



# Frylde Bird Club

Chairman: Mr. L. BLACOW  
Secretary: Mr. A.J. HINCHLIFFE

NEWSLETTER NO. 51

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## FROM THE CHAIR

Last week we attended the second meeting of the Marton Mere Reserve Management Team; most of this was spent discussing the Bye-Laws of the Reserve and future management work. Dave McGrath informed the meeting of our recent donation of optical equipment and money towards fencing: all present expressed their appreciation.

I'd like to thank you for supporting the donations, this gesture has confirmed our commitment to the Reserve and reinforced our position at future meetings. There will be more opportunities for us to demonstrate our commitment to the Reserve; as individuals you will be able to help in Management work or act as a Voluntary Warden. If you don't want to be so involved but have any ideas or strong feelings about the Reserve, please tell us; we are your voice in the Management team.

On a lighter note, have you heard about the well known Bird Club Officer who, after failing to see the almost resident King Eider on the Ythan Estuary, learned about another amongst 10,000 Eider at nearby Tayport. firmly stated, "if it's there I'll find it".

The following morning saw the Officer at Tayport, his three underlings behind him, waiting with optics ready; they waited and waited and saw him fail to see a single Eider!

Prizes will not be awarded to any member who identifies a King Eider or the Officer involved.

L.G.B.

CETTI'S WARBLER - A background to the Marton Mere record.

If anyone had told me in the Fifties and Sixties that I would one day see Cetti's Warbler at Marton Mere I would probably have thought them either a complete idiot, mad, or both.

It was not until the 4th March 1961 that Cetti's was added to the British list when a bird was found at Titchfield Haven, Hampshire. It stayed at least until the 10th April. A second was caught in a mist net on the Crumbles, near Eastbourne Sussex on the 9th October 1962.

At the turn of the Century it was confined to the Mediterranean region but since then has spread northwards through France into Belgium, the Netherlands and England.

It reached Southern Brittany in 1927, the Seine basin in 1932, the Loire Valley in the 1940's and 1950's: the north coast of Brittany and Channel Islands in 1960: England in 1961: Belgium in 1962 and the Netherlands in 1968. Breeding was first proved in Belgium in 1964 and England in 1973.

After the two British records mentioned above there were no more until 1967, three in 1968 when one was also found on Cape Clear island, County Cork on the 24th August, some 600 klm North West of the nearest known breeding site.

In 1971 the present phase of vigorous expansion began. In 1973 a bird was found in Norwich on the 28th June bearing a Belgium ring having been ringed there as a juvenile on the 23rd August 1970.

By 1975 a census in the Stour Valley, Kent, revealed 54 to 58 singing males and there were records in suitable sites from Cornwall to Norfolk.

One reached Hornsea Mere, Yorkshire on the 2nd November 1972 and Bardsey on the 26th October 1973.

A series of cold winters caused a population crash in Kent in the early Eighties from which the species is only just recovering. Nevertheless it still occurs from Norfolk intermittently round to Cornwall and South Wales.

There have been one or two further records in Yorkshire and two in Cheshire but these were both short stayers on the 20th April 1984 and the 8th and 9th May 1989 so it is good to know that our bird is a long staying over-winterer.

M.JONES January 1991

BETTER TO REMAIN SILENT

Whilst mis-printed bird names have provided many a laugh over the years, I think it's time that some of the verbal variety joined the collection of howlers.

Some years ago, during a slide show, when a Whitethroat appeared on the screen I was amazed to hear a lady sitting behind me whisper "Robin Redbreast" to her friend. At Fairhaven Lake a man was heard to announce to his family his verdict on the Red Necked Phalarope - "a young Water Hen" said the Expert confidently, whilst at South Promenade Frank Bird's reply

of "looking for a diver" to an enquiring lady was taken by her to mean a man in a wet-suit.

From the mouths of people at work have come "Great Suka", "Scooter", "Caprinole" and "Rosita Tern" (not forgetting the Warbler that was "sulking in the bushes), but I sympathise with bewildered visitors to South Promenade when hearing that "Leach's " are being searched for.

E. STIRLING

RECENT REPORTS

JANUARY

Strong to gale force winds at the start of the month brought many Little Gulls close inshore. On the 3rd Ed had 110 in an hour at Central Promenade. The 5th was an equally rough day with small numbers being counted at South Promenade and up to 30 at Fleetwood on the sea by the Marine Lake. One individual was on the Lake itself. 18 were still there on the 6th with 4 seen on the Golf Course taking shelter.

Along with the Little Gulls 32 Kittiwake were seen at Starr Gate on the 5th and 93 were seen moving South on the 6th. 73 were also present at Fleetwood on the 6th. An adult Glaucous Gull was on the CEGB Pool on this latter date.

On the 4th Ed thought he had a 1st Winter Ring Billed Gull at Knowle High School but the bird disappeared before confirmation of the sighting could be made.

Accompanying the seabird movements of the 6th were several parties of duck moving south off Starr Gate. These included 66 Pintail, 48 Wigeon and 94 Teal. 7 Red Throated Divers passed by as did 3 Guillemots and a single Puffin.

Calmer conditions on the 12th produced a large movement of Red Throated Divers off Starr Gate. In a two and a half hour seawatch 86 flew south in parties of up to 6 birds. The calm conditions also meant that the Scoter flock could be counted as they drifted and flew south past the Promenade. 1036 in the same period was only a small proportion of the total flock - on the horizon many more could be seen flying south but too far away to count.

In similar conditions on the 27th 28 Red Throats, 489 Scoter, 16 Great Crested Grebes and 16 Scaup in 4 parties were seen on an ebbing tide at Starr Gate. 17 Pochard flying south was unusual and constituted a Starr Gate tick for me, I don't know whether it was for Maurice though!

Interestingly, up the coast at Rossall on the 12th, only 4 Red Throats were seen. By way of compensation Pete Scholes had a 1st Winter Mediterranean Gull and on the following day with Paul Slade an adult Glaucous Gull, different from the one seen on the 6th. Diver numbers improved at Rossall with 12 there on the 13th.

month and close views could be obtained in the extremely cold weather as the bird moved out of cover to search for food.

As mentioned in the last Newsletter it proved to be a Star attraction with people travelling from far and wide. It was not the first Lancashire record. Maurice informs me that the first was a male shot near Fleetwood on 8th December 1845 (J.Cooper, Zoologist 1845, Page 1248). The specimen is currently in the Preston Museum.

During the month there were reports of sightings of 'ordinary' Bittern at the Mere but nothing substantive.

At the Mere on the 3rd and also on the 17th an adult Mediterranean Gull was seen. On the 9th 3 Long Eared and 3 Short Eared Owls, 3 Water Rail and a Great Spotted Woodpecker were present. A Barn Owl was seen throughout the month. The following day a Woodcock was found; part of a local influx, for on the same day one was discovered at Clifton Hall with 4 present there from the 9th to the 24th. Singles were also seen at Lytham Hall and LSANR.

The arrival of the Woodcock were no doubt hard weather movements. Other species involved were Redwings and Fieldfares, noted at South Fylde during the same period.

50 Golden Plover and 5 Fieldfare were at the Airport on the 10th. 30 Golden Plover, 20 Lapwing, 1 Mistle Thrush, 20 Fieldfare, 10 Redwing, 10 Meadow Pipits and 4 Skylark were on the adjacent Golf Course on the 13th.

The Ringers did well at Clifton throughout the month ringing 48 Redwing, 14 Blackbird, 28 Chaffinch as well as an immature male Sparrowhawk and 1 Woodcock.

The same hard weather saw the departure of most of the Duck from the Mere as the surface became frozen.

On the 12th a pair of Wigeon were on Fairhaven Lake which was unusual for this species.

A Common Sandpiper was found by Barry Dyson on the Wyre at Larbreck on the 17th. No doubt his heart began to beat a little faster as he entertained thoughts of Spotted Sandpiper. It was not to be. Consolation though came in the form of record counts of 41 Goosander at the same location and 132 Wigeon at Windy Harbour.

