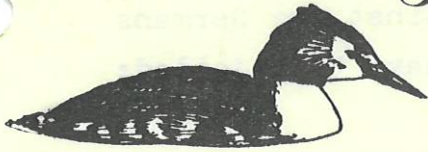


Fylde Bird Club



NEWSLETTER NO. 46

VIEW FROM AN EDITOR'S HOBBYHORSE

Pick up any reasonably serious newspaper and the chances are that somewhere within will be an article or reference to the environmental or ecological problems that the world is facing today. These tend to fall into three categories, the problems that the planet faces, those that particular regions face and those problems that are nearer to home and perhaps seem more immediately relevant to us. By way of illustration, global warming for the first, destruction of rain forests in Amazon for the second and destruction of SSSI's for the third. They are, of course, linked but provide a convenient framework for newspaper editors to appeal to a particular sector of readers.

The wealth of cuttings which I receive are testimony to the fact that environmental news is good news for newspapers. The Guardian has recently started a Friday Environmental Supplement, other newspapers have regular nature correspondents producing articles far removed from those of yesteryear when the habits of your local garden Robin were examined in minute detail.

If nature is good for newspapers then it is equally good for conservation bodies. Articles are generally sympathetic to the 'nature' cause and provide an advertising platform for societies such as the WWF, RSPB etc. by attracting readers to join the Society or send a donation to help in the work being carried out by that particular organisation.

Whilst sorting through the cuttings for this issue it seemed to me that there was a link between the shooting of birds for sport in Italy and the destruction of birds by gamekeepers and other shooting interests here at home. On the one hand here we are telling Italians not to shoot skylarks or Honey Buzzards yet here on the other hand we have gamekeepers indiscriminately poisoning wildlife to preserve the sporting interests of a wealthy minority. For the Italian League for the Conservation of Birds read the RSPB here at home. Whereas the former has and indeed is suffering intimidation and violence from the shooting interests the RSPB is fighting from within to change the attitudes of the landowning fraternity. How can the Duke of Westminster condone the slaughter of birds of prey undertaken by gamekeepers employed by him and acting on his behalf.

People tend to think of the RSPB as an organisation geared to buying and preserving habitats. Its work encompasses much more than that and subscriptions from members go not just to the purchase of, say, Abernethy Forest but go to species protection and to the 'heavy' arm of the RSPB involved with the

pursuit of egg collectors and bird thieves. Only today I read that the Society has brought a successful prosecution against two Germans involved in stealing young Peregrines. The two men have been jailed; a notable first for the RSPB.

Operations such as these are expensive in terms of manpower and time. By increasing membership of the society we can all help promote a change in the attitudes of the hunting and shooting lobby and more importantly prove to the rest of the world that we care for our own wildlife.

If you're not a member then join now and do something positive. If your friends aren't members get them to join too.

A.D

LATE MIGRANT REDSTARTS IN LANCASHIRE

Any Autumn date for Redstart after the first week of October can be considered late, but in recent times stragglers have been noted in the last week and people have suggested that these are probably of Scandinavian origin. Two years ago, having found two of these in Blackpool, I began to doubt the identity of a bird in my backyard on 30 October 1977 which was recorded as a Black Redstart (Fylde Naturalist No.4) mainly because two of these had been found the previous day at South Station about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away and stayed a week. This now becomes the third latest Lancashire record of Redstart.

The following are extracted from Lancashire Bird Reports:-

29.10.66 Burnley
24.10.77 Whalley
30.10.77 Blackpool (not recorded)
31.10.81 Formby
10.11.82 St. Annes
24.10.87 Sunderland Point
23.10.88 Blackpool
24.10.88 Blackpool
02.11.89 Chipping

E. STIRLING

FOREIGN BIRDING

During the last twelve months a start has been made on producing a register of foreign birding information. This information is available for all members to use in the planning of, and during, their holidays if required. Information collected to date is as follows:-

CANADA	Spring Migration, Point Pelee	May 89	BRANTA
CANARY ISLANDS	Report, Sites, Lists	Aug 88	WEBB/STIDOLPH
CRETE	Site & List	Apr 87	-
GAMBIA	1) Report, Sites, Lists 2) Birdquest & Cygrus itinerary	May 85 Nov.88	WHITEHOUSE/ISLES -
GREECE	Lesbos - Sites, list	May 89	Sun-Med
ISRAEL	1) Report, Sites, list 2) Eilat - Sites, list	- -	various SUNBIRDER
MALLORCA	Report, Sites, list	77/86	WHITEHOUSE et al
PORTUGAL	1) Algarve - sites, list 2) Southern - sites, list	84/88 Aug.87	BROADBENT
SPAIN	South West Spain, Guide	-	ORNITHOLIDAYS

In addition there are various magazine articles and/or book extracts on the following places:- Canary Islands, France, Greece, Holland, Israel, Morocco, Portugal and Spain.

There must be plenty of overseas birding life held by Club members and if you have any that you are willing to have included in the "pool" I will be pleased to arrange for a copy to be added and be available for use by the Club members.

Many thanks to members who have already contributed to the register.

J.L.FLETCHER

RECENT REPORTS

MAY

Migration continued unabated in the first half of the month. At Rossall School on the 1st. 2 Yellow Wagtails, 14 Wheatears of the Northern type, 2 Whinchat and a Sedge Warbler were present. On the same day at the Mere 11 Redpoll and 2 Whimbrel flew North; a Lesser Whitethroat and a first year Little Gull were also seen.

Sightings on the 3rd really gave the true flavour of migration with a single Yellow Wagtail at South Promenade, Wood Warbler at Watson Road Park, Cuckoos at Bank Lane Warton; Lesser Whitethroat, Grasshopper Warbler and 4 Common Sandpipers at the Mere and a Wood Sandpiper flying low over Stanley Park.

The 4th was no less exciting with 3 male Pied Flycatchers in the Woodland Gardens and a female present in Stanley Park along with a Spotted Flycatcher and a female Redstart. At the Mere two Reed Warblers were singing and a Whinchat was observed on Harrowside Putting Green (Ed doesn't say at which hole). At least 30 Sedge Warblers and 15 Whitethroats were at the Mere.

Blackcaps, Wheatears and Whitethroats continued to move through but Yellow Wagtails were just as scarce as in previous years with the only other report, apart from the one above, of a single at Fairhaven on the 6th. Lesser Whitethroats in contrast were slightly more common this year with 2 at Ribby on the same day. At the Nook on the 10th there were 10+ Willow Warblers of which 8 were caught and ringed. 2 of those caught had first been ringed in 1989.

By the 13th there were two singing Lesser Whitethroats and 4 or 5 singing Reed Warblers at the Mere. A single of this latter species had been in song at LSANR on the 6th.

The 20th saw a marked influx of Spotted Flycatchers into the Fylde with birds observed at Lytham, Fleetwood, Thurnham and Fluke Hall.

Swallows, House Martins and Swifts were present in good numbers by mid month. There was a marked passage of House Martins and Swallows at Rossall on the 20th with 90 and 29 respectively flying into a north easterly wind in one hour. On the same day Great Spotted Woodpecker and one Green Woodpecker were at Thurnham. A Grasshopper Warbler sang at the Mere and a late Short Eared Owl was seen there in the evening.

A pair of Garganey arrived at the Mere on the 2nd and individuals were

seen throughout the month. On the 25th 2 male Garganey were present, later joined by the female. On the 31st though the male was present the female could not be seen. If they weren't breeding then other species were trying to - Maurice noticed a pair of Pochard mating at the Mere on the same day.

During the first week of the month 2 pairs of Great Crested Grebes had been seen with young whilst an additional pair were displaying on the 13th. A pair of Shoveler were at the Mere on the 20th with up to 8+ Ruddy Duck there during the same period.

Wader passage had virtually dried up so far as 'fresh' Waders were concerned. Small numbers of Common Sandpipers moved through but apart from these there was only a single record of a Greenshank at Lane Ends on the 20th.

Coastal Wader passage was in full swing. At Fairhaven on the 6th there were 10,000+ Knot, 100 Bar Tailed Godwits, 300 Grey Plover, 300 Ringed Plover and a Whimbrel. 7000 Sanderling were at Rossall on the 20th and 550 there on the 22nd. Numbers fluctuated from day to day as parties stopped to feed and then move on.

Terns became more common off the coast as the month progressed. 14 Sandwich were at St. Annes on the 8th and 2 Little and 4 Arctics there on the 9th. 3 Arctic Terns were seen at Rossall on the 20th and 26th. 2 Sandwich Terns were unusually at Lytham jetty on the 30th.

Single Guillemots were off South Promenade on the 9th and 20th. At Rossall on the 20th a Guillemot was offshore and more remarkably a Shag. In addition a late Red Throated Diver and 5 Red Breasted Mergansers were seen - all very nice bonus birds for those involved in the sponsored bird race and lucky enough to see them!

On the 26th, a day of light easterly winds, a Puffin flew into the Bay and was seen close inshore from Rossall. Unusually, in view of the conditions, 6 Fulmar and 6 Kittiwake were seen on the same morning.

On the 13th 5 Eiders were off Lytham. In the Wyre Estuary 2 adult male and 3 female plus an immature male Eider were seen displaying.

The feature of the month must be the remarkable influx of Black Terns into our area. At 08.43 on the 2nd 9 suddenly appeared over the Mere; between 17.15 and 18.00 on the same day 38 were present. This movement coincided with south easterly winds and other parts of the country had similar, and in some cases, much larger movements. By the following morning all had disappeared from the Mere.

