



Fylde Bird Club

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

NEWSLETTER NO. 52

FROM THE CHAIR

I must apologise to all who attended the May meeting. I went on holiday thinking the evening had been organised and you would be enjoying a light hearted quiz. Extra apologies are due to Andrew who had to cope without warning or an Agenda and Phil who worked so hard to prepare an excellent programme.

As we won't be holding a business meeting until July I would like to make a couple of requests in this newsletter.

Work on the current Bird Report is progressing but if we are to maintain standards we will have to meet the cost of producing the report. If any of you can sell some advertising we would be very grateful.

My second request concerns the 'Birds of Estuaries Enquiry', the monthly Wader counts. From this Autumn we are planning to revise and slightly expand our counting area. If we are to succeed we will need some help: if you can spare one day a month to help with this important survey please join us, whatever your level of experience. We can guarantee you a good days birdwatching, a free annual report and the possibility of finding a rarity. I hope to see you at Pilling Lane Ends on 14th July.

L.G.B.

POINT PELEE, CANADA, SPRING 1991

On Sunday 12th May myself, Frank Bird, Tony Myerscough, Paul Morgan and Peter Webb set off on a birdwatching holiday to Point Pelee, Canada.

Point Pelee is a wooded, long narrow spit of land in S.Western Ontario which extends southwards into Lake Erie and is therefore a first landfall for birds migrating northwards into Canada. Several club members had visited the area before us and recounted tales of huge numbers of birds if conditions were favourable.

It was with considerable anticipation therefore that we arrived at Manchester airport at 5.40am and hurried through to check in. There was a minor hitch when one member of the group left his hand luggage outside on the pavement. Paul Morgan had organised the trip and had all the tickets and as we checked in asked for everyone's passport. This was to start a major panic as a certain person went deathly white and announced that he hadn't got his passport. A long search of his person and his baggage ensued whilst the girl behind the desk announced "there's always one". The passport could not be found and he dashed off to phone home. He had just succeeded in getting his wife out of bed and searching the house when another member of the party put his hand into his bag and found the passport immediately. What a relief! The rest of the queue who had fallen about laughing quickly settled down again and normality returned.

The flight was uneventful and on landing we collected our luggage and set off to pick up the hire car. However a small holdup again ensued as the same member of the party announced that he had left his tripod on the luggage carousel and dashed off to retrieve it! Now come on folks, you're only allowed one guess as to the identity of Mr. Forgetful! Soon we were loaded up and set off on the drive from Toronto to Leamington, where we were staying. It was absolutely red hot and most of us were dressed for Arctic conditions having heard some of the stories told by previous visitors at this time of the year. A stop for refreshments was soon required and a "Whopper Combo" - a huge beefburger with all sorts of filling slid nicely into a small corner. By now the birdwatching had started in earnest from the car and several birds were ticked off en route, although I was of the opinion that the odd one was, shall we say, "doubtful".

We arrived at Leamington and checked in at the Motel. This was fairly basic but nevertheless clean and adequate. A quick couple of hours birdwatching locally revealed that there was plenty to see and next morning we were up bright and early and drove to Pelee to walk to the point. There had obviously been a fall just before our arrival and various Warblers, Orioles and Vireos etc hung from every tree. It was difficult where to look next. Blackburnian Warblers, American Redstarts, Yellow rumped Warblers, Magnolia Warblers, Northern Orioles etc. seemed everywhere as well as some rarer species such as Hooded Warbler and Prothonotary Warbler. It was unbelievable birdwatching. Several visits were made during the fortnight to

the point and exploring the various trails and there was always that feeling that you never knew what could turn up. It's always funny to see the look on people's faces when they ask you where you went whilst on holiday and you tell them that you visited all the local sewage farms, but that is exactly what we did! These produced an excellent variety of Waders over the two weeks including Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpipers, Semi Palmated Sandpipers, Short billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpiper, White Rumped Sandpipers, Red-necked Phalaropes etc. One particular highlight was when after turning up a Ruff - a local rarity - a full summer plumage Wilson's Phalarope flew in. All the party were busy taking in the superb plumage of the Phalarope whilst the American's present weren't interested and were jumping up and down anxiously asking us to point out the Ruff to them!

Another good area to visit fairly locally was Rondeau National Park and it was here that most of the Thrushes such as Swainson's, Grey cheeked, Veery and Wood Thrush were seen together with Ovenbird. It was also good for Woodpeckers and one member of the party was especially keen to see all the species available. In fact, you could say that he had a 'thing' about Woodpeckers which quickly led to him being christened 'Tony Pecker'. He was over the moon when Red Headed and Red Bellied Woodpeckers were seen although Pileated Woodpecker proved elusive being seen only by one person at Long Point on the way back to Toronto.

As the second week wore on and the weather was still red hot (between 80° & 90° F) no further falls occurred. The weather was just too good. Each morning at the point new birds continued to trickle through however and a Western Kingbird, a rarity in Ontario provided a highlight on one morning. However, each time we visited the sewage beds the species of birds seemed to alter and visits to other sites fairly locally continued to provide us with excellent birdwatching.

The trip finished with a visit to Niagara Falls, a must for everyone. Over the holiday we notched up 193 species including 28 species of Warbler, 6 species of Virio, 10 species of Flycatcher, 11 species of Sparrow, and around 15 species of Waders. I personally had over 120 new species. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the holiday and I have no hesitation in recommending it. The food is excellent and very reasonable. Everything is very civilised and the people very friendly and polite - even the Americans! Finally, I cannot let the trip pass without knocking one or two myths on the head, hopefully for good. Firstly, I have it on the authority of the two other people who roomed with me that I definitely do not snore and secondly I drank 6 ½pt cans of lager during the fortnight effectively killing off the rumour that I am prone to drinking copious quantities of ale!

A.J.HINCHLIFFE.

RECENT REPORTS

MARCH

The Cettis Warbler at the Mere was still present on the 13th when it was heard in song. Previously, on the 6th it was heard to sing on at least 6 occasions. The chances of it finding a mate were, not to put a fine point on it, extremely slim, so it wasn't entirely unexpected when no reports of its presence at the end of the month were received.

Not to be outdone the American Bittern remained all month although it became rather elusive largely as a result of the growth of foliage on the island and surrounding the Mere itself. It didn't break into song - does this mean it was a female? The National Geographic Society field guide states that it has a distinctive song "oonk-a-lunk" - quote - "most often heard at dusk as it skulks in dense marsh reeds". Hands up those who may have heard it sing after all.

You may remember from the last Newsletter that we left Ed in the Greyhound Stadium at Blackpool closely observing Stonechat. Well, a pair were present on the 1st and remained until the 5th and no doubt Ed was there on the 6th to discover that they had gone.

Spring arrived on the 10th in the shape of Wheatears at South Station found by guess who? and one at Pontins Camp no doubt wondering where the Oystercatchers had disappeared to from the Cafe roof. The first song of Meadow Pipits was also heard by Maurice on that day at LSANR and Ed came across a female Stonechat at Squires Gate Industrial Estate.

A female Wheatear was at Harrowside, South Shore on the 14th and 4 Wheatears were at LSANR on the 17th and 27th. Passage seemed to be thin with only a report of 2 Wheatears and 86 Meadow Pipits at Rossall School on the 13th, 7 at Fleetwood on the 17th and 5 on the 29th.

3 Jack Snipe were in the slack at LSANR on the 10th. At Ribby a flock of 140 Tree Sparrows were present on the 16th.

March usually sees an influx of geese into Over Wyre and this year was no exception with not only good numbers but also a good variety. The 3rd saw approximately 4000 Pinkfeet on the reclaimed marsh between Lane Ends and Fluke Hall which was unusual in itself. I think this was the first time that a large flock of geese had been in this particular area since the marsh had been reclaimed. Correct me if I'm wrong anyone! Amongst the Pinkfeet were 5 Adult and 2 immature Russian Whitefronts, 1 Greylag, 2 Bean Geese (a Rossia and a Fabalis) 3 Barnacles, 1 Dark Bellied Brent and 2 Canada Geese (1 small and 1 large). The wonderful quality of the light made for some superb views. Quite a spectacle with sound accompaniment.

Just down the road at Green Dicks Lane were another flock of 3½-4000 Pinkfeet which held another 'fabalis' Bean.

The Geese continued to be 'viewable' throughout the month. On the 10th a flock of approximately 8000 Pinkfeet at Pilling held a similar variety of species supplemented by 1 adult and 2 juvenile Greenland Whitefronts. A leucistic Pinkfoot was also present in the main flock.

Small parties of Brent Geese have been seen on several previous occasions in the Fylde however a flock of 20 Dark Bellied at Lane Ends, also on the 10th was extremely unusual. 13, probably part of the same flock, but who knows, were still there on the 17th. The influx of observers to Over Wyre also resulted in sightings of other species. Little Owls which seem to have declined in several of their old haunts there, were seen at Eagland Hill, where 2 were present and 1 was also seen at Nateby. The regular Tawny Owls were present at Crimbles and at Rawcliffe. I use the word regular with certain misgivings - odds on if you want to see a Tawny Owl and visit these spots they're not there as a certain team in recent Bird Races have found to their cost. On the 24th a Barn Owl was seen near Churchtown.

On the 10th 2 adult and 1 juvenile Whooper Swan were on the banks of the River Wyre at Cartford along with 2 Goldeneye. On the 17th, the day of the Wader count additional interest was provided in the shape of an Avocet at Condor Green which had been noted in earlier months on the Wyre, at Lytham and at Hest Bank. Even allowing for its close proximity it still managed to disappear for a while on the sloping mud banks of the Lune.

At Lane Ends on the 17th a flock of 38 Twite were seen along with 1 Grey Wagtail and 25 Goldfinch.

At the Mere a pair of Scaup appeared on the 6th and there was the usual good variety of Duck present on the 10th with 4 Great Crested Grebes, 60 Mallard, 61 Teal, 39 Pochard, 14 Tufted, 7 Goldeneye and a flock of 253 Common Gull but no Ring Bills! Sand Martins were seen from the 23rd but predictably Duck numbers declined at the month end with 39 Teal, 24 Tufted, 2 Pochard, 5 Goldeneye and a solitary Shoveler.

Adult Mediterranean Gulls were seen at Hambleton Marsh by Christopher Batty and Daniel Woods and another was seen by Ed at Arnold School playing fields on the 17th and at Knowle High School on the 19th. Who's watching Queen Mary and King Edward's school playing fields? Yes, Ed.

