



Fylde Bird Club

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

NEWSLETTER NO. 53

I read that Barclays profits fell by 37% - "Can you better that?" you ask.

As it is your cash I think it only fair that you are informed of what has been going on over the last 8 months, particularly with regard to Tax Reforms and the BCCI closure.

At the start of the year the Club's single account, combining both General and Special Projects Funds, was closed and two separate accounts opened. This allows both accounts to accrue their own interest and run independently.

Once the accounts were established the American Bittern was released from it's cage thereby allowing the credit/debit facilities to be tested. The bird not only brought Twitchers but cash to the tune of £310 (net) to the Special Projects Fund (Thanks Monty and Dave.)

In April the Government's new regulations, on non-tax payers receiving gross interest on their Building Society Accounts, were introduced. Well the Fylde Bird Club is not a tax-payer. I broach this matter with the B.Soc. - they tell me to B- off, to the Inland Revenue. The Inland Revenue inform me that the new regulations only apply to "individuals" but suggest that we apply to become a registered Charity, and enjoy the benefits!!! The Charity Commissioners have been contacted and currently I am looking into the implications and procedural maze(does anyone know a charitable solicitor?)

The BCCI affair came as a shock and it is difficult to get all the facts - but eventually I contacted Threadneedle Street and was assured that the Bird Club Credit Indices were "sound as a groat", thereafter I slept a little easier.

In trying to get the best returns on our monies I have found only one guaranteed way to double your money, and if you wish to try it for yourself, here it is:- Fold it once and put it back in your pocket.

Finally; Please can I have all bird race Sponsorship money no later than the September meeting - so that I can have the year ending accounts as up to date as possible for the A.G.M.

J.F.

The following article has been sent to all County Recorders and covers the work of the British Birds Rarities Committee. They are happy to see the article published in Club Newsletters providing we mention that the article is sponsored by Zeiss West Germany.

Rare birds -
the work of the
British Birds
Rarities Committee

Sponsored by



Before the 1950s, and for most of the years in that decade, the responsibility for the vetting, acceptance or rejection and publication of rarity records in Britain rested with local bird recorders, and, for the extreme rarities, rather haphazardly with the editors of British Birds. The increase in knowledge and travel opportunities both within Britain and overseas during the early 1950s created a nationwide upsurge in rarity observations. New textbooks emerged and identification expertise accelerated amongst a growing following. It was against this background that the Rarities Committee was formed in June 1959, under the patronage of the journal British Birds. It is thus known as the British Birds Rarities Committee, or simply the BBRC. Its function is to collect, investigate and

apply uniform adjudication standards to claimed records of rare birds in England, Scotland and Wales and 'at sea' within the British Fishery Limits (which now extend to 200 miles, 321 km), and to publish annually in one document the essential details of the rarities seen in Britain in the previous year. The BBRC also assesses records from the Channel Islands, at the request of ornithologists there.

The BBRC is sponsored by the optical company Carl Zeiss, and has been since 1983. This has resulted in more pages in British Birds for rare-bird topics, including the fully detailed annual report of the Rarities Committee, and more colour photographs of rarities. We are very appreciative of this continued support.

The BBRC is currently made up of ten voting members, nicknamed 'The Ten Rare Men', plus a Chairman, a Secretary, a Museum Consultant/Archivist and a Statistician. There is at least one vacancy each year, upon the retirement of the longest-serving member. Qualifications for membership, which deliberately reflects a wide spread of regional representation, include a widely acknowledged expertise in identification, a proven reliability in the field, the ability to work well on paper and, very importantly, the capacity to handle the considerable workload, plus the willingness to do all this unpaid, on a voluntary basis. This workload, of course, is record assessment. All members see all records, which, including recirculations, total over 1,300 each year.

Observers are encouraged to submit records as soon as

possible after the observation. This is vital during the period September to December, so that these records from the end of the year complete their circulations before the report deadline. It is unlikely that records received later than March will be processed in time to be published in the annual report. Use of the carefully designed 'Unusual record form', or its format, greatly helps record processing. Photographs and sketches, regardless of artistic merit, are of much assistance. Records should be submitted to the Secretary or, in the case of a trapped and ringed rarity, to the BTO Ringing Office, via the county or regional recorder. Many local societies appoint someone especially to liaise with the BBRC over records. Receipt of records is normally acknowledged only when accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope or postcard. Decisions are, however, always notified to the appropriate recorder, who passes this information on to the observer concerned.

For a record to be accepted, all ten members on first circulation, or at least nine on a subsequent circulation, must vote in its favour. Recirculations occur for several reasons: borderline cases (eight or nine accepts on first circulation), pending records, when requested by any member on first circulation, or if the Secretary feels it is warranted on a balance of comments, so that more detailed assessments or comparisons can be made. Occasionally, records are sent to acknowledged experts on a particular species; and the BBRC has its own Seabirds Advisory Panel to advise on that difficult

group. A rejection is usually a case of 'non-proven' rather than one of clearly incorrect identification. It is fully appreciated by the BBRC that it is usually not an observer's fault that a poor view is obtained. Brevity of view, distance, bad light, a single angle or any combination of these may result in important characters not being noted. If what remains is considered insufficient for identification to be fully established, a record has to be rejected.

A small but significant percentage of records takes longer than usual to be considered. Reasons for the delay in publication are various. They include late submission, those contentious records which require extensive enquiries and two or more circulations, records of very difficult species which involve reference to experts, and records of birds new to Britain which also have to be verified by the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee. Records in the latter category are assessed in the normal way, but then passed to the BOURC, which considers formal admission to the British List. Publication is subject to acceptance by both committees. It is the BOURC which carries out the detailed investigations into escape likelihood and vagrancy potential.

All descriptions, comments sheets and correspondence are retained permanently on file. This central repository of rarity descriptions and opinion on difficult identification topics allows problem areas to be pinpointed. Subsequent additional research often results in identification notes and papers in British Birds.

The BBRC normally meets twice a year. Administration and policy are dealt with at an annual meeting held in early spring, and identification and related topics during a summer meeting.

The 'Report on rare birds in Great Britain', published annually in British Birds for the past 32 years, contains details of all accepted records, plus a list of those not accepted. Accepted Irish records are also included, giving a clear picture for the geographical unit of Britain and Ireland, and greatly facilitating analysis of rarity occurrences. Thanks for these are due to the Irish Rare Birds Committee and the Northern Ireland Bird Records Committee. Photographs, both in black-and-white and colour, and sketches of rarities are eye-catching features of the report. For each species, the report includes a general comment on trends, and a running total of individuals seen in Britain and Ireland. A second publication 'Rarities Committee news and announcements' appears annually in British Birds and covers general matters relating to the Committee's work.

The BBRC is very aware that its successful operation is entirely dependent upon the co-operation of observers, county and regional recorders, bird observatory wardens and reserve wardens and their committees. We thank them most sincerely one and all.

Peter Lansdown

Chairman, BBRC

May 1991

APRIL REPORTS

Some late reports which were omitted from the April section of the last Newsletter included a Chukar seen by Ed. at Squires Gate Industrial Estate on the 6th.

At Lytham Hall Monty had a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers excavating a nest hole on the 9th and at the same location a Wood Warbler singing on the 30th.

Barry Dyson had his first ever Yellow Wagtail on passage at Poulton on the 28th. This was especially notable considering how rare this species has become in our area in each successive year.

MAY

May began with the song of a Chiffchaff in the trees opposite 390 Vicarage Lane, alias Maurice's shop. It remained until the 4th. On the same day 4 Whimbrel were on the Golf Course near LSANR and St. Annes Moss held 6 Wheatear, 2 White Wagtail, 41 Corn Bunting and 8 pairs of Grey Partridge. A Garden Warbler was present at Lytham Hall on the same date.

Small numbers of Hirundines were passing through with 41 Swallow, 3 House Martins, 5 Sand Martins and 9 Swifts over the Mere on the 2nd.

The 5th was the day of the sponsored Bird Race, emphatically won by Maurice's team of Paul Ellis and Robert Stinger. They managed a grand total of 104 species in the Fylde plus one Grey Wagtail seen on the wrong side of the A6 at Churchtown and therefore out of the Fylde. I have it on good authority that driving for the team was a Nigel Mansell clone who managed some spectacular point to point times e.g. Churchtown to Rossall Point in 19 minutes - no they weren't using a helicopter. Nevertheless they managed to survive the day. The highlights included a male Garganey and a Greenshank at the Naze plus a Cuckoo and a Stock Dove in the same area. At Rossall Point, no doubt with binoculars a quiver, they saw Arctic Skua and 16 Arctic Terns.

A male Whinchat was seen at Fleetwood, 24 Pinkfeet at Moss Edge and 2 Yellow Wagtails at Churchtown Sewage Farm. Grasshopper Warbler, 2 Goldeneye and a male Scaup (present from the 2nd to the 13th) were seen at the Mere.

Another Grasshopper Warbler was heard at the Mere on the following day.

Meanwhile back at 390 Vicarage Lane a Sand Martin was seen flying North past the shop on the 8th. Unremarkable? - no, this was a shop first for Maurice. Unfortunately he hasn't divulged his shop list total but maybe the information will be divulged for a future issue of the Newsletter?