Barry's luck was certainly in for on the 24th he, along with other observers saw an Avocet at Stanah, a bird previously reported from Lytham and Hest Bank earlier in the month.

Over Wyre on the 17th there were 8500 Pinkfeet at Jarvis Carr and 1 White Front. On the 24th 3000 plus Pinkfeet were at Scronkey. In with the flock were 2 Barnacles and 1 small dark Canada Goose. On the same day at Eagland Hill another flock numbering some 5000 Pinkfeet contained 1 large Canada Goose

Peregrine and Sparrowhawks were particularly noticeable in the Lane Ends and Scronkey areas and a Barn Owl was seen on several occasions in the latter area. At Warton Marsh 2 male Hen Harrier and 2 Merlins were present on the 9th.

A Bonxie was present at Lane Ends on the 20th, presumably the same bird which had been seen a few days earlier off Heysham.

Over Wyre large numbers of Pinkfeet could be seen with up to 6,500 present. On the 20th 3,500 were in the Head Dyke Lane area, included in the flock were 2 Pale Bellied Brents and a Russian Whitefront. As in the previous year some of the Pinkfeet resorted to the fields between Cleveleys and Fleetwood. On the 13th 1000 paraded obligingly past the Westbourne Road Tram Stop.

11 Bewick and 7 Whoopers were seen at Pilling on the 20th and 17 Whooper Swans were in the same area on the 26th. For connoisseurs of the unusual the single Whooper on the sea at South Promenade on the 18th takes a lot of beating. No prizes again for guessing that the local member for Watson Road and South Shore spotted that one.

The St. Annes shore roost held 2,800 Dunlin, 1,670 Bar Tailed Godwit, 2,000 Knot, 500 Sanderling, 200 Grey Plover, 31 Ringed Plover and 1 Turnstone on the 20th. 320 Oystercatcher were also present with the Pontins Cafe Roost sub species represented by 30 individuals.

Whilst we're in the environs of LSANR a Stonechat was present on the 13th and a pair were there on the 23rd. 3 Jack Snipe were in the Slack on the 13th and the 27th.

Marton Mere, I was going to say surpassed itself in January, but with the benefit of 20:20 hindsight I won't. Nevertheless for sheer variety it was excellent. On the 13th it held 275 Teal, 47 Pochard, 27 Tufted, 670 Mallard, 1 Great Crested Grebe, 1 Little Grebe, 8 Ruddy Duck and a single Goldeneye.

On the same day 3 Long Eared, 2 Short Eared, 1 Barn and 1 Little Owl could be seen and the Cetti's Warbler was alive and kicking; well, alright, calling. It was still there at the month end.

Away from the Mere, male Hen Harrier, Merlin and Sparrowhawk were seen at Warton Marsh on several occasions and Peregrine and Short eared Owl were regularly over Wyre in the Pilling and Knott End areas.

A single Ruff was seen on floodwater at Cartford on the 19th and 20th and 20 Goosander were on the River Wyre at Larbreck on the 19th. A Water Rail, first seen at the CEGB Pool, Fleetwood on the 25th was still present on the 31st.

Towards the end of the month 200 Fieldfare were in the fields by Bradshaw Lane, Pilling.

## FEBRUARY

An American Bittern was seen at the Mere on the 2nd by visiting Birders - he says casually, in a throw away manner. A possible contender for Bird of the Year 91? It was first seen in January by Derek McCullagh when he had brief flight views. Despite scepticism in some quarters he was subsequently proved correct. The bird was seen very well by many people throughout the

Andrew Myerscough reports a Water Rail from Wesham Marsh on the 17th, a first for the site.

Back at the coast 850 Bar Tailed Godwit, 350 Oystercatchers, 2000 Dunlin, 27 Ringed Plover, 2 Turnstone, 170 Grey Plover, 500 Sanderling and 800 Knot were on the St. Annes shore on the 17th.

Seawatching was again productive. At Starr Gate on the 9th there were 3 parties consisting of 5 male and 5 female Eider. Common Scoter numbered 598, Great Crested Grebes 13, Red Throated Diver 19, and one small unidentified Grebe flying north.

At Rossall on the 17th 1640 Eider were offshore, 1 Guillemot and 1 adult winter Glaucous Gull.

Single Guillemots were off South Promenade towards the end of the month and a female Red Breasted Merganser was on Fairhaven Lake on the 22nd. 11 Common Scoter were displaying only 50 yards from the sea wall at Starr Gate on the 26th.

The monthly report wouldn't be the same without an Ed sighting of a bird at an unusual location. The Greyhound Stadium in Central Blackpool wouldn't be the first site that would spring to mind when you think of Stonechat - but, sure enough that's what Ed found there on the 28th. Why was he there? What did he expect to find? Is he going to the dogs? I think I'll have to ask Ed to do a site by site guide to South Shore with recommended times for visits. What will he find next, and where? Read the next Newsletter to find out.

Situation Report at Month end for the Mere - Cetti's still there showing amazing staying power.

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#### BREEDING BIRDS SURVEY

Andrew has kindly supplied preliminary details of the Fylde Breeding Bird's Survey. (See over the page). As you will see it's not too late to supply further information.

If you can upgrade a species from Category 1 to 2 or from 2 to 3 great. Better still, how about a new species for Category 3?

FYLDE BREEDING BIRDS SURVEY. Preliminary report.

This an unedited list of all the birds reported during the breeding birds survey, 1986 - 1990.

1 = possible breeding.      2 = probable breeding.      3 = definite breeding.

Gt. Cr. Grebe	3	Herring Gull	3	Wheatear	2
Little Grebe	3	Black-h Gull	3	Stonechat	3
Mallard	3	Common Tern	1	Whinchat	2
Grey Heron	1	Stock Dove	3	Redstart	1
Teal	2	Woodpigeon	3	Robin	3
Garganey	2	Collared Dove	3	Grasshpr. Warb	3
Shoveler	2	Cuckoo	3	Reed Warbler	3
Tufted Duck	3	Barn Owl	3	Sedge Warbler	3
Pochard	2	Little Owl	3	Blackcap	3
Eider	2	Tawny Owl	3	Garden Warb.	3
Ruddy Duck	3	Long-eared Owl	3	Whitethroat	3
Shelduck	3	Swift	3	L. Whitethroat	3
Canada Goose	3	Kingfisher	3	Willow Warb.	3
Mute Swan	3	Green Wpckr.	3	Chiffchaff	3
Sparrowhawk	3	Gt.S. Wpckr.	3	Wood Warbler	1
Kestrel	3	Lr.S. Wpckr	3	Goldcrest	3
Partridge	3	Skylark	3	Spotted Flyc.	3
R-l Partridge	3	Swallow	3	Dunnock	3
Quail	2	House Martin	3	Meadow Pipit	3
Pheasant	3	Sand Martin	3	Pied Wagtail	3
Water Rail	3	Carrion Crow	3	Yellow Wagtail	3
Moorhen	3	Rook	3	Grey Wagtail	3
Coot	3	Jackdaw	3	Starling	3
Oystercatcher	3	Magpie	3	Greenfinch	3
Lapwing	3	Jay	3	Goldfinch	3
Ringed Plover	3	Great Tit	3	Linnet	3
Lit.R.Plover	3	Blue Tit	3	Redpoll	3
Snipe	2	Coal Tit	3	Bullfinch	2
Woodcock	1	Marsh Tit	2	Chaffinch	3
Curlew	3	Long-t Tit	3	Yellowhammer	3
Common Sand.	3	Treecreeper	3	Corn Bunting	3
Redshank	3	Wren	3	Reed Bunting	3
Dunlin	1	Dipper	3	House Sparrow	3
Ruff	2	Mistle Thrush	3	Tree Sparrow	3
G.B-b Gull	1	Song Thrush	3	Feral Pigeon	3
L.B-b Gull	2	Blackbird	3		
				<u>GRAND TOTAL</u>	107

Category	1	2	3
Total	7	13	87
%	6.6	11.3	82.1

TETRADS with less than 20 species recorded, except coastal tetrads.