I almost hesitated when I was about to write - sea watching was once again productive - but its true! March is an excellent time for seeing good numbers of birds on passage and also for seeing a good variety too.

Red Throated Diver numbers have been well up this winter on the Fylde coast. 7 were off Starr Gate on the 2nd with a more normal 2 there on the 3rd and the 10th. Fine but hazy conditions with a light southerly wind on the 16th produced 33 flying past the Starr Gate shelter. On the same day there were 19 Great Crested Grebes, 2 Slavonian Grebes and 135 Scoter. For good measure there were 3 Little Gulls, 1 Fulmar, a Kittiwake and a pair of Eider. 7 Wigeon flew south.

On the 14th 96 Eider were off North Promenade, a large number for this area. At South Promenade 4 Scaup flew south on the 17th and 2 on the 23rd. A seawatch at Rossall on the 29th included 1 Red Throated Diver, 1 adult Gannet, 13 male and 13 female Mergansers, 2 male Scaup with 27 Eider, 5

adult Kittiwakes and 2 Sandwich Terns. Just to show that seawatching isn't just looking at sea birds, 36 Meadow Pipits and 5 Wagtails moved north.

At the month end Newton Marsh still held 40 Wigeon and 10 Black Tailed Godwits. On the 30th at Ecclesgate, Marton Moss Maurice observed 2 Ring Necked Parakeets calling at 0900. They had been at liberty for approximately two weeks. On the 31st Maurice saw a male Wheatear at LSANR plus a new candidate for the dead Mammal section of the Newsletter - a Pygmy Shrew. He doesn't say how it met its demise but think its safe to assume that it wasn't savaged by a male Wheatear.

APRIL

The American Bittern was present all month with particularly good views being obtained on the 14th as it worked its way along the edge of the island at 1700 hours.

Cormorants are regular in small numbers at the Mere however an adult - to quote the classic phraseology - displaying the characteristics of the continental race "sinensis" was seen by Maurice on the 7th and the 14th.

Spring passage picked up somewhat from the start of the month but generally most species seemed to be late and few in numbers possibly as a result of generally adverse northerly winds combined with the effects of a harsh winter. On the 2nd at Fleetwood there were 16 Wheatear at the Power Station area and 180 Meadow Pipits. The following day saw 16 Wheatear at the Mere with parties continuing to pass throughout the month.

Single Ring Ousels were there on the 2nd and 8th, Common Sandpiper and Swallows on the 12th. A Sedge Warbler on the 13th equalled the earliest Lancashire record. 2 House Martins, 30 Willow Warbler and 30 Wheatear were also present on that day. 34 Wheatears were at Rossall on the 11th. The 13th was also an exceptionally good day for Wheatears with 10 on St. Annes Moss, 30 on Common Edge football fields plus a minimum of 13 at Fleetwood.

In a 5 hour watch at Rossall on the 13th 335 Meadow Pipits, 21 White Wagtail, 5 Goldfinch, 1 Twite, 26 Linnets, 9 Siskin and 5 Swallows were seen plus 2 Kestrels flying out across the bay. A Merlin and Peregrine terrorised the Wader flocks.

At Bourne Hill 3 Goldcrests were in the bushes. This species seems to have been particularly badly hit by the hard winter with very few being seen on passage.

2 Chiffchaffs, a Willow Warbler and a Goldcrest in song were at Witch Wood, Ansdell on the 10th.

Yellow Wagtails have become decidedly scarce both on passage and as a breeding species in the Fylde so it was good to hear one call as it flew over Bank Lane, Warton on the 21st. 2 flying past Rossall on the 28th afforded better views. White Wagtails by comparison seemed more abundant with 6 at Rossall on the 27th and 45 there on the 28th. Tree Pipits also flew over Rossall with two there on the 27th and 9 on the 28th. The first

2 Whinchats of the year were at Jameson Road, Fleetwood on the 27th. It was rather strange to see these plus 15 Wheatears and then to drive further along the road and find a solitary Fieldfare stood on a mound of rubble.

A Reed Warbler was singing at the Mere on the 24th and the first two Whitethroats appeared on the 28th.

House Martins were seen at Rossall on the 27th and 28th. On this latter date 117 Swallows flew north in 7 hours.

If March was excellent for seawatching then April was every bit as good. On the 13th 2 Little Terns; again an earliest Lancashire record; 8 Sandwich Terns and 48 Kittiwakes flew past in light north easterly winds. 2 Whimbrel also flew past whilst 5 Purple Sandpipers were in with a flock of 350 Turnstones. On the 20th an Arctic Tern, 7 Sandwich Terns and 5 Little Gull were seen.

At Starr Gate on the 21st misty conditions with a south westerly force 3 produced 12 Sandwich Terns, 13 Fulmar, 22 Gannet and 3 Red Throated Divers. The bonus was a dark phase Arctic Skua flying south.

The 28th at Rossall in light south easterlies produced an excellent selection of species:- 1 female Long Tailed Duck, 24 Arctic, 5 Little, 4 Sandwich and 20 Common Terns, 4000 Knot, 16 Mergansers, 5 Gannet, 3 Red Throated Divers, 1 Razorbill, 1 Guillemot, 12 Common and 1 male Velvet Scoter. A Pomarine Skua was seen flying into the Bay. Altogether an excellent day.

The St. Annes shore roost held 1000 Dunlin, 450 Sanderling and 68 Ringed Plover on the 14th. 250 Black Tailed Godwits were at Fairhaven on the 17th and on the same day 317 on the River Wyre. Golden Plover were on Spring migration with 442 at Weeton on the 14th and 300 at Stalmine on the same day.

A Greenshank was at Newton Pool on the 21st and on the same day a Lapwing was seen with one young which had fledged that day.

The Pinkfeet Over Wyre remained well into the month. On the 14th 1000 were still present at Moss Edge and on the 21st a similar number were there accompanied by 1 Greylag and a dark bellied Brent.

At the Mere a Short Eared Owl was seen on the 12th. Bad news from the Mere came in the form of a dead Great Crested Grebe killed by a Mink. It's a pity that in this case that the Mink didn't appear in the dead Mammal section of the Newsletter!

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E. Stirling.

As you will no doubt notice there are no details of the Wader numbers for the Birds of Estuaries counts on South Morecambe Bay in the preceding reports. It's often hard to convey in a meaningful form the numbers and variety of birds seen during the counts. In an effort to present it in a better kind of way forms have been produced giving details of the numbers and in what section of the Bay they've been seen. Count details will appear in every Newsletter from this one so that comparisons can be made on a month to month basis.

Details of counts outside the B.O.E.E will continue to be included; which reminds me, if you're looking for a relaxing, meaningful, enjoyable... supply your own adjectives, day out, counting Waders, then contact Len and come along on a Wader count. You'll enjoy it.

A.D.

POSTSCRIPT

The newly refurbished shelter at Starr Gate was given a full testing on Sunday 9th June in a moderate south westerly wind. Three guinea pigs namely the Chairman, the Lancashire County Recorder and myself had a ceremonial spilling of coffee and dropping of crumbs to declare the shelter open. In its new livery of green and cream (surely a job lot from Blackpool Transport?) it stood up well to the conditions and even better the roof remained intact, not letting a single drop of water through during a particularly heavy shower. It also gave protection to two fishermen, who: and you'll find this hard to believe: stood there for hours gazing out to sea and didn't have a bite never mind a fish. Why they came into the shelter from the rain was a complete surprise to the three of us as they'd been a standing target for every wave that broke over the sea wall. What's a little rain after that? Still, it takes all sorts.

Although Sunday was an early start it was nothing compared to the previous week when an 0240 get up was called for in order to be at Brock for the Dawn Chorus walk organised by Wyre Borough in conjunction with the Bird Club. Surprisingly, to me anyway, 21 people had booked on the walk programmed to start at 0400. For the first half hour I felt completely disorientated; out of habitat, no seabirds, sleep walking and it was chilly no, I lie, it was downright cold, never mind unseasonal, and thermals wouldn't have gone amiss.

The birds, thankfully, didn't seem to be too affected; we saw or heard most of the expected species but missed things like Spotted Flycatcher and maybe Redstart which a bit of sunshine might just have encouraged to perform for a definitely keen audience.

Rain starting at 0750 on the last leg of the walk 'set in' for the morning and brought an end to the birding.

I don't know whether you've seen the leaflet published by Wyre Borough but they have a programme to cater for a wide range of interests throughout the whole of 1991. Personally I think they deserve every encouragement for their efforts. So far as their commitment to local conservation is concerned they are in a different league from the other local councils.

The North West Water proposals for a three mile sewage pipe extending from Rossall Point have, not surprisingly, resulted in a deluge of mail to the Editor. Questions concerning the feasibility of it's construction and how it will affect the bird life of Morecambe Bay have been dropping through my letter box since the scheme was first announced.

Some of the questions and answers are given below but if you need a more in depth analysis then undoubtedly North West Water are the people to contact

Q. Will I be able to walk along the pipe and will NWW construct a hide at the end of it?

A. Yes, if you've got the right kind of deep sea equipment and no, probably not yet.

Q. Petrels are often seen in Morecambe Bay during Autumn. Will I have to take my own 'chum' along to see them?

A. Well, they do say two's company.

Q. Will the construction of an undersea outfall with primary and secondary treatment of sewage really mean clean seas off the Fylde ^{Coast}

A. No, its just a pipedream but it will initially lead to a slight improvement in water quality. What you should really do is write to your local M.P pointing out that as a member of Save our Sewage you're concerned that this will adversely affect the quality of food available to bird life in the Bay, particularly any rare Gulls which might just be passing through.

Q. Councillor Louise Ellman has asked for a tertiary level of treatment. What is this?

A. Search me, I didn't know sewage had feathers.

Q. I am a birdwatcher but also a keen angler. Which other species of fish will be attracted to the outfall?

A. Definitely Pipefish.

A Public enquiry would seem to be the logical next step after the announcement of this scheme so go along and ask your questions.

A Postscript wouldn't be complete without a mention of our Secretary. First, I'd like to thank him for the excellent account of his Point Pelee trip; but can you really believe that he went without alcoholic beverage for four whole days? I'm not saying anything; I don't want any more unsigned threatening letters.

A.D.