A single Black Tern was at Lytham on the 13th. On the 20th one was at Rossall in the morning, 2 at Cockersands in the afternoon and 3 at the Mere in the early evening.

On the Raptor front, without a doubt, all the honours go to Ed. Starting with a Merlin on the 1st over Watson Rd. Park - where else would you expect one to be seen? - he hit the jackpot on the 19th. After seeing a Hobby fly

in off the sea at Central Promenade and head towards the Pleasure Beach - he followed it, as you would! He continued to St. Annes Moss to be confronted with, not a Hobby but a female Marsh Harrier being mobbed by 3 Lapwings. Greater things were to happen on the following day when he watched an Osprey being mobbed by Gulls over St. Annes beach. Sparrowhawk over St. Annes Moss on the 22nd was tame by comparison.

In stark contrast Maurice's run of bad luck continues. Whilst in his shop one day he heard a noise which sounded very like the rasping call of a Corncrake - sadly it was just one of those warning noises made by reversing lorries these days.

On the 2nd an orange tip butterfly flew across the lawn of the Thursby Home directly opposite LSANR. If it had flown across the road it would have been a first for the preserve. Alas, it didn't. One can only speculate what misfortunes will befall Maurice on the Natural History front in the future. On the bright side he might just stumble across a real goody. Whilst at the ICI pool Fleetwood at dusk he saw a Fox on the 6th and on the 22nd 3 well grown Fox cubs were there.

JUNE

Generally a quiet month with birds concentrating on breeding rather than moving. Offshore up to 30 Gannets, 50 Terns, a small number of Fulmars could be seen from South Promenade in the early part of the month. However, on the 2nd, a day of poor visibility, 58 Fulmar, 11 Manx Shearwaters and 17 Kittiwakes could be seen. On the 3rd 140 Turnstone were still at Lytham.

Light south westerly winds and overcast conditions with showers brought 11 Storm Petrels close inshore at Starr Gate on the 24th. These numbers were every bit as remarkable as the arrival of the Black Terns at the Mere in May. On the same day other locations had similar movements, notably Hopes Nose, Devon, where 100 passed during the day.

Also on the 24th 5 Arctic Terns including one second summer bird were seen from South Promenade. A Wader count carried out at long range from the Starr Gate shelter by the County Recorder discerned 70 Sanderling on the beach at Squires Gate.

On the 10th 32 Mute Swans were on the ICI Pool and on the CEGB Pool there were 25 Coot with 4 well grown young. A pair of Mute Swans had 3 young at the CEGB pool on the 17th.

At the Mere on the 6th 6 Pochard were present and a minimum of 46 Coot. A Shelduck with 3 ducklings were on the main dyke just below the dam.

At Bispham Marsh 5 male and 1 juvenile Ruddy were seen on the 20th. An adult Great Crested Grebe with one small young on its back was on the Mere on the 20th. This third pair hatching seems to have failed, probably due to the bad weather as it was not seen again.

The same party of Eider mentioned in the May report were at Armhill on the 10th whilst another 3 males were at Knott End jetty.

A male Crossbill was seen flying over the car park at Lytham Hall on the 11th and feeding in the pines near the golf course. It was not seen after late morning. 2 Garden Warblers were singing at Ribby on the 16th and another was seen feeding young out of the nest at Lytham Hall on the 18th.

After last years good Quail season there was only one June record, a single at Stalmine Moss on the 18th.

CONTRIBUTORS :- L.G.Blacow, A.Dawe, B.Dyson, S.Eaves, M.Jones,
Maud A.Myerscough, D.Pilling, P.Scholes, P.Slade,
E. Stirling.

POSTSCRIPT

For those of you previously sceptical about Blackpool Borough Councils attitude to conservation and birdwatching in general, I have an item of good news - well, good news for those who visit the Starr Gate shelter. Yes, it's been repaired - well, semi repaired; new seating has been installed which has been treated with a green preservative, which not only works on all kinds of woods but on trouser seats too. The roof still gives cause for concern though with several slates missing and many leaks visible in heavy rain.

The repairs have met with a favourable response from other sectors of society too, with graffiti and litter in the form of chip papers and cans reappearing plus the occasional itinerant spending the night on the benches.

Continuing the maritime theme 11 Club members went out from Fleetwood on the good ship 'Harvester' on the 19th July. It was a gloriously calm evening with the sea like glass. We didn't see much apart from a few Terns Guillemots, and a distant Skua but it was really pleasureable going out beyond Wyre Light and then drifting in towards Heysham Power Station outfall. We arrived back at just after ten, giving enough time for a dash to the 'Queens' for a couple of drinks to quench our thirst.

The boat trips sponsored by Wyre Borough Council on August 1st attracted 7 in the afternoon and 22 for the evening trip. Not many birds were seen in the Channel to Wyre Light but the evening trip, on its return from the Light, sailed upriver as far as Stanah coinciding with high water. There were approximately 2000 Dunlin and 100 Godwits of both species stretched across the mudbanks of Barnaby Sands and Burrows Marsh. The trip offered a new perspective on the river and is highly recommended to anyone wanting to part with £5. The Wyre Borough Rangers (not a football team) give a commentary on the sights to be seen and a brief history of Fleetwood and its development as a port. The boat used was the 'Bay Queen' which

apparently seats 72, those of you who have travelled on the inter island boats on the Scillies will not be surprised by this!

Recently our area has played host to two rare birds, the first, a Pacific Golden Plover was found by Dave Jackson and the Lane Ends Wader counters (this is not a Country and Western Group) on the 22nd July. It predictably attracted birders from far and wide during its stay. The second was a Stone Curlew found by Peter Hornby of Burnley on Parrs field on Jameson Rd. on August 5th. It, too attracted many visitors but from not so far and wide.

Both these occasions produced equally rare sightings: a particular pair of Bausch and Lamb binoculars were actually seen pointing seawards at Lane Ends (beware - salt spray can seriously damage your wealth). The second was none other than Ed. seen well outside his normal range, watching the Stone Curlew through his telescope. This latter sighting was a 'tick' for many people, though not for me. I must admit I had mixed feelings seeing Ed there: it makes you wonder what he was missing in the railway bushes at South Shore or Watson Road Park.

The arrival of the Pacific Golden Plover caused a few identification problems for many people. In view of this I'm thinking of starting an agony column, with all letters treated in the strictest confidence and passed to our panel of specialists for reply. For example:-

Dear Editor,

I was recently at Lane Ends when the Pacific Golden Plover was present and made to feel totally inadequate by the experts around me. How can I become an expert?

Answer: It seems to me that your problem is mainly scapular in nature. Reading your letter I can see that you have a very poorly developed vocabulary and I suggest that the quickest way to solve your problem would be to learn a few key words and phrases e.g. axillaries, coverts, primary projection would do for starters. These would help fill those embarrassing moments when you are completely at a loss for words. The words and phrases can be used at the appropriate moment in a conversation in any sequence but preferably using a very loud voice. A word of warning - never use the phrase "I don't know" as this will severely damage your standing in the birding world and could lead to a terminal loss of credibility.

You may be interested to know that an identification film - Teenage Mutant Tertials will shortly be showing at a cinema near you.

Dear Editor,

I am 41 and thought I saw Chris Heard at Lane Ends recently.
Is this true?

Answer: You are obviously going through a mid life identification
crisis.

Dear Editor,

I love seawatching but my friends treat me like a Pariah.

Answer: Try seawatching off India.

I would welcome articles for inclusion in the newsletter and any
other items which would be suitable.

A.D

Tidal power pushes forward

The search for clean, efficient sources of energy has produced new ways of using natural forces.

Nick Nuttall reports

A tidal power barrage may be built in the North West for almost a tenth of the cost of the proposed 8,500-megawatt Severn barrage and take a quarter of the time to build. The energy department is expected this week to announce funding for studies into a 47mw project at Fleetwood, Lancashire, across the River Wyre.

Initial investigations into small tidal-power schemes, carried out for the department's energy technology support unit at Harwell in Oxfordshire have examined more than 120 possible locations along Britain's coastline.

The North Western Electricity Board (Norweb) has also been studying the potential in its region for renewables, including wind power, landfill gas, small-scale hydro and tidal-power schemes.

Both investigations have concluded that the Wyre estuary, which runs into Morecambe Bay, potentially has the geographical and tidal features capable of making a barrage cost-effective. The new study to be carried out by Trafalgar House and Binnie & Partners for Lancashire county council, will be into the technical, economic and environmental acceptability of a 13 turbine, 530 metre construction at the mouth of the Wyre.