SD 34 A - 0  
 SD 42 N - 11      SD 42 Z - 11  
 SD 43 F - 6      SD 43 P - 17      SD 43 U - 17  
 SD 44 G - 5      SD 44 L - 6      SD 44 Y - 15

It is not too late to submit any records which you may have which will improve on the information which we already have.

R. A. CADMAN.

## POSTSCRIPT

The 'Cuttings' section of the Newsletter this month includes coverage of the court case against Graham Stirzaker who was recently found guilty of firearms offences and possessing protected species of birds. In a future issue of the Newsletter we hope to have a first hand account of the circumstances leading up to the apprehending of Stirzaker by the Police.

It is obvious from reading the comments from the 'Shooting Times' that they consider he has done considerable damage to the image of their 'sport' and his actions have brought him a deserved punishment. Not being a reader of this magazine I was pleasantly surprised to find such support for the actions taken by the court.

On a less serious note regular readers will have noticed that there has been scant reference to Starr Gate in recent issues, apart from mentions in "Recent Reports". "Thank Goodness" I can hear you saying. However, I feel I have to give an update on the condition of the Shelter; not to do so would be to deprive you of extremely relevant information. I am happy to report that the slates on the roof are being replaced and the drips and rattles when it rains and blows will shortly be a thing of the past. How long it remains intact remains to be seen.

The Postbag has been decidedly thin this last few months so it was a pleasure to receive a letter from the Treasurer reproduced in full below:-

Dear Sir,

It was with some surprise and dismay, that I read of my responsibility for 'fund raising', in the last Newsletter (No.50).

As I recollect, at the last committee meeting the Hon.Sec. was democratically forcing duties on all and sundry with his usual aplomb, but I would point out that his pronouncement of my duties must have been misheard. Admittedly his diction was slightly impaired but in fact the responsibility thrust upon me was not one of "Fund Raising" but, and I'm certain of this, was one of "Food Tasting", a duty that I readily accepted.

Having read this letter, no doubt, the Hon.Sec. will suitably revise the minutes.

However, in the meantime I am only too prepared to rest on Monty's laurels.

I remain, Sir, your obedient servant.

J.L.FLETCHER.

Obviously I can not comment fully as I was only there at the time but I do like the comment about "democratically forcing duties". Maybe the Secretary would like to reply in the next Newsletter?



Talking of the Secretary; and let's face it a Newsletter wouldn't be complete without some reference to him; he has recently lead two expeditions to Scotland.

On the whole the Islay and Aberdeen trips were a success if you discount the fact that the Tour Leader didn't show us all the birds that we expected to see. His comment "If it's there I'll find it" didn't stand up to serious examination. Nevertheless, and using 'football Manager speak ; the lad showed potential and commitment and will probably improve with each game!

One of the things that made me laugh on the Aberdeen trip was the conversation in the B & B in St. Andrews on the Sunday morning. Len and Alan shared a room and I casually mentioned what a sound sleep I'd had. Len remarked that I'd obviously been sleeping on a different latitude from him as judging by the noise he'd heard at 02.30 he thought herds of Wildbeeste were migrating through the bedroom. Over to you Alan.

Once again I'd like to thank everybody for their contributions. Articles for future Newsletters are particularly welcomed, so keep them coming in.

A.D.

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FYLDE BIRD CLUB -- MEMBERSHIP LIST - 1991

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11/4/91

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47, BELVEDERE ROAD. THORNTON.

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864214  
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# The RSPB: a job well done?

● All birds are equal — but some seem more equal than others. Robin Page examines a charity in action

WITH more than 600,000 members, the RSPB is probably the most common name that ever comes to mind when you think of Britain's largest and fastest growing conservation organisations.

Some of its recent work has been outstanding: the reintroduction of the red kite, the sea eagle project, for which the RSPB and the Nature Conservancy Council co-operated successfully to restore this magnificent creature to Britain as a breeding bird; and the campaign to monitor and protect the stone curlew.

It has also been extremely pleasing to see how the RSPB has extended its interest over recent years: now not only does it protect birds, but also whole habitats, including butterflies, flowers and mammals. And with its educational displays, (usually) excellent club and (usually) excellent magazine, Birds, it is responsible for raising the general perceptions of many people. In short, it is a fundamentally good organisation.

Unfortunately, there is another side to the RSPB, for as it has grown so it has become far too bureaucratic and autocratic. A huge gap seems to have developed between the RSPB's wardens on the ground and the official spokesmen at the society's headquarters in Bedfordshire. To many people, it seems to have become a "bird business" — a means of raising money, not for conservation, but to keep the cogs of its own machine turning.

To achieve this, concessions are being made and species and habitats are becoming threatened. The most obvious example is the vexed question of predation and predator control.

On a small, overcrowded island such as Britain, successful conservation is about "management", which should both habitat and wildlife populations. If this is done, certain targeted species such as the avocet will flourish; if it is not done, vulnerable species will disappear.

However, the RSPB seems to be moving increasingly towards habitat control only, which means that several species requiring protection are now under threat from crows, magpies, foxes and even birds of prey.

A few years ago birds of prey were declining because of poisoning by pesticides. This problem has now been largely overcome and numbers have

recovered dramatically. The peregrine falcon is probably more common than ever before, the hen harrier has quickly extended its range and the sparrowhawk is experiencing a population explosion — often at the expense of generally endangered species. Despite this, the RSPB refuses to discuss predator control openly for fear of offending its more ignorant of its urban members.

The most controversial predator to control problems is the hen harrier, yet the RSPB tells us that it is not a problem. The issue of Birds — designed to coincide with the start of the grouse shooting season — the

Others agree. Phil Drabble, one of Britain's best-known conservationists, says: "I think there is something to be said for the licensed killing of sparrowhawks in some areas where they are doing damage — not killing every one, but sensible control of raptors if it can be shown that they are a specific danger to endangered species."

Anybody interested in rap-tors is also in danger of persecution by the RSPB. Last year, Jack Dowers, a Suffolk conservationist and part-time warden for the Nature Conservancy Council, answered a knock on his front door. It was an RSPB investigator clutching a search warrant, accompanied by an embarrassed local policeman and a photographer. Jack's crime was that he had passed on "birds illegally taken from the wild" to a taxidermist. He was grilled for three hours, cautioned and asked for his egg collection.

The facts were that Jack Dowers had never collected eggs, but for many years had taken in sick and injured birds of prey. The vast majority recovered and he put them back into the wild, those that died he had given to a taxidermist. And where did many of his injured birds come from? Why, they were given to him by wardens at MIM, the nearby RSPB reserve at MIM, Bedfordshire. Legally, Jack Dowers committed an offence by passing on dead

birds. Forget the technicalities: in this case, the self-righteous RSPB lacked tact, common sense and understanding. Dowers, a retired farmer, has still not received an apology.

Last year the society supervised the erection of a peregrine's nesting box on the side tower. The site was totally unsuitable. There were no soft draughts, no ledges and no soft young birds plumaged to the young birds; one was injured and all had to be taken to a falconer for care and attention. Was the RSPB official responsible for three hours?

The RSPB's attitude concerning crows and foxes is just as worrying. On the almost-excellent RSPB reserve at Abernethy, where crows and foxes are not controlled, virtually no young capercaillie have been reared for two years and the survival rate is "perhaps too low to sustain the population". Yet on surrounding estates where foxes and crows are controlled, capercaillie are doing well.

