters in the press..

Murderous magpies

Daily Mail June 2008

Some weeks ago, we watched fascinated as a pair of blackbirds built a nest next to our house despite ferocious attacks but two magpies. From dawn to dusk they chased the blackbirds, but amazingly, the songbirds built their nest and managed to hatch three chicks. However the attacks increased and we looked on helplessly. After five days, the chicks were gone.

This nest-raiding probably occurs across the country, and people such as Bill Oddie should be ashamed to praise these ruthlessly efficient killers. The RSPB does nothing except inform us that British birds are on the decline.

While no attempt is made to increase the dwindling number of songbirds, the number of magpies is unchecked. In the old days, gamekeepers shot magpies to protect nesting pheasants, but this has now declined. This problem could be solved if people were to contact vermin controllers to destroy these killers during the nesting season from January to April. Then, the birds of Britain might stand a chance. If not, the beautiful song of the blackbird will be lost forever.

Mrs D Dobbs, Hove, East Sussex.

Magpies not the problem

EDP, May 2008

Re the poor old magpie (Letter, May 27), magpies, crows, jackdaws and other members of the crow family have no effect on song bird numbers.

The crow family has an effect on ground-nesting birds only, not because they are mindless killers but more because there is little habitat and that makes it easy for an intelligent bird such as those from the crow family to find them. It isn't that farmers kill magpies because they are concerned with helping songbirds. They are concerned to protect ground-nesting birds which are being reared to be shot. What has had a dramatic effect on bird and wildlife numbers is the amount of intensive farming.

So stop blaming animals. They have evolved over millions of years to live in balance, and not to wipe out their own food source. Only humans do that.

J Bunn, The Street, Long Stratton

Clever magpies will hunt for chicks

EDP, June 2008

So, J Bunn (letter, May 29) thinks crows have no effect on songbirds. I have seen carrion

crows and magpies searching hedgerows for nests, hopping from bush to bush, stopping to look and listen for a reaction to their movement. Yes, they are very clever as stated in the letter and will find eggs and chicks of any species. Nature has not lived in balance on this tiny island of ours for many years, as J Bunn seems to think, and crows will live on anything. It wouldn't affect them if they killed the last songbird in the country.

B Flaxman, The Common, Brumstead.

Magpies do attack songbird nests

EDP, June 2008

J Bunn (Letter, May 29) states that magpies are not the cause of the decline of songbirds, because they only affect ground nesting birds. Try logging on to www.songbird-survival.org.uk to see what the members of the crow family are doing to all our song birds.

Only last week my neighbour saw a magpie take a young collared dove out of a nest in his garden and fly off down the field with it in its beak. If they are doing this to collared doves, they are doing it to song birds.

R Millichip, Weybourne Road, Bodham

Letter from which above excerpt was taken... which was then sent in full to SBS as requested: -

As you kindly requested, I enclose the letter in full which is not the same as what the EDP has put into print. I will give you some examples of how some of the bird watchers think. Last year a couple moved into a house in our road and are against any form of killing anything. Yesterday morning I was talking to him about a turtle dove being chased by a magpie in the field. I remarked to him that the magpie's mate has probably taken the eggs or chicks whilst this was happening. He turned to me and said he had seen a magpie take an egg out of a wagtail's nest, and then returned another three times and took an egg each time. Well as he was a birdwatcher why didn't he do something about it, not just stand back and let the magpie rob the nest, and yet he is always saying that we haven't seen many birds today when they return from their daily excursions with binoculars to the Bodham Woods. Their neighbour is another one of the same breed, I was telling her that a cuckoo was calling, and it was in a big Ash tree nearby...at which tears came into her eyes and she said, but it might have laid an egg in another bird's nest and she felt very sorry for it, as it upsets her when she hears

a cuckoo calling. Well I have just related two instances of how these people think and act towards what is happening in today's world and little do they know about what it is destroying, the songbird population.

Shooting rabbits, pigeons etc is my main hobby and it is often said to me I don't know how you could be so cruel in doing this and yet the same people are paying to have birds and animals killed every time they buy meat from a butchers or supermarket. One thing I did not mention in this letter was that the lady has a car and two dogs; the couple has a cat also and yet condemn cruelty towards birds and animals whilst paying for tinned dog and cat food. I do hope I have not bored you with this letter, but everything here is fact not fiction as seen and heard by myself.