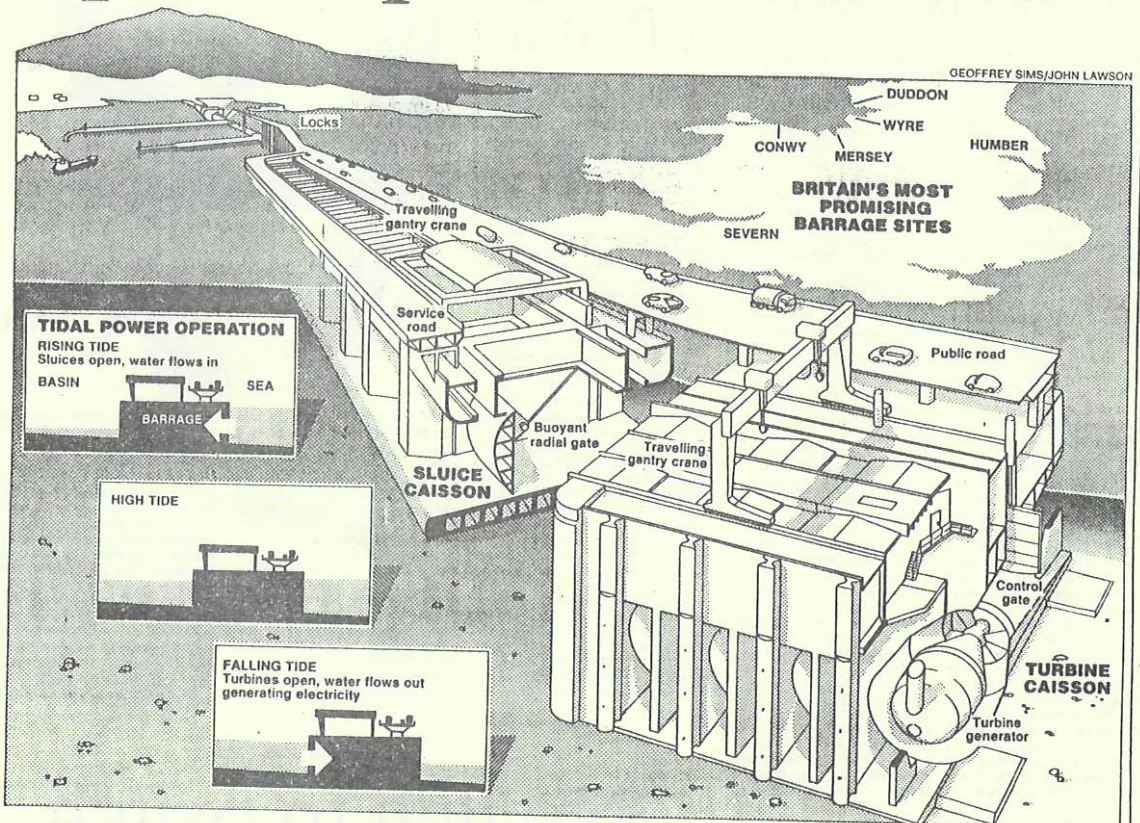
Other aspects of the study, now deemed crucial to a tidal-power project's funding, are the regional-development implications, including leisure opportunities and the possibility of the barrage's use as a river crossing.

Fleetwood's position as the main deep-water fishing port on the west coast and an important port for ferries to the Isle of Man could be harmed by an insensitively sited barrage.

Studies are expected to look at the impact on electricity generation if the scheme is built 1km upstream, which is beyond the docks but in water which is shallower at low tide.

The decision to investigate the Wyre highlights the slow but steady push to exploit Britain's coastline to generate clean, cheap electricity from the tides.

Findings from a pre-feasibility study of the Humber will probably be announced this month. They are



expected to conclude that a barrage is worth serious consideration, and will be used to seek the £150,000 backing needed to present the idea of a barrage across the Humber to the European Commission as a regional development scheme.

Peter Hill, chief executive of Scunthorpe, Glanford and Gainsborough Chamber of Commerce, said that such a project could, by raising the water level of the river, encourage shipping, industry and employment back to the region. The barrage would include up to 90 turbines to generate electricity and, supporters believe, turn the Humber into a serious commercial rival to the Channel tunnel.

Mr Hill says: "We imagine that freight getting to the tunnel could suffer serious congestion difficulties. There would be none of these problems with freight leaving from the Humber for the Continent."

In July, the Mersey Barrage Company, which wants to build a 700mw scheme across the River

Mersey, said it hoped a private bill would be put before Parliament in autumn next year, enabling it to start construction. Environmental and technical studies into the effect of a huge barrage across the Severn estuary are also continuing. A report is expected this autumn and some experts hope that construction could start at the end of the decade.

Planners at local authorities and construction companies, however, are beginning to look at some of Britain's small estuaries as financially appealing locations. The main attractions are the relatively low costs, and thus reduced loan interest payments, as well as quick building times for schemes capable of both clean energy generation and significant regional benefits.

If construction on the Severn started now, it would cost £8 billion. Full electricity-generating capacity would be unlikely before 1999. The Mersey scheme would take five

years and cost about £880 million.

On the other hand, some of the smaller schemes could cost in the £30 million to £100 million range and take just two years to build.

A series of carefully sited tidal barrages could also play strategic coastal-defence roles in the protecting of cities, towns, farm land and wildlife habitats from rising sea levels if global warming became a reality.

Apart from the Wyre, several other small-scale tidal schemes have been under consideration. Two of the construction companies involved in the Severn Tidal Power Group, Balfour Beatty and McAlpine, along with Norweb and several local authorities, are considering seeking energy department backing for a study on the Duddon estuary, near Barrow-in-Furness, in Cumbria. This could involve a 120mw barrage, costing about £100 million. Some of the smaller sites have undergone more detailed investigations. A study of the River

Loughor near Llanelli in south Wales has indicated that a project might be cost-effective. However, the difficulties of balancing leisure and amenity interests, which require certain water conditions, with the very different conditions that are needed to generate economic electricity from the tides, has led to the project being dropped at Loughor.

Studies into a six-turbine, 30mw, 225m barrage on the River Conwy from the Brecon Beacons to Deganwy appear more encouraging. Findings are expected to be published soon.

The site under consideration is close to the river mouth but out of sight of the castle. Being close to the popular holiday resorts of Llandudno, Conwy and Colwyn Bay, the area could benefit from a barrage with its impounded water offering water-sport opportunities. The river has no industrial shipping but does have mussel fishing on local beds and some private boating.

Pacific visitor drives twitchers to sea

HUNDREDS of birdwatchers were sailing the Bristol Channel yesterday in search of a 10-inch sea bird which ought to be several thousands of miles away in the northern Pacific Ocean.

The first ancient murrelet, a type of auk, to be recorded anywhere in the Atlantic was said by the Bird Information Service to have been last spotted on the sea south of Lundy Island off Devon.

However, the armada of little boats is worrying wildlife wardens who fear the "twitchers" may upset Lundy Island's famous puffin population, and nature reserve staff have been standing by to repel the visitors. The appearance of the

black and grey *Synthliboramphus antiquum* has resulted in birdwatchers hiring every boat available in Ilfracombe, Bideford, and Appledore. Some harbour masters doubt all the boats could legally carry passengers.

Enthusiasts, though, were so anxious to get to the island that some would not wait for the official ship Oldenburg, booked to take 250 of them, leaving the organizers out of pocket. Others shied away from television cameras as they boarded because they were meant to be at work and not bird hunting.

The murrelet was spotted on Sunday at Jenny's Cove on the island by 250 members

of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds who had come to observe puffins. Mr Stan Davies, regional director for the society, who was one of the first to identify the bird, said: "It was very exciting for the people on our trip. They had only gone out to Lundy to see the puffins, but ended up seeing the murrelet. It must rate as the rarest bird seen in Europe for some time."

"We had to go and borrow a bird book before we could identify what it was. It must have been blown from the Pacific to the Atlantic across Panama or at Cape Horn, and then taken back north by the winds and currents."

Mr John Puddy, agent on

Lundy Island, said he had already told some skippers not to land.

"One thing we are worried about is that they could disturb the resident puffin population because the murrelet may be near their nesting area. We are particularly worried about them trying to land in the cove itself and we have someone standing by stop them."

"The area is a site of special scientific interest, and we have the power to restrict access and movement if necessary. It is more important to us to protect other sea bird colonies than for people to view one bird that has appeared on the island."

Rare bird at risk on grouse moors

Maev Kennedy

HEN harriers, among Britain's rarest birds of prey, are being destroyed illegally by managers of grouse moors, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says.

Heather moorland is the bird's main habitat, but where moors are managed for grouse shooting it is seen as a pest. The society's research indicates dozens are shot or have their nests and young destroyed each year. Breeding numbers are down to 500 pairs in Scotland, and 30 in England and Wales.

This year the society has reports of 16 nests destroyed or birds killed in Scotland, one in Wales where three chicks were stamped on, and one bird poisoned in England. Last year 32 incidents involved at least 85 birds, young and eggs. One nest on a nature reserve was destroyed, and another nest was stamped on, killing six chicks.

The birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside

Act, and the review, Red Data Birds in Britain, lists them as among the rarest and most vulnerable in the country.

When the bird attempts to breed on moorlands managed for grouse, its success rate, 25 per cent, is only a third that of unmanaged moors. In 1988 the society found 12 cases where either the eggs or chicks had been deliberately destroyed, all on managed moors.

"The grouse moor owner is the custodian of all the wildlife on his land," said the society's director, Ian Prest. It does not oppose grouse shooting, but Mr Prest said that deliberate persecution could only bring field sports into disrepute.

The hen harrier is doing much better than Spix's Macaw, the world's rarest bird. According to the International Council for Bird Preservation, one has been found in the wild, but trappers are converging on its secret habitat in the remote North-east of Brazil. The brilliant blue parrot would be worth at least £30,000 to a collector.

Shelduck watch

Birdwatchers are arriving in Gloucestershire to see the largest group of Shelduck to have gathered on the Severn estuary.