The RSPB's answer has been to instigate a "research project" with the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology. I could have told them the causes and the solution to their problem without leaving my house, 480 miles away in Cambridgeshire. On the Somerset Levels the nests of black-tailed gulls have been predated by crows, yet the Somerset crow problem is described by the RSPB head-quarters staff as "trivial".

Despite this, the society wanted to cut down an oak tree, subject to a Tree Preservation Order, in the middle of the Levels. Why? Because crowds perched on it took the crow problem really well. "The tree" only apply to cut down the tree? Fortunately the request was refused by the local district council. What was wanted was not tree control but crow control.

Sadly, the RSPB could do better on other issues too. Some years ago, when I wanted the RSPB's support in Water Authority over its poor record, they were given their co-operation on many occasions and so we have to be careful.

I have belonged to the society since the late 1950s; I have visited many of the society's reserves and I am privileged to know as friends several of its wardens and other employees. I intend to remain a member. But my unease remains.

Conservancy Council issued for study in 1981. Mr. Smith nor Mr. Stott had such a licence for Bowland, although Mr. Stott had one for peregrines in Cumbria.

the Protection of Birds Act 1969, found eggs marked with black felt tip in a peregrine's nest last May and two men named as Mr. Smith and Mr. Stott were later seen approaching the nest.

Mr. Smith searched the police's homes and removed the alleged offences under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 were said to have taken place in April and June last year.

The court heard that it was an offence to disturb the birds intentionally without a "disturbance licence" from the Nature

for evidence of persecution of protected birds. They intended to prosecute them. Mr. Stott said that over the past 10 years there had been 47 breeding attempts with peregrines at Bowland but only nine had succeeded. Thirty-eight sites and more than 100 chicks and eggs had been destroyed, and 11 adults birds had more missing.

For the hen harrier, there had been 66 breeding attempts, 38 of which succeeded, but 52 had been destroyed. More than 40 adult birds had gone missing. Mr. Coupe said: "It is not in the interest of the Westminister estate to have hen harriers or peregrine falcons there because they feed on grouse, but I am not here to suggest there is any issue there."

Mr. Smith told the court the birds had been persecuted for years. He said: "Someone has to do something about this. There is a law in this land to protect these birds and it is being abused by people with money."

The court was told that much of the area was owned by North issue there.

After the case, Mr. Stott said he believed the police had been misled.

Both men intend to continue working for bird protection. André Farrar, RSPB regional conservation officer, said persecution of hen harriers had almost stopped at Bowland. There had been only a couple of cases in the past two years.

Fourteen nesting attempts had been made in 1987 but by 1988, the harrier population had fallen to five pairs. In 1989, 20 nesting attempts had been made, 11 of them successful.

The peregrine population was still suffering, he said, although numbers were rising. There are eight pairs in the area. There are about 1,200 pairs of peregrines in Britain and 300 pairs of hen harriers.

## Bird watchers cleared of disturbing falcons

West Water and the Duke of Westminster's estate. Simon Coupe defending said that over the past 10 years there had been 47 breeding attempts with peregrines at Bowland but only nine had succeeded.

Asked by Nicholas Turner, prosecuting, why he had no licence for Bowland, Mr. Stott said: "Perhaps I was a bit naive, I didn't think I really needed one."

Mr. Smith told the court the birds had been persecuted for years. He said: "Someone has to do something about this. There is a law in this land to protect these birds and it is being abused by people with money."

## Britain exports bird-watching skills to Saudis

By MICHAEL MCCARTHY  
CORRESPONDENT

BRITISH ornithologists flew to Saudi Arabia yesterday to teach the Saudis advanced bird-watching skills as part of the clean-up operation in the Gulf. The skill of recognising a distant ruddy turn is Britain's latest export to the Gulf state.

Bird-watching skills are common in Europe but much rarer in the Middle East. The eight scientists, five from Britain, two from the Netherlands and one from Egypt, are to teach local conservation workers techniques of bird recognition and counting, as part of an attempt to establish an accurate picture of the Gulf's resident and migratory bird life. The data could then be used to help to prevent environmental damage in future oil spills.

Rather than helping dirty up, the team, sent by the International Council for Bird Preservation, with the support of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, will conduct a two-month study of migrant waters, such as ruddy turn, along the Saudi coast, and breeding seabirds, such as lesser crested terns, on offshore islands. Mike Parr, of the International Council, based in Cambridge, said that an earlier reconnaissance trip by

the two organisations found that much basic information about Gulf bird-life was missing. "Very little is known about the distribution, movements along the coast? To cope with future oil spills we will need



in the Gulf," he said. "Do more spots before flying north, or are they trickling through the bays all the way along the coast? To cope with future oil spills we will need

to know which areas need particular protection."

The team is going out at the request of the Saudi national commission for wildlife conservation and development, which is overseeing the operation to clean up the oil and rescue wildlife, and will be taking the commission's workers out to develop their bird recognition skills. A number of species familiar to British bird-watchers have been affected while wintering or migrating in the Gulf, including ruddy turn, red-necked phalaropes, great-crested grebes, grey plovers and dun-lin, although most of these individual birds will be heading north to the tundra of Siberia to breed rather than heading for Britain.

Less familiar species beginning to nest in the Gulf about now, and also threatened, include bridled, white-cheeked and lesser-crested terns, and Sooty terns.

To recognise a distant ruddy turn, look out for prominent white wing-bars and a distinctive two-note or three-note jutting call.

# Duet of love on the wing

I WATCHED spring catch light at Minsmere bird reserve in Suffolk. Every day for 14 days I was there, and I learnt that one marsh harrier does not make a summer. I had seen her every day: creamy-headed and beautiful, gliding over the reedbeds, her wings held in a shallow V. Only one, and female.

Kestrels hover, sparrow-hawks dash, peregrines stoop and buzzards soar. Harriers quarter. They earn their living by gliding over the reedbeds, dropping silently on to voles and moorhens. When a harrier strikes, death comes in a whisper.

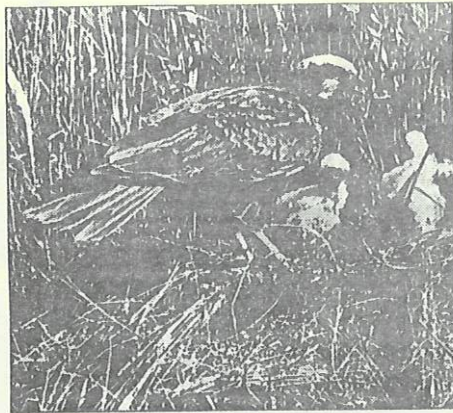
Only 15 years ago, marsh harriers were Britain's rarest breeding bird, with just one pair nesting. That was at Minsmere, a place where the normal rules of life seem sometimes to have been suspended. Last year, there were 40 nests

in the country; eight nests at Minsmere produced 27 chicks.

The reasons for the improvement are simple. First, there is less gamekeeping, and much less mindless gamekeeping. Second, DDT and related pesticides have been banned. These worked their way up through the food chain and had their most serious effect on the leading predators. To see a marsh harrier at Minsmere is a celebration that some battles in conservation have been won.

Well, no: to see two marsh harriers is to celebrate. But it was always one: always a creamy-headed female. Early days yet, no cause for worry — yet every time a Minsmere warden saw a marsh harrier, he hoped it was the first male to arrive.

The sexes are not hard to tell apart: females are mostly dark and creamy-headed, but



Rare sighting: a marsh harrier and chicks among the reeds

males have spectacularly tri-coloured wings: white background, black-tipped and chestnut-shouldered. When a male arrives, the business of spring can begin.

The holiday weekend came. And I saw him. It was about an hour after dawn, for I had been granted the privilege of entering the reserve out of visitor time, as I was research-

ing a book. I had already sighted the female, and seen her go down into the reeds.

Then came the unmistakable male in his glorious colours, gloriously going down into the same patch of reeds. It was clear that the passions of spring had enflamed the reedbeds. Twice I saw the male go to the same spot, carrying sticks: a sign of

passion if ever there was one. Then the female and the male took to the air together, separated, and performed their habitual quartering of the reeds, finally coming together again and gliding side by side.