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORFAMBE BAY SOUTH

17th March 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe			2				2
Cormorant						2	2
Mute Swan	1			82	2		85
Pink Footed Goose			49				49
Shelduck			275			30	305
Wigeon	1		88				89
Teal	25		14			35	74
Mallard	8		42		5	3	58
Pintail							
Shoveler			2				2
Eider				270			270
Goldeneye	2				11		13
Red Breasted Merganser	4					2	6
Coot					21		21
Oystercatcher	224		2236		3	348	2811
Ringed Plover			1	18			19
Golden Plover							
Grey Plover	308		203			16	527
Lapwing			134				134
Knot			12000			157	12157
Sanderling			1	263			264
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	502		6000	5		74	6581
Ruff							
Snipe							
Black T. Godwit						251	251
Bar T. Godwit	135		1600				1735
Whimbrel							
Curlew	533		1284			77	1894
Spotted Redshank			1				1
Redshank	193		485			452	1135
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone	8			347		61	416

A Condor Green/Glasson
 B Cockersands Pt.

C Pilling/Cockernam
 D Rossall Point

E ICI & CEGB Pools
 F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

14th April 1991.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe							
Cormorant			1	20		4	25
Mute Swan				24	2		26
Pink Footed Goose			1				1
Shelduck	23		61			32	116
Wigeon			1				1
Teal	31					5	36
Mallard	7		4		6	4	21
Pintail							
Shoveler					2		2
Eider				3		4	7
Goldeneye					4		4
Red Breasted Merganser	5		3			4	12
Coot							
Oystercatcher	205	fully covered by high tide	400	1	2	330	938
Ringed Plover		high	108	6			114
Golden Plover		high				370	370
Grey Plover	315	high	220			14	549
Lapwing							
Knot	3	fully covered by high tide	1100	2		259	11264
Sanderling			22	288			310
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper				5			5
Dunlin	1106	fully covered by high tide	3000	13		450	4569
Ruff							
Snipe							
Black T. Godwit						317	317
Bar T. Godwit			25				25
Whimbrel			1				1
Curlew	346		450			29	825
Spotted Redshank			1				1
Redshank	129		287			308	724
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone	12			439		64	515

A Conder Green/Glasson
 B Cockersands Pt.

C Pilling/Cockerham
 D Rossall Point

E ICI & CEGB Pools
 F Arm Hill & Wyre Est

FYLDE BIRD CLUB PROGRAMME

1991

- MAY 15 Business Meeting & Quiz (Bird Calls and Songs)
JUNE 19 Steve White - "Seaforth".
JULY 17 Business Meeting and Member's Slides.
AUGUST 21 Roger Scholes - "Costa Rica".
SEPTEMBER 18 Business Meeting & Phil Slade "Spring at Long Point, Canada.
OCTOBER 16 Harry Andrew "Montenegro - A Naturalists Paradise".
NOVEMBER 20 Peter Marsh - "Heysham Nature Reserve, Ringing Station and
Migration Point".
DECEMBER 18 A.G.M Business Meeting and Christmas Raffle.

1992

- JANUARY 15 Mike McKavitee - "Birds & Animals of the Kenya Bush".
FEBRUARY 19 Business Meeting & Bird Photographic Competition.
MARCH 18 Business Meeting and Member's Slides.

Homing in on the Hebrides

RECENT events must have delighted promoters of tourism in the Outer Hebrides for they considerably enhanced the bird-watching status of these remote islands.

They have somewhat slipped from the main twitcher trail since the mid-Eighties when a Steller's eider from Arctic Russia and an American pied-billed grebe — the eighth for Britain in each case — ended long, crowd-pulling stays.

However, the islands have continued to produce unusual bird reports and quite likely rarities have gone unrecorded with not enough bird watchers being prepared to go to the trouble of travelling to such an isolated spot.

However, that may change after the exciting run of birds experienced particularly on North Uist and South Uist during the past few weeks.

This began with a snowy plover (spectacular visitor from the Arctic, on North Uist on April 28, followed by a killdeer) an American plover species, in the island's Barra area, on May 5.

Next day a long-tailed skua was seen off Ardrachar Point, South Uist, a sighting which set the pace for a

remarkable movement over the next fortnight.

Around 1,200 of these elegant and uncommon seabirds — plus 500 pomarine skuas — were seen off this headland and, to a greater extent off Aird an Runair, the most westerly point of north Uist, near Balranald, up to May 21.

At least 424 long-tailed skuas passed on the 12th and 500 on the 19th, the largest numbers ever noted in British waters. Another all-time record was set by a single flock of over 120, which must have been an awesome sight.

The significance of these statistics is underlined by the fact that until recent times the average total of this species recorded in the whole of Britain and Ireland in a full year was around 50.

What is not clear is whether the fortunate observers were witnessing a regular, spring movement, which has generally gone unnoticed in the past through lack of coverage.

Certainly, I can recall at least one major skua passage off the outer Hebrides — although on nothing like this scale — in the past decade, so perhaps this is the case.

On the other hand, it may

have been due to bird watchers being in the right place as north-westerly winds drifted in exceptional numbers of skuas migrating from their winter haunts, mainly off South Africa, to their breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Supporting this is the fact that long-tailed and pomarine skuas have been seen much more often than usual in other parts of the North this spring.

Over 150 pomarines were recorded off Bowness-on-Solway in Cumbria, between April 23 and May 14. Smaller numbers have been spotted off Heysham, Lancashire, Flamborough Head, Humberside, and Whitburn, Tyne and Wear.

Also offbeat have been the past fortnight's passage of long-tailed skuas along the north-east coast of England, where they are very rarely seen in spring. At least 11 have been reported, six of them off Seaton, Sluice, Northumberland, last Saturday.

Perhaps the appearance of the skuas has been a one-off phenomenon, possibly influenced by what everyone must agree has been this spring's highly unseasonal weather.

NATURE NOTE

MY COLLEAGUE Robin Page commented a few weeks ago that the swallow had returned early to his barn. I hope they did not suffer from the spells of freezing weather at the end of April. However, while the first swallow or cuckoo or chiff-chaff is a welcome sign that the year is advancing towards summer, it is the quantity of returning migrants that should attract our attention.

Robin told us about his project to help his swallows by rebuilding the barn, but this is only half the story of the conservation of our migrant birds. The other half is out of our control because it takes place in their winter quarters.

There was a time when the whitethroat was one of our commonest warblers. In 1969 its population fell to one-quarter of the 1968 numbers. The cause was the severe drought in the region south of the Sahara, where the species winters. Further droughts have removed any chance of the whitethroat's recovery.

The sand martin suffered a similar disaster, but the house martin has held its



Returning migrants: swallow and house martin

own, probably because it is nomadic in winter and has been able to find regions in Africa where the rains still fall and there are plenty of insects.

The swallow has also changed its winter quarters, but it continues to decline.

This has been due, at least in part, to the modernisation of farm buildings robbing it of nesting sites, so we must applaud Robin's efforts and hope that they catch on in the farming community.

Robert Burton

Mute swans make a stealthy return

By JULIAN ROLLINS

THE mute swan is undergoing a remarkable recovery after decades of being poisoned by Britain's anglers, according to a national census of the birds.

The breeding success of the *cygnus olor* during the late 1980s has more than replaced the thousands that

died from lead poisoning and is causing a comeback at many of their traditional haunts. Before lead fishing weights were banned in 1987, thousands of the swans were thought to be dying each year as a result of swallowing the lead that collected in the mud on the bottoms of rivers and lakes.

The survey of mute swan numbers carried out during the early summer of 1990 shows that the birds are flourishing and population levels are higher than they have been for at least 40 years. On some of England's lowland river systems, most notably the Thames, Trent and Warwickshire Avon, numbers have as much as tripled since 1983, when the last census was taken, according to Simon Delany, special surveys officer for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

The survey was commissioned by the Nature Conservancy Council and full details of findings will be published early in 1992. "There has been an undoubted increase in numbers throughout the country of between 40 and 50 per cent ... and we believe that the cause has almost certainly been the ban on lead weights," Mr Delany said.



Swans in Bristol docks at a feed dispenser

Feather report

Stockhausen of the woods

THE most astonishing sound in British birding is weirder than nightjar, lovelier than blackbird, louder than a screaming jay. It is in some phrases simpler than willow warbler, but then it will throw in wild, advanced Stockhausen sounds that even upstage an indefatigable modernist like the skylark. It is the nightingale.

We are almost into summer, so this is getting close to being your last chance to hear them this year. It is a treat not to be missed. The sound is belting, stunning, unmistakable. And they sing all day as well as all night at this, the most thrilling time of the birds', and the birder's, year as they proclaim their territories and win their mates. Once young are on the nest, they shut up. So far as nightingales are concerned, autumn starts sometime in the second week in June.

The finest, loudest and most furious singers win the best mates, it is believed. It must be some choice for the females. How can a bird so small, halfway between robin and blackbird, make such a din? The nightingale is the Jimi Hendrix of the bird world, with its astonishing virtuoso effects; it is also the Ginger Baker, with its thumping jug-jug drum solo.

A line from the Severn to the Humber is the northern

limit of the nightingale range, and, exotic though they are, they are common enough in the right places: coppiced woodland, a habitat that is making a comeback.

Casting an idle townie's eye over the countryside, one tends to think of woods as remaining fragments of Britain's avistatic landscape. Not so: most English woodland is as much a man-made landscape as the green deserts of Lincolnshire.

Woodland was traditionally managed, controlled, and cultivated as a source of food and building materials. One of the important forms of management was coppicing. This involves cutting a tree off at ground level: from the base spring shoots that thicken into poles. The poles were harvested every few years, depending on the tree and the use the poles were intended for.

As life changed, people had less need for coppice poles to provide warmth and shelter. There was less management of woodland, and much less coppicing. Woods thickened up, and became quite different places. A coppice woodland bursts with light; the glades opened by cutting explode with flowers and ground-covering plants. These bring in insects, particularly butterflies. As the coppice poles develop, they create an impen-



Sounds of classic and rock: the furious-singing nightingale

etrable thicket that teems with invertebrate life. And this is what nightingales like best.

The nightingale is pretty well restricted to this man-made habitat in England. On the Continent it is found in river-side scrub, also other kinds of scrub that do not exist here. In England, they have adapted to a man-made landscape. They like to nest right in the heart of a coppiced tree, in a thicket of poles where the cover extends to ground level.

From there, they trumpet out their song, quite invisibly, and the ground almost shakes with the passion of it.

