



Fylde Bird Club

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

NEWSLETTER NO. 56

FROM THE CHAIR

You are all probably aware that the Wyre Barrage Feasibility Study has been published. The £200,000 spent has only raised further questions that will cost another £1.2 million to answer.

We have already attended a couple of meetings to discuss the barrage, unfortunately I cannot report about the content of the meetings but there are a couple of questions that we can help answer.

1. We need to know how many birds feed around the mouth of the Wyre, particularly Oystercatchers on the Mussel beds.
2. Regular observers at Rossall and South Promenade will be aware of the movement of Bar Tailed Godwits feeding around the Wyre and roosting on the Ribble. We need further details of the numbers involved.
3. Thanks to all of you who helped with the low water survey on the Wyre, your results have been well received by the relevant bodies and we have been asked to continue with the Survey.

If any of you can help with this important field work please let me know as soon as possible. The information gathered could be vital to the future of the Wyre Estuary.

I hope we can rely on you for your usual enthusiastic support.

Many thanks

L.G.B.

THE SHORELARK IN LANCASHIRE

The first record for the County came in 1882 when 8 (of which 2 were alive) were captured in Gin traps set for Larks on the Formby coast in early September. This is an exceptionally early date, no others being recorded before 14th October. In 1899 one was shot at Oxcliffe in December. Two were reported shot at Ainsdale in 1908. In December 1920 F.W.Holder who made so many pioneering observations in S.W. Lancashire saw one in the Dunes at Ainsdale.

After ten years birding with no Winter visits to Norfolk my familiarity with the species remained pictures in Peterson's Field Guide so when I heard of 2 at Meols, Wirral, in November 1963 a mini-twitch was arranged for the 1st December. We saw 2 on the tideline and behind the dunes. Driving back we decided to search our own Fylde tidelines as soon as possible and on the 8th December Graham Blackwell and I headed for Fairhaven. We descended the stone steps at the north end of Fairhaven Lake and within 100 yards were watching Lancashires first Shorelark in 43 years! It wintered there until the 13th March 1964.

Throughout the sixties and seventies at least 18 records followed, several of up to 5 birds and some involving overwintering. All were along the Merseyside coast or South Fylde except for a male at the Kear estuary on 15th January 1968: 2 at Rossall 13th February 1970: 1 at Carnforth marsh 19th February to 1st March 1975.

Following a National trend Shorelarks have been rarer from the Eighties to the present day.

The following are all the records in this period.

1980 - 6 at Seaforth on 31st October.

4 at Hesketh Out Marsh 9th November to 22nd March 1981

1981 - 1 at the Go-kart track, South Promenade Blackpool 8th November.

1982 - 3 at Seaforth on 20th November.

1983 - 1 at Banks on 28th February.

The last 2 records have not 'fitted the pattern' with 1 at Stocks reservoir on the 23rd February 1987 and one with Snow Buntings on Pendle Hill on the 16th and 17th December 1990.

With increasing disturbances by dog-walkers and others along tide lines on sandy beaches perhaps we should be looking for Shorelarks in future along the upper edges of salt-marshes.

The Pilling-Cockerham embankment seems to me a likely spot - anyone feel energetic?

Maurice Jones

1992 - SURVEYS

Have you ever thought of contributing to the Common Bird Census (CBC) or participating in bird survey work?

The BTO is currently looking for birders to carry out work on three surveys during 1992, they are:-

1. Pilot Census Project (CBC) . The object of this pilot project is to test two radically new methods of carrying out the present CBC. If the methods are found to be unenjoyable or yield poor results then any future pilot work will probably take new directions.

The methods are based on a simple line transect system. The lines will be on a 1 km. square of the national grid and two transect lines up and down or across the square are to be established, ideally 500m apart, such lines to be as straight across the square as possible. Once the transect lines are set up the observer will be asked to record the habitats along it and make two visits using each method, one early and one late in the season (mid April - end of June). One method of carrying out the survey is called the "Transect Method" and will involve walking up one transect line recording every bird identified within 25m, between 25m and 100m of the T.L., and over 100m from the T.L., or only in flight. This process is repeated for the return leg down the other T.L. The starting and finishing times for each leg is to be recorded. The other method is called the "Combined Method" and is basically the same as the Transect Method but has additionally ten stations (five per T.L. at ideally 200m spacing) at which a five minute point count is taken. Birds recorded at a point count are not recorded on the transect count.

The 1km squares are to be selected at random to avoid any bias that would be introduced if observers were to choose their own site. A field worker would be given a reasonably local square but the square could just as easily be a dense urban area as it could an area of interesting habitat.