Yours sincerely... R Millichip

In yesterday's EDP (May 29th 2008) I found it very amusing that J. Bunn's letter stated that magpies are not the problem. Has an effect on ground nesting birds only. Well would he explain to me and others, how the skylark numbers have decreased by 55% in the last 10 years, I suggest J. Bunn and all the other doubting Thomas's log onto or email dawn-chorus@songbird-survival.org.uk and they will explain to you what the members of the crow family are doing to our song birds. Only yesterday my neighbour saw a magpie take a young collared dove out of a nest, in his garden and fly off with it in its beak, now if they are doing this to collared doves, they are doing the same thing to song birds. At this moment I have before me The Readers Digest AA Book of British Birds and I will give you some quotations, as to what members of the crow family are doing to our dwindling song birds:

Page 79 the carrion crow - diet - eggs and young birds

Page 81 Jackdaw - diet - eggs and young birds

Page 122 hooded crow - diet - eggs and young birds

Page 123 raven - diet - eggs and young birds

Page 149 jay - diet - eggs and young birds

So do not blame the farmers and gamekeepers for the decline of songbirds, it is people with blinkered vision such as J. Bunn, by making such statements. To see or hear the highest number of song birds you will have to go to an estate which has gamekeepers, where members of the crow family and grey squirrels are kept to an absolute minimum.

Your letters to SBS....

A Nesting Pheasant June 2008

In the last decade it has been a very hard job for birds to rear their chicks here in rural Worcestershire not far from the Wyre forest as there are now too many predators around and with farmers giving up farming the others don't seem to bother about keeping down the rooks or magpies.

Our worst predators are the sparrowhawks and magpies in the feeding area of the lawn but squirrels are just as bad taking birds eggs and attacking chicks. Up in the fields the buzzards are in abundance and now we have new predators - the seagulls who with the rooks attack the solitary hawk. So far we haven't seen them having smaller birds but we expect they do so with lack of food around.

One of our few female pheasants left decided to nest close to my bungalow window at the back of the property in a small enclosed garden. She chose my old tin bath planted with flowers so I moved her fourteen eggs into another box next to the bath hoping she didn't mind and I made her a nest of dried ferns and leaves. She sat for around a month on her eggs only getting off for five minutes to have some seeds and water and to see where the other pheasants were. She didn't mind us peering at her to see if she was all right from the window overlooking her nest. On one occasion we saw a magpie enter the garden and we sent it packing. The day before the eggs hatched Whitehead the old male pheasant came to her side for the

whole day as if he knew they were about to hatch and then flew off. We never saw him again and wonder if he had been shot as he never stayed away before. The day came when the eggs hatched and there were seven chicks but two of these died just outside the nesting box. Two eggs didn't hatch and five went missing probably by the magpie whilst she was off her nest. She brought the five chicks to the front of the property to be attacked by a squirrel but she sent it off. Later that day only three chicks remained and overnight it was down to one chick. Whilst eating on the lawn a rat ran at her and so we checked on the poison put down in sheds and under them. Fifteen days the pheasant kept the chick and then it went missing. Each of these days she stayed close by and came for mealworms for her and her chick. Neither of them were frightened and the chick grew big and strong and could run and eat well. The mother still comes for mealworms as she had worked hard for a month sitting and going without much food and had Whitehead been around to help her fight off these predators she may have reared the chick.

Miss H Woodridge, Bewdley, Worcestershire

Song Bird Survival June 2008

At the beginning of May we were in the strath of the Helmsdale river fishing for salmon. This entails, as you will know, a good deal of walking and bird observation is automatic.

gather as much information about me as possible. I told him that I was sorry but I had no food with me, but will bring some next time I was in the office. He seemed to understand (or simply give up) and flew back to the big hedge at the edge of the car park.

About 20 minutes later I was upstairs, checking the SBS emails and there was a 'tap-tap-tap' at the window. Curious, I got up to take a look.

There was Mr Greenfinch, inches away from my face busy trying to eat the splashed window frame paint from the glass! He looked at me through the glass using his 'one-eye-at-a-time' trick; pecked (unsuccessfully) a few more times then gave up and flew off.

Now I am feeling really guilty that I had

There were a large number of predators about and we were informed that these birds were carefully preserved by the RSPB, which has a large estate adjacent to the strath.

During the week I was there I watched two kills. The first was a widgeon, flushed from its nest by a cock henharrier and then taken in flight after a few yards. On inspection the bird was found to be dead. The second was a skylark taken by a peregrine falcon which flew off in possession.