Coppicing is a form of management that has come back into fashion. The art and science of traditional woodland management is being learnt, and re-applied. And it is being done not for the sake of people in villages, but for wildlife. It is being done by conservationists from county trusts and national bodies. The practice opens up woods and fills them with life.

A well-managed, decent sized chunk of woods will bring in the high forest species to standard trees: the woodpeckers, nuthatches and tits, and the areas of coppice, managed in rotation, will attract the understorey birds, thrushes and warblers.

And, particularly, it will bring in nightingales. Altogether, it creates places of a beauty you can appreciate whether your eyes are open or closed. These places are magnificent, as full of human as of natural history. There is a real meaning to such places: they are as much a part of our past as they part of the birds' endless present.

SIMON BARNES

What's about Birds — check gatherings of swifts, swallows and martins over lakes and reservoirs for any unusual species. Twitchers — two white-winged black tern, one at Llandegfodd reservoir, Gwent, the other at Dungeness, Kent. Red-throated pipit at Seaford, Sussex. Details from Birdline 0898 700222.

THE MALE redstart is a striking bird with a white forehead and black face and throat, as well as the red rump and tail that gives the species its name — *sylvia* being the Old English for tail.

As is often the case with birds that appear in spring from warmer winter homes, the male arrives first. He is driven by the need to arrive on breeding grounds as soon as conditions allow so he can compete successfully for a territory. The drab females arrive a few days later.

Redstarts may be found in

NATURE NOTE

and old gardens and other areas where there are large trees with holes for nesting, although redstarts will nest under tree-roots or in piles of stones, and nestboxes are acceptable. These are the scenes of the male redstart's very attractive display.

Having found a suitable nest site, he draws the attention of prospective mates by flying to the entrance and

his black-and-white face or facing in to display his red rump and tail. Sometimes he glides steeply down to the hole with wings and tail spread. These displays are accompanied by a song that recalls that of the robin, the redstart's close relative, but is harsher and less liquid.

As soon as a female signals acceptance by bringing some nest material, the male's part in setting up home is finished and he rarely enters the nest until it is time to bring food to the newly-hatched nestlings.

Robert Burton

NATURE NOTE

THE RUFF, in winter, is not easily distinguished from the other grey-brown waders feeding along the shore. It is not particularly common at this time, but it is even rarer in the summer.

The ruff became extinct as a British breeding bird about a century ago. But within the last 30 years it has returned to East Anglia, where it has found the wet meadows of the Ouse Washes to its liking.

In contrast to the anonymous winter bird, the male ruff in summer is a dandy. It develops a mass of loose feathers around the head and neck which can be erected to make the eponymous ruff. This is shown off when the

males meet at the communal display ground, called the lek.

The female, or reeve, who retains a drab plumage, visits the lek to choose a mate and, after a brief courtship, departs to rear the family on her own. This type of breeding behaviour, not unusual, is usually linked with an elaborate and colourful plumage in the males, who must compete fiercely for the females' attention.

The males' plumes come in different colours and are marks of rank. The highest-ranking birds acquire the most mates.

Robert Burton

Breaking the sound barrier

PEOPLE think I'm a genius, and I am not averse to giving that impression. I can walk through the wood behind my house and give a name to every bird that calls.

Those who know me well suspect that I am making the most of a rather superficial achievement. The business of identifying birds by call is dead easy, but the basics take some learning.

The best way is to walk the woods with an expert, but not everyone can lay their hands on one. Failing that, you must observe real birds and back this up by listening to tapes.

There are two kinds of tape. One gives you a quick burst of each species, like an aural reference book. However, this is invariably a male in full song. Such tapes are excellent, but limited. Other tapes have a relaxed, walkabout format: these are also excellent, but confusing, with hundreds of birds calling at once.

The thing about birdsong is that once you get a toehold, the whole thing opens up to you. Once you can distinguish a blackbird from a robin, you can start. But until you have, as it were, broken the sound barrier, all you hear is a confusing Babel.

To hear the first chiffchaff or willow warbler of spring: these things are an annual delight to those who have been initiated. When these migrants arrive, and start to sing, one's heart leaps: there is no more life-affirming sound in the world. That is literally what song is for: an affirmation of life. With his song, a cock bird proclaims his territory and attracts his mate. A bird's song is, if you like, the meaning of life. It is worth making an effort to understand it.

There is, then, a vacant ecological niche for a tape that cures this nature-deafness. Something uncomplicated, something that concentrates on the dozen most common garden and woodland singers.

Such a tape fell through my letterbox this week. *Beginning Birdsong* runs for 42 minutes and each of the dozen stars sings uninterrupted for between two and five minutes: blackbird, mistle thrush, song thrush, and so on. The tape allows you to interpret the daily Babel.

Once you have managed to get your ear in, you hear more and more. Bird noises are categorised into song and call: song is territorial acclamation; call is everything else. Call has many different and often overlapping functions: warning, alarm, anxiety. It is also a way for birds to keep in contact with each other: life in the canopy and undergrowth means that hearing is as important as seeing, not just for birds but for humans.

The more you hear, the more wonderfully confusing the whole business becomes. It is a birding maxim that if you hear a call you have never heard before, and stalk the caller for half an hour, and finally get a decent view of it, it is always a great tit. I have read that a great tit has nine songs and 26 calls, but I don't believe it: there must be at least twice as many as that.



Music: great tit and the notes of its song

There is regional variation: experts swear that birds sing with Scottish accents. And then you have the business of mimicry. Starlings are the best: there are still a few Sixties-orientated starlings who do Trimfone impressions. This is the acid test: when you recognise which birds starlings are impersonating, you are beginning to get the hang of birdsong.

This tape will get you that far. It is an excellent first step: overture and beginners, please.

SIMON BARNES

Beginning Birdsong from Sounds Natural, Upper End, Fulbrook, Oxford OX5 1BX, £5.50 inc. p&p.

What's about: *Birders - spring continues slowly, but first cuckoos are arriving. Listen for bubbling calls of female Twitlers - the ancient murrelet has returned to Lundy Island. Also black kite, Hayle Estuary, Cornwall; alpine swift, Spurnhead, Humberside; two cranes on Pevensey Levels, Sussex. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.*

Lead under fire

LEAD has become a form of elemental wickedness. Pb, superstar of evil. Lead-free petrol has been one of the great consumer advances in recent years, and car manufacturers are engaged in an advertising war of ever more competitive greenness. There can hardly be a person in all Europe who is not aware that lead is most frightfully bad for you.

And yet there is a socially acceptable pursuit that dumps an estimated 2,000 tons of lead all over the nicest bits of environment we have left, and does so every year. This comes in the form of lead shot. Shooters often miss their birds; but never mind, the lead shot they accidentally dump will kill in the long term just as efficiently as it does with a good bang.

The International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau meets in Brussels from June 13 to 15 and is likely to produce damning results of further research into the problem of lead poisoning. Shooters are always telling us they are the most conservationally minded people about (and just have a funny way of showing it). It will be interesting to see how the wildfowlers' lobby reacts to these findings.

For as long as wildfowlers use lead shot for their pleasures they must be regarded as major polluters. The amount of lead they discharge is large: what is more, it gets dumped where it can do most damage.

THE detritus from wildfowlers' misses falls into the wetland that they are shooting up. From there, it gets picked up by birds. Wildfowl (and other birds) take in grit, which they hold in their gizzard and use to grind up food. Beaks have their uses but they are not much good for chewing; a gizzard full of grit does the job.

When a bird takes in lead with its grit it is literally poisoning itself. The bird gets ill, and often ends up dead. In most cases this is a slow job, lasting three weeks or so. In northern Europe, almost 20 per cent of



Poison: lead shot can kill birds long after it has been fired

diving ducks were found to have ingested lead: this rises to almost 60 per cent in the trigger-happy Mediterranean.

Brits like to consider themselves more civilised about guns than the Mediterraneans and the Americans. It was Tom Lehrer, the satirist, who wrote the national anthem of the American Hunting Man:

And there are ten stuffed heads in my trophy room right now -

Two game-wardens, seven hunters and a pure-bred Jersey cow!

But in gun-crazy America, the use of lead shot will be made illegal in the 1991-92 season. In Canada, lead shot became illegal in selected areas last year. Which is the uncivilised side of the Atlantic now?

From now on, American shooters must use steel shot. Hunters are traditionally minded people, and perhaps British hunters more than most. Steel, being much harder stuff, increases barrel wear significantly.

But I am reminded of the fishing people: another bunch of traditionalists. For years, the dihardists insisted that there was no "real" substitute for lead weights. Abandoned lead weights killed wildfowl, particularly mute swans. In 1986, the sale of lead weights was banned. Every year since

then the Thames population of mute swans has risen. If fishers can survive such trauma, so can shooters.

THE relationship between conservation organisations and shooters has always been complex. For example, the RSPB's charter forbids it to take any stand against shooting. Shooters always like to say that they are better guardians of the countryside than any do-gooders. Now they have a chance to prove it.

The issue puts their conservation credentials on trial. There are plenty of worse polluters in the world: but wildfowlers are dumping large quantities of poison exactly where it hurts most. Wetlands are a precious, vulnerable and dwindling habitat. Shooters must stop poisoning such places if we are to avoid considering the phrase "responsible hunter" a classic oxymoron.

SIMON BARNES

What's about: *Birders - watch for full-grown young of blackbird and mistle thrush; cold weather has badly affected breeding of smaller birds. Twitlers - an American least tern at Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, East Sussex; white winged black terns and a bridled tern in Essex. Details from Birdline 0898 700222.*

Cold comfort barn

SWALLOWS have been early to arrive this year. Last year they did not show up until April 21; this year they were flying around the animals on April 5. Their arrival coincided with rain on the roof of our small barn - a genuine swallow roof. Mick, our skilful and ingenious jobbing builder, was not pleased and shouted: "Come back in a week."

As some readers will remember, for the past two summers we have had problems with our swallows. The high temperatures have caused over-heating of the young, as well as infestations of mite; as a result several broods were lost. Yet for years swallows have nested in the barn and we are anxious not to lose them.

Intervet, the animal health company, has come to our aid. It is sponsoring the new roof, which will be insulated with polystyrene and have its corrugated iron replaced with a

FARMER'S DIARY

type of plastic sheeting. We hope this will reduce the temperature of the barn during hot weather.

We have also sprayed the nest to kill mite. The swallows will not be "organic", but at least they should survive. I will report during the summer on the effectiveness of the experiment.

Already our farmyard is as dry as a bone. Consequently we are helping the swallows in another way, by creating two muddy puddles for nest-building and repairs.