The above methodology has not yet been finalised. But this pilot study will require at least two years coverage and will continue in 1993 but it is likely that there will be some changes in methods.

2. Corn Bunting Survey . Since the publication of the first BTO breeding atlas the Corn Bunting has shown a reduction of its breeding range. A decline of 42% over 20 years. The CBC index now stands at about 50% of the 1963 level. At the present rate of decline the Corn Bunting could be extinct in Britain in sixty years time.

The BTO will be conducting a nationwide survey of Corn Buntings, spread over 1992 and 1993. The objectives being:- (a) to estimate the current population, (b) to provide a framework for future surveys, and (c) to collect some simple habitat data in order to relate bird distribution to land use.

3. Nightjar Survey . (This one is for the Fylde optimists). The last BTO nightjar survey in 1981 showed a British Nightjar population of c2000 males. Ten years on the status of the Nightjar in Britain is unclear. The object of the survey is to count and map the locations of churring male Nightjars in the U.K. and provide a baseline for future systematic monitoring of the species throughout Britain.

I am sure that you are all extremely anxious to get involved in one or more of these surveys and just wondering what to do next to receive your bumper package of instructions and proforma..... well! just contact your friendly BTO Regional Rep. - Dave Jackson. Go on - Give him a surprise!!!

Any one who has read the latest BTO News can feel free to skip this page.

RECENT REPORTS

NOVEMBER

Undoubtedly the bird of the month award goes to the immature female Desert Wheatear found at Rossall on the 5th. The bird was found by Roger Scholes and Don Rusling and must have considerably brightened up their day. At first it looked pretty subdued but the longer it stayed the perkier it seemed, feeding well and being very approachable. It survived some pretty horrible weather and was last seen on the 19th. That evening was a very clear one and probably moved off in the clear conditions.

It attracted many hundreds of visitors, not just Twitchers by the car load but coach trips too, from afar afield as Northumberland and the Borders. With so many people visiting the area it was inevitable that other birds would be found. Pomarine Skuas were seen on the 8th and 9th whilst another was found dead on the Golf Course, this luckless individual now resides in the capable charge of Simon Hayhow, Curator of the Natural History section of Fleetwood Museum. Other birds seen were 2 Snow Buntings, a Lapland Bunting and a Mediterranean Gull, all seen on the 17th. Another rare visitor was Ed Stirling, seen well outside his normal range.

During the early part of the month there were some impressive diurnal movements. On the 1st, 205 Chaffinch, 2 Brambling and 5 Skylarks flew south in twenty minutes whilst at Rossall on the same morning between 0720 and 0820 397 Chaffinch, 5 Brambling, 15 Greenfinch, 6 Linnets and a Reed Bunting moved southwards.

Large flocks of Fieldfares with just a few Redwings moved through the Mere early in the month. Another Brambling flew south over Rossall on the 15th and a solitary Redpoll moved north.

8 Long Tailed Tits were at Stanah on the 12th - it seems to have been a good Autumn for this species - Monty Myerscough had 15 at Ribby on the 2nd and 12 at Lytham Hall on the 19th. The only surprising thing was that Maurice hadn't had them feeding outside/inside/on the gutter of his shop. Watch this space.

Talking of Maurice, on his visit to the Reserve on the 17th, a male Blackcap, a female/immature Stonechat, a Short Eared Owl and 8 Common Snipe were present. 4 flocks of Fieldfare totalling 76 flew south. It was pretty cool that day and when I saw Maurice later on in the afternoon his face was red with cold. I'm sure this must have acted as a beacon for migration - the Fieldfare were passing fairly close to him.

On the same afternoon a visit to the Mere produced 8 Shoveler, 201 Teal, 2 Wigeon, 3 Goldeneye, 2 Great Crested Grebe, 80 Fieldfare and a Short Eared Owl. A Rock Pipit called as it flew over towards Staining.

A pair and a female/immature Stonechat were at LSANR on the 24th.

Four Rock Pipits were at Stanah throughout the month. A Water Rail was found in the small Reed bed below the Car Park, and a female Blackcap was seen at Burglars Alley on the 17th.

At Pilling a flock of 110 Twite frequented the area between Lane Ends and the Cocker Estuary. The flock was seen on several dates between the 10th and the 24th. The 10th was not only Wader count day on Morecambe Bay but on the Ribble too. Details of numbers for Morecambe Bay can be found at the end of the Newsletter; The St. Annes shore roost held 550 Oystercatchers, 400 Bar Tailed Godwits, 900 Knot, 29 Ringed Plover, 400 Sanderling, 150 Dunlin, 190 Grey Plover and a lone Turnstone.