Then all at once, they spun around each other, talon to talon, as if passing something from male to female, and as suddenly, they were down in the reeds again.

This is just a small sample of marsh harrier excesses. They greet spring with the sky dance, which starts at 3,000ft. The male somersaults, loops the loop, crashdives, slews and spins, seeming at times to be totally out of control. The best sky dancers get the best females.

Harriers also perform a ceremonial food pass, initially as part of courtship, later when the male provides for his mate during incubation. He passes a wonderful gift to the female: something no female could resist, such as a dead moorhen.

I had seen the pair perform a dummy pass. Watching them perform that fragment of courtship behaviour made me think of last year's Minsmere superstar, the trigamist male. The reserve had eight nests, with six males. There were five pairs, and one trigamist.

All males were thoroughly involved in the raising of young. The five ordinary males raised 16 chicks between them: the three nests of the trigamist raised 11.

That rogue male was probably the single greatest hero of the conservation movement last year. And to win those three females, what sky dances he must have performed.

SIMON BARNES

● What's about: *Birders* — listen for first willow warblers and blackcaps. Decent weather should bring in doves. *Twitchees* — little bunting at Chippenham, Wiltshire. The American wigeon at Elmley RSPB reserve, Kent. Details from *Birdline* 0898 700222.

## Birds shot by keepers, court told

PROTECTED birds were shot by keepers on an estate owned by the Duke of Westminster, a court was told yesterday.

Simon Coupe, who is defending two men accused of eight offences under the Protection of Wildlife Act, said that he had photographs of hen harriers killed on the Duke's Abbeystead estate at Bowland, Lancashire.

"Are you aware that keepers have shot protected birds?" he asked Roderick Banks, the estate manager and a prosecution witness. Mr Banks did not answer after an intervention by Nicholas Turner, for the prosecution.

Cliethere magistrates heard a taped interview between police and Paul Stott, one of the accused, in which he claimed that birds of prey were persecuted on grouse moors.

Mr Stott, an exhibition designer aged 47, and Carl Smith, a coach trimmer aged 48, both from Blackpool, deny disturbing the birds and say they marked eggs to reduce their value to poachers. The trial continues today.

# Rare sightings as the migrants drop in

RECENT EVENTS have belied the usual pattern of the light March/early April period being a slack time for northern birdwatchers. Usually we chomp at the bit as southern colleagues enjoy the first real wave of spring migrants while nothing much is happening in our part of the world.

However, the limited off-beat migration occurrences have been fairly equally split between the North and South, and we have possibly fared better through the continuing presence of several of the more exciting winter visitors.

Humberside stole the show over Easter, first with the appearance at Spurn Head on Saturday of the Snowy Owl, which had been in South Lincolnshire for almost three months. Unfortunately it was only in the area for a few hours, dropping into coastal fields north of Easington as darkness fell.

As this massive white owl, with a wing span of around five feet, is apparently trying to find its way back to the

**BIRDS**  
Brian Unwin

Arctic, hopes are high that it may reappear further up the coast.

Meanwhile, Humberside birdwatchers quickly forgot any disappointment over its disappearance with the sighting of a Bluethroat at Flamborough Head on Sunday. This came as a surprise: normally we expect these delightful Robin-like birds to pass through in May en route to breeding areas in Scandinavia and Russia.

However, a white spot in the centre of the bird's bright blue bib indicated it was of the race which nests in southern Europe and migrates earlier. Northern race birds have a red spot.

The same day, a lucky observer in the Conwy Valley, North Wales, found

himself in the right place as a White Stork passed over.

Monday brought a thrill for someone at Cheadle, Greater Manchester, with the appearance of a Hoopoe in all its finery. It is odd how these birds often turn up in urban areas when they stray here from the Continent. A week earlier another was found in the centre of Darlington, Co Durham.

The North-West has had an impressive run. The latest long-staying attraction is an American Bonaparte's Gull on Merseyside. This added to a strong transatlantic presence, including at least one Ring-billed Gull around the Mersey Mouth and the American Bittern which has been at Martin Mere, Blackpool, since February.

North Wales, too, has regularly had rarities on offer, with a White-billed Diver from the Arctic spending over five weeks at Holyhead, Anglesey, and Parrot crossbills in two Clwyd sites.

The Parrot Crossbill invasion has been one of the highlights of the past

six months — the total seen must be close to the 231 recorded before 1990. The North-East has had a good share of the influx — especially after news in early March of a new flock of 47 near Guisborough, Cleveland.

It will be a few more weeks before the Northern Isles begin to enjoy the full fruits of spring migration but, in the meantime, bird watchers have been celebrating the return of Shetland's famous Black-browed Albatross. Apart from a two-year gap, this massive South Atlantic seabird has been turning up at the Gannet colony on Herness on the Island of Unst since 1972.

Mainland Scotland's recent highlights have all involved wildfowl, most notably the Harlequin Duck, still at Wick this week. Birdwatchers travelling to see it have been able to take in other stars on the way, with a Ross's Goose near Lossiemouth, a Snow Goose at Loch of Strathbeg and two King Eiders on the Ythan Estuary North of Aberdeen.

## Crossbills keep on coming

PARROT crossbills have been dominating bird news since early November. Their invasion is on an unprecedented scale and they are strong contenders for bird of the winter.

However, as I mentioned last time, it is no surprise. Ornithological tipsters were predicting something like this when common crossbills began pouring into the country in early summer.

Periodic big arrivals of these highly specialised finches from Scandinavia and Russia occur when there is a shortage of their favourite food, the seeds from the cones of larches.

Parrot crossbills, however, are much more of a rarity here. Pine cones are their preferred food source and with the crop more consistent, there is less potential for them to be forced out of their breeding areas.

Something catastrophic has clearly happened in the east. As well as vast numbers of common crossbills we are also playing host to a quantity of refugee parrot crossbills, fast approaching the total of 231 recorded up to 1990.

Most of that total were recorded in 1962-63 and 1982-83, the only two periods when major influxes of this species are known to have taken place.

The present mass immigration began slowly, with one on Fair Isle, Shetlands, in late September, followed by 16 over the last half of October, mostly scattered along coasts between Yorkshire and Kent.

Recent weeks have seen reports of around 40 in Chopwell Wood, Tyne and Wear, and smaller flocks in Harwood

**BIRDS**  
Brian Unwin



Parrot crossbill: break time as the influx continues

Forest, Northumberland, Hamsterley Forest, County Durham, at Lockwood Beck reservoir, Cleveland, and in Pennine woodlands west of Sheffield.

Farther south there have been more than 40 in two flocks in Lincolnshire with further birds reported in Suffolk and Northamptonshire.

There are probably many more waiting to be discovered. The problem is distinguishing them from the common crossbills.

The main difference is in bill size — the parrot's is much bigger and heavier. However, there is so much variation in the size and shape of the com-

mon variety's bill that careful examination is necessary.

The extent of the headache birdwatchers face is evidenced by a report last weekend of an estimated 35,000 common crossbills in Northumberland's Kielder Forest alone. So it will probably be several years before we know how many have arrived and then it will almost certainly be much less than the real figure.

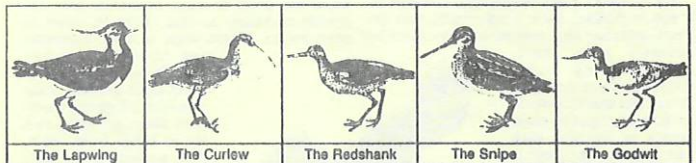
While the majority of the parrot crossbills have been in the North, most of the above-average arrival of even rarer two-barred crossbills have been in southern counties. The crossbill phenomenon has eclipsed other bird headlines over the past seven weeks — although there have been plenty of other stories.