Intervet has a good conservation record. It is assisting the fightback of the otter and has sponsored schemes for artificial hots. I hope more companies connected with farming and the countryside will follow its example.

OTHER WILDLIFE on the farm is doing well. When the idea of set-aside was first proposed I had reservations, both from a farming and a wildlife viewpoint. Now, only my farming reservations remain.

After an absence of over eight years, hares have returned to the farm and they spend most of their time on our 30 acres of set-aside. They seem to thrive on the peace, the absence of sprays and the abundance of food.

English partridges and skylarks have also benefited enormously. On other chunks of set-aside in the area it is said that the corn bunting - another once-common bird the population of which has sharply declined recently - is making a comeback. Now that set-aside is helping wildlife to re-establish itself, I suppose the Ministry of Agriculture will tell us to plough it all up again.

A Country Diary

LOCH RUTHVEN: The fishing boats in their bright colours of blue, green, brown and grey lay partly on their sides as they had been dragged up the narrow strip of yellow sand at the end of the loch. We walked along the path under the birch trees that were showing a tinge of green in the April sunshine and at least two willow warblers were singing. With such a strong wind it felt much better as we went quietly into the hide and we found we had the place to ourselves. A quick glance through binoculars revealed only a single drake mallard upending in a gap in the sedge bed and I was about to comment on the lack of birds when round a corner swam a pair of Slavonian grebes. Within ten min-

utes they were feeding directly in front of the hide and we could see every detail of their attractive plumage even the red eyes. Another pair appeared from the same direction as the first and then the telescope picked up a pair near the far bank and yet another pair to our right. There was virtually no display from either of the pairs and this may well have been because of the conditions as the wind seemed to swirl in every direction over the loch and the long golden "horn" feathers were being flapped around. Other birds included a male reed bunting that was feeding in the sedge bed, a single grey wagtail flew past and there were chaffinches everywhere in the birch trees.

We were intrigued by the open-fronted nest box near the hide as it had a very narrow slit as an entrance whilst further off we could see a nest box designed for goldfinch. In this particular area these boxes are often colonised by tawny owls which reminded me that I was sent an interesting record last week of such a box near Fort William that has been taken over by a barn owl which is a rare species in the Highlands. The highlight of our visit was meeting the RSPB Summer Warden who was very helpful and informative and we wished her luck with her first Warden post - she will have an interesting summer ahead.

RAY COLLIER

Maltese cross-hairs on British birds

Feather report

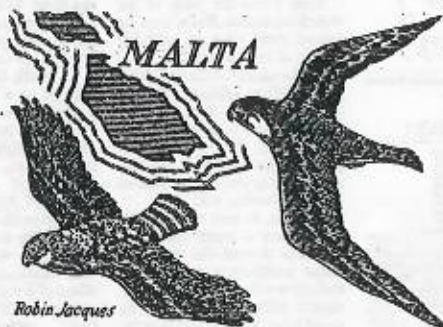
To British eyes, this looks like one of the most absurd court cases in history. But in Malta it is a cause célèbre. A company which runs tours for bird-hunters is suing the Maltese Ornithological Society (MOS) for the right to shoot legally protected birds, many of which breed in Britain. The tour company is claiming £52,000 for alleged loss of revenue caused by the MOS.

Malta has the worst record for shooting in the Mediterranean, and it has taken to exporting its hunters. Egypt has been a popular destination. There are even fewer practical restrictions on hunters there than in Malta, and you can visit Egypt during the Maltese close season. Thus, you can blast away at the birds that migrate up the Nile valley and along the eastern Mediterranean. These include such British breeders as white-throat, which are little warblers that nest in tangles of bramble, and turtle doves, whose purring song is, more than the crump of cricket ball on bat, the sonic essence of a southern English summer.

In 1988, the MOS launched a campaign to stop Maltese hunters visiting Egypt to shoot protected birds. It linked with the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), which has, in turn, put pressure on the Egyptian government. Protecting birds by law is one thing; enforcing the law is quite another. The result is that Egypt has imposed restrictions on the activities of foreign hunters.

So far so good. But Edward Vassallo, the director of Sphinx Tours, has responded by taking legal action against the MOS.

There is no question about the shooting of protected species in Egypt. Little owl, kestrel, black-shouldered kite and little green bee-eater have all been shot. In April last year, an Egyptian tour guide



Robin Jacques

Under fire: the little owl, left, and the hobby are two targets was jailed after a raid on a hotel full of Maltese hunters, which produced the corpses of protected species among 150 dead birds confiscated.

Maltese Customs has also found protected species in the bags of returning hunters: hobby, black-shouldered kite, and two of the world's most stunning birds, golden oriole and roller.

Dr Tobias Salathé, a bird migration expert with the ICBP, says: "Your first reaction to this is that Sphinx Tours could not have a case. But this is Malta. The influence of the hunting lobby is immense."

This court case sets a precedent, and it could go either way. The shooting of migrating birds is an offence against international conservation, and a specific threat to British breeding birds. The RSPB has lent money, and the ICBP is appealing for more funds to defend the case.

Malta has for centuries been a stepping-stone by birds migrating from north Africa and up through Italy. The tradition of shooting them began as a search for food: the over-flying hordes were seen as the gift of a bountiful providence. Now the birds are shot and stuffed: the Maltese fad is to have a bigger collection of stuffed birds than your

neighbour. Birds of prey are particularly favoured: I wonder how many of the 27 marsh harriers miraculously raised at Minsmere bird reserve in Suffolk in the past have been shot over Malta this spring.

To lead the Mediterranean league for bad conservation should be a cause of national shame. This court case could be pivotal for conservation.

Every time I hear of mass bird shooting, I think of Martha, the last passenger pigeon, who died in Cincinnati zoo in 1914. Passenger pigeons were, perhaps, the most numerous species in history. With Martha, they went extinct. They flew in flocks four miles long and a mile wide, blackening the sky. They nested in colonies of 30 square miles. They were shot to extinction. They, too, seemed the gift of a bountiful providence.

SIMON BARNES

● The ICBP, 32 Cambridge Road, Giron, Cambridge CB3 0PJ (0223 277318).

● What's about: *Birders* — listen for the grasshopper warbler, arriving now from Africa. You might even glimpse one in a bush. *Twitchers* — marsh sandpiper at Elmley reserve, Kent; little bunting at Cromer, Norfolk; and a red-rumped swallow on Treco, Isles of Scilly. Details from *Birdline*, 0898 700222.

Twitchers delight in arctic blasts

BIRD WATCHERS considering going into semi-hibernation until the spring, after the inactivity of the past few mild winters, were quickly shaken into life by last month's arctic blast.

However bad the weather may have seemed here, it was far colder across Europe and an influx of birds frozen out of the Continent meant the binocular brigade was among the few sections of the public with something to celebrate.

Of course, it wasn't easy. The star of the arrival, only the 12th Harlequin duck ever recorded in Britain, appeared at Wick, near the northern tip of Scotland, just as the freeze-up was beginning.

Despite warnings not to travel, flocks of twitchers slithered hundreds of miles over snow-covered roads to feast their eyes.

In some ways the appearance of this duck, probably a wanderer from Western Siberia, was almost predictable. This was the first to turn up in Britain since 1987, when two were logged. The first of those, on Shetland, in January, was found during a comparable international weather pattern.

Many more familiar wildfowl flocked into Britain as the cold spell intensified. On Feb 7 over 300 scaup flew past Whitburn, South Tyneside — the largest movement noted on the north-east coast since 1962.

This was widely reflected, with flocks of these mainly coastal diving ducks turning up on rivers and still unfrozen lakes all down eastern Britain, including 79 at Pugnsey's country park, near Wakefield, an all-time record inland count for Yorkshire.

Smew, among the scarest of our winter-visiting wildfowl, also showed up in force. Up to 10 were on Ladyburn Lake in Northumberland's Druridge Bay country park and at least that number were scattered over Humberside and York-

shire. White-fronted and Brent geese also started cropping up in unexpected places. Three spent 11 days on the landscaped former pit heap behind my South Tyneside home, which remained mostly snow-free due to its coastal location.

The hard weather also brought land bird surprises, notably two woodlarks at Teesmouth on Feb 10. This species is virtually never seen in the North, and these birds were almost certainly refugees from north-west Europe.

There was also an upsurge of reports of twites and Lapland buntings, the latter particularly along the Tees-Humber coast. Only four shore larks had apparently

been in the country before February — the number at least trebled subsequently, two of the newcomers being found at Scarborough.

Meanwhile, the general southward dispersal of the waxwings which arrived in strength last autumn, continued. During the month flocks in excess of 100 were reported from Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle.

More than normal has been seen of white-billed divers, rare visitors from the Arctic. At least three have been around Shetland, two off Orkney and — more accessible to twitchers — one swam into Holyhead Harbour, Anglesey, in recent days.

One major event not initiated by the recent weather was the discovery of an American bittern — the first in Britain for almost a decade — at Marton Mere, Blackpool, on Feb 2.

This elusive heron species was blown across the Atlantic by westerly gales. However, the sub-zero conditions it flew into at least helped to make it more visible to the thousands of enthusiasts who went to pay homage — after the mere's ice melted it proved much harder to see.



Spring migration on ice

BIRDS

Brian Unwin

IT WOULD be strange for April to pass without a spell of chilly weather to put spring migration on ice. The difference this time is that the cold period and resulting near bird inactivity has been protracted. I cannot recall over the past 25 years ever having seen such a small range of summer visitors by the start of May.

Of course, much of this is due to my location on a Tyneside headland in the teeth of the icy breezes which have been blowing off the North Sea with frustrating regularity recently.

However, while most of the species which we expect by now have appeared in northern Britain, usually in more sheltered, southern areas, it would be fair to say that generally the build-up has been slow. There have, nevertheless, been several reports of rarities with Humberside, as was the case in March, scooping a prominent share of the outstanding events.

One of the brief milder interludes produced a great spotted cuckoo at Easington,

near Spurn Point, on the 10th, then an alpine swift flew into the arctic blast of air that was beginning to sweep over the promontory on the 16th. In between, a Savi's warbler sang near Beverley.

Not surprisingly, it was another 10 days, as the weather began warming up again, before another bird more associated with southern European climates was reported in north-east England.

This was a subalpine warbler on the Farne Islands last Friday. Coinciding with it were three avocets in Northumberland, one on the coast at Beadnell and two at Holywell Pond which later moved to the Blyth Estuary.