Not only was the 10th Wader Count day, it was also official Goose Count day. November, during the last few years has yielded some spectacular nil counts, however this year things were a little better with 279 present over Wyre.

Birdline North West reported a Snow Goose east of Pilling on the 17th and 18th along with 600 Pinkfeet and a single White-front (race unspecified). 2 female Goosander were on the Wyre at Cartford on the same day. Later in the month 6 Whooper Swans were at Bonds Farm, Pilling on the 24th.

Len, whilst on his perambulations in the Stanah, Skippool and Fleetwood areas managed to find a second Winter Ring Billed Gull and an adult Glaucous Gull at the CEGB pools on the 20th. Sadly, they weren't seen the following day. More common fare, but seen in good numbers were the 3380 Lapwing and 600 Golden Plover using the sandbanks in the Wyre at Barnaby Sands and Skippool on the 17th. On the 30th 3000 Lapwing were at Skippool again, roosting on the sandbanks.

On a visit to the south of his range Ed found 20 Snipe on Lytham beach on the 16th. A return to more familiar territory produced a Grey Wagtail over Blackpool town centre on the same day, with one at South Shore on the 26th.

Marton Mere had some good birds during the month. A Pomarine Skua present briefly on the 3rd was only the second record for the site. On the same day a juvenile, possibly the same bird, flew south along the beach at Starr Gate at 1157. The Bittern, which had been present during October, was seen on several occasions. Overhead 10 Bewick Swans flew east on the 13th and 10 moved south on the 16th.

At the coast a male and female Velvet Scoter consorted with the flocks of Common Scoter off Starr Gate throughout the month. This latter species is always difficult to count but 244 were seen in calm conditions on the 16th. 2 Long Tailed Ducks were present there on the 3rd.

Great Crested Grebe numbers increased, with 18 at Starr Gate on the 1st, 24 on the 16th and 48 on the following day. 4 Red Throated Divers were offshore on the same day. Most unusual were the 103 Eider also seen on the 17th. This species seems to be extending its range southwards to the Ribble with counts of 60 or so now coming from North Promenade on a regular basis.

A Great Skua, which appeared to be oiled was at the Go-Kart track at Starr Gate on the 6th and 7th.

There were some good duck movements too, small parties of Pintail or Wigeon could be seen fairly regularly moving south at the coast. On the 17th 197 Wigeon flew past in small parties along with 18 Teal and 86 Mallard. Ironically this last species, although common virtually everywhere, is never seen in large numbers moving along the coast.

Murky conditions on the 24th produced 20 Guillemots and 1 Razorbill moving south off Starr Gate.

Along the coast at Fleetwood a Shag was seen at Rossall on the 4th. Up to 95 Mute Swans, 21 Mergansers and 3 Goldeneye graced the Marine Lake.

For me, birds of the month at the coast were a Great Northern Diver flying south through the surf at Starr Gate on the 1st and a Black Throated Diver doing likewise on the 24th. Both were firsts for me in the Fylde. I'm now wanting to see Surf Scoter at Starr Gate and King Eider at Rossall.

DECEMBER

The number of Swans in our area increased substantially during the month. The 6 Whoopers at Bonds Farm were joined by another 6 and 29 Bewick Swans. Newton Marsh held a maximum of 65 Bewicks throughout the month.

On the 8th a Lesser White-fronted Goose was found by Len Blacow with a small flock of Pinkfeet at Thurnham. The bird was not seen again, in fact the Pinkfeet remained elusive throughout the month no doubt as a result of shooting pressure. On the 12th approximately 2500 were on the fields at Thurnham. It is some years since the geese last used Thurnham on a regular basis.

At Pilling 6 Dark Bellied Brents were at Lane Ends feeding on the Salt marsh.

Low water levels at the Mere produced some good numbers of wildfowl. A peak count of 750 Teal plus 615 Mallard, 41 Wigeon, 33 Shoveler, 33 Tufted Duck and 27 Pochard. 4 Bewick Swans roosted on the Mere on the 4th-14th. The Bittern was seen again on the 23rd and 28th.

The St. Annes shore roost on the 22nd held 1500 Bar Tailed Godwits, 2500 Knot, 220 Oystercatchers, 1000 Dunlin, 200 Sanderling, 100 Grey Plover, 8 Ringed Plover and 2 Turnstone. Looking at these figures something appears not quite right - yes, you've spotted it - all the counts end in even numbers. Come on Maurice, surely there were 1497 Bar Tailed Godwits and maybe 1007 Dunlin!