At the Mere on the 8th the American Bittern flew from the island to the South East corner. It was last seen by Dave McGrath on the 15th - where did it go to? Also present on the 8th were a male Pochard, 23 Tufted Duck and 4 Common Sandpipers. Approximately 20 Sand and House Martins flew over plus a solitary Whimbrel.

Whinchats were passing through the area from the 2nd until the 19th at least. On the 9th 3 males and a female were seen at Ballam and on the same day 13 were in a field by the main road at Singleton. The only one of Spring at LSANR was seen on the 19th.

Wheatears were passing throughout the month with 11 at Rossall on the 6th, 5 at the Mere on the 11th, 4 at LSANR on the 19th and 1 there on the 26th.

Single Spotted Flycatchers were at LSANR and the Mere on the 19th.

On the 11th 2 Lesser Whitethroats were at the Mere. At the Mere on the 18th there were 22 singing Sedge Warblers and 7 singing Whitethroats. By the 26th 5 Reed Warblers were in song at the Mere.

There was some good seawatching to be had in May too! The good thing about seawatching in May is that apart from seabirds there tends to be a lot of summer migrants as well. On the 6th at Rossall there were 23 Mergansers, Razorbill, 23 Sandwich Terns, Arctic Terns, and a red Throated Diver. The previous day the high tide Wader roost held 1490 Dunlin, 350 Sanderling and 330 Turnstone.

On the 12th at South Promenade a varied watch included Gannets, Fulmar, 83 Sandwich Terns flying south, 4 Razorbills on the sea, plus Whimbrel, a Diver, Kittiwake and an Arctic Tern. The St. Annes shore roost held 2900 Sanderling. During the count 3 male and one female Eider flew north along the tideline.

Better was to come on the 19th when Maurice saw a lone Shag and a remarkable, for this coast, flock of 24 Auks plus 9 later. Also seen were 2 Red Throated Divers on the sea and 2 flying north off the Promenade.

A first Winter Little Gull was present at the Mere on the 14th. Another was seen on St. Annes Moss following the plough along with 10 Black Headed Gulls.

A Short Eared Owl was seen regularly at the Mere from the 4th until at least the 19th.

At Newton Pool a Little Owl was seen at dusk on the 22nd.

Generally speaking May seemed so much quieter than previous years. The Spring migrants didn't appear in numbers, probably as a result of adverse winds which blew throughout the month. Chiffchaffs in particular were noticeably scarce.

JUNE

The month started well for Monty Myerscough when he found a male Ortolan Bunting at Warton Bank on the 1st. It flew onto a fence from the side of the bank and then over the fields into a small paddock. It was not seen again and heavy rain on the following morning made conditions very difficult for a further search.

The few who searched for the bird on the evening of the 1st were rewarded with a Cuckoo but small consolation when the target was an Ortolan.

Summer Migrants continued to trickle through the Fylde. A Wheatear was

at LSANR on the 2nd and a Blackcap was in song on the island at Fairhaven Marine Lake.

The paucity of summer migrants was well illustrated when Maurice heard a Willow Warbler sub song and a Sedge Warbler at the Reserve on the 9th, only the second of the year for both species.

A male Wheatear was seen on the Reserve on the late date of the 19th.

On the 24th in those famous bushes (no not the Railway bushes) opposite 390 Vicarage Lane etc. a male Blackcap was in song. A first for Maurice and his 5th Warbler species there - exclamation mark in his notes. Now come on Maurice how big is this shop list, tree list, flyover list? I think we should be told.

Large numbers of Swifts were seen at the Mere on several dates up to the 15th. 150 were there on the 2nd, 130 on the 3rd and 350 on the 15th.

At South Promenade on the 9th highlights included 39 Manx Shearwaters flying north, 20 south; 32 Gannets, 13 Auks plus 5 Guillemots, 14 Sandwich and 3 Arctic Terns. An adult Pomarine Skua flying south close into the seawall was an unexpected bonus.

As happened last year a period of moderately strong westerlies brought Storm Petrel's to the Fylde coast. One was seen feeding out from the Starr Gate shelter for 15 minutes on the morning of the 15th whilst the following day produced 5 also seen from the Shelter. The birds weren't distressed. They seemed to be feeding easily and moving north with consummate ease on the 16th.

22 Common Scoter flew south off the Promenade on the 23rd along with 1 or 2 Sandwich Terns and 3 Grey Plover.

Grey Seals, normally 1 occasionally 2, can be seen from South Promenade during the summer months. Very occasionally Dolphins appear and on the 23rd Maurice had 3 probable Risso's Dolphins distinguishable by their large Dorsal fins:- without doubt winner of the Mammal of the month award. What would be good to see would be a Basking Shark, a species which appears off the Isle of Man in some numbers during June. Can one wander our way please?

CONTRIBUTORS:-

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M.Myerscough, R.Stinger, E.Stirling.

POSTSCRIPT

I'm happy to inform you that Millie has finally sold her mint condition pristine, (fill in any other adjectives here) Kowa TSN 4. This is the first item which has been sold directly or indirectly through the Newsletter and already the adverts come rattling in!

Well, not quite, but the sale has had a 'knock on' effect. Graeme Mortimore now has an immaculate green armoured Mirador 32 x 80 plus photo adaptor for sale at a bargain £200 o.n.o - original price nearly £300. He assures me that the scope has seen some good birds in its time and that

no doubt any purchaser will have similar good fortune. Graeme can be contacted on Preston 709956. If Graeme or anyone else is looking for a KOWA 40x lens then Frank Walsh has one for sale. He hasn't quoted a price but can be contacted at the meetings.

David Hindle, who many of you will know, has a pair of Leitz 10 x 40B plus case for sale. He is asking £250 o.n.o. His phone number is Preston 743706 although he is away on holiday for two weeks commencing August 17th. Reason for sale is that he is considering the purchase of a pair of BAUSCH & LOMB'S.

On a recent visit to Focalpoint Bausch & Lomb's were still outselling Leitz and Zeiss by a considerable margin. Obviously they are the binoculars to be seen with - I certainly wouldn't mind a pair. Dear Santa.....

A friend of Dave Berry has the following RSPB magazines for sale and is open to offers:-

VOLUME 1 No.2 March/April 1966 and No.4 July/August 1966.

VOLUME 1 No.8 March/April 1967.

Thereafter all copies until Autumn 1989. If you are interested either contact Dave at the meetings or phone him on Poulton 892850.

The Wader count figures for the last two months are included with this Newsletter. As Len mentioned at the last meeting the more Counters we have the more effectively can we count the birds. The next count is Sunday September 8th, meet at Lane Ends at 0845.

There was a fine selection of slides shown at the last meeting - the quality was really good. At the end of the evening one member, who normally doesn't show slides put through six from Orkney which were excellent. I'm sure there must be other members who have equally good slides but are a little bit apprehensive about showing them. Please bring them along - they don't necessarily have to be just birds - they can be other natural history subjects too. Several members have said that they would be quite happy to see other subjects.

One of the most remarkable comebacks in modern times was accomplished at the last meeting; none other than Len's projector making a surprise appearance. I thought it had gone for good when it expired during Steve White's talk. Len is obviously a dab hand at optical repairs and will no doubt be pleased to consider repairing your cherished scope or binoculars for a suitable fee.

I'm running short of material for future issues; any articles or points of view would be most welcome. Thank you to all who have sent notes for Recent Reports. Please keep them coming.

A.D.

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

20th May 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe							
Cormorant	1		5			3	9
Mute Swan				7	2		9
Pink Footed Goose							
Shelduck	24	30	427			7	488
Wigeon							
Teal							
Mallard	4		65		6		75
Pintail							
Shoveler							
Eider						2	2
Goldeneye							
Red Breasted Merganser							
Coot							
Oystercatcher	197	101	361		2	258	919
Ringed Plover	206	377	900	19		59	1561
Golden Plover							
Grey Plover	9	12	7			11	39
Lapwing	8	26	54				88
Knot		1	115				116
Sanderling	12	6	2423	580		10	3031
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	1002	1065	1463			208	3738
Ruff							
Snipe							
Black T. Godwit							
Bar T. Godwit							
Wimbrel							
Curlew	7	3	6			16	32
Spotted Redshank							
Redshank	7	3	59			25	94
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper			1				1
Turnstone	16					15	31

A Condor Green/Glasson
 B Cockersands Ft.

C Pillin/Cockernam
 D Rossall Point

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

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

16th June 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe							
Cormorant	10			4			14
Mute Swan				16	2		18
Pink Footed Goose							
Shelduck	19		414			48	481
Wigeon							
Teal							
Mallard	2		25	3		11	41
Pintail							
Shoveler							
Eider				1		1	2
Goldeneye							
Red Breasted Merganser							
Coot					26		26
Oystercatcher	280		253			237	770
Ringed Plover	6			3			9
Golden Plover							
Grey Plover	11		1				12
Lapwing	50		236				286
Knot							
Sanderling				265			265
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	15		12	2		9	38
Ruff							
Snipe							
Black T. Godwit							
Bar T. Godwit							
Whimbrel							
Curlew	8		5			72	85
Spotted Redshank							
Redshank	6		23				29
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone				1			1

fully covered by high tide.