Obviously a mini-surge was in progress for the weekend, bringing the first rarities: a short-toed lark and a little bunting to Fair Isle.

Meanwhile, in Ireland a glossy ibis flew over Belfast,

two cranes and a black-winged stilt appeared in Staffordshire, a little egret was reported from Merseyside, a hoopoe from Harlech, Gwynedd, and a Savi's warbler from Leighton Moss Reserve, Lancashire.

Also over the weekend a black stork was seen on Skokholm Island and then flying over neighbouring Skomer off the West Wales coast. Could this have been the same individual seen about a week earlier at St Asaph in Clwyd?

During the preceding interval of northerly winds, reaching their peak over April 19-20, seabird passage was the main focus of attention, although the time of year meant no great variety.

There were surprises on the Humberside coast. Four Leach's petrels were recorded off Hornsea, three storm petrels appeared off Holmpton and another in the Humber Estuary off Goxhill — all unusual in spring.

The most consistent offbeat seabird activity, however, has been on the West Coast, with an impressive total of 34

pomarine skuas bound for the Arctic tundra, passing Bowness-on-Solway, since the 22nd — 16 last Monday.

Odder still was a weekend's inland report of a long-tailed skua, also heading for the Arctic, passing over the Washburn Valley north of Otley in Yorkshire.

Returning to land birds, apart from a sprinkling of ospreys on either side, the past month's other highlights occurred mainly before the harshest weather.

They included, in Wales, a rustic bunting at Arthog Bog, near Barmouth and a honey buzzard over the Great Orme, Llandudno; while Scotland weighed in with a Richard's pipit at Barns Ness, near Dunbar and a hoopoe at Nairn.

The one thing of which we can be reasonably sure is that May is going to produce a more consistent flow of milder weather and migration activity. With the brakes having been so strongly applied over recent weeks, it could be quite spectacular when passage birds do begin arriving in force in the north.

Take-off for new ways to clip goose's wings

By HARVEY ELLIOTT, AIR CORRESPONDENT

HEATHROW airport is trying new techniques to keep flocks of Canada geese away from nearby fields, lakes and reservoirs.

The birds, which are rapidly increasing around London, are particularly troublesome in July and August, soon after the young take to the air. They present a constant threat to aircraft taking off and landing.

For more than 18 years Heathrow airport has mounted a 24-hour patrol to frighten away flocks of birds, including starlings, pigeons, gulls and lapwings. The Canada geese, however, have defied all attempts to oust them.

Last year they damaged a

South African Airways jumbo jet and several times the control tower has had to stop all flights until a flock has passed.

Tony Sayers, head of the bird patrol, has persuaded the authorities to grow the grass around the airport exactly 9in high; if it is shorter the birds use it as their own landing strip and if it is higher they hide in it. Farmers have agreed to plough in their stubble quickly to cut off the birds' food supply.

Mr Sayers is loading every variation of star-shell into his gun in the hope that a combination can be found to frighten away offenders.

The blackcock bubbled and danced

IT CAME at 5.25am with the first glimmer of dawn: a long, bubbling call that carried clearly over the dark moor. "He's there," whispered my companion. "Right on schedule."

All round us, well back on the horizon, the mountains of north Wales rose black against the sky. Frost crunched in the grass underfoot, and a keen north-easterly breeze knifed into the backs of our necks as we huddled on a plank-beach in a skimpy hide; but minor discomforts were of no consequence, for out there in front of us a blackcock had come to his lek, or mating ground, and was starting his age-old ritual.

Blackgame are nearly double the size of red grouse, and the female, or greyhen, strongly resembles her smaller cousins, being barred and freckled in much the same combination of brown, buff and grey. The cock is a much more splendid creature: glossy blue-black, with byre-shaped tail-feathers turning outwards, white undertail coverts, white flashes on his wings, and red wattles above his eyes.

Black grouse were once common in many counties but now survive only in the north of England, in Scotland and a few parts of north Wales. Birds of the upland forest edge, they need heather moors flanked by woodland, with plenty of openings and boggy patches — an increasingly rare combination.

In north Wales, the number of cocks is thought to have fallen to about 300, and efforts are now being made by the Forestry Commission, with help from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to arrest the decline. Hence my dawn vigil this week, in the company of Mike Conway, the Commission's conser-

vation ranger for Dolgellau forest district, who is doing a survey of the birds in his area.

Not many people would willingly get up before dawn and sit for a couple of hours in the hope that a few birds would come and perform in front of them. But for Mike, and me, it was magical to watch daybreak steal over the mountains. The eastern sky paled until the stars went out; but for a while the land remained dark, and although we could hear the blackcock bubbling, we could not see him. At last, light seemed to filter down to ground level, and details of the landscape stood revealed.

We were in a wide bowl, with ridges forming an irregular rim round the skyline. Up there, 1,250ft above sea level, the plantation of sitka spruce was uneven: many of the young trees had disappeared, leaving open patches of grass and heather.

It was on one of these that the blackcock had alighted: a mound carpeted with tussocky grass 100 yards in front of us. At the height of last year's lek, in May (Mike told me), eight cock birds occupied this territory all at once; this year, so far, only two had shown up.

In the older trees behind us, songbirds struck up their dawn chorus. The light strengthened. Now, through binoculars, I could see the solid black shape of our first customer on the mound, moving erratically as he went into his song-and-dance routine. For much of the time he prowled about in a crouching posture, with wings half-extended, head held low and forward — and it was in this mode that he uttered his bubbling song. Then, every few minutes, with an abrupt screech or squawk, he would suddenly leap

Country Matters

DUFF HART-DAVIS



into the air, fly to a height of three or four feet, and tumble down again.

No two of these explosive take-offs were quite the same. Some carried him a few yards across country; others landed him back where he had started. As Mike put it: "Sometimes he seems to fly up tidy, but sometimes he goes up all shapes." Clearly, he thought himself a hell of a fellow — and so he was; but what was the aim of his extraordinary dance?

To attract females, was the obvious answer. Yet there seemed to be no greyhen within miles. Mike whispered that females did not normally come to the lek so early in the season, but if another male arrived, the two would instantly fight.

The sun crawled over the horizon behind us and cast a faint but welcome glow on our backs. In its pink radiance our solitary performer looked even more

splendid, wattles blazing scarlet, plumage gleaming blue-black.

Then I saw the point of his crouching stance. Every time he turned away from us, with his main tail curled over his back, his white undertail flashed like a snowy beacon. I thought of great bustards, which, to attract females, inflate their white gular sacks so that they show up like giant puffs. Our fellow was using slightly different means to achieve a similar end.

Yet why, in that case, had he not chosen a more rewarding site? His mound did not command particularly wide views, and there were many more prominent hillocks from which he could have flaunted his charms.

In low voices we discussed whether the birds were drawn to the same lek year after year by primeval instincts, as deer are drawn to rutting stands, or whether they choose any open space that takes their fancy. Mike inclined to the second view, for he had noticed that blackcock sometimes lek on forestry rides or other man-made openings that have not been available to them before.

In fact, he reckoned, they move around as changes in the pattern of the forest dictate — and indeed the commission's present programme of habitat improvement consists mainly of maintaining or increasing the number of desirable open spaces by removing trees and cutting grass and heather.

After a slow start, action broke out all around. A movement on the skyline caught our eyes; 400 yards off, a second blackcock landed on a hillock and began to perform, silhouetted on the horizon. From somewhere to our right came the bubbling of a third male.

Then from our left floated the call of the year's first cuckoo, hot from Africa. Almost at the same moment a barn owl came fainting across our front, only a few feet off the ground.

A fourth blackcock sped in, straight as a black arrow, and landed on the main lek. At once — as Mike had predicted — he and the original incumbent began to spar, circling warily in their ritual crouch, head to head, and flying up to strike at each other like farmyard cockerels. But the contest was more of a formality than a threat to either combatant, and the main effect of it was to advertise their presence still more boldly, for their upturned backsides flashed white signals that must have been visible half a mile away.

Soon they produced results. In swept a solitary greyhen, plummeting into the heather a few yards from the brawlers. One of them immediately began posturing in her direction, but seemed to have no serious intention of mating with her, and soon returned to his boxing.

Then, at about 7.15 — again, exactly as Mike had forecast — both males decided they had had enough for the morning, and flew off to a breakfast of fresh heather-shoots. Stiff and half-frozen, we slipped away along a little stream, back to the road and home.

Never did bacon and eggs taste better; but as I ate them, my mind was still on those lovely birds and their mysterious rituals. That courtly dance is thousands of years old — the question is whether we can manage the upland environment with sufficient skill to ensure the spectacle survives through centuries to come.

IT HAS been known for a long time that starlings will line their nests with flowers and fresh leaves. They are not the only birds to do this but the habit puzzles ornithologists — does the greenery act as a camouflage, improve insulation to keep the eggs warm or even raise the humidity inside the nest?

None of these explanations is convincing. Another idea, still untested, is that the flowers and leaves are decorations that help the male to attract a mate, so he really is "saying it with flowers". Another possibility comes from the amazing discovery that some of the plants gathered by starlings have

NATURE NOTE

insecticidal properties. Nests often become infested with bloodsucking parasites, such as the fowl mite, which attack the nestlings. Tests have shown that removing green leaves from starlings' nests lets the population of mites increase a hundred-fold.

Plants selected by starlings include agrimony, yarrow and, not surprisingly, seabane, which has traditionally been used for banning troublesome insects. Their foliage contains volatile sub-

stances that disrupt the growth and development of insects. A reader wrote to me last year wondering why a starling attacked her parsley and mint. I have also read of sage being carried to a nest, so I imagine that these herbs also contain natural fumigants.

Yet the mystery is not fully solved, and I cannot think of a good explanation for the observations, reported in the monthly magazine "British Birds", of starlings feeding leaves of lavender and a flower-head of dandelion to newly-fledged youngsters.

Robert Burton

Wildlife lobby wades into battle for West Country wetland

FARMERS, conservationists, water officials and bird lovers are skirmishing over the future of the Somerset Levels, one of Europe's richest habitats for wild plants, birds and animals.

The battle over the 170,000-acre Levels, Britain's most important wetland, could test the government's commitment to protecting the countryside.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says that the flats' population of wading birds will vanish within five years or survive, much diminished, only in nature reserves unless farmers allow water levels to rise. "Farmers here are getting £1.3 million a year in wildlife grants, but to

little effect," Mark Robbins, of the society, said.