3/7

Owl warning

An Eagle Owl with a five-foot wingspan which escaped during a display at Long Eaton, Derbyshire, could attack domestic pets, police said yesterday.

30/5

Runway scheme divides islanders

By HARVEY ELLIOTT, AIR CORRESPONDENT

A PLAN to extend the runway on the Scilly Isles by 90 metres — just twice the width of each runway at Heathrow — has divided islanders and led to a major environmental dispute that may eventually involve the Prince of Wales.

The 600-metre grass strip, which has served St Mary's airport for 50 years is crumbling and the Civil Aviation Authority has ruled that it will have to close unless it can be surfaced to enable passenger-carrying aircraft to land safely. Councillors decided that if the runway is to be brought up to date it should also be extended to allow larger aircraft to use it and provide a service for holidaymakers and the local economy, mainly reliant on producing fresh flowers for British and French cities.

The extension would mean, however, covering an area of important natural beauty with 30,000 tons of granite hardcore and surfacing. The environmental trust set up by the Duchy of Cornwall to administer the Prince's land in the islands was asked if it would hand over the land voluntarily, but refused. If the local council decides to go ahead, the trust says, it will have to ask the Prince to order the trust to transfer the site.

Mr Mike Hicks, a local businessman, said: "If we are going to go into a new century and the expanded Common Market we must have a decent landing site on the islands. It would be quite ludicrous, at a time when people are flying more and more as a matter of

course, to force the islands to return to the old ways of communicating with the mainland only by sea, or, at best, by helicopter."

The councillors voted narrowly for the improvement scheme and have sought tenders for the work.

Mr Hicks said that with only £1.5 million available for development, the size of the tenders might settle the issue, but added: "Whatever happens, we must do something to improve the landing strip."

Mr Robert Dorian-Smith, chairman of the trust and a pilot, agrees on improvements, but opposes an extension. He said: "The original 600-metre strip is adequate for any aircraft which now use the runway and by extending it mean destroying an important and beautiful coastal footpath, but would mean 30,000 tons of granite being ferried through the tiny country roads."

Brynmor Airways, which now flies a Twin Otter between Plymouth and the islands every day, disagrees. "We can only use our bigger aircraft, the 48-seater Dash 7, on a runway which is 690 metres long," said a senior official. "To make the operation profitable, we have to use the Dash 7."

The only other air links with the mainland are by helicopter from Penzance or by a nine-seater Islander aircraft from Land's End, and, say those in favour of developing the airport, there is no guarantee that they will always be available.

Flying off at a tangent

YOU know where you are with birds of prey. At least, I always thought so. But I have just returned from my hols in Africa with my faith in their reliability shattered.

Birds of prey are fliers: that is what they are supremely adapted for. They fly about and drop on things from above: a straightforward and rather satisfying way of making a living.

Different birds of prey do it in slightly different ways. Peregrines crash on to flying birds; kestrels hover and drop like shuttlecocks. Vultures soar and alight on carrion; ospreys and fish eagles pounce on fish. The snake eagles of Africa have cornered the snakey end of the market and eat little else; they have evolved scaly legs as protection from bites, and poisonous and non-poisonous snakes are alike to them.

In England, the marsh harrier quarters the reed beds on wings lifted in a shallow V and drops on its prey from above. So, when I saw a typical harrier overfly Lake Kariba on the Zambia/Zimbabwe border, I naturally assumed that it earned its living in the normal, harrier fashion.

I was in a canoe at the time, threading my way through a maze of drowned trees. Lake Kariba is



Robin Jacques

man-made, only 28 years old, and everywhere shallow enough is a half-submerged forest of dead mopane trees.

This harrier was already familiar: I had seen several of its kind. It was the commonest bird of prey to be seen, apart from the fish eagles. It was called a gymnogene.

I watched it fly over the canoe and glide down on to one of the dead trees. Then it did something so bizarre that I could hardly believe what I was watching. It landed and then huggled the tree with its wings. Its head vanished inside the tree.

Birds of prey don't hug trees, I knew, but that one did. The reason

why it did so opens the great Pandora's Box of evolution — of, if you like, the meaning of life.

For the gymnogene, although a superb flier like all harriers, does not live the conventional harrier's life. It is a specialist tree-hugger. This bird has given up quartering the ground and dropping on prey. Instead, it has become a poker and clamberer. The gymnogene lives on all the delightful things you can find in cracks and crevices: reptiles, amphibians, nestlings, small mammals, insects and birds eggs. It seems to use its wings more for balance than for grip when it goes into its tree-hugging routine.

Hole-nesting birds are a special

delicacy and the gymnogene has a strange adaptation all the better to eat them with. It has extra long, double-jointed legs with which it reaches into holes, around corners, and grabs the nestlings out one by one. It can bend 150° forward and 40° back, and there is a fair amount of lateral movement as well. The only hole-nester safe from the gymnogene is the hornbill, which walls up its nest with mud as a defence.

Gymnogenes can walk upside-down on branches; hang upside-down for ages. They are bold enough to grab swallow chicks from nests beneath the eaves of houses. They have a specially small head that can reach into an impossibly narrow crack.

What they have done is to claim a vacant ecological niche. No other bird is capable of earning its living the gymnogene way. The bird's uniqueness is what has enabled it to survive and prosper. That is how evolution — life — operates: a fundamental principle that the gymnogene demonstrates to perfection. On Lake Kariba it prospers, I suspect, as never before. I have no doubt that the reason there are so many gymnogenes is because there are so many dead trees: millions of them, all of them a mass of cracks and crevices. No other bird can exploit them as well.

With Lake Kariba, man has created a gymnogene heaven, and with it a gymnogene glut. Eventually the mopane trees will rot down and disappear, and when that happens, the gymnogene numbers will fall away. That is tough on the gymnogenes — but that, after all, is life is it not?

SIMON BARNES

Traps and poison are the old image

BRITAIN'S gamekeepers fear that the conviction of five of their number for using a banned pesticide to kill predators will revive the outdated image that they are employed solely to protect game for shooting by rich landowners (Craig Seton writes).

Alan Jones, an investigations officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said after the Hereford convictions that some gamekeepers were still using the illegal techniques of 150 years ago, including shooting, trapping and poisons.

However Ian Grindy, head gamekeeper of a Lancashire estate, who is employed by a syndicate that shoots pheasants, partridge and wildfowl, said yesterday that the notion of the ceaseless war of gamekeepers against traditional predators like the fox and birds of prey was dying out as fast as its former practitioners.

Mr Grindy, aged 40, learn his craft on a Suffolk estate where his tutor, a traditional gamekeeper, might well have been prepared to use pole traps to catch owls and gin traps to prevent foxes attacking the landlord's pheasants.

He believes that most gamekeepers today shun illegal methods of destroying predators and should be regarded as modern conservationists, more likely to be equipped with a City and Guilds certificate than ancient country lore.

"Nowadays we are responsible for forestry and woodland, which encourage wildlife and the methods of rearing pheasants for shooting are different," Mr Grindy said. "Vermin control is only important at critical times of the year. We have a live and let

live policy. We only kill when an animal is literally threatening our living. We use a high-velocity rifle to kill foxes."

He believed it was time the public realised the conservation work of gamekeepers, particularly against badger baiters, egg thieves and poachers.

"My boss has to pay for this work. I took over here nine years ago and in the first three years I had my nose broken twice, four or five broken ribs and threatening phone calls. These people, who come out of the cities, left a tailor's dummy at the end of my drive with a knife in it and was warning that that was what would happen to me if I did not stop going out at night to catch them. It was found by my children on their way to school," Mr Grindy said.

The Game Conservancy has 23,000 members, including about 2,500 gamekeepers, about half Britain's number. Charles Nodder, of the conservancy, said most gamekeepers worked for shooting syndicates. There were very few private shoots now.

He said: "All birds of prey are protected. The image of gamekeepers killing birds of prey is one we can well do without. There is nothing like the degree of control of predators that there was in the early part of this century."

Last year the Game Conservancy had been instrumental in an agreement under which employers had to ensure that every employee strictly observed the law, Mr Nodder said. A gamekeeper who used illegal methods could expect to be sacked.

Feather report, page 18

Feather report

No itch to twitch

AS I write, there are three birds in Britain that have never been seen before on these shores. Three "firsts" — and I shall not see a single one. And it just so happens that I do not give a monkey's

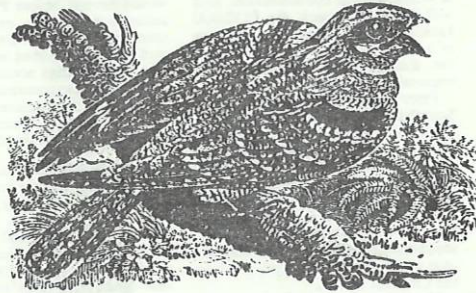
Yes, I care a great deal about birds, always have. I am even writing a book about the damn things. But, pleasant though it is to hear about the tree swallow of the Scillies, the least tern of Suffolk and, of course, the ancient murrelet of Lundy, I am quite content for them to go on strutting their stuff without me.

Such a statement will draw gasps of horror from the twitchers. It is a confession that one is simply not serious about the business of birds. Twitchers are the people who love to chase such fantastic, impossible rarities as the ancient murrelet. They make lists, they collect; in short, they are driven by an acquisitive urge.