A Condor Green/Glasson C Pilline/Cockernam E ICI & CEGS Pools
 B Cockersands Ft. D Rossall Point F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.

Shetland terns soar out of their decline



A mid-air confrontation off the island of Noss, Shetland, between an arctic tern (left) and a great skua, or bonxie, which preys on the terns' young. Photographs: Tom Pilston

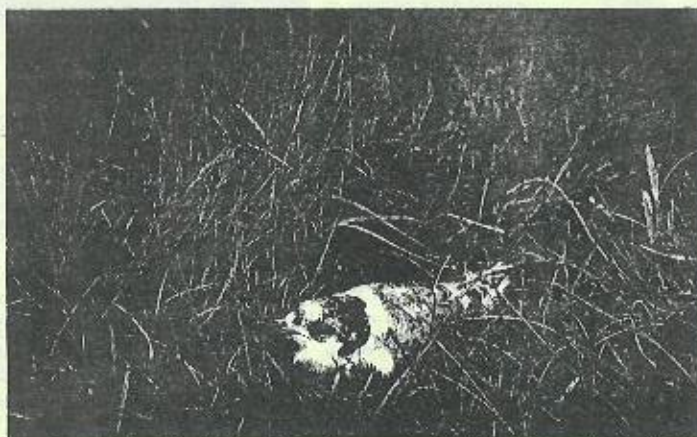
FOR the first time in seven years arctic terns are successfully raising their young in Shetland — home to more than 40 per cent of the British population of the birds. Colonies of other seabirds, such as gullinots, kittiwakes and skuas, are also experiencing a relief from a series of disastrous breeding seasons.

Shetland ornithologists have given a cautious welcome to the news, which they ascribe to a dramatic increase in numbers of young sand eels, a prime food source. But they warn that an overall population decline may continue if sand eel stocks do not continue to prosper.

At a breeding ground on the tiny island of Noss, no arctic tern chicks had lived long enough to fly since 1981. They would die three or four days after hatching, the parents unable to find enough food.

But this week the two Noss bird wardens employed by the Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland were wreathed in smiles. The bulk of their 130 pairs of terns were expected to produce one or two fledglings. As we walked through the moorland we came across only a handful of dead chicks. We picked our way nervously, fearful of crushing the clutches of two or three green speckled eggs, or the fluffy chicks covering in scrapes in the grass. Above us the elegant little arctic terns screamed their indignation at the invasion, swooping and diving at our heads, knocking us with their wings. Even the

Threatened breeding colonies are growing for the first time in seven years. Alex Renton reports



An arctic tern chick on Noss. It is the first breeding season since 1981 that any have survived on Shetland

bulking "bonxies" — great skuas 10 times the size — were being driven away after a dive-bombing by hordes of angry terns. Warden Roy Armstrong entertained us with stories of Caspian terns capable of driving their beaks through intruders' skulls.

Among the wheeling birds were a few that didn't look quite so graceful. These were the newly

fledged young, taking to the air for the first time three or four weeks after their birth. Next month they will start leaving Shetland to make a two-year circumnavigation of the globe that will take them to the Antarctic and eventually back to breeding sites in the northern hemisphere.

Noss's first arctic tern took to the air last Saturday — and was

grabbed by a bonxie for food. But Roy Armstrong and his colleague Lucy Gilbert watched adult terns harass the great skuas until it released the fledgling.

Ornithologists are even more concerned for the bonxies than for the terns. Shetland has 43 per cent of the northern hemisphere population of great skuas, and they too have experienced a sharp

decline. But by stealing food from other birds, the skuas are expected to raise young successfully in Shetland this year.

Pete Ellis, the Royal Society for Protection of Birds regional conservation officer, welcomed this year's success but warned that there was no indication that it would be repeated in coming years. The arctic tern population, at between 10,000 and 15,000 on Shetland, is still less than half what it was in 1980.

"This year's young won't breed for three years — so you've still got seven missing generations," he said. A total ban on sand eel fishing has been in place in Shetland since the middle of last year, but ornithologists believe other factors may account for the rise in the eels' population.

Diplomacy is important on this issue because the sand eel fishery was a big source of income for Shetland's small boats. In 1988, £300,000 worth of the eels was landed, to be made into fish meal.

Brian Ishister, of the Shetland Fishermen's Association, said: "We accepted the need for the ban because of scientific evidence on the declining stock. But the fishermen have never accepted that because of overfishing the birds have had failures of breeding seasons."

Mr Ishister said the fishermen were keen to start the fishery again. Mr Ellis said this was the last thing that was needed. Both sides are awaiting results of research being carried out by the Scottish Office.

NATURE NOTE



An ill wind

A FEW weeks ago I discussed some of the problems facing our migrant birds. Some species have been declining over the years, but I was so bold as to say that the house martin has maintained its numbers.

Unfortunately, I wrote this before the appalling weather of June. I have since heard of house martin colonies where not a single nest has been started, and of similar disasters among swallows.

According to Chris Mead of the British Trust for Ornithology, many species of migrant returned late this year, and their numbers are reduced. Contrary winds in the Mediterranean held up the birds and cold weather starved them of insect food while they waited. It is also likely that African drought affected the birds.

The silver lining is that house martins and swallows have the ability to start nesting very late in the summer. Our village martins started in the last week of June, after the starlings and blue tits had launched their young. Given a better summer they will have some young to take back to Africa.

Robert Burton

Survival kitty for rare birds

FARMERS and landowners are to be paid a bounty for birds of prey that breed successfully on their property.

The Yorkshire Dales national park authority will pay out for each rare peregrine falcon raised. The amount may even be worked out on the black market value of a bird which, in the case of a peregrine, could be at least £1,000.

Incidents

The park has one of the worst records in Britain for poisoning of wild birds and animals.

Between 1979 and 1980 wildlife "detectives" from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds uncovered 68 incidents. North West Scotland was the worst area with 100 poisonings.

The bounty scheme, due to start next year, may be extended to mergansers, hen harriers and buzzards.

Bird world's punk rocker shuns big-city life

By CRAIG SETON

THE starling, one of Britain's most common birds, appears to be in rapid decline. The bird is dwindling in numbers in town and country and an annual survey in Birmingham that two decades ago found a city centre population of 30,000 has this year found only 64.

The mystery of Birmingham's missing starlings has worried members of the West Midlands Bird Club, whose survey, begun in the 1960s, has produced the lowest figure ever for the number of starlings roosting on once-crowded ledges and parapets. The total is a big reduction on last year's figure of 2,000 birds.

Club members have been speculating about the decline demonstrated by the survey, which was conducted

in February when the number of native starlings would usually be swelled by winter visitors from the Continent. They believe that modern buildings may not provide suitable roosts for the bird, and that anti-starling measures on older buildings might have also helped to drive them out.

They also fear that modern farming techniques are depriving starlings of food in the country during the breeding season, and have even considered the possibility that nuclear fall-out from the Chernobyl disaster could have hit the migration of starlings from eastern Europe.

The decline in the population of the noisy, raucous, squabbling bird has been confirmed by the British Trust for Ornithology. The trust says that more efficient farming means

that cranefly grubs, on which fledglings are raised, are in much shorter supply.

The trust's estimate of Britain's starling population shows that it has fallen by half in ten years in woodland locations and by at least a quarter on farmland. Fifteen years ago the population was thought to be between four and seven million pairs, but that is now believed to be down to between three and five million and still falling.

Starlings leave the countryside after the summer to find winter roosts in towns and cities, where it is warmer and more food is available. Alan Richards, chairman of the West Midlands Bird Club, said yesterday: "They're regarded as the punk rockers of the bird world and people think they are unattractive, but the sight of

dozens of them wheeling across the city at sunset is dramatic. If we do not know the cause for the decline, we worry whether there is some insidious cause. If our next survey reveals there are no starlings to be found in Birmingham, we would be concerned."

Chris Mead, who is in charge of the national bird-ringing scheme for the British Trust for Ornithology, said that although the evidence showed a big decline in the number of starlings in Britain, the Birmingham city centre birds had probably moved to another location.

"There are still flocks of starlings on buildings in London and other towns," he said. "It's still one of our commonest birds, so we're not talking about extinction. They're very adaptable."



gives you nationally important numbers of breeding snipe and black-tailed godwit.

Breeding waders declined 55 per cent on the Somerset Levels between 1977 and 1987. The reason for this is drainage. Levels have been progressively lowered, and shallow floods have been prevented. This suits a small number of farmers.

The draining is in the hands of

internal drainage boards, which report to the NRA. Local farming interests are strongly represented on these bodies. Thus, we have self-interest. The NRA has spoken about its duty to "balance" the interests of farmers and of conservationists. But you cannot

balance a wetland — it is either wet or it is not.

Stuart Housden, the RSPB's head of conservation planning,

failing in its international commitments to conservation "by allowing one of the top sites in the United Kingdom to be damaged and destroyed. Important decisions about drainage should not be left to quangos."