Elsewhere large flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover roosted at Skippool with smaller numbers off Stanah and Barnaby Sands. 200 Dunlin were feeding off Stanah on the 3rd.

The pair of Stonechats were still present on LSANR on the 8th though the presence of a local Sparrowhawk later in the month would seem to jeopardise further chances of survival. Sparrowhawks were seen regularly over Wyre and at Marton Mere. A Peregrine on the 10th at the Mere was unusual. Also present there were 3 Short Eared and 3 Long Eared Owls. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen at the Mere on the 15th and 29th. A female Hen Harrier was seen at Warton on the 1st and 28th.

Winter flocks of corvids seem to get overlooked but on the 8th December Barry Dyson counted 4500 (individually) between Winmarleigh Moss and Eagland Hill. More counts please, I'm sure there's lots more out there, as I cast my mind back to last Sunday (9th February). In fact, come to think about it Barry, I'm not sure whether a Corvid flock doesn't come into the category of Boring Birds (see last Newsletter). Did you fall asleep as you counted? Would you count another flock? Is a pigeon flock more exciting than a Corvid flock?

On the 9th Barry found a Water Rail at the CEGB pool at Fleetwood.

Seawatching was hampered by dark misty conditions brought on by the high pressure which sat over the British Isles for most of the month. 37 Great Crested Grebes were off Starr Gate on the 1st. Common Scoter numbers peaked at 701 on the 27th whilst Velvet Scoters increased to 3 on the same day. At Rossall the Eider flock rose from 870 on the 3rd to 1128 by the 29th. They were a fine sight as they displayed and cooed close inshore.

Unfortunately approaching mist and drizzle soon put an end to the spectacle. What odds on a spectacled Eider?

After the gloom of most of the month it was a pleasant experience to wake up to a westerly force 6 increasing to 7 on the 22nd. A total of 484 Kittiwakes passed southwards along with 122 Pintail and 55 Wigeon. Strangely there were no Little Gulls.

As Maurice (Chevalier, this time) once said "Thank heavens for Little Gulls" - alas there were none. By way of compensation a Little Auk whizzed southwards through the surf looking far from distressed unlike the one which was brought to Len at the Stanah centre which had been picked up on Amounderness Way. Sadly it expired that evening.

A female Long Tailed Duck was discovered on a small pool off Fluke Hall on the 26th. Another was later found on the Marine Lake at Fleetwood. A female Merganser was present on Fairhaven Lake on Christmas Day.

Seamus Eaves has supplied details of the Fylde Ringing Group's activities during December. On the 7th at Bank Lane Warton, 2 male Sparrowhawks and a male Great Spotted Woodpecker were ringed. I must

admit it sounds potentially risky handling either of these species. Was there much blood spilt? On the same day another Sparrowhawk, but this time a female, was ringed at Clifton along with 6 Blackbirds, 11 Chaffinch and an immature male Blackcap. At the same site on the 24th 28 Chaffinch, 7 Blackbirds and 2 Treecreepers were ringed.

2 Jays were at Singleton Hall on the 27th and approximately 300 Chaffinch roosted there. 7 Blackbirds, 2 Redwing, and 2 Song Thrush were ringed. The following day 8 Blackbirds were ringed at Clifton Hall.

CONTRIBUTORS: C.G.Batty, L.G.Blacow, A.Dawe, B.Dyson, S.Eaves,
S.Hayhow, M.Jones, M.Myerscough, R.Stinger, E.Stirling.

POSTSCRIPT

I receive many cuttings for the Newsletter but I don't often see or buy the Evening Gazette. Would it be possible for someone who gets the paper on a regular basis to cut out any relevant articles for inclusion in the Newsletter. I know that this will no doubt mean endless pictures of our Chairman in his capacity as Warden at Stanah but I'm sure that he can stand the exposure. Maybe he'll start getting fan mail or even requests for bird boxes - I understand that he's a dab hand at constructing these and what's more he's still got all his fingers.

I saw Ed a couple of weekends ago on one of his visits to the shelter at Starr Gate. He was saying that he saw his earliest ever Wheatear on March 10th last year. That's barely three weeks away; it doesn't seem that long since the first geese were arriving or we were scanning the sea for Leach's Petrels. I must be getting old or something but this winter seems to have flown by.