Each twitcher lists the birds he has seen in Britain. This is a "life list", and a new "lifer" sends him — twitchers are almost always men — into raptures. The word "twitcher" describes the state of near-screaming neurosis that overtakes such a person when a rarity is at hand, and he has yet to clap binoculars on it.

Ludicrous stories abound in the twitching world. There was a grey-checked thrush that flew the Atlantic and landed, exhausted, on a rock off the Scilly Isles. It was promptly listed by a handful of alert birders, and a second later it was washed into the sea by a wave and drowned. Another grey-checked thrush made the journey last autumn and was eaten by a ginger tom on St Mary's, also in the Scillies.

But not all bird people are twitchers. Many birders see the pursuit of extreme rarities as a world of illusion. The murrelet is lost creature. Most extreme rarities are the result of catastrophic navigation, disastrous involve-



Voice in the wilderness: a nightjar, as captured by Thomas Berwick

ment with boats, or unavoidable trouble from appalling winds. Lundy Island is simply a personal disaster for the poor murrelet, no more.

My finest bird moment this year occurred at three o'clock on a May morning in the middle of a patch of blasted heathland on Minsmere bird reserve, in Suffolk. At one moment, I could hear no fewer than four nightjars chirring dementedly to the night.

NIGHTJARS are British breeding birds, and any twitcher would tell you a nightjar is a "tart's tick" — a bird every twitcher has ticked every year of his twitching life. Nightjars are not rare. But they are seriously threatened by the loss of their heathland habitat. At Minsmere, the bird people are reclaiming and managing heathland to recreate the land a nightjar loves. And this year, nightjars are thriving.

The real business of birds is not about ticking rarities, or even about the protection of more glamorous species. Real birding is about the Great Chain: the interconnectedness of just about everything. The point is not just the nightjars. You must provide the

insects that nightjars eat, and you must provide for these insects. The point is not to protect nightjars, the point is to protect everything.

Twitchers have a bad name among many bird people: "the Chelsea supporters of the bird world," said one.

But all bird people are essentially on the same side. There is no time for internecine strife or class snobbery. The best twitchers are magnificent field naturalists: to tell a least tern from the virtually identical British little tern is a serious piece of work. A good few bird reserve wardens are lapsed twitchers.

The twitching subculture is an interesting phenomenon and, no doubt, good fun for the twitchers. But, ultimately, it is a distraction from the real thing. What does the arrival of a least tern demonstrate? Principally, it shows that there are a lot of twitchers about, and that some of them are very good. But the real issue is not with the ancient murrelets of British life. There is only one issue of real importance and that is conservation, conservation.

SIMON BARNES

TODAY, it seems, if you want your views on the countryside to be taken seriously, you have to be a scientist. A degree is essential. A PhD gives even greater credibility, even if it was obtained by simply studying the rear left leg of a centipede. If they had been alive today, the views of country writers and farmers such as Richard Jefferies, Gilbert White, Henry Williamson and A.G. Street would have been dismissed.

A few years ago I visited specialist butterfly reserve "What birds to you get here?" asked, expecting the scientists to be interested in what species were scuffling his charges. "I have no idea," he replied. "My subject is butterflies."

This is nonsense. I carry n letters after my name, but b walking the fields I get a ver accurate idea of what is going on in the countryside around me. Consequently, I have recently become alarmed by the decline in numerous bird that were once common — thrushes, linnets, corn buntings, skylarks and turtle doves.

Now, I am delighted that m simple peasant's-eye view has been confirmed by the scientist, in the fascinating "Population Trends In British Breeding Birds", published by the British Trust for Ornithology, Tring, Herts, HP23 5NR, a £12. The conclusions are pretty depressing. Still, it's nice to have the boffins on your side for once.



Kite is right: several red kites and other protected birds have been killed by gamekeepers under pressure to protect their charges from predators. How can they be saved?

Unfair game for poison

● Many protected birds are victims of indiscriminate slaughter, says Robin Page

THE recent fines for the poisoning of a red kite in Herefordshire can only be applauded, though the punishment seems rather light. The incident reflects the increasing use of poisons by gamekeepers to kill foxes, crows and anything else that takes the bait.

In this case, it killed a red kite — one of five released in England last year. Sadly, too, one of the six released in Scotland has also been poisoned.

The bodies were found solely because the birds were being radio-tracked after release. This is itself worrying — how many wild birds are being killed that we know nothing about?

The Hereford bird was hatched and reared for a joint project run by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Nature Conservancy Council, under Dr Nick Fox, a falcon biologist. Naturally, the poisoning was a disappointment to him: "It was a sad day. I even moved my 3½-year-old son out of his bedroom to allow the chick to hatch safely."

But Dr Fox was also upset to see shooting being given a bad name. "There are extreme views on both sides. Some keepers want to kill everything with a hooked beak, while

some armchair wildlife experts simply do not understand the problems."

The dilemma is that, just like any other predator — rats, crows or foxes — birds of prey can cause problems not only to game birds such as grouse, partridges and pheasants, but also to protected birds — golden plover, lapwing and even the black-tailed godwit. So how do you protect one species from another? Or a game bird from a hen-harrier, goshawk or sparrow-hawk? And how do you stop birds such as the red kite being caught in the middle?

Paul Johnson, the conservation officer of the Hawk and Owl Trust, believes that there is never a case for killing birds of prey as a form of management: "Those who do it are short on their biology of raptors, but long on their prejudices. On a shoot, owls and hawks can actually help control vermin, and grassland corridors put in for barn-owls can be beneficial to game birds.

Shooting should be about quality, not quantity, and that quality includes the other wild life the shooters encounter."

This worry is also shared by Roy Dennis, the RSPB's regional officer for the north of England. He believes that in non-shooting areas, birds of prey are doing better than for some years: "You shouldn't have to go to a reserve to see birds of prey, you should see them in the open countryside."

Dennis thinks the problems have been exaggerated: "I would like to be co-operating with shooting interests, not fighting them, and we would certainly rather see grouse moors in Scotland than areas of Sitka spruce plantations." He also considers that landowners could help themselves: "For instance planting scrub-willows along small burns would create a habitat for other birds and animals and take pressure off grouse."

Sadly, evidence suggests that a few birds of prey — sometimes even individuals who have acquired a certain taste, or hunting knack — can cause problems; particularly goshawks with pheasants and partridges and hen-harriers with grouse. Continuing research by the excellent and respected Game Conservancy suggests that a pair of hen-harriers can take up to 250 grouse chicks — in a good grouse year this represents only a small percentage of chicks, but in a bad year it can be devastating.

The implications are also serious for wildlife, for if grouse numbers fall too low, then protected and declining birds such as golden plovers, dunlins and curlews are the ones to suffer. These days it

should also be remembered that no "natural balance" can be reached, for the whole of Britain is unnatural and is totally dominated by the influence of man.

Lindsay Waddell, chairman of the Moorland Keepers Association, is against illegal killing: "But it has been proved that at low grouse densities, hen-harriers do make a significant difference. Birds of prey are doing better here than on the Continent — why? We are providing a high level of food supply leading to higher densities of birds of prey. What will happen if the game bird food supply fails? Nobody knows. We should not take the risk."

Sir Anthony Milbank, chairman of the Moorland Association, with 4,000 acres of moorland himself, also sees problems: "Illegal poisoning and trapping is terrible. There should be a partnership between shooting people and conservationists instead of the present hysteria. But there are problems — particularly with

the marginal moors in Scotland, caused by foxes, carrion crows and hawks."

From an objective viewpoint, both sides are partially right; indiscriminate poisoning, trapping and shooting of birds of prey deserves heavy punishment. Yet there are problems and the government should provide the solution. Sporting rates should be removed from land, particularly in Scotland, to save marginal shoots from becoming commercial forestry.

Present legislation should be implemented. Licences to kill or disturb birds of prey can be granted by the Nature Conservancy Council. Yet the NCC has stated that it will never grant such a licence — although legally provided for — and the RSPB supports this view. This is absurd; if there is legislation to help control a problem it should be used.

The time has come for the shooting fraternity to weed out and "shop" its black sheep, but the conservation bodies should also be offering understanding and genuine help to those land- and shoot-owners with real bird of prey problems. This also means that the views of the often ill-informed urban majority, plus those of assorted armchair naturalists, should be ignored completely.

Saving an island for the birds

Lundy is small, lonely and a paradise for birdwatchers, Elunid Price reports

LUNDY Island, which this week has been almost overrun with birdwatchers in search of an errant ancient murrelet, has survived as an unspoiled refuge for wildlife thanks to the combined resources of the Landmark Trust and the National Trust's coastline campaign, Enterprise Neptune.

The island, off Devon in the Bristol Channel, was bought for the National Trust by Sir Jack Hayward 21 years ago for £150,000.

"We weren't quite brave enough at the time to take on Lundy alone," says Peter Broomhead, the National Trust's director for Devon. Landmark supplied the bravery, underwrote the trust's acquisition, and guaranteed to restore and maintain the island for 60 years.

Since 1969, Landmark has spent almost 20 times the original donation on the island. When every screw, nail and bag of cement has to

be brought over from the mainland, it has not been easy. The island's power comes from an underground gas supply and a wind-driven generator, backed up by diesel. And they recycle exhaustively. During last summer's drought a water-diviner sprang to their aid: now two 100R boreholes complement numerous catchment tanks.

Landmark has repaired every building and dry-stone wall. It provides full-time employment for 20 on the island and for 10 on the mainland. "They are," Mr Broomhead says with some satisfaction, "the ideal tenants."