The last meeting of the Somerset flood defence committee took the decision to opt for further consultation. In other words, they decided not to decide anything.

In the meantime, the RSPB is wondering what effect the new agency is going to have on wetlands. Will the control of water become the responsibility of a body that has no need to keep its "environmental" end up? It's just

Meanwhile, at the Somerset Levels, the plug has been pulled and the water is running down the plughole. Within five years the breeding waders will have gone.

In five years' time, I have no doubt that my nephew's work will become comprehensible to me. And in five years' time, perhaps Mr Major will still be prime minister. I wonder if we will understand his environmental policy by then?

SIMON BARNES

What's about: Birders — now checking gravel pits for rearing waders. Twitchers — black-winged stilt at Trimley, Felixstowe, along with over Lumbard Pools.

Feather report

Mr Major on the level?

Mr Major's announcement of a new environment agency — me feel like the nice uncle I inspecting something his ew has made at school. "It's y, Luke... er, what does it

Mr Major and the Conservative party the moral high ground. But what does it do for, say, black-tailed godwit and Bewick's swans?

The new agency will combine the National Rivers Authority (NRA) with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution. The NRA has two principal functions: control of water levels and regulation of pollution. Pollution is not the only conservation problem; water level also involves human greed and permanent destruction of wildlife.

This brings us to the Somerset Levels: an area of sumptuous wet meadows. Winter brings to the levels internationally important numbers of Bewick's swans, wi-

Tickers let the train take the eye-strain

I have already achieved the ambition of a lifetime this year: I saw avocets from a train window. I was travelling from Penzance to Exeter, and this run offers some of the best opportunities in Britain for the esoteric and beautiful pursuit of train-birding.

There are about 20 miles of sea, turning into the Exe estuary, and there are always plenty of birds about, particularly in winter. The best way to watch the Exe is to remain motionless over a telescope for hours at a time. Train-birding, done with the naked eye at 50mph or so, is a serious test of observation skills. Your chances of identifying anything smaller than a blackbird are minimal. Birds with bold or, better, boldly contrasting plumage are easiest: oystercatcher, greater black-backed gull.

Mainly, you are down to jizz — the art of identifying a bird while seeing it badly. When your viewing time is reduced to a few nanoseconds, you have no time for analysis. A shape, a vague idea of pattern, and the bird is gone.

I have seen avocet on the Exe before, but only through a telescope while on foot. From the train, I saw a tight raft of 50 white shapes, floating on the surface, all taking to the air in sudden alarm; the calligraphic black pattern on their white backs as familiar to me as the coat of the cat that sits on my desk, for I spent much of last spring and summer in the company of avocets.

This, I thought, was something long desired, at last achieved: the ultimate train-tick. The fastidious may find something frivolous about all this. And since this column tends to curl its lip at the excesses of the twitchers, I could be accused of inconsistency. But no matter: a train-tick is still a train-tick.

I remember being asked in a questionnaire how often I went birdwatching. Wrong thinking: no real birder is ever wholly off-duty. Sirding is one



Now we see it, now we don't: fleeting glimpse of a hen harrier

of the pleasures of being alive: an eye and an ear ever open to birds enhances all of life, not just the days you go on safari.

Part of this is serious, not because my observations are of any use to science, but because awareness of wildlife seems to me an essential part of the way a sane person faces life. Seriousness does not rule out laughter, however, let alone joy.

Twitchers are called the train-spotters of the birding world: well, train-birding takes that nonsense a stage further. One of the pleasures is that a train-tick can never be verified. A friend of mine claims a purple heron overflying a train between Sandy in Bedfordshire and King's Cross, but he knows he can never be 100 per cent certain.

Ah, but I'm 99 per cent certain of this one. I was travelling to Hereford races at the time, on the line from Newport, and I saw something that has, I fear, even replaced the avocet as top train-tick.

I saw it for less than half a second, but am morally certain of it: a vast, reddy-brown shape on ragged wings starting into the air beside the track, not ten yards from the train. A bird of prey, obviously. It had

the jizz of a harrier: and I have seen harriers all year at the Minsmere reserve in Suffolk. I saw, without any doubt, a white ring around the base of the tail: that gives you the hen harrier.

The white ring would not be enough to convince, let alone interest, the rarities committee and, in theory, it could have been a still rarer bird: a rough-legged buzzard. But we train-tickers make our own rules, and I am happy with my hen harrier. I don't get a winner like that every time I go racing.

Train-birding is silly. It is also a deeply moral business, for birds are there to enjoy as well as to study and to save. But I don't think you can count a train-tick if you have pulled the communication cord.

SIMON BARNES

● *What's about: Birders — listen for woodpeckers: distinguish lesser-spotted from greater-spotted by quieter, more rapid and sustained drumming. Green woodpecker does not drum, but very audible laughing ("yaffling") call. Twitchers — American wigeon in County Cork, snow goose and whistling swan in County Wexford. Details from Birdline 0898 700222.*

Five-star petrel stumps the massed ranks of twitchers

By ALAN HAMILTON

IS IT a bird? Is it a plane? It's a bird all right, but the specimen which flew into an ornithologists' net on Tyneside in the early hours of yesterday morning has confounded all efforts to identify it.

Moments after its accidental capture, the bird-watchers' bush telegraph sprang into action, and more than 100 twitchers drove through the night to Whitley Bay to catch sight of the creature before it was measured, studied, ringed and released. None of them knew what it was. They knew, of course, that it was a petrel, but it did not fit the description of any of the 20 or so sub-species of petrel known in the world. It was, in the birdwatchers' view, a five-star petrel.

Its dark plumage and absence of white markings on the tail showed it was clearly not the common British storm petrel. Nor was it the much rarer Leach's storm petrel, the only other sub-species known in the British Isles, which breeds at only seven known sites, most on remote Scottish islands. What it most closely resembled was Swinhoe's storm petrel, but even then there were differences of detail.

The trouble with Swinhoe's storm petrel is that it nests on islands off Japan, China and Korea, and the nearest it gets to Europe is its winter sojourn in the Indian Ocean. Petrels are little bigger than a swallow, and experts cannot envisage any weather conditions that would carry one to the Northumbrian coast.

Two years ago, the same bird-ringing team caught two



Mystery tourist: the petrel before release yesterday



similar specimens close to the same location. Experts have still failed to produce a positive identification.

Not even the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds can provide an answer. Michael Everett, of the RSPB headquarters at Sandy, Bedfordshire, said

yesterday that the creature was unlikely to be a completely unknown species. It was more likely to be a hitherto undiscovered sub-species of Swinhoe's petrel, and its presence in Whitley Bay might be explained by the existence of an unknown colony of the birds in the Atlantic.

The very fact that petrels have been shown to fly up and down the North Sea has itself been a revelation to ornithologists. The rings entice passing birds towards their nets by playing recordings of the native petrel's curiously mechanical birdsong, which proves an irresistible attraction to others of the species.

The land lends a hand



work on the field. The RSPB then moves the eggs or the chicks out of the way while the work is done. When it is completed, it puts them back. "It's not ideal, but as long as you can keep the adults out of the way, the birds can stand it," Mr Prater says. "Certainly more than half the existing stone curlew nests would be wiped out without this work."

The best place to see stone curlew is West Weeting, where the Norfolk Naturalists Trust has a couple of hides overlooking heathland. There, amid a thousand rabbits, the stone curlew have their being, strutting fussily up and down the short grass and the bare earth, hunting insects with a run, a stalk and a lightning, heron-like stab, "looking like a great aunt going shopping", as a friend said.

You get there late afternoon and early evening, and see them hard at it (when raising a brood they are not exclusively nocturnal). And as the light fades, you can hear the wild weeting call that echoes across the Breckland. Still, Kur-lee.

SIMON BARNES

● *What's about: Birders — look for young kestrel on wing, sometimes in family parties of four and five. Listen for rapid squealing call. Twitchers — two common ransinch at Flamborough Head, Humberside. Black-winged stilt at Trinity Marshes, Suffolk. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.*

THE limitations of a literary medium are not often irksome, but with stone curlews I confess I am struggling. I sometimes wish for a scratch 'n' sniff newspaper that would give the smell of some particularly odoriferous habitat, but with stone curlew, I wish I could supply a free tape. For this must be one of the wildest sounds in Britain, and it is close to being indescribable.

I heard it this week in a place called West Weeting, in Norfolk, which is almost an inornatopodia. The stone curlew sound is a high, wild piping or weeting, a glorious, lull-hearted wailing, and you hear it as night is falling across the Breck country on the Norfolk-Suffolk border: kur-lee, kur-lee.

This is one of the weirdest sounds, the weirder because it is so unfamiliar to most of us, and it is made by one of the strangest birds you could wish to see. Even from a distance, the first thing that strikes you about the stone curlew is a perfectly enormous yellow eye, owl-like in its beatitude.

These birds fill an odd ecological niche in an odd part of the country. They walk around in the night eating nocturnal insects, and they do so in the heath, the sandy-soiled area which is the nearest England gets to European steppe.

They are also found on the Wessex chalklands, but most of the British population is in the Brecks, the driest place in

Britain. Traditionally, the Brecks has been tightly-grazed heathland. It was occasionally cultivated when grain prices were high, and allowed to fall into disuse when the price fell or the soil was exhausted.