The low marshy meadowland is between the Mendips ridge in the north and east and the Quantocks to the south and west.

Traditionally, the water level was managed to allow the grazing of dairy cattle during summer and shallow flooding during winter and spring — ideal conditions for wildfowl and ground-nesting wading birds and a wide variety of wetland plants. But changes in farming methods in the past few decades have upset that delicate ecological balance. Farmers can pump off winter floods in a few days with modern drainage systems.

Low water levels are threatening many species of birds, plants and animals on Britain's most important wetland, reports Michael Horasby

Sheep can be grazed in winter and cattle put out to pasture earlier in the spring. Land can be reclaimed for cropping and herb-rich water meadows dried out and sown with more nutritious, artificially developed ryegrass that would not stand heavy flooding. Haymaking can be



replaced by early cutting of grass for silage.

The RSPB says that the number of breeding pairs of lapwing, snipe, curlew, redshank and black-tailed godwit fell from 578 to 258 between 1977 and 1987. The decline is believed to be continuing despite less inten-

sive farming in recent years. Brian Johnson, assistant regional officer of English Nature (formerly the Nature Conservancy Council), says wetland plants such as creeping jenny, marsh marigolds and marsh orchids are disappearing. Some 27,000 acres of the Levels have been declared an "environmentally sensitive area" (ESA) since 1987, and 16,600 acres of that is made up of 15 "sites of special scientific interest" (SSSIs). About half the 1,750 farmers in the ESA receive grants for curtailing farming activity.

Those arrangements are not linked to the maintenance of minimum water levels. But conservationists

feel they can press for stiffer conditions as "green" subsidies may be the farmers' only hope for long-term public support. English Nature wants shallow flooding in all the SSSIs throughout the winter and a high water table through the spring and early summer. In the rest of the ESA, it wants the government to offer farmers bigger grants to allow high water levels.

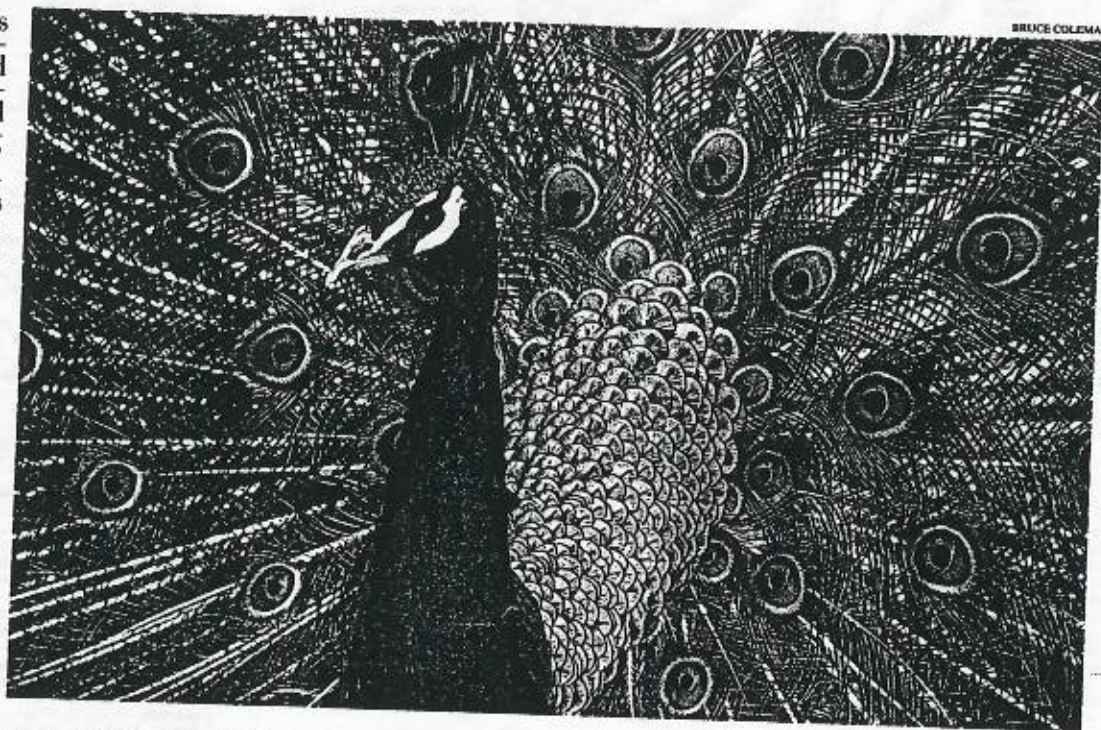
Under pressure from farmers, English Nature is moving towards the National Rivers Authority's compromise in which levels would be raised in a few key areas. The RSPB says a fragmented approach could kill the conservation effort.

Power dressing pulls the birds

Does the peacock's finery that puzzled Darwin advertise real survival qualities? Colin Tudge reports the latest findings



The peahen (above) is attracted by the showiest train precisely because the size of this extravagance is a handicap



BRUCE COLEMAN

EVERY SUMMER, the peacocks that roam free within Whipsnade Wild Animal Park in Bedfordshire expose their magnificent trains to the critical and often disdainful gaze of the hens. They re-enact the mystery that tormented Charles Darwin to his dying day: how in this competitive world, where nature — as Tennyson said — is red in tooth and claw, could birds have evolved such an obvious extravagance? How do they get away with it? The zoologist Marion Petrie and her colleagues of the Open University are now exploiting the quasi-wild conditions of Whipsnade to try, a century after Darwin's death, to settle the matter.

Modern biology began with the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. In it he argued (a) that living creatures came to be the way they are by evolution, rather than by special creation; and (b) that the principal mechanism of evolution was natural selection. That is, in a crowded and hence competitive world, the individuals best suited to the circumstances — the "fittest" — are the most likely to survive and have offspring.

But the implication is that fittest would generally mean toughest, swiftest, cleverest, most alert. The peacock's tail, by contrast, was at best a waste of space and in practice a severe encumbrance; and Darwin felt obliged to invoke what he felt was a separate mechanism of evolution, which he called "sexual selection". The driving mechanism was simply that females liked — in his words — "beauty for beauty's sake".

Helena Cronin of Oxford University and the London School of Economics argues that this notion of Darwin's is at least in accord with his general argument — presented in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871 — that all human qualities have their prototypes in animals. Darwin was happy (up to a point) to argue that peahens have a primordial sense of aesthetics.

But Darwin's friend and collaborator, Alfred Russel Wallace, though in many ways more "romantic" than Darwin, was in others even more Darwinian. "Beauty for beauty's sake" he wanted nothing of. If peahens

chose cocks with the showiest trains, he felt, then it must be that they knew what they were about. The cocks must have some other quality, which was not necessarily obvious to the human observer, but which the hens themselves could appreciate. According to Wallace, then, the train was not an end in itself, but an advertisement for some genuine contribution to survival.

Now, 100 years later, the wrangle is still unresolved, for the natural behaviour of peafowl is much harder to study than might be imagined. But the 200 birds at Whipsnade, which live like wild birds yet are used to human beings, offer unique opportunities for study.

Marion Petrie and her colleagues at Whipsnade have identified two main questions. First, is the premise correct — do peahens really choose the males with the

hypothesis that showy male birds in general, of whatever species, are the most parasite-free; and that their plumage advertises their disease-free state. There is evidence that this is so in other birds. But Dr Petrie and her colleagues have not been able to assess the internal parasites in the Whipsnade peacocks, to test this hypothesis. This year, however, she is comparing the offspring of cocks that have in the past proved attractive to hens with the offspring of cocks that hens find unattractive. Do the children of the attractive cocks grow faster? Are they more healthy? If so, then the females' choice will be seen to be utilitarian after all, just as Wallace predicted.

One highly intriguing observation at Whipsnade gives reason to suppose that Wallace was right. Peahens, it now seems, frequently mate with more than one cock. If

male with a slightly better tail than the rest. The sons of that mating will inherit their father's tail, and the daughters will inherit their mother's predilection for long tails. This is how the runaway begins. Within each generation, the males with the longest tails will get most mates and leave most offspring; and the females' predilection for long tails will increase commensurately. Modern computer models show that such a feedback mechanism would alone be enough to produce a peacock's tail. Oddly, too, as Helena Cronin points out, this would vindicate Darwin's apparently fanciful notion — once the process gets going the females would indeed be selecting "beauty for beauty's sake".

The second twist results from Wallace's apparently down-to-earth idea that showiness advertises some "real" quality. Logically, an advertisement is no advertisement at all unless it exacts some cost from its possessor. After all, if it were easy for a peacock to produce a long train, then any old bird could do it. A creature riddled with parasites might produce a train 20 feet long, but evolution would soon punish those hens foolish enough to fall for it. In practice, then — bizarrely — the Wallacian advertisement succeeds because it is a handicap; in fact, the peacock train (which the bird regrows each year, like a deer's antlers) weighs about three-quarters of a kilogram, in a bird with a body weight of 5kg. Again, computer models at Oxford University by Alan Grafen show, against many people's expectations, that the "handicap principle" (which derives logically from Wallace's theory) does indeed work.

Dr Grafen likes to suggest that humans, too, act according to the handicap principle. We all like to show how good we are by acts of self-sacrifice. The man who buys drinks all round is really saying: "Even though I may part with a wad of fivers, I still have the edge over you lot!" But these are murky waters. The Whipsnade peacocks will do for the time being.

□ Colin Tudge is author of *Last Animals at the Zoo*, to be published by Century Hutchinson later this year.

If it were easy to produce a long train, then any old bird could do it. A creature riddled with parasites might produce one 20 feet long, but evolution would soon punish those hens foolish enough to fall for it

showiest trains? And, secondly, do the peacocks with the showiest trains have some extra, genuinely advantageous quality, as Wallace supposed, or is it really all show, as Darwin felt?

In practice, the mature cocks display in groups at a number of sites around Whipsnade, and the hens judge one against the other. Long observation from hides, backed up by photographs, suggests that the hens really do like the showiest males. What seems to count is the number of eye-spots on the train, which is related to its length; the cocks with the most eye-spots do indeed attract the most mates.

But whether the males with the best trains are also "better" in other ways remains to be pinned down. William Hamilton of Oxford University has put forward

they first mate with an unattractive cock (one that attracts few mates), then they are more likely to move on to another. If they first mate with the most attractive cock, then the first-comers may mate with him repeatedly, and effectively stand guard over him, preventing other females from approaching him. In the wild, such behaviour would be risky. Surely they would not do it unless there was some pay-off, and the pay-off, presumably, is that the showiest males really are the best.