Wendy Puddy, the wife of Lundy's agent, John Puddy, must be as near to perfection as a tenant can get. While he, an engineer, supervises his

inventive energy systems and administers the island, she works as island secretary and feeds the pigs and milks the cows.

Eighteen months ago she had her first baby, Emma, five weeks early, and on the mainland, courtesy of the helicopter service.

"Twenty people is a very small community," she says. "There is one pub and a fixed set of people to make friends with, or fall out with. You are not just taking on a job, but a whole way of life."

The Puddys have been on Lundy for nine years. The staff tend to stay no longer than 10 years. But with its own ship, the 300-ton MS Oldenburg, running daily in the summer and twice weekly in the winter, the community is less isolated than those in many rural areas. Lundy is three

miles long by half a mile wide, rising 400ft out of the Atlantic, 22 miles off the north Devon coast. It is treeless, save for its rhododendron valleys, and has about as much cosy charm as the Falklands. An established puffin colony — Lundy is Norse for puffin — and the breeding grounds for grey seals, Sika deer and Soay sheep make Lundy a naturalist's dream. It is also one of the most important breeding grounds for sea birds in the West, home for guillemot and kittiwake, pit-stop for boblink and warbler; more than 280 species have been recorded here.

The appearance of the ancient murrelet, a member of the auk family from the Pacific, was exceptional even by Lundy's standards.

● Lundy Open Day departs Bideford 10.30am, June 13. Details: The Landmark Trust, Shottesbrooke, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 3SW (062 882 5925).

Poison threat to kite's survival

By CRAIG SETON

ATTEMPTS to re-establish the red kite, one of Britain's most threatened birds of prey, may be scrapped because of the number being illegally poisoned by gamekeepers and farmers.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Nature Conservancy Council are about to release 20 red kite imported from Sweden into the wild in Scotland. Thirteen more, 11 from Spain and two from Wales, are to be released at secret locations in southern England, where they were common in the last century.

The scheme, called translocation, is aimed at re-establishing breeding colonies in areas where the bird has virtually disappeared.

The project started last summer when 11 red kite were released in southern England and Scotland, but two have already died from poisoning and two more are unaccounted for. The RSPB fears it may no longer be safe to release the birds in areas where their numbers were originally decimated by humans mainly through shooting and poisoning. The society wants landowners to control the activities of their

employees, particularly on game estates.

Of the two red kite that died, one released in southern England survived only five months. It was killed in Hereford and Worcester where it fed from a carcass laced with Endrin, a banned pesticide used by gamekeepers to kill foxes attacking pheasants. A second was found dead near Inverness after eating from a poisoned carcass suspected of being put down to protect grouse.

In Wales, the British strong hold of the bird, there are about 200 red kite, including 53 breeding pairs, but 11 die from poisoning last year.

The RSPB suspects that the red kite, a carrion feeder, is a target of some gamekeeper because they suspect the bird attacks young pheasants.

Andy Jones, an RSPB investigations officer, said landowners must keep a closer eye on staff. "Illegal poisoning is still widespread in England and Scotland and it is part and parcel of the project to consider whether we feel able to continue this programme because, unfortunately, our game estates do not seem civilized enough."

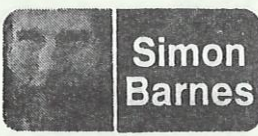
A sporting scandal to shame World Cup hosts

ITALY'S high season of sport is already over. The World Cup next month is a trivial sideshow, compared to what took place throughout April and May. This was an annual event of annually devastating international consequences. It is deeply enshrined in Italian sporting tradition and there appears to be no will at all to stop it.

The event is one that ensures that the name of Italy is spoken with contempt throughout the world — wherever one of the world's crucially-important issues is discussed. The issue is conservation.

Every year, terrifying numbers of birds are slaughtered by Italian 'sportsmen'. It is the birds of prey who are hammered most consistently. Birds of prey, operating from a smaller population base than most birds, are particularly susceptible to such direct and intense persecution.

Take May 9 and 10 this year. At least 1,500 birds of prey were killed by Italian sportsmen: honey buzzards, black kites, ospreys, harriers and falcons. Most of these birds



Simon Barnes

were merely passing through Italy, or trying to. Every spring, birds pass over Sicily and through the Straits of Messina on their way to Europe. Every year, thousands upon thousands are shot. For no reason other than sport.

Quite apart from anything else, the mass shooting is illegal. The above-named birds are all protected by European and Italian laws. But the enforcers of the law do nothing to stop it.

There are valiant people from the Italian League for the Conservation of Birds (LIPU) who attempt to monitor the killing. This year, five members of that organisation have been assaulted and threatened with shooting. One car owned by a LIPU

member has been burned; a van has been damaged.

In previous years, there have been many other similar crimes against LIPU members. Once, the LIPU office at Messina was bombed. The law is simply disregarded: both by hunters and by the authorities. Evviva lo sport!

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the British conservation organisation, gives financial support to LIPU. Alistair Gammell, the RSPB head of international affairs, said: "This illegal slaughter takes place every year with the full knowledge of the Italian authorities."

"Conservationists who try to monitor the illegal killing are physically threatened and are given no protection from actual harm to themselves or their property. It is deplorable that the Italian government makes no move to halt what amounts to terrorism. The Italian police must work with, and protect, conservationists who are fighting to end these illegal practices."

The arguments for conservation should need no rehearsing here. One can argue equally forcefully with an anthropocentric point of view as with a wider one. The issues involved are, of course, far greater than sentimentality. If conservation issues are not taken seriously, we might as well all give up.

Conservation is an international issue, not a parochial one. Poisonous emissions in Britain are believed to cause acid rain in Scandinavia. The effects of Chernobyl did not stop at the Soviet border. The Italian slaughter affects wildlife populations over the rest of the continent. Conservation is not an issue on which any nation can be seen to drag its feet: not any more.

Italy is holding a national referendum on hunting next Monday. If this is successful, it will cancel the existing hunting laws, forcing the Italian Government to come up with a new package to provide better protection for wildlife.

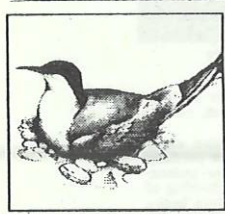
Clearly, the question of adequate enforcement is the crucial one. The Italian police force has become a centre of international attention as the final preparations for the World Cup begin. The police are refining their anti-hooligan tactics, principally for the arrival of the unspeakable English.

However, the Italian police have already failed, as they fail every year, to cope with this annual tradition of hooliganism: the custom-sanctioned devastation of Europe's birds of prey.

As Italy celebrates the World Cup, those with an interest in conservation — a number which, logically at any rate, should include the entire human race — believe, before the football starts, that Italy's sporting reputation is an international disgrace. This will remain the case until Italy does something to stop its annual celebration of destruction.

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30/5



In peril: Arctic tern

Drastic fall in Shetlands' Arctic terns

By Charles Clover
Environment Editor

THE seventh disastrous breeding season among seabirds in the Shetland Islands, one of the three most important colonies of seabirds in Europe, was reported yesterday by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

The society said there was now inescapable evidence of drastic long-term decline in the numbers of adult Arctic terns since the early 1980s.

"If present trends continue there will be no Arctic terns in Shetland in five years time," Mr Stuart Housden, the society's head of conservation planning said yesterday.

Many nesting colonies are deserted this year. In 15 tern colonies studied last week, only five chicks were found where normally hundreds are seen, said Mr Housden.

Kittiwakes, Arctic skuas, shags and black-backed gulls were also having difficulty finding food this year and their young were beginning to die from starvation. Puffins, which are breeding late this year, are being closely monitored.

Mr Housden said a survey found only 14,000 pairs of Arctic terns in the Shetlands in 1989, and this year adult numbers were down by half.

Shetland is a prime destination for ornithologists from all over Europe, and scientists have linked the decline of seabirds with the drastic decline of sandeels, their staple diet. In Shetland waters. A £360,000 three-year survey into the sandeels' decline has been commissioned by the Government.

Once bittern?

From Mr B. H. Parker

Sir, Yesterday you informed us (early editions, May 29) that the hot weather in Surrey had created a mini-tornado of sufficient force to lift up a gardener's bucket and tip it over. Yet only a quarter of a century ago it was reported that conditions were so cold in Norfolk that a bittern joined a bus queue and pecked the leg of a man standing there.

Is there no limit to the turmoil we can expect from all these climatic changes?

Yours sincerely,
BRIAN PARKER,
Rook House,
Victoria Road,
Dartmouth, Devon.
May 30.

NATURE NOTE

THE HIGH point on our recent holiday in the far north of Scotland was watching the antics of dippers from the comfort of the living-room window. A rocky stream ran below the house and the dippers appeared at intervals to search for insect larvae and other small aquatic life.

The dipper resembles an oversized wren, with its plump body and short, cocked tail, but it is larger and is immediately recognisable by its white bib. The dipper is also fitted for an aquatic life, with thick, waterproof plumage and closable nostrils.

Unlike other small birds, such as the pied wagtails



Buoyant: the dipper

that were feeding on the banks of the same stretch of stream, dippers enter the water and dive in search of food.

From our vantage point we could see them walking in the shallows and ducking so that cascades of water flew over their backs and, now and then, one dipper would simply walk into deeper water and disappear. When dippers swim on the surface, they float high in the water, and it seems incredible that such a buoyant bird can remain submerged.