An American red-eyed vireo was spotted at Sunderland in late October — the latest recorded in Britain and only the third in eastern England. It was trumped last month by the yellow warbler at Lerwick, the second ever for Britain, the first occurring on Bardsey Island in 1964.

That both the vireo and warbler should have turned up so late has given rise to speculation that they may have been blown across the Atlantic much earlier in the autumn.

Other late autumn rarity reports involved an Alpine swift near Leyland, on November 2, two red-rumped swallows in County Antrim a week later, and a Pallas's warbler at Filey, Yorkshire, last week.

The waxwing influx has grown, with 250 in Aberdeen and 200 in Edinburgh.



## Wetland birds under threat

By MICHAEL HORNSBY, AGRICULTURE CORRESPONDENT

THE falling water table in the Somerset Levels, one of Europe's most valuable wetlands, is threatening the survival of wading birds and is drying out meadows rich in rare flowers, according to the Nature Conservancy Council.

Over the past ten years, the numbers of breeding snipe, lapwing, curlew, redshank and godwit have fallen drastically, mainly, the council believes, because water levels are too low during the winter and spring as a result of drainage by farmers wanting to "improve" their land.

"Breeding snipe have gone down by 70 per cent and are now extinct in two areas," Brian Johnson, the council officer for the region, said. "We have seen a decline of 50

per cent in most other species. There is only one breeding pair of godwits left."

He said that plants were also disappearing. "We have evidence that wet herb-rich meadows are starting to deteriorate, and that wetland plants such as creeping jenny and marsh orchids are being replaced by dryland plants of less botanical interest."

Since the early Eighties pioneering management agreements between the conservancy council and 1,000 farmers have partially halted the damage. Much of the Levels has been declared an "environmentally sensitive area" and other parts have been designated "sites of special scientific interest". In such areas farmers are paid

grants to refrain from draining their land, from grazing sheep in winter and from cutting grass for silage before July which would disturb ground-nesting birds. There is growing concern, however, that bird numbers continue to fall. Mr Johnson said that the conservancy council would like to see the payments to farmers linked to the maintenance of minimum water levels.

The National Farmers' Union is not against such payments, but said that predators were more to blame for falling bird numbers than were low water levels. Anthony Gibson, NFU policy adviser in the South West, said: "Farmers are suspicious that the NCC wants to turn the whole area into a nature reserve."

# Birdman spreads his wings

Roy decides it's time to fly the coop

BY JOHN ROSS

**B**IRD lover Roy Dennis has become a victim of his own success.

In his job as Highland officer with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Roy has been an active campaigner for the environment for years.

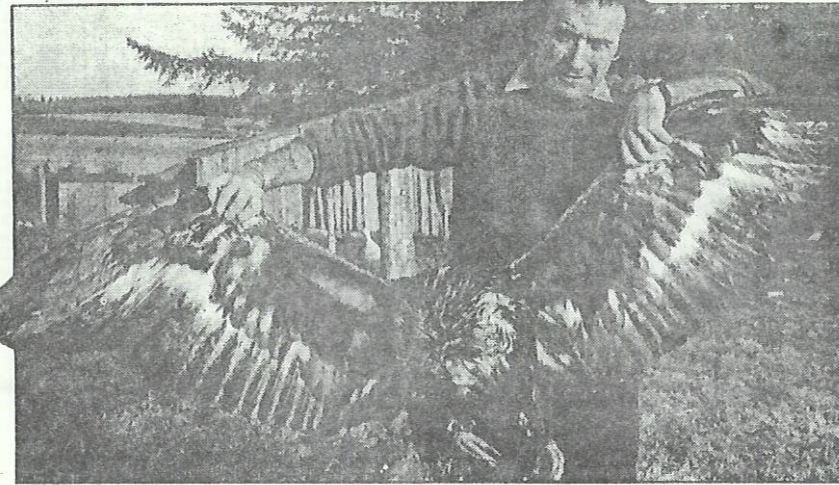
But ironically his success in getting across the conservation message is forcing him to quit. Growing public interest in green matters has meant too much paperwork for a man used to the outdoor life.

So in February, Roy will quit the post he had held for 20 years to become a freelance wildlife consultant.

"The move will get me back in the field and among wildlife again," he said.

Roy will be advising companies and landowners from the Speyside croft where he lives with his wife Marina.

One of his first jobs will be counselling the Greek govern-



POISONED: Roy shows an eagle which fell victim to 'a Victorian activity'



SUCCESS: Holding a red kite chick

Pictures: JOHN PAUL

ment on conserving birds of prey in forest areas.

"People are now more aware that wildlife can add to the attraction of their business — especially somewhere tourist-related," he said.

Roy was once the RSPB's only full-time officer in the Highlands, where he has headed operations since 1971.

During those twenty years,

membership of the RSPB has grown from 25,000 to 800,000 — and Roy now has a full-time staff of seven.

There have been some remarkable success stories, such as the re-introduction of the osprey.

When Roy arrived in the Highlands there was only one pair left in existence — at Boat

of Garten. Today there are 63 pairs in Scotland.

Sea eagle and red kite populations are now more healthy, but the numbers of corncrakes and capercaillies have dwindled through loss of habitat.

Two of the big problems still facing the society are poisoning of birds of prey and the theft of wild birds eggs.

"We have had a problem

with the theft of eggs for some time", said Roy. "It is very disappointing but the police and the courts are backing us up really well in our efforts."

Poisoning of wild birds is also a major problem. There were 25 to 30 cases last year and the society are investigating a black market suspected of supplying gamekeepers with poison.

"There are still some people involved in this Victorian activity to this day," said Roy.

His job is not only looking after wildlife, however. Skiing and the oil industry have both posed serious threats to wildlife habitats and Roy has fought some fierce battles over conservation during his long and worthy career.

## Feather report

### Cry like an eagle

A GOOD zoo aims to serve four things: amusement, education, science and conservation. Every time I consider the way zoos work on these laudable notions I think of eagles. In what way is an eagle in a cage amusing? What can we learn from it? In what way does its life help the lives of wild eagles? What does the spectacle of a caged eagle teach children? How large should an eagle's cage be? Ten square miles would be hardly big enough. "Robin redbreast in a cage puts all heaven in a rage," Blake wrote: divine fury at the incarceration of eagles should be enough to destroy the galaxy.

Education? A piece of scholarly research on a zoo in Buffalo, New York, found that the most common expressions used to describe

sands of miles a year — seems no more than an experiment in avian sanity. Zoos know this, and have tried to offer the animals a more enlightened captivity. But even the zoo's main self-justification, the breeding of rare mammals and birds, can seem no more than a further celebration of man's manipulation of the world to his pleasures.

Conservation is the thing. Zoos do their best for conservation, but they are carrying too much weight for the course. The saving from extinction of Père David's deer, the European bison and the Mongolian wild horse are down to zoos. However, it is not strictly necessary to cage eagles in order to save horses. If you want to save mammals and birds from extinction, the answer is not to shoot their mothers, capture their offspring, transport them overseas and try to breed from them. The answer is to save their habitats.

If there is a place for zoos at all, it is as centres of campaigning and education. The number of species of mammals and birds that can live a decent life in a zoo is seriously limited. Zoos must be rethought from top to bottom if there is

to be any point to them at all. London zoo has launched a £13 million appeal to carry on as it always has done. Just think what all that money could do for real conservation. I do not think that £13 million should be given to support a rather degrading form of public entertainment. If you want to spend that kind of money on nature, then spend it to protect places where eagles fly free.

Jamieson said: "Because what zoos teach us is false and dangerous, both humans and animals will be better off when they are abolished." Abolished — or rethought. It is better to save a mountain than cage an eagle.

SIMON BARNES

● What's about: *Birders* — first swallows and house martins are arriving. *Twitchers* — great spotted cuckoo at Spurnhead, Humberside; serin at Sandwich Bay, Kent; white stork seen flying along the river Medway, Kent. Details from *Birdline*. 0898 700222.