But since 1930, 86 per cent of the Brecks has gone to forestry and full-time arable farming. The stone curlews population plummeted, but now it is clinging on, partly on heathland maintained by conservation bodies, and partly on arable land.

IN FACT it was always thought that these birds had adapted to farming practices. But recent research has shown that where stone curlew nest on arable land, they are using an ancestral nesting site, a place that was once heathland but which has now been lost.

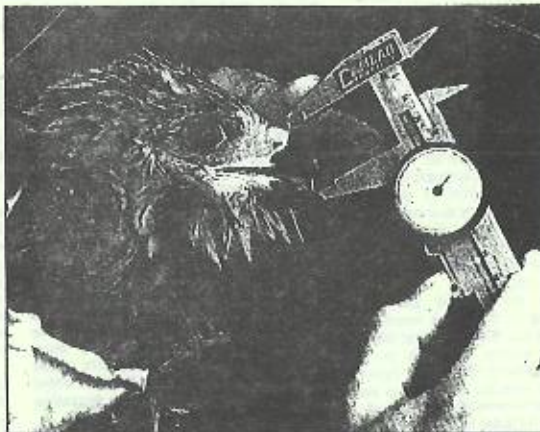
That stone curlew survive is entirely thanks to co-operation

between farmers and conservation bodies. The farming industry gets a lot of stick from conservationists, and rightly, but often individual farmers are delighted to strike the odd blow for conservation.

There are getting on for 90 pairs of stone curlew nesting in Britain this year, and most of them are on farmland. The population is stable, perhaps even slightly rising. This has happened because the RSPB has three wardens on the Brecks, whose task is to locate stone curlew and then tell the farmers.

"We get a tremendous response," says Tony Prater, the RSPB East Anglian regional officer. "They are all pleased and proud to have a rare bird on their land, and they give us all the help they can."

The help mainly involves telling the RSPB when they are going to do disruptive



Inch-perfect: a red kite having its beak measured before being released at a secret location in Scotland this weekend

Return of the kites

By ADAM FRESCO

THE Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has reintroduced red kites into Scotland for the first time since they became extinct during the last century. The 20 young birds were brought from Sweden in a joint operation between the RSPB and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

All the birds had radio tags fitted to their tails yesterday so that the

RSPB can monitor their movements following their release over the weekend at a secret location in Scotland.

The red kites were abundant in the last century in Scotland and Eng-land, but were persecuted to extinction and now breed only in Wales. The birds have spent six weeks in quarantine since arriving in this country.

In search of the stylish merlin

NEARLY a thousand feet below the river Fyngotw would lazily between the rocks of its dramatic gorge. Low down, a pair of kestrels circled above a ravine and, in a cliff-face, we could see a raven's nest, from which this year's young had already flown.

But most of our attention was focused out beyond the river, on the hills of Central Wales which rolled away green and empty to the horizon, for somewhere above them a male merlin was hunting.

Once again Steve Parr, a freelance ornithologist working jointly for the Forestry Commission and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, swung his hand-held aerial slowly back and forth, searching for a signal from the tiny radio lashed with fuse wire to one of the bird's tail feathers.

"There he is!" he says. "Moving from left to right. Now he's stopped. I reckon he's perched up somewhere."

Behind us in the sitka spruce plantation his mate was brooding her clutch of three chicks on an old crow's nest near the top of a tree. We had already wrestled our way up through the spiky branches to check them — a huddle of grey and yellow down — and Steve had pronounced them in excellent order, growing strongly at the tender age of 12 days.

Now we were expecting the male to return with whatever prey he had caught, and yield it up to the female in a ritual food-pass. She, then, would pluck the bird and take it to her young.

Along a ride just inside the plantation, patches of feathers dotted about a mossy bank showed where the female had been plucking, and bore witness

to the industry of the hunter. Meadow pipits were easily his most common victims, and Steve reckoned that to keep his family going he would need to catch at least 15 a day.

Out on the sunny hillside, as we waited, we discussed this most stylish of all British hawks. Sometimes known as the sparrowhawk of the uplands, the merlin favours altitudes between 800 and 1,800 feet. The male is scarcely bigger than a blackbird, and in flight looks rather like a cuckoo, though with a shorter tail. His back is a fine slaty blue, his underparts barred buff and brown. Head on, his profile is so slim as to be almost invisible: like a Stealth fighter, he is scarcely detectable as he powers in towards a target.

Four or five years ago, ornithologists feared the merlin had gone into a serious decline in Wales. Old nest sites on the ground, in heather or molinia grass, were being deserted, and the birds themselves seemed to be disappearing.

The reason for their demise — people claimed — was the spread of new plantations in the mountains. It was said that by putting huge blocks of hillside under trees, foresters had drastically reduced the area of open land on which merlins depend for food. Forestry, in other words, was the *bête noire* of the uplands, the destroyer of wildlife.

Recent research has largely disproved these claims. The current research project in particular has shown that, far from disappearing, the merlins have merely shifted their nest sites into the new trees.

Steve Parr believes there are now about 90 breeding pairs in Wales. The 20 nests he found

Country Matters

DUFF HART-DAVIS



Last year produced an average of 2½ young apiece — a good performance. This year's average will be lower, as a result of the relentlessly wet weather in June, which made hunting difficult and may have drowned some chicks. Even so, he reckons the merlins are doing well.

So, indeed, are all the Welsh raptors. In the past two years the celebrated red kites had their best-ever breeding seasons, and peregrines have increased from the low point of the Sixties to their highest recorded total of some 260 breeding pairs.

The aim of this summer's survey is to find out more about the merlin's habits, especially the way it hunts. Impressions gained so far are that the male has several favourite areas that he works in turn. Having made three or four kills in one, he seems to try another for a while.

To capture the particular birds he is studying, Steve set a

net across a ride near the nest, put a stuffed tawny owl on a dead tree, and played an owl call through a tape recorder. The female, hurrying out to drive the intruder off her patch, was caught first time and fitted with a radio; soon afterwards the male came in with a pipit and was also netted.

Now, by switching to the female's frequency — 259 — Steve could pick up a stream of loud bleeps that showed she was on or near the nest close behind us. By turning to 279, he could faintly hear another merlin, known as the Dalarwen male, far off on a different territory to the east. But the fellow we wanted was on 309, and should be somewhere much closer.

"I've got him!" Steve announced suddenly. "He's heading towards us. Over the bluff there. He's coming in fast."

The strength of the signal increased rapidly. Any moment, we would see him... and there he was — a slim, fast, dark shape speeding with long wing-beats towards the trees.

From over the wood behind us came his shrill, whickering call. Immediately the female answered with loud cries of *kew, kew, kew*. A food pass had been made, and was over in a flash. Already the female would be plucking the male heading out on another sortie.

As we slipped quietly away, my heart went out to those fine, bold birds and their strange ritual. I envy them the high and wild environment in which they live, and hope for their sake that man does nothing to wreck it.

POACHERS often turn gamekeeper, but not many gamekeepers turn artist. One who did is the sculptor Geoffrey Dash-

wood, whose wonderful bronze birds go on show from tomorrow for 10 days in a retrospective exhibition at the Nature in Art gallery at Wallsworth Hall, north of Gloucester.

A rebellious boy, Dashwood was always first in art at school. At 15 he left and enrolled at the art college in Southampton, but hated it so much he quit five weeks later.

After a series of dead-end jobs, he was taken on by the Forestry Commission, and for five years worked as a ranger, culling deer in the New Forest. Then he set himself up as a freelance artist; he began sculpting 10 years ago, and since then has gone from strength to strength.

The figures of birds that he creates are life-sized, and somehow catch the character of their subjects to an uncanny degree. He makes his models from plaster and synthetic clay, and tends to carve and pare them down, rather than build them up. The bronze casts are made in a foundry that now understands his requirements so well it can reproduce the finish and patina he specifies without him having to supervise the operation.

Dashwood's birds have a hypnotic smoothness, but at the same time are fully alive, and radiate the qualities he discerns in the original. His magpie is thus "a bird of false bravado and loutish showmanship", his cockerel a "symbol of masculinity or pompous chauvinism", his small-owl "a little wicked and rather comical".

All are covetable, the only snag being that the price of even the smallest (a wren) is in four figures. And what, by chance, should his latest creation be, delivered to the foundry on Wednesday? A merlin.



Wild birds taken into captivity for falconry

Wild birds killed under licence in course of falconry



Call to end falconry 'bloodsport'

By JOHN YOUNG

THE League Against Cruel Sports called yesterday for the abolition of the "ancient bloodsport" of falconry.

It cited a report it commissioned from Peter Robinson, former senior investigations officer of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, as evidence that the government has issued licences to falconers to kill thousands of protected birds, including skylarks, meadow pipits, song thrushes, fieldfares, and redwings.

Most of Mr Robinson's report is concerned with the welfare of birds of prey, including falcons, and the encouragement that the sport is said to give to illegal trading in wild birds and to thefts from nests.

Government figures show that just under 10,000 people in Britain are registered as keeping one or more live diurnal birds of prey.