Underwater, dippers appear silver from the air trapped in the plumage, and they move over the stony beds of streams with scant regard for the strength of the flow.

As far as it is possible to discern from imperfect views of birds moving underwater, they counteract their buoyancy by gripping the bottom with their strong claws and pressing themselves down by "flying" underwater, much as a human diver stays underwater by continually swimming downwards.

Robert Burton

Who killed Cock Robin?

An Italian, probably. It's open season on birds again all over Italy. Do the conservationists stand a chance?

Yell welcomes an Asian sandgrouse

BIRDS
Brian Unwin

THE most studied member of its species in history. June reports of collared flycatcher on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides and needle-tailed swift near Selby, North Yorkshire and Jedburgh, Borders region, were put in the "probable" category.

The pick of the more expected run of late spring visitors was a bee-eater at Hiltre Island, Merseyside, a marsh warbler near John O'Groats on June 6, and a very late blue-throat on Anglesey, North Wales, on June 27.

There is much excitement, particularly in the Northern Isles, over a mass arrival of crossbills, members of the finch family with elongated, crossed mandibles to extract seeds from pine cones. We are now into the time of year for the first signs of autumn migration by northern-breeding waders — broad-billed sandpipers in the Spey Bay and at Teesmouth were the most outstanding of a wave of shorebirds coming in from Scandinavia in late June.

As for other seabird happenings, the most consistent interest has been in the return to the Farne Islands off Northumberland, for its seventh consecutive season, of a lesser crested tern. It has also paid brief visits to Teesmouth.

The main seabird passage-watching period normally begins around now, but this year it got off to a cracking start, with early sooty shearwaters off Whitburn, Tyne and Wear, a little shearwater off Flamborough Head, Humber-side, and a European storm-petrel off Merseyside in June.

Over the coming weeks, a much wider range of seabirds and waders is bound to become the focus of attention.

At this time of year, the hills above the straits between Sicily and the Italian mainland are alive with the sound of gunfire. Sometimes it is rare migrating hawks that are in the sights of the hunters' guns, sometimes it is game wardens.

The annual war between hunters and conservationists at this point, where the migration route between Africa and Europe narrows to a few miles, is more intense this year than ever before. On Sunday, in Calabria, a car carrying six forest guards was attacked by poachers using a sawn-off shot-gun.

A week earlier, Fulvio Zavoli, another forest guard, had been shot in the chest, neck and arms at the same spot. He was seriously injured, and is still in hospital. Attacks have also been made on volunteers from the Italian League for Bird Protection, who camp out on the hillsides in spite of the increasing dangers, to raise the alarm if hunters attack honey buzzards, ospreys, storks and other protected species.

This year, more is at stake than the lives of the birds on the wing. On Sunday, Italy holds a national referendum over its hunting laws, probably the most permissive and weakly enforced in Europe. Conservation groups all over Europe, including Britain, are closely involved in the dispute, because many birds which breed in north Europe use Italy as a land-bridge across the Mediterranean to and from their winter territories. Italy was recently found guilty by the European Court of being in breach of the EC directive on wildlife protection.

Hunters' organizations have called for Italy's 46 million voters to boycott the referendum, ensuring that all those who go to the poll on Sunday will be marked out as supporters of reform. Alistair Gammell, head of the international department of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, says the attacks in Calabria "are a clear attempt at intimidation in the days before the referendum".

Hunting for sport and for the pot is an ingrained part of Italian country life, with none of the overtones of privilege that it has here, and none of the related traditions of conservation. Hunting associations claim that as many as 1.5 million Italians hunt with the gun. In the south, it is seen as a test of masculine prowess to bring down a big hawk in early summer, when they are moving north.

Hundreds of miles further

north, in the valleys at the foot of the Alps which channel birds on their autumn migrations through the Alpine passes, hunters use illegal nets, spring-snare and bird-lime to capture small birds such as robins and finches, some protected, some not, quite indiscriminately. In numbers estimated in tens of millions a year, they are destined to end up in patés and rich sauces with polenta.

Hunting on such an enormous scale inevitably involves major commercial interests. But the main obstacles to reform are rural traditions, formed when the countryside was less under threat, and reinforced today by nostalgia.

"My family is from the countryside near Rome, and I started shooting with my father and grandfather when I was still a boy," says Federico Polidori, a craftsman who makes custom luggage in central Rome. "I do not believe game shooting is responsible for the decline in wildlife. It is all the building and industry which has made the country around Rome uninhabitable for animals."

Signor Polidori agrees that Italian hunters have a bad reputation, but distinguishes between responsible countrymen shooting over their own land, usually with a trained hunting dog, and "urban louts who go hunting for the pleasure of blasting away at anything".

The main focus of Sunday's referendum will be a law which gives hunters the second almost wherever they like. "The contrast between our own controls on hunting and the Italian situation is extreme," says Mr Gammell. "In Britain, you may shoot only on land you own, or with the owner's permission. In Italy, a gun is a passport which gives you the right to go almost anywhere. It's crazy — if you are birdwatching with a pair of binoculars, an owner can sling you off his land, but: if you take a gun along, there is nothing he can do."

If the referendum succeeds, the hunting law will automatically be repealed. It will then be for Italy's precariously-balanced coalition government to frame new legislation. But it will take more than a law passed far away in Rome to persuade the trigger-happy hunters of Calabria that they do not have a God-given right to take their toll on the storks and the great birds of prey which pass by on their way to the rest of Europe.

GEORGE HILL
Illustration

How did the dinosaur?

"The day had been long and the meal very good, so neither of us was at his best. 'Just a theory, isn't it?' Engel was saying between sips. 'The theory of evolution. It's not a fact, is it?'"

I brought in play one of the strongest arguments it is possible to use. "That's exactly what Ronald Reagan thinks." It is true. He once told an evangelical group in Dallas: "Well, it's a theory. It is a scientific theory only, and it has in recent years been challenged in the world of science — that is, not believed in the scientific community to be as infallible as it once was."

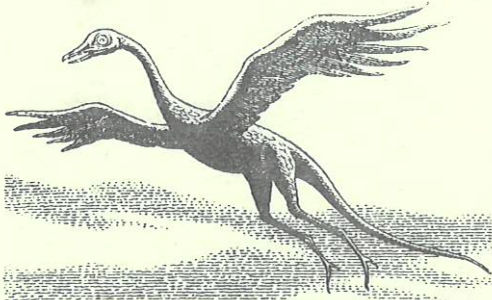
Engel did not flinch. It is Barnes's First Law of Debate that no one is convinced by reason over a second sambuca. It is also just possible that the presentation of my arguments was marred by the stresses of the day.

Perhaps I should have brought in dinosaurs. I should have told him that dinosaurs survive today and are flying all around us: birds are, in fact, dinosaurs, or at least their ancestors. But I doubt if Engel would have swallowed it; in any case, there is still plenty of scientific debate about the accuracy of that one. But the fact remains that I am right and Engel is wrong. (This is Barnes's Second Law of Debate.)

But evolution itself is a fact. The theory of natural selection explains how evolution works. Darwin proposed; the mechanics of evolution have been discussed and researched endlessly ever since. But the fact of evolution is not in doubt, nor is it discredited by debate. Quite the reverse.

By the same token, as has been pointed out, Newton's theory of gravity gave way to Einstein's theory... but gravity itself never ceased to be a fact. Not even Mr Reagan expected apples to start falling upwards.

That evolution happens cannot be doubted. One of the finest proofs in existence is a British moth, and we have industrial



Missing link: archaeopteryx, a reptile which finally evolved into a bird

pollution to thank for it. The beast in question is the peppered moth, so called because it used to be speckled.

The speckles were for camouflage. But in industrial areas peppered moths are now predominantly black. Circumstances have changed. Air pollution has killed the lichen on the tree trunks and soot has made the tree trunks black. A speckled moth on a black tree trunk shows up like red wine on a white tablecloth.

Where there are black tree trunks, the peppered moths are now likely to be black. The change has come because being black increases the chances of surviving and breeding. This is evolution in action.

Engel was as unimpressed by the moths as he was by Mr Reagan. I refrained from mentioning the other two simple proofs of evolution: I doubt if I could have remembered them. It was, after all, almost two o'clock. This column represents a kind of extended piece of *esprit de l'escalier*: what I should have said to Engel had the sambuca permitted.

There is the argument for perfection. It is normally assumed that adaptation is perfection, but the truth is to be found in

imperfection. Let me quote Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard professor of palaeontology and a magnificent writer: "Why should a rat run, a bat fly, a porpoise swim and I type this essay with structures built of the same bones unless we all inherited them from a common ancestor? An engineer, starting from scratch, could design better limbs in each case."

The final example is a bird. Darwin was aware that his argument for natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* was short of a good, solid back-up in fossils. He needed transitional creatures, "missing links".

The *Origin* was published in 1859. Two years later, the most famous missing link in history was discovered: it "seemed an unparalleled act of cosmic goodwill towards science," one writer said.

The missing link was archaeopteryx, a reptile-half-way through changing into a bird. It had feathers like a bird, teeth and solid bones like a reptile. Archaeopteryx: imperfection of design and perfection of proof. Quite a bird. Argue your way out of it, Engel. And while you're at it, ask your friend Serge to bring us more sambucas.