Free flight: a lesser-spotted eagle

wilderness as we have left exists only by man's express permission.

Zoos emphasise the gulf between man and the natural world. Dale Jamieson, a professor of philosophy, wrote: "Zoos teach us a false sense of our place in the natural order. The means of confinement mark a difference between humans and animals. They are there at our pleasure, to be used for our purposes. Morality, and perhaps our very survival, require that we learn to live as one species among many rather than as one species over many."

Zoos can be used to teach. Early delight in the Snowdon aviary at London zoo was part of my education. But too much of what zoos teach is unacceptable. Even in the free-flight cages, one asks: are we really teaching about birds? Or the wonders of human ingenuity?

Birds have delighted us throughout history because they can fly: they express mystery and freedom. Locking up a bird — say, a bird genetically programmed to migrating thou-

### Birds in the bog

● Eamonn Rafferty on tempting the corncrake back to Belfast

**T**O THE commuters who disgorge from Belfast out along the M1 on their way home, the Bog Meadows appear as a seemingly incongruous piece of waste land that rises gently to blend into the sombre background of Milltown Cemetery. The Meadows lie on the boundary of West Belfast, watched over by army observation posts. It was here that the corncrake came fleetingly two years ago.

To ornithologists, the corncrake is a "common Eurasian rail with a buff speckled plumage and reddish wings". To others, it is the most elusive of birds, seldom seen but with a "crax, crax" call that was once a regular feature of summer nights. But the changing country terrain and ecology has made it scarce in Ireland.

That the corncrake should choose the Bog Meadows was piquant irony for a site long thought to have no value, scattered with household refuse, discarded tyres and the ubiquitous supermarket trolley. However, the marshy terrain, with its proliferating vegetation and reeds, was an ideal breeding site for the bird. That was until the mechanical diggers came: this self-same vegetation was a hindrance to drainage and by the time they had carved out their channels, the corncrakes had left.

"It knocked the heart out of me," said Aidan Crean, 28, an enthusiastic ornithologist from his teens. With more than a sense of despair at the loss, Mr Crean and some friends held a public meeting. West Belfast needed to know about the fragility of the Bog Meadows. Today, diggers and drainage, tomorrow bulldozers? To their surprise, the meeting was a success. There was a strong local interest in the site, even if the community had neglected its responsibilities in the past. But with an eye less on the past than the future, the Friends of the Bog Meadows was founded, with Mr Crean as chairman.

Nearly 18 months on, there is hardly a day that Mr Crean cannot be seen striding round the site with binoculars, camera and terrier Toby. He is a man with a vocation rather than an interest. It is hard to think of him — an Inland Revenue official by day — poring over tax returns, when he could be out on the bog.

But there is always work to do off the site. "Some people who were dumping rubbish were asked to take it elsewhere. We even hired skips at our own expense to clean up the area. I think we have got the message across."

Friends of the Bog Meadows have also maintained a good

relationship with the Department of the Environment, which was recently persuaded to delay a water-pipe scheme until the birds' breeding season was finished. It also agreed, at considerable expense, to lay a "temporary" road, which will be lifted when the job is completed.

All this should satisfy Mr Crean, but he carries about him the air of unease. Across the M1, similar terrain to the Bog Meadows has already been colonised by edge-of-town shopping developers. These carpet warehouses and DIY suppliers stand like huge matt-grey temples to Mammon and an omnipresent threat to the Bog Meadows.

Among the initiatives planned are to turn the site into a conservation park to protect the unique ecological balance. By the time it is finished it should be a safer, permanent environment for the snipes, warblers, lapwings, ducks, and others of the 35 species of birds it attracts.

But for Aidan Crean, all the efforts would be worthwhile if it was sufficient to entice the corncrakes back. At the dead of night, he has been known to lie in the meadows, hoping to lure the bird back, with only his recordings made two years ago rupturing the silent vigil: "crax, crax".

# Law finds antidote to poison

## Feather report

In the past it was accepted without question that a landowner had total rights over his land: everything, living or dead, that came into contact with his property was at his disposal. But attitudes to the countryside have changed beyond recognition in recent years.

Townies believe they have some sort of stake in, as it were, the soul of the British countryside. Organisations such as the National Trust act in that belief. Landowners are expected to accept their responsibility to the community: they cannot build 500 bungalows on an ancient wood or stick a car factory on a sheep meadow. Not without a lot of trouble, anyway.

The belief is now that people have some sort of rights over private land and, increasingly, it is accepted that non-human animals also have rights. There has been statutory protection of various species of wildbirds since 1954: you cannot legally blast away at any bird you happen to fancy, even on your own land.

There is, however, a difference between legal protection and enforcement. Many countries have all-embracing laws protecting wildlife, and absolutely nobody takes any notice of them. These laws look pretty, but don't do the wildlife much good.

In this country it is illegal to put out poisoned carcasses: they are a weapon used to kill foxes and crows, which are both legal targets. But poison does not pick and choose. The technique puts all carrion feeders at risk, and this class includes some of Britain's



Remedy: MPs are backing action to eradicate wildlife killers

most spectacular birds of prey: golden eagles, for starters.

Records show that, between 1980 and 1989, 327 birds of prey were killed by poisoning. Of these, 199 were buzzards, which is an alarming figure. The numbers for rarer birds are in one sense more shocking, as the desperate waste of it all seems so much more obvious.

The point is, however, that all birds of prey are by definition rare, just as lions are much rarer than antelopes. Which makes them — eagles and lions alike — particularly vulnerable to persecution.

The figures show that 27 eagles were killed by illegal poisoning, including one white-tailed eagle, which is very rare indeed in this country. Poison also killed 21 red kites, which are among Britain's rarest breeding birds: the RSPB is running a captive-rearing and release scheme in an attempt

to improve their numbers. Some of these released birds have been poisoned.

Poisoning, then, is a problem that affects the country's most vulnerable birds, which makes it particularly cheering to hear that the government is launching a campaign to stop it. "We need to challenge head-on the entrenched attitude of a small but destructive minority who believe that illegal poisoning is acceptable," says David Maclean, a parliamentary secretary at the agriculture department.

The campaign will include government support for a private member's bill which will make it an offence to use or, importantly, permit another to use prohibited means to kill wildlife.

All this is good news. Even those who are lukewarm on conservation will be pleased that their pet will be made safer by the law's enforcement: illegal poisoning killed 721 cats and dogs in 1980-89. It is

good to know, too, that the government is putting its weight behind a serious conservation issue, or indeed, any conservation issue.

As conservation issues go, this one is pretty painless, and has plenty of charm. It involves saving our pussies and doggies and our spectacular golden eagles and red kites, at the cost of annoying a few rogue landowners and gamekeepers: a good trade.

Plenty of other conservation issues need urgent government action, however. These include the piecemeal destruction of estuaries, the loss of heathland, the draining of wetland, the regular loss of sites of scientific interest, threats to seabirds through gill-net fishing and insensitively planned oil exploration, the need to pay farmers for conservation as well as food production, the valuing of roads and commerce over conservation, and on, and on.

A campaign against illegal poisoning is a fine thing. Two cheers for the government.

### SIMON BARNES

● The conservation campaign leaflet, "Stop Illegal Poisoning", is available from MAF Publications, London SE99 7TP (081-694 8862).

● What's about: *Birders — fine weather could bring any of the big three early summer arrivals: sand-martin, wheatear and chiffchaff. Twitchers — two-barred crossbill (second ever for Wales) in Clocaenog Forest, near Denby, Clwyd. Flock of 20 Arctic redpoll (biggest ever in Britain) at Norwich. Details from Birdline 0898 700222.*

# French feathers fly in hunting dispute

FROM PHILIP JACOBSON IN PARIS

IN THEIR passion for the slaughter of small birds the huntsmen of France outdo even the Italians. By most counts they bring down more than 25 million, from lark and curlew to woodcock and oyster catcher in an average season, and that is only among the "licensed" species.