In spite of a prohibition on sales, at least 3,735 live birds of prey and owls were sold openly between 1980 and 1987, at a total value of nearly £700,000, the report says. Although there are greater controls on the possession of live birds of prey, robberies from the wild have continued more or less unchecked, particularly of peregrine falcons.

John Bryant, the league's wildlife officer, said yesterday the report showed that falconry "is virtually uncontrolled and conflicts with the conservation principles and the spirit of European legislation for bird protection".

AT SHORT notice it is hard

to come up with a profession held lower in public esteem than farming. We all know about farmers who tell us that the weather is too dry but on the other hand it is too wet as well, and then drive away in a Jaguar to bank several enormous cheques of subsidies they have been given so that they will grow something as unpeppable as it is uncatchable in order that it might be stored in a Brussels warehouse for 25 years before being destroyed.

Since the end of the second world war, farming has been transformed, with huge government encouragement, into agribusiness. It is only now that we are realising the cost.

Lincolnshire is the most alarming example: a county of drained wetland and mashed hedges; a treeless, birdless, trackless place. But green desert farming has been the way for farmers to gain the greatest reward: maximising their land for profit.

We have been cut off from our countryside, from our country. Footpaths are ploughed up, signposts destroyed and, even when the paths exist, they are not worth walking any more, as there is nothing to see and enjoy in an open-air food factory. "Almost every rural change since 1945 has extended what is already commonplace at the expense of what is wonderful or rare or has meaning," said Oliver Rackham in *The*

Feather report

Of lawmaking and lolly



History of the Countryside

The agricultural countryside has become as poor a place for humans as it is for wildlife, and nor are these things unrelated. Birds such as corncrakes, stone curlew, barn owl and grey partridge used to make their living on farmland. Now they are struggling. Even the most common farmland birds are in decline: lapwing, corn bunting and snipe.

One answer is to have a good old moan at the farmers. Any conservationist worth his salt can out-whinge a farmer any day of the week. The end of the world is at hand, and nobody cares, we say.

But gloom 'n' doom is not the way forward in conservation. Agricultural policy is all wrong: so the answer is not to bemoan what has been des-

troyed, but to safeguard what is left and begin the process of restoration. The answer is not with the farmers but central government legislation and lolly.

The RSPB has drawn up a report, "A Future for Environmentally Sensitive Farming", which has gone out to all government agriculture departments. The bedrock of the scheme is subsidy. Jim Dixon, the RSPB agriculture policy officer, says: "The Common Agricultural Policy puts a high price on food production but does not reward farmers who protect wildlife. Farmers who manage their land to protect wildlife habitats deserve encouragement and support."

The report outlines a three-tier structure for environmentally sensitive farming, all based

around financial support. The three tiers comprise nationally important conservation areas at the top, important local features such as hedges and ponds on the bottom, and other landscapes, including moor and wetland, in the middle.

The central part of the scheme would be to pay farmers to protect, improve and create wildlife habitats. Surely not even a farmer would whinge about that.

The notion is tremendously encouraging, but there is a long way between idea and implementation. If it goes through, it will be a great step towards returning the countryside to the people and wildlife who have, after all, some kind of moral rights over the place. A countryside, or a country, that is only for making money in, is a very poor country indeed.

SIMON BARNES

"A Future for Environmentally Sensitive Farming: RSPB Submission to the UK Review of Environmentally Sensitive Areas, 1991", available from: Policy Research Unit, RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds, SG19 2DL.

What's about: *Birds - check woods for newly-fledged greater spotted woodpecker. Very vocal, bright red crown. Twitchers - Franklin's gull in adult plumage on Teeside; male red-backed shrike at Santon Downham, Norfolk. Details from Birdline 0898 700222.*

Soaring success

Two Californian condor chicks will be released in October as part of a four-year programme to save the birds from extinction. The last 27 condors were taken into captivity in Los Angeles and San Diego zoos. There are now 84.

Flying eels are for the birds

From Mr *Fratercula arctica*
Sir: I write as a puffin from Skokholm who was made aware of your recently published photo by Ian Ball (10 July), under which the caption read "the birds catch eels in their serrated bills as they fly just above the water".

Unfortunately, the eels do not jump out of the water for us, we actually catch them underwater. Perhaps you could advise your readers of this; otherwise we might be inundated with visitors looking for flying sand eels and aqua-batic puffins.

Yours faithfully,
FRATERCULA ARCTICA
Dyfed Wildlife Trust
Haverfordwest, Dyfed
10 July

From Ms *Lorraine M. Gilmore*

Sir: In your edition of 10 July, there was a photograph of a puffin with its bill full of fish, off Skokholm Island. May I point out that this particular bird and its young were very lucky indeed.

The photograph failed to show the upsetting and distressing picture of hundreds of birds and their young dying on the Islands of Pembrokeshire. Their deaths are due to fisherman, no longer locals, who are sweeping the seas off West Wales free of all living matter. Seagulls have been coming ashore and scavenging in dustbins to look for food.

I am informed by local fishermen that the same is happening to the bird population living off the Shetlands and Orkney Isles.

Yours faithfully,
LORRAINE M. GILMORE
Milford Haven, Pembrokeshire

Farming threat to wetland wildlife

By ALICE THOMSON

BRITISH wetlands are being drained, causing irreparable environmental damage and threatening rare wildlife, according to a report by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Using the Somerset Levels and Moors as an example, the report says that local drainage bodies are continuing to lower water levels for a small number of intensive livestock and arable farmers despite pleas from conservationists.

This has caused a serious decline in breeding waders and was threatening the wintering bewick's swan, teal, lapwing, snipe and black-tailed godwit.

The National Water Authority's flood defence committees, which control drainage, are dominated by local farmers. The RSPB accuses them of ignoring conservationists' requests to manage water levels for wildlife. The Somerset flood defence committee, which has one conservationist on its board, meets on Friday to discuss the future of wildlife on the Somerset Levels.

Roger Buffon, RSPB policy officer, is pessimistic. He said: "The area is in a perilous state but they don't look as if they're going to move an inch."

Nigel Reader, general regional manager of the NWA Wessex region, and the committee's adviser, said the committee would probably not recommend raising the water level. "We will probably designate some areas for conservation but we also have to take into account the interests of the intensive farmers," he said.

The cold weather is threatening fledglings of rare birds and is preventing some eggs from hatching, the RSPB said.

Birds that traditionally migrate from Africa, such as swifs, house martins, swallows and nightingales, are turning back at the French coast.

The RSPB is particularly concerned about the stone curlew which comes to Britain from Spain from February to October. There are only 40 to 50 breeding pairs in this country.

Lake Baikal pollution threatens world system

From BRUCE CLARK IN IRKUTSK

LAKE Baikal, the aqueous equivalent of Brazil's rain forest, is edging towards the environmental abyss, with incalculable consequences for the world's ecosystem. Like Amazonia, the Siberian lake is so vast and seemingly endless in its capacity to absorb man's misdeeds that environmentalists find it difficult to muster the proper sense of urgency.

The problem looming over the lake, which contains one-fifth of the world's fresh water, is, however, more imminent than that facing Brazil; and the madness of polluting it — in the strictest economic terms — even more obvious.

The lake is larger than Belgium, more than a mile deep and the biggest single



generator of new forms of waterborne life. Superficially, it presents a happier picture than the Aral Sea, which has been reduced by irrigation schemes to two lifeless pools and a bowl of salty dust that is poisoning much of Soviet Central Asia.

In spite of 27 years of discharge from the cellulose and paper factory at Baikalsk on its southern shores, the lake's water has been safer to drink than anything out of an urban tap, thanks to a cleaning system operated by tiny crustaceans.

According to Dr Grigori

Galaxy, head of the Baikal Ecological Museum, the lake is the sole habitat of 600 forms of plant life and 1,200 forms of animal life, in all two-thirds of the waterborne species known on the planet. These include 80 of the 120 species of mollusc, 600 of the 1,100 forms of seaweed, 252 of 450 species of crustacean, and seven families of sponge. The 50 species of fish range from sturgeon to the small but protein-rich omul.

The 600,000 inhabitants of Irkutsk, upstream from the lake on the Angara river, are concerned about the water pollution, but there is little sense of impending disaster. Two recent developments have, however, made it clear that all is not well. The omul, which provides vital nutrition for vitamin-deficient Siberia, has halved in weight to barely six ounces, and is spawning later. Over the past three years, an epidemic has killed 10 per cent of the lake's seals. Dr Galaxy says these changes are a forerunner of a wider, inevitable breakdown of the bio-system.

Although the paper mill uses the best filtration available, the 1.5 billion cubic metres (4.25 billion cubic feet) of effluent it has discharged requires 10,000 times as much water to sterilise it. Dr Galaxy estimates that two-thirds of the lake has been "affected" by the struggle to neutralise pollution; in a few years, the cleaning system's limits will be reached.

One calculation puts the cost of the damage wrought by the paper factory every three days as greater than the value of its annual output, placing a rather arbitrary worth of 0.02 roubles on a single litre of Baikal water.