There are two final twists to this continuing story. First, the great mathematician and biologist R A Fisher in the Thirties proposed what has become known as "Fisher's Runaway". Just suppose, for example, that for whatever reason — perhaps for a sound "Wallacian" reason — a female first picks a

Killer of the skies defended

Feather report

A FEW weeks ago I wrote, rejoicing, about the increase in sparrowhawks. This prompted impassioned letters from readers denouncing the murderous excesses of this wonderfully fearsome bird. "The strict conservation" of sparrowhawks is "resulting in sad depletion of our common wild birds", one reader says. She cites seeing sparrowhawks killing birds in her garden.

Another reader writes of the apparently declining number of birds in Highgate cemetery, north London, and wonders if this is the result of predation. And yet another gives a description of a sparrowhawk — presumably a young and inexperienced bird — taking something like an hour to dispatch a starling. She wanted to intervene: "It was only the knowledge that the starling would die anyway and the hawk would go off and kill another bird that stopped me." (A bird reserve warden once told me of his mixed feelings when a lesser spotted woodpecker was demolished by a sparrowhawk a few feet from him.)

This is not a simple issue. If you are trying to save birds, what do you do about birds that kill other birds? Magpies are favourite villains; the RSPB gets more letters on this subject than any other. People fear that our nice, friendly songbirds, blue tits, robins and so on, are being slowly wiped out as the predator population increases. A pair of sparrowhawks are likely to kill 500 small birds in a breeding season: that, you would think, could not fail to have an effect on the population at large. As the number of sparrowhawks increases, so robins and blue tits surely must decline.

Let us turn to the alarming episode of the Mairé Gunders. They were American ecological researchers who set out to study caterpillars but ended up making a startling discovery about songbirds. They marked out an area of woodland in Maine and counted 148 pairs of breeding songbirds. Then, acting like the ultimate predator, they shot the lot. They had mapped out the location of every nest and expected the slaughter to be a quick business.



Predator: a threatening sparrowhawk circles above a linnets

They had counted 148 singing males: after three weeks they had killed 302. And there were still birds singing their heads off. It was clear that there was a surplus population of non-breeding birds.

This rather ghastly experiment indicates that the breeding population is regulated by the number of places available to breed in, rather than the number of predators. The point is not the size of the predated population but the land's "carry capacity".

The population of British breeding birds has been logged every year since 1961 by the British Trust for Ornithology through its Common Bird Census and, despite the increase of magpies and sparrowhawks, the number of

common species; there are fewer tree sparrows, corn buntings and linnets. This is not because these are favourite snacks of sparrowhawks but because of changes in agricultural practices.

If you change the nature of the land, you must alter its carrying capacity. If you chop down trees or plough pastures, you destroy breeding and feeding opportunities. If you build houses on heathland, yachting marinas in estuaries and drain wetland, you change the character of the countryside and affect the bird population it can maintain.

The temptation to blame predators for a perceived decline in the prey population is wrong. Birds of prey are highly visible and they indubitably kill for a living. But the long-term fortunes of their prey population depend on far more subtle and elusive matters.

The sparrowhawk stands accused of being an enemy of conservation. It emerges without a stain on its character.

SIMON BARNES

What's about: *Birders watch for flocks of mixed finches, mixed yellowhammer, corn bunting and tree sparrow, ducks and grebes around unfrozen water. Woodcock can turn up anywhere. Twickers — harlequin duck at Wick, north Scotland, surf scoter at Largo Bay, Fife. American bittern still at Marton Mere, Lancashire. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.*

Drifting oil slicks threaten colonies of nesting puffins

By KERRY GILL

TWO oil slicks, one more than two miles long and the other about one-and-a-half miles long, were drifting off the west coast of Shetland yesterday as transport department officials tried to discover their source.

The slicks, first spotted by the Sea Explorer drilling rig on Tuesday, were moving at about 4mph some 30 miles west of Esha Ness on the Shetland mainland before a north-easterly wind. The authorities

were hoping they would break up or continue to drift away from Shetland.

Last night, however, there were fears that the slicks would drift on to the island of Foula, 12 miles west of Shetland. The islands are notorious for sudden changes in weather.

Big colonies of puffins, skuas, kittiwakes and gannets would be affected at nesting time if the slicks contami-

nated the Foula shoreline. Thick fog hampered efforts by the transport department's marine pollution control unit to identify the slicks. Sea-level visibility was about 50ft yesterday morning.

The unit managed to fly a reconnaissance aircraft from Coventry low over the scene by midday after a break in the fog.

Samples will have to be taken from the slicks before their origin can be identified. One theory was that the oil may have come from an exploratory well in the Clair field off Shetland. Captain Keith Radley, of the islands' council's ports and harbours department, said its own helicopter, which monitors the sea around the Sullom Voe oil terminal, would also make a further inspection.

Two drilling rigs, operated by BP and Elf, have recently begun working in the area. BP denied any responsibility and an Elf spokeswoman said that no one appeared to be aware of the slicks.

Port staff said that it was unlikely that the spillage had come from a tanker. Two tankers were berthed at Sullom Voe yesterday and one left on Tuesday. The two at Sullom Voe came directly from ports on the east coast of Britain and the third was still in the terminal when the slicks were found.

Feather report

Listen to the garden frenzy

MAY is here, the great month of the birding year, and the bank holiday weekend is a grand annual celebration for birders. October is the month for twitchers, but May is when it all happens for the birds. Birds breed, birds sing, birds display, and everywhere you find birds, you find a world exploding with fecundity. This is the weekend for celebrating life: here are a few suggestions on how and where to do it.

Suggestion one is your back garden. This is peak of the year for birdsong: the dawn chorus reaches its demented peak right now.

This spring has been slow, but most of the summer singers have arrived. A trip to any decent bit of woodland could — or even should — bring you wood warblers, pied flycatchers, and best of all, nightingales. Nightingales sing day and night: listen for a series of whistles that might make the bird burst with the intensity of it, followed by a bizarre, unbirdlike thrumming: twit twit twit jug jug: T.S. Eliot had it to a T.

This is a good time to visit a seabird colony. A cliff-edge community offers the best and noisiest kind of soap opera ever devised: a non-stop din of quarrelling, greeting, feeding and pairing off.

There are good colonies that are easy to visit at Benpton cliff, Humberside and South Stack cliffs, Anglesey, Bass Rock, in the Firth of Forth, gives spectacular views of gannets, which fly like arch-angels, land like Eddie the Eagle and walk like Coco the clown.

The breeding frenzy continues in every habitat across the country. This weekend offers southerners a last chance to see the waders, the mud-lovers, in their sumptuous summer plumage before they move north to their breeding grounds. Look for sanderting, curlew sandpiper, knot and bar-tailed godwit at places such as Minnere, in Suffolk, and Titchwell and Cley, in Norfolk.

Minnere, of course, has

the bonus of breeding avocets: a sight no person should miss. Bank holidays see Minnere packed to the gunwales: the answer for a casual visitor is to use the two public hides along the beach just outside the reserve: all the avocets and none of the hassles.

The south coast is another good place to be over the weekend. The best places are the bird observatories of Portland Bill, Dorset, and Dungeness, Kent: but all points in between can be interesting, especially Beachy Head, in east Sussex, and Selsey Bill, west Sussex. Look for a big movement of pomarine skuas, and the arrival of terns, swifts and swallows.

Perhaps the best treat in the northwest is the bitterns of Leighton Moss, Lancashire; as long as you do not expect to see them. But you can listen for them: in May, bitterns make their gentle, long-carrying call known as booming.

If you want to try a spot of twitching, the south coast is the place. Richard Millington, of Birdline, predicts rarities from the Mediterranean: bee-eater, bluetit, red-rumped swallow, and continental species of wheatear.

I shall not be doing that, however. I plan a quiet stroll in nightingale country and, on any fine evening, a visit to the great Hadley Wood bird observatory, in north London. This happens to be my back garden: there, beer in hand, I will enjoy the songs of a dozen common birds, and listen out for the return of the garden warbler that showed up this week and then vanished. May is the month that teems with life. Something worth drinking to.

SIMON BARNES

What's about: *Twickers — white stork (possible escape) seen flying over Lowestoft; Savi's warbler at Leighton Moss reserve, Lancashire. Long stayers include ancient murrelet on Lundy, harlequin duck at Wick. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.*

Defeat of fax by feathers embarrasses high-tech firm

London Daily Telegraph LONDON — A homing pigeon beat a fax machine in a one-mile challenge race this week, leaving executives of a high-tech communications company highly embarrassed.

Joe, a four-year-old Blue Chequer, flew from a hotel near Heathrow airport back to his loft at West Drayton in one minute and 20 seconds, arriving more than a minute before a caricature drawing of him emerged from a fax machine in his owner's garden.

The company, Faxit Europe, wanted to show that fax is quicker than flight. But they made the mistake of giving Joe, a winner of two open races from Guernsey and Weymouth, a two-minute start before they began faxing.

"They were flabbergasted," said a delighted Joyce Smith, 51, who owns

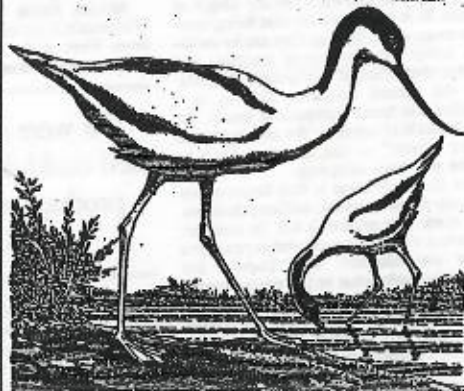
the champion with her 52-year-old husband, Dennis.

"They couldn't believe it. It was a dawdle for Joe. He arrived back fresh as a daisy before their fax came through. But then he's in peak condition.

"They gave him a start so that he could find his bearings. But Joe has won races covering the 167 miles from Guernsey and the 105 miles from Weymouth with no trouble. He knows where home is."

Joe was chosen for the challenge from the Smith's 70-strong loft because of his track record and his instinct to get back among the hens.

Back at the hotel, All Safa, chairman of Faxit, said: "We thought that if we could beat a pigeon we could beat anything. It's a bit embarrassing, but then we did give it a two-minute start."



Minnere marvels: avocets are a sight no birder should miss