SIMON BARNES

The dying days of birdsong

IT IS good to hear birdsong again. After a month in Italy you begin to forget what it sounds like, for Italy is a silent land. In four weeks of traveling all over the country, the only songbird I set ears on was a single chaffinch. From Palermo to Jolite, by way, naturally, of Assisi, Italy annually celebrates a silent spring.

ent, but for the blast of guns. *L'uomo e cacciatore* man is a hunter. D.H. Lawrence brutally mocked the tradition of Italian hunters in an essay with that title, writing of these intrepid types stalking the woods with their bags full of bloody goldfinches and lying thrushes. The slaughter is part of Italian life.

The main squares of the cities are filthy with pigeons; fed, encouraged and cherished, considered, for some baffling reason, hothogenic. Foreign and Italian tourists stand covered by pecking orders of grey birds while the cameras click away delightedly.

Away from the wonders of igeonkind, birds are killed by the billion. The slaughter is sanctioned by law and custom. The hunters kill not just songbirds, but migrating birds of prey, birds for which Italy has an international responsibility.

This is not merely horrible, it is crime against international conservation. Predators operate in a smaller population base than prey species, which is obvious enough when you think of it. That takes them particularly vulnerable to direct persecution.

Members of Lipu, the Italian conservation organisation, are routinely attacked by hunters. Intrepid birders do not attempt to spoil the



shooting, they merely monitor it. For this, they have been assaulted, and their vehicles have been damaged and burned.

On the Sunday before the World Cup began, Italy held a referendum on hunting. The vote was overwhelmingly against the hunting laws as they stand. Unfortunately the referendum is not binding. It required 50 per cent of the electorate, voting one way or the other, to make it binding. It does not take a genius to work out how to foil it. The hunting lobby simply boycotted the referendum.

As a result, 43 per cent of the electorate turned out, which was good, but not good enough. Of these, 90 per cent voted on the side of conservation. It was a victory, yes, but not a decisive one. The next spring will be as silent as the one before.

The hunters continue to enjoy

the most wonderful set of laws that could be devised for them. They are immune from laws of trespass: the law permits a hunter to go where he pleases and to gun down anything he fancies. For a man with a gun, the legal rights of property have no meaning, and the moral questions of conservation no existence.

A birder with a pair of binoculars has no such freedom. The law's partiality towards hunters is resented, but the combination of landowners and conservationists was not enough to win the day of the referendum.

CONSERVATIONISTS tend to seek silver linings: there is no point in the opposite attitude. It is clear that there are enough people opposed to the shooting laws to have some kind of political clout, even if this was not to be decisive on the day of the referendum.

But the weapons industry has clout of its own, clout that is measured more in terms of lire than outrage. Gun people like lots of guns: there is money to be made from such obsessions. In the US, the strongest pressure for the right to bear arms comes, albeit indirectly, from the arms industry. The same applies in Italy.

The result is an international disgrace, and one that attracts increasing international disgust. *L'uomo e cacciatore* indeed! How many birds are killed every year so that Italians can prove their virility? Ah, but you're not a real man, are you — not unless you have carried the day in savage one-to-one conflict with that legend of ferocity, the blood-thirsty, man-eating chaffinch.

SIMON BARNES

Lord lieutenant's gamekeeper fined £600 for using pesticide

By CRAIG SETON

A GAMEKEEPER on the estate of the Lord Lieutenant of Hereford and Worcester was fined £600 yesterday after a red kite, one of Britain's rarest birds of prey, was poisoned by a banned pesticide.

The red kite was one of 11 released last year in a joint effort by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Nature Conservancy Council to reintroduce the bird into areas where it was once common.

The bird, fitted with a radio transmitter, was found dead on the Gately Park estate, near Leominster, Hereford and Worcester, of Captain Thomas Dunne, the lord lieutenant. It had died from poisoning by Endrin, banned in 1986.

John Noble, aged 41, the gamekeeper, pleaded guilty at Hereford Magistrates' Court two weeks ago to storing Endrin and using it in a bait, a dead pheasant, which resulted in the death of the red kite and a champion gun dog.

Four other gamekeepers and a farmer were fined at the time a total of £8,000 for offences involving the storage and use of the pesticide. Noble's case was adjourned to yesterday, when the second charge was amended to using Endrin. David Matthews, for

the defence, said Noble did not exclude the possibility that the Endrin had killed the red kite and gun dog, but it had not been proved to "criminal standards".

He said Noble was a beginner with only two years' gamekeeping experience after 22 years in the Army and he had not realized the toxicity of the chemical or that it was banned. The court had heard that Endrin had been used to kill foxes that attacked young pheasants being reared for shooting.

Mr Matthews said Noble had disagreement with some people in the course of his duties and believed that an attempt may have been made to sabotage his pheasant shoots by placing poisoned baits. Five gun dogs had been poisoned and one, a Labrador named Rosie, which was judged the Midlands top retriever in 1988, had died.

Chris Harrison, for the prosecution, said Noble admitted to police that he used Endrin after 54 pheasants were killed by a fox and that he thought the chemical was an essential part of gamekeeping. Noble was fined £250 for storing Endrin and £350 for using it and ordered to pay £314 costs.

Bird off course

A Pacific golden plover, normally found nesting in eastern Siberia or migrating to Hawaii or Australia, has been drawing crowds to Morecambe Bay, Lancashire, where it was first seen two weeks ago.

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Last moa egg

Auckland — One egg from the extinct moa bird remains worldwide after the only other one has been destroyed in an accident. Moas, which were flightless birds about 10ft tall with flat breastbones and inhabited New Zealand, have been extinct for over 500 years. (AFP)

THE BEST time to go out looking for warblers was in the spring when the males were singing urgently and establish territories and attract mates. At that time the foliage had not fully unfurled and it was quite easy to get a good view.

In the past few weeks, however, a blanket of greenery has grown up and the birds have become obscured. It is now extremely difficult to make out the small forms fitting through the foliage.

I rely on the brief spring period of relative visibility to refresh my memory of each particular species' song. Yet I still find some difficult to recognise, and I am not alone in this failing, even among experienced bird-watchers.

The garden warbler poses a special problem. It has been described as "best recognised by its lack of field characteristics".

My reason for raising this awkward problem of bird identification is that I have been waiting for the opportunity to write about the "pettychaps". This delightful name for the garden warbler survived into the early years of the century. According to the dictionary, it means "little boy" or "little jaws", so the garden warbler is merely a small bird with a small beak.

This just about sums up its undistinguished appearance but the name is more appropriate than the one in current use. Only a large, overgrown garden is likely to attract the species.

If the hedge sparrow has to be a duncock and the bearded tit must now be called a reedling, perhaps the garden warbler should be relieved of its drab image and restored to the memorable name of pettychaps.

Robert Burton

OF PIKE AND MEN

At the behest of Hyde Park officials, anglers have netted some 40 prime pike from the Serpentine and moved them to a new residence in the Thames. Their purpose was to save ducklings from the pike and at the same time provide good sport on the river.

Mother Nature may have different ideas. An alternative outcome of this unwarranted interference is that the Serpentine could be over-run by ducks while the Thames will be systematically stripped of fish — except for 40 sleek and predatory monsters and their offspring. Who put the pike in the lake in the first place anyway? People play around with nature at their peril.

Not since Robert Burns ploughed up a mouse and worried his neighbours by starting a conversation with it, has mankind been so concerned about ecology. Unfortunately the capacity to cause upset has more than kept pace with those good intentions. Take the case of the gamekeepers in the West Midlands. They pumped a dead bird full of a banned pesticide to kill a fox who was gobbling up their pheasants. Their bag included not only a gundog but a rare red kite (one of 11 imported from Sweden to this country) and they paid for their misdeed in court. Brer Fox is presumably laughing fit to kill.

The beasts of the field have worked out their own pecking order. As long as nobody interferes, it works. A succession of mild winters means more greenery; but it also means more ladybirds to eat them. Cats catch small birds which pick up spiders who enmesh bluebottles whose maggots eat whatever is lying around. He who treads on an ant is standing on someone's lunch.

Man has not yet learnt his place in all this.

When he spent all his time hunting down mammoth and clubbing them to death with flintstone axes, nature no doubt kept him in mind in all its planning. His behaviour was predictable: he killed only for food or clothing. Those creatures not fated for his menu or wardrobe could carry on their carnage undisturbed.

Nature must have been puzzled when man started to farm, keep pets, kill for sport, rescue ducks from pikes, or treat Swedish red kites like the Crown Jewels. Man's mistake was not to tell nature he had overruled it. The rabbits ate his crops, foxes stole his chickens and otters continued to take his fish — unaware that the odd-looking fellow in tweeds and wellingtons, standing 200 yards downstream in pouring rain was more or less in charge, or so he thought.

Nature will clearly require several millennia of mutation once again to get the better of mankind. Birds still overfly Italy in the spring, foxes still risk their necks in hen runs. Rare British birds have yet to learn to build their nests beyond homo sapiens' reach, and up to 50,000 of their eggs are stolen every year, usually by grown men who would be more gainfully employed in spotting trains.

People feed pigeons (then complain when these proliferate); keep pet snakes (which escape among the runner beans); rear ground then shoot them, send greyhounds coursing after hares. Their latest offer of a helping hand to nature is to save ducks from pike, successfully, and to save kites from foxes, less so. Sooner or later natural selection could catch up, but only if man would stop interfering. Otherwise the pike-proof duck, the fox-proof kite, will never evolve at all.