Clipping the wings of traders

Feather report

IF A robin redbreast in a cage puts all heaven in a rage, the angels from the realms of glory must be choking with apoplexy fury day after day. As an example of sinful wastefulness, the trade in wild birds is

hard to beat. A campaign against this business was launched next week by the RSPB, the RSPCA and the Environmental Investigation Agency, which are seeking a complete ban on the wild bird trade throughout the European Community. This is not

a matter of sentimental guff: it is not a few soppy birdy folk trying to stop people pursuing their hobbies. They are taking on a multi-million pound international industry.

This is not a campaign against aviculture. Birds can be bred in captivity, often are. But that's doing it the difficult way. The easy way is to capture thousands of wild birds, ship them to the markets and flog the survivors.

This is, quite simply, a numbers game. Hundreds die, but enough survive to make this the most profitable way of doing bird business. There are tip-of-the-iceberg figures to show this. In 1988, 47 hummingbirds arrived in Britain from Peru: 21 were dead, the other 26 died in quarantine. The same year, a shipment of 280 honey creepers arrived: 68 were dead, 194 died in quarantine. An on, and on.

The birds come from Asia, South America and Africa. There are two stock responses to this: one is to blame the third worlders, the second to say that banning the trade would harm the third world. Both are inappropriate.

One can hardly blame third world people for making a couple of bob here and there, but the big money in wild birds is made by the importing countries. The trade is run for the benefit of entrepreneurs in Europe, North America and Japan. And as it becomes clear that the third world is not a bottomless pit of goodies, so the pace of exploitation heats up.

After decades of trapping, there is only one species of Spix's macaw left in the wild.

The EC imports one million birds from the wild every year. The business thrives on mistaken and/or forced declara-

tions on import/export documents. Protected species are smuggled in regularly. Legislation is impossible to enforce: how many customs men can recognise a Spix's macaw?

The only answer is a blanket ban on wild bird trading. The EC operates a similar ban for the export of its own birds: the implementation of a ban on imports of other countries' birds is a logical next step.

In the United States, plans to end the trade are in progress. Of 410,035 birds imported in 1988, 12,907 were dead on arrival, 38,942 died in quarantine, and 6,596 were refused entry because of disease. These were killed.

THE campaign urges a three-point legislation: all trade in all birds must be made illegal unless the bird is of a species on a "green list" and is captive-bred; or, if it is not on the green list, can be proved to be captive-bred; or if the shipment of the bird has real conservation benefits.

Pet birds are greatly loved, but anyone who acquires a bird without knowing it was captive-bred commits a crime against conservation and against life.

SIMON BARNES

• The campaign pack "Ban the Wild Bird Trade" is available from RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL.

• What's about: Birders — listen for mechanical churring sound of nightjar in East Anglia and southeast England. Late arrivals include turtle-doves and spotted flycatcher. Twitchers — rare American larkspur sparrow at Waxham, Norfolk. Laughing gull on Orkney. Details from Birdline 0898 70022.

Moves to outlaw wild bird trade

Polly Ghazi

BRITAIN is to press for a European ban on imports of exotic wild birds, thousands of which suffer horrific deaths during transport every year.

Agriculture Minister John Gummer and Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine will ask the European Commission next month to investigate the banning of shipments of wild birds trapped in the jungles of Africa and South America. The EC is the world's largest consumer of wild birds, importing 1.5 million every year to satisfy the demand for exotic caged pets.

Environment Minister Tony Baldry told *The Observer*: "With 1992 coming up, it is important that action is taken at a Community level. We are keen to find a solution to the welfare problems of the bird trade, and we believe we need to consider the implications and operation of an import ban."

In 1989, of 184,600 birds imported into Britain, 4,000 were dead on arrival and a further 19,500 died in quarantine. Ministers are worried that many more birds are known to die en route for Britain, during capture in the wild or during airline transportation.

Last month, British Airways pulled out of the trade after pressure from campaign groups, including the RSPCA and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Last year, 76,498 wild caught birds were carried on BA flights, 968 dying in transit. Several other major airlines, including KLM and United, have stopped transporting them.

A Government-commissioned inquiry into the effects on conservation of the international trade in wild plants and birds will also urge the EC to tackle the issue of deaths in transit. The report, to be published in September, also recommends that rare bird species whose survival is threatened by high death rates during transport should be banned from

trading. The Government is to urge that they be given endangered status at the next meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites).

The British initiative was welcomed this weekend by animal welfare and conservation groups. "We are delighted that the Government is responding so quickly," said Peter Knights of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). "Britain is traditionally in the forefront of animal welfare issues so it is appropriate that we should take this up in Europe."

A recent EIA investigation in the illegal bird trade centres of Argentina and Senegal has uncovered widespread abuse of regulations governing the trade.

Abuses include false Cites trade documents and export licences claiming that rare birds were caught in countries where the species does not occur. Protected endangered species which are being illegally shipped to Europe include hyacinth macaws, of which only 5,000 remain in the wild, canaries and military macaws, golden conures and purple-bellied parrots.

EIA investigators uncovered illegal trade routes by road and rail from Paraguay and Bolivia into Argentina. The team followed one illegal shipment of rare blue-fronted Amazon parrots from capture in the wild in Argentina's Corrientes province to shipment to the US.

The chicks were pulled from their nests in hollow Quebracho trees, force-fed maize, mixed with water, and then packed into cramped wire cages for the long, arduous journey to Buenos Aires. Of 425 which were captured, only 375 reached Buenos Aires alive and several more died in quarantine.

"Every regulation in the book was being broken," said Knights. "We've been trying to regulate the trade for 35 years and it just hasn't worked. If birds are to stop suffering and dying, an international trade ban is the only solution."

Wader flies into an early autumn

BIRDS

Brian Unwin

A RARE least sandpiper on Humberside this week provided a lively climax to July and a reminder that for many shorebirds it is already autumn. This diminutive wader, on Beacon Lane Ponds near Kilnsea, is the first to arrive from Canada since 1988, when three appeared at the same time of year, increasing British Isles records to 42.

Its arrival fitted well with the classic pattern of departures of mainly adult females of this species — which play the lesser role in rearing young — from the Gulf of St Lawrence from mid-July.

Their destination is northern South America which, despite their sparrow-size, they can reach in a single flight, making it feasible for them to drift off-course to Britain, especially with a tailwind. One slightly off-beat feature of the Humberside sighting was that the bird was reported to be moulting. Generally, this does not become evident among birds newly arrived in South America until mid-August.

The only other rare wader

in the North recently was another long-distance migrant far from where it ought to be — a Pacific golden plover on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, in mid-July. As this species does not normally leave its breeding grounds in Siberia and western Alaska before August, this was most likely a bird summering in Britain after arriving last autumn.

More typical migrant waders in the early stages of their autumn journeys have been increasingly evident lately — just a few weeks after the last signs of northward spring movements.

I focused last month on the lateness of spring passage. Remarkably, this trickled into early July with reports of a golden oriole sighted at Filey, North Yorkshire on July 4 and red-backed shrikes on Anglesey and at Flamborough Head, Humberside, over July 5 and 6.

Further surprises came

with a common rosefinch at Flamborough on July 6 and up to three more from July 20, perhaps reflecting the apparent expansion of this species' breeding range, the western limits of which are Germany and southern Sweden.

I also mentioned bee-eaters overshooting their southern European summer haunts. This, too, continued into July with sightings at Loch of Strathbeg, Grampian, on the 3rd and Stronsay, Orkney, on the 11th.

More spectacular were the wanderings into Scotland of black storks, the nearest summer territories of which are Spain and eastern Europe. Last week one was in the Inverness area and two were near Little Loch Roag on Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

This was just a few days after a white stork was seen over Dublin, one of several Irish July rarities, the others including a rose-coloured starling at Shannon airport and a black-headed bunting at Loop Head, Co Clare.

Meanwhile, the month's most exciting seabird report was of a black-browed alba-

ross seen from the Skye to South Uist ferry, most likely the bird which has been visiting Shetland almost annually since 1972.

Other highlights were a series of reports of rare terns, including a Caspian tern at Ross Carbery, Co Cork, a white-winged black tern near St Fergus, Grampian, and possibly the same gull-billed tern off both the Humberside and Tyneside coasts.

Also outstanding was the discovery of up to six American surf scoters among an impressive gathering of 5,000 common scoters on the sea off Murcar golf course, near Aberdeen.

Arguably the month's oddest seabird report, however, involved a Leach's petrel which turned up over both Broomhill, Fife, and Wormley, south Yorkshire, on July 5. Inland sightings of these ocean-dwellers do occur from time to time, but usually during intense westerly autumn gales. Why this bird should have appeared so far from the sea in calm mid-summer weather is puzzling.



The cuckoo's arms race

By Tom Tregenza

of Bristol University
Runner-up in the
Telegraph Young Science
Writer Awards 1991

THE distinctive call of the cuckoo has marked the first stirrings of spring for many thousands of years. While most birds are preparing for the labours of another brood of hungry chicks, male cuckoos put their energies into wooing mates from the tree tops.