There is a tradition of blazing away at migrating flocks, and here the wood-pigeon — *la palombe* — suffers more than most in the annual trek across hostile stretches of countryside.

But in one huntin' and shootin' stronghold in the Ardèche these graceful blue-grey birds are enjoying a partial reprieve, thanks to determined ecologists and the long arm of European Community regulations. To the fury of the region's *chasseurs*, the Col de l'Escrinet, four hectares of hillside which they have used for years to blast off at flocks passing overhead, were strictly off-limits during the (official) season that finished last weekend.

The site, which is now owned by conservationists, has become a symbol of the confrontation: for the past two months disgruntled hunters have been staging a sit-down protest on the summit. The end of the season saw about 400 hunters, without their guns, assemble for a frigid encounter with about half as many members of the local nature preservation society. While a police helicopter cir-

led above, the two sides did their best to ignore each other: all the same a riot squad was on standby down the hill.

When hostilities were adjourned for lunch the hunters enjoyed their traditional end-of-season meal of *fricassée de pigeons*. The opposition opted for picnics and a spot of bird-watching, rewarded by the appearance of a majestic short-toed eagle.

With about 1.8 million people holding hunting licences in France, and a good many others shooting illegally, the nation's bird life undoubtedly needs protecting. More than 500 protected species, including eagles and falcons, herons and swans, were brought down during a six-month period last year, provoking calls from conservation groups for hunters to "bring their troops into order".

There is also criticism of the significant political clout of France's hunting lobby. In the birds' corner is Brigitte Bardot, an implacable opponent of all blood sports, while President Mitterrand has pointedly declined to make use of the excellent hunting facilities available to the Elysée Palace.

Then there is the EC, whose directives prohibiting the shooting of birds and animals in certain circumstances have driven French hunters into the streets to protest against this assault by "the bureaucrats of Brussels" on their right to kill.

# Owl centre opens to public viewing

By JOHN YOUNG

A NATIONAL centre for owl conservation, in Wolterton Park, near Aylsham, Norfolk, will open to the public today.

The centre has been established by the Hawk and Owl Trust, and includes an exhibition devoted to the conservation of birds of prey, particularly the barn owl, which used to be common in most parts of Britain but is now an endangered species. In the last 50 years the number of nesting pairs in England and Wales has declined from about 12,000 to an estimated 4,000.

Barn owls feed mainly on rats, mice, voles and shrews found in rough grassland and, until recently, in farmyards. However, increasing use of rodenticides has destroyed much of their natural prey, and many of the barns and trees that provided their nesting sites have also disappeared. Because they fly low in search of food, many hundreds are killed by cars and lorries. Large numbers also starved to death during the cold winters after the second world war.

Wolterton Park, created in the 18th century, is owned by Lord Walpole, a descendant of Britain's first prime minister. Although the centre does not keep or display live birds, there are several owls and nesting boxes on the estate. ● A neighbourhood watch has been set up to protect rare red kites in Wales from egg thieves. The birds are now hatching their chicks at secret locations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is urging local to report details of sightings of the bird. Last year was the birds' most successful, with 60 pairs raising 72 young.

# Bird sanctuary

Parts of Rendlesham and Tunstall forests, east Suffolk, are being set aside for the woodlark, one of Britain's rarest birds.

# Badger alarms

Pupils at Endon high school, Staffordshire, have made burglar alarms that sound when badger sets are tampered with.

# Bird guardian

Because I am a member of Friends of the Earth and my godfather is a keen bird watcher and member of the RSPB, I was very interested in your story about the rare bird on Marton Mere.

I cut this out for my godfather who lives in Suffolk.

But I was sad to read about the man killing rare birds (Gazette, February 8).

I noticed that Mr Tony Myerscough was in both stories. Thank goodness for him looking after our bird population and keeping it for our future.

EMMA GARSIDE (aged 9) Grange Lane, Newton-with-Scales

## Feather report

# A bird by any other name

I suppose, at a pinch, one could agree that one barn swallow doesn't make a summer, but when people want to refer to the nightingale — a bird that nothing common does or mean — as a *common* nightingale, I feel it is time to draw the line.

Even as I write, I can hear the hurried, sweet song of the hedge accentor, and the excited squeaking of a party of long-tailed bush-tits. In the garden, the European robin sings on, the acorn jay screams in the wood beyond, and a couple of ever canny black-billed magpie swoop down like paper aeroplanes.

Names! Names are part of our perception of the thing named: part, it seems, of the thing itself. The name dunnoek reeks of homeliness and seems to express the bird's eternal nature. Hedge accentor, its suggested replacement, would take some getting used to.

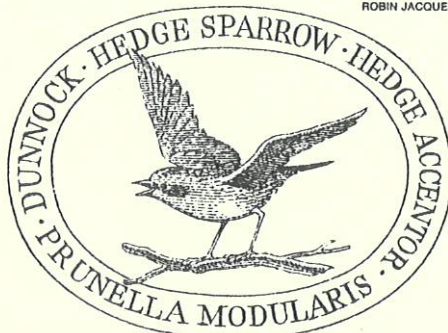
There are powerful moves afoot to change the names of many of the birds on the British list: to rationalise, internationalise, and almost to common-marketise our birds. It is a task guaranteed to raise the hackles of the world. There is logic behind it. Of course there is. The last British list was drawn up by the records committee of the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) in 1971. Since then, we

have had a revolution in British birding: travel. Those who have a passing interest in birds take a passing interest in the birds they encounter on holiday: birding holidays are big business.

I was in Florida recently, covering the Super Bowl, and managed to play truant and go birding. At once there were problems: is Florida's green-winged teal the same as what we Brits call a teal? Is a northern shoveler the same as a shoveler? Is an American wigeon the same as a wigeon? The answers are: yes, yes and of course not; use your eyes.

There is an easy way of checking this: no matter whether you call your bird teal or green-winged teal, the bird is always *Anas crecca*, and almost every bird book will tell you so. Scientific names are universal: that is their function. You can call a bird a dunnoek, or a hedge sparrow (its former name) or a hedge accentor, but any ornithologist knows what you are talking about when you say that a *Prunella modularis* is singing its head off near the railway line.

We already have global consistency of nomenclature: however, the BOU felt that it was worth the trouble of eradicating the confusion of ordinary birding folk. It has since drawn up a list of



ROBIN JACQUES

### Hedging on names: but the world calls it *Prunella modularis*

suggested name changes, not just for British birds but for all the birds in the region.

However, all that work has been shelved. Last December, the International Ornithological Congress met in New Zealand and decided that it was such a good idea that consistency within the western Palaearctic was not enough.

The congress liked the idea of standardising the English names for all the birds in the world. A final list will be offered to the congress in eight years. I suppose it has a point, but like everyone else I instinctively reject the whole business. I spent much of last spring and summer watching avocets: I have no problem with *Recurvirostra avosetta*, but I could not feel happy calling them pied avocets.

To speak of bearded parrotbills will be hard: true, bearded tits are not tits (and nor are they bearded, they are moustached), but the new name seems awfully clumsy. No

doubt for most birders they will be called what they always are: beardies.

You can make a rule about a name, but not about what things are actually called. Perhaps the imposition of intrusive standard names will see a rise in such unofficial nicknames: we already have sprawks and groppers and klutes and kipper gulls and redheads and ringtails — these being sparrowhawks, grasshopper warblers, avocets, herring gulls, female or immature smew, and ditto hen harrier.

Changing names by decree is one thing: getting them used is quite another. Hear that dunnoek sing.

### SIMON BARNES

● What's about: *Birders — Visit open water to watch ducks and grebes displaying. Twitchers — white-billed diver at Holyhead harbour, Anglesey. Lesser scap and Forster's tern in County Down, Northern Ireland. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.*