I also saw a peregrine pursuing a lapwing but the two birds disappeared over the horizon. The reasonable presumption is that this resulted in another kill.

At this rate of slaughter the chances are that the unique small bird population of this strath will be killed out within a few years, to say nothing of the larger birds which appear to be equally at risk.

The law should be altered to prevent the activities of the RSPB in connection with preservation of predators. Unless this happens the few places left where there are green plovers, curlews, skylarks and other increasingly rare birds will be left birdless.

In our area, South Shropshire, whilst there are not many hawks apart from the sparrow variety and buzzards, the ground nesting birds have been wiped out by badgers, as have the hedgehogs and frogs. The badgers have been seen eating the frogspawn out of the pond by our house. The sparrow hawks regularly take the song birds from our garden.

Richard Strachan, Nash, Ludlow

nothing to give him. There are a lot of garden birds near the offices here. It is rather nice to hear them singing when the windows are open, or when I'm having a crafty cigarette outside. I must remember to bring some bird food in and find somewhere safe to position it.....

Georgina Bradley



British birds family tree created by scientists

By Paul Eccleston, Telegraph, June 2006

A family tree of British birds has been drawn up by scientists to help them identify which species are most at risk. The evolutionary tree shows how all birds are related and groups together those who share genetic traits. It shows that our most endangered birds appear in clusters on the same branch of the evolutionary tree.



Blackbird (top) and the greenfinch (bottom) which are not currently endangered

And they will help identify close relatives who could face a similar population crash in the future.

There are 572 species of bird found in Britain and almost half - 286 - are classed as resident, migrant breeders or wintering birds.

The bird family tree drawn up by Dr Gavin Thomas from the Centre for Population Biology at Imperial College, London covers more than 93 per cent of British birds.

Birds who are currently flourishing such as the blackbird - the third most frequently seen bird during this year's Big Garden Birdwatch - has been identified as being at risk of decline in the future because its near relative the Song thrush is struggling. Closely related species on the family tree share physical traits and some of these, such as poor breeding rates or specific habitat requirements, may make them less able to cope with climate change or habitat loss and make them exceptionally vulnerable to decline.

A fall in numbers is one of the main criteria used by scientists to assess which species are of high conservation concern alongside loss of suitable habitat but the Imperial College study found no link between closeness on the family tree and range contraction.

It means scientists will need more information to obtain a clearer picture of which birds need most help.

Dr Thomas said the family tree would serve as an early warning for conservationists and would help identify the birds which share similar traits as those already on the endangered list.

"Numbers of the common blackbird are currently not perceived as threatened at all, however it has several close relatives, including the song thrush, that are experiencing severe levels of population decline.

"This could mean that populations of blackbirds in the UK are at risk of declining in the future," he said.

"Pulling together the family tree was an important task as we now have a clearer insight than ever before into the evolutionary relationships of birds in Britain.

SEE 'Telegraph - birds family tree'

"The data clearly shows a link between closely related birds and chances of population decline which could be useful for conservationists, although they will

always need to take other factors, such as range contraction, into account."

Examples of birds which may be at risk of population decline in the future, based on their close relationship to other endangered birds, include:

? The greenfinch - not currently endangered but closely related to the linnet and bullfinch which are currently experiencing severe levels of decline

? The ptarmigan - not currently endangered but closely related to the black grouse and grey partridge which are currently experiencing severe levels of decline

? The blackbird - not currently endangered but closely related to the song thrush which is currently experiencing severe levels of decline

? The Pied wagtail is currently stable but grey wagtail and yellow wagtail numbers are declining.

? The rock pipit is stable, but the tree pipit and meadow pipit are declining.

? The Cirl bunting has a stable population size but a contracting range, three close relatives - reed bunting, yellowhammer and corn bunting - have suffered severe population declines.

According to the RSPB a total of 247 species of British birds have been assessed, and placed onto one of three lists - red, amber or green depending on their conservation status with red the highest conservation priority requiring urgent action.

Forty species are currently on the red list, 121 are amber-listed and 86 are green-listed.

Farmland birds such as the turtle dove, grey partridge, skylark, yellowhammer, linnet and yellow wagtail have suffered some of the biggest population declines due to loss of habitat and change in farming practices which has deprived them of an important food resource.

Woodland birds which have suffered a similar fall in numbers include the lesser redpoll, willow tit and tree pipit.