The close-knit team of the monogamous pair, characteristic of most bird species, is lost as males attempt to pass on their genes by mating with as many females as possible. The females, with a similarly cavalier attitude, then lay their eggs in the nests of an unfortunate host, normally a smaller bird, which carries the burden of raising a new generation of parasites.

But can the cuckoo really be having it so good? Research shows that, just like other animals, it is fighting a constant battle to survive. The young cuckoo, hatching before its nest-mates, kills them by heaving them out of the nest one by one. The hosts then labour all spring to feed the parasite, which grows to many times the size of its foster-parents.

This is good news for cuckoos. The problem is, that because the cuckoo is so good at manipulating its host, it begins to produce pressure for new generations to avoid making the same mistake. If cuckoos are common, they will affect the offspring of a larger number of birds.

This means that if a host bird is born which can distinguish between its own eggs and that of a cuckoo, it will avoid wasting time and energy on bringing up cuckoos and will instead bring up more of its own young. These birds will also carry the ability to discriminate against cuckoo eggs, and so they too will be more successful, as will their offspring and so on. Hence birds that can recognise and remove a cuckoo egg will spread through the population. This begins to make



A willow warbler feeds a young cuckoo that has made itself at home in the other birds' nest

things more difficult for cuckoos, producing a pressure on them that gives an advantage to a cuckoo which by chance produces eggs closer in appearance to host eggs, and so are not rejected. This in turn causes pressure for hosts to become more discerning, which leads to better mimicry by cuckoo eggs and so on. An "evolutionary arms race" like this has been going on between cuckoos and their hosts ever since they became numerous enough to make an impact.

Aristotle, Shakespeare and Chaucer all mention cuckoos, so we can be sure that they have been around for a while. We can see the results of the arms race by examining the behavioural armoury of either

participant: more discriminatory hosts are parasitised by cuckoos whose eggs are near perfect replicas, while less discerning victims get only a more approximate copy.

Hosts have evolved to abandon their nest if they see a cuckoo on it; this has forced cuckoos to time their raids for the afternoon when the parents are out, and to lay an egg within 10 seconds.

6 Cuckoos have been forced to time their raids for the afternoons

Also, hosts have begun to count — their brood — they are more likely to abandon their nest if eggs appear or disappear. This has forced cuckoos to remove only a single egg when they lay their own, and means they can lay eggs only once the host has begun laying its own brood.

Some potential hosts have

avoided the war zone: experiments in Iceland, which has no cuckoos, on species known to be parasitised in mainland Europe have shown that unlike their Continental relatives, they cannot discriminate against eggs unlike their own, and will happily incubate model eggs "laid" by researchers.

Luckily for everyone who waits for the first cuckoo of spring, it seems likely that their victims are destined to remain one step behind. This is because raising a cuckoo prevents a host bird from raising young for one season, but still leaves it with the possibility of future broods.

For a cuckoo, on the other hand, things are more drastic: any egg which is recognised will not reach adulthood, so only those eggs which fool hosts will pass on their adaptations. Therefore the selection on cuckoos to win the arms race is strong enough to keep them permanently ahead.

Research explains migration instinct

By Nick Nuttall

TECHNOLOGY CORRESPONDENT

A STUDY of two closely related populations of European warblers has helped to unlock the secrets of how birds migrate. Research on the Austrian and German blackcaps offers evidence that birds inherit genetic maps that steer them to wintering grounds sometimes thousands of miles away.

The research helps to explain how young birds find their way over strange terrain without guidance from an adult. It has also found that crossbreeding the birds leads to the offspring inheriting damaged maps that steer them off course, sometimes fatally.

The findings, by Andrew Helbig, a German biologist, are published in *Behavioural Ecology and Sociobiology*. He has harnessed a phenomenon called migratory restlessness, which causes captive birds to flutter in the direction they would take if they were free.

Dr Helbig crossed the blackcaps and observed the direction of their migratory restlessness. Pure German blackcaps travel southwest, whereas Austrian ones migrate southeast to the Mediterranean. Both avoid the Alps. The crossbreeds, however, appeared to inherit half a map from each parent, which would drive them south to the Alps on a journey they would be unlikely to survive.

Odd weather a boon to June

SPRING migration regularly spills over into early summer. This year, however, the erratic weather delayed the usual mid-May rush of rarer passage birds until June.

Red-backed shrikes and common rosefinches illustrate the point. Exceptionally, neither species was reported anywhere in the country until a few, mainly in southern regions, right at the end of May.

Over the next three weeks this accelerated with at least 13 shrikes and 15 rosefinches in Northern Britain, mostly in Orkney and the Shetlands,

with Humberside faring best among mainland areas. Last month stood out for other reasons — one being the sequence of sightings of needle-tailed swifts, a species which winters in Australia then migrates to a breeding territory spread between Japan and eastern Siberia.

As there had been only seven British Isles records in 145 years, reports from Kent on May 26, Blythfield reservoir, Staffordshire, on June 1 and the island of Noss, Shetland, on the 11th and 14th were remarkable indeed.

While it cannot be proved, it seems likely this was a single bird flying the country's length. It is also possible this could have been the same bird that was recorded in Northern Britain in 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1988.

The Reclamation Pond at Teesmouth, Cleveland, enjoyed quite a run of events in June, with a gull-billed tern on the fifth, a lesser crested tern on the 16th and, most sensational, a Franklin's gull

from the 19th to the 23rd. One could speculate whether the Franklin's gull — which ought to have been on the North American prairies at the time — was the same bird which was seen on Shetland on May 27 and then in Norfolk last weekend.

Two days after the gull's Teesmouth appearance, a pied wheatear was found at Spurn, Humberside. It promptly vanished, only to reappear two days later at Scarborough —

with an equally rare woodchat shrike. The Northumbrian coast

weighed in with a Pacific golden plover at Druridge Pool Nature Reserve — far from its normal summer haunts in north-east Siberia or Western Alaska.

More mobile bird watchers were able to take in all these events, plus the king eider which has been on the sea near St Abb's Head, north of Berwick-upon-Tweed since June 9, only the third time this Arctic species has occurred between the Firth of Forth and the Humber this century.

Over the past nine days the Yorkshire and Humberside coast has kept up the momentum, with reports of at least four bee-eaters while an American spotted sandpiper has been found near Wakefield.

Notable reports elsewhere in June included a black stork on Anglesey, a gyrfalcon on the outer Hebrides, a white-winged black tern near John O'Groats, a bee-eater in Greater Manchester and a black-headed hunting at Tarbet on the Scottish coast.

Paul Brown
Environment Correspondent

HUNDREDS of sites saved from development to protect wildlife could lose their special status under a government scheme approved in the Lords last night which has shocked conservationists.

Professor Fred Holliday, chairman of the Nature Conservancy Committee, said he was deeply disturbed about the decision to review sites of special scientific interest in Scotland. He said he had not been consulted.

The scheme was proposed by Lord Pearson of Rannoch, a city banker who owns a large section of Rannoch Moor in Scotland. He is locked in a long battle with the Scottish Nature Conservancy Council over a site of special scientific interest on his land. He wants to graze cattle on it but the NCC said it should be confined to sheep or deer.

Following the row two years ago when the Government announced the break-up of the Nature Conservancy Council the latest move is bound to undermine confidence in the replacement body.

Chris Patten, then the Environment Secretary, appointed a co-ordinating committee to represent all British interests in

nature conservation. The new body was to be consulted about all major policy decisions.

"I am deeply disturbed by what I have heard," said Professor Holliday. "The implications of this go far beyond Scotland and affect all nature conservation in Britain. One of my functions as chairman was to make sure that the same standards applied to the whole country."

"They have reopened the whole issue of independence, the feeling of confidence will go. We have worked like hell to make these changes work."

Mr Ian Lang, the Scottish secretary, said the new body would be set up separately from the Scottish Natural Heritage the NCC's successor. All cases where the NCC had been in dispute with Scottish landowners will be reviewed. The body will have no heritage committee members.

Sir William Wilkinson, the retiring chairman of the NCC who fought to keep its independent status in the changeover, said: "Prof Holliday has been badly let down by the Government, they have broken their promises."

Shuart Housden, for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said: "What is the point of having a statutory body with professional staff if you are going to introduce a separate review body to second-guess all its decisions."

NATURE NOTE

THE SKYLARK is a favourite of poets. As well as Shelley's rapture on the blithe Spirit and its unpremeditated art, there are five poems by Clare devoted to the species. It was the song of this otherwise unremarkable small brown bird that inspired both poets. They saw the lark ascending on winnowing wings until a speck in the sky, and singing as it goes, as a symbol of freedom.

I have been taking pleasure in watching and listening to skylarks, one of the few species to nest among the barley and oilseed rape of the surrounding farmland. I particularly enjoy the headlong dive as the lark drops back to earth.

When singing, the skylark, like any bird, is labouring under the imperative of defending its territory. It will sometimes sing from the ground or a perch, but it more often pours out its message to other larks while airborne. Flying is a strenuous enough activity, but hovering and climbing almost vertically, even when heading into the wind for added lift, are exceptionally arduous.

However, the skylark is assisted by unusually well-developed flight muscles, which give it another advantage: it can escape from birds of prey by out-climbing them.

Robert Burton