Talking of geese, they've been 'very viewable' in recent weeks since shooting stopped inland. There were easily 3000 on Moss Edge a couple of weekends ago, naturally because they were so viewable there were no 'oddities' in with them - certainly no Snow Goose. Still there's time yet. For those of you who haven't been across to look at the Geese it's well worth a visit over Wyre, maybe combined with a Wader watch at high tide at Knott End or Pilling.

I'm not going to mention the Secretary in this issue. People just don't realise the flak I get from him. He now tells me that the first thing that happens when he gets home from the Bird Club is that Ann (alias Mrs.Hinchliffe) snatches the Newsletter from him to check for any defamation of character. Personally I'm a bit hurt by this; everything I write about him is true, as time will tell!

May I remind everyone that I would welcome articles, points of view, or even adverts for the next issue.

A.D

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

10th November 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt.C. Grebe			2				2
Cormorant	1		5	3			9
Mute Swan				94			94
Pink Footed Goose			58				58
Shelduck	41		950			122	1113
Wigeon	105		556			18	679
Teal	14		31		4	26	75
Mallard	10		476		8	104	598
Pintail			2				2
Shoveler					11		11
Eider				526			526
Goldeneye				1			1
Red Breasted Merganser	4		6	21	4	4	35
Coot					15		15
Oystercatcher	260	100	6145	9	384	341	7239
Ringed Plover				13			13
Golden Plover	100						100
Grey Plover	38	12	143			15	208
Lapwing	12	350	48		68		478
Knot			4250	1		40	4291
Sanderling				1			1
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	50		6485	1			6536
Ruff							
Snipe	2		1				3
Black T. Godwit	10					15	25
Bar T. Godwit	57		1271	1		9	1338
Whimbrel							
Curlew	20	250	427			9	706
Spotted Redshank							
Redshank	43	35	423	3	54	219	777
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone	10	30		492			532

A Condor Green/Glaason

B Cokersands Pt.

C Pilling/Cokersands

D Roscall Point

E [C] & CEGB Pools

F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.

B.T.O BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

MORECAMBE BAY SOUTH

8th December 1991

	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Gt. C. Grebe	2		7	3			12
Cormorant	2		6	1	1	4	14
Mute Swan			6	122			128
Pink Footed Goose			10				10
Shelduck	55		800			138	993
Wigeon	37		1070			18	1125
Teal	144		544		1	870	1559
Mallard	76		398		2	174	650
Pintail			26			4	30
Shoveler							
Eider				700			700
Goldeneye		6		5	7		18
Red Breasted Merganser	9	8	11	17	5	5	55
Coot							
Oystercatcher	25	135	3946	80	206	468	4858
Ringed Plover			33	9			42
Golden Plover	60		30				90
Grey Plover	1	14	252				267
Lapwing	225		612		234	138	1209
Knot		90	1430	4		15	1539
Sanderling			190	14			204
Little Stint							
Curlew Sandpiper							
Purple Sandpiper							
Dunlin	124	6	6841			31	7002
Ruff							
Snipe	7		2				9
Black T. Godwit	2					23	25
Bar T. Godwit	217		509	5		5	736
Whimbrel							
Curlew	12		837		21	32	922
Spotted Redshank						1	1
Redshank	41		931	4		128	1104
Greenshank							
Common Sandpiper							
Turnstone	1	85	16	292		26	420

A Conder Green/Glasson

B Cockersands Pt.

C Pilling/Gockernham

D Rosall Point

E ICI & CEGB Pools

F Arm Hill & Wyre Est.

Birder's eye view of the Big Apple

I have waded a crocodile-infested river in pursuit of birds, but this was a new and greater challenge. We were to meet at 81st Street, a few blocks north of the Dakota building, where John Lennon was murdered. And we were to penetrate the most intimate fastness of Central Park, New York: an area known as The Ramble. This is a taken bit of countryside bang in the middle of the world's most famous forest of concrete.

The sun had risen over the East Side, on a clear day that made it look like a fortress from an Arthurian epic, surrounded by the green wilderness of the park. I had arranged to meet a woman called Star. I never did catch her surname, but she is from the New York chapter of the National Audubon Society, and a crack birder. You need to be in these circumstances.

Autumn is the time of bird movements across the northern latitudes, and I set out to look for "fall migrants" in New York. The fall brings scores of warblers tumbling down to Central Park, and they are spectacular. If you can dodge the muggers and avoid treading on hypodermic syringes, the park is a grand place to watch birds. "Part of the reason I come on these trips is because I can see parts of the park where I'd never dare go alone," one of the party said.



Central Park provides many surprises: you can find joggers, roller-skaters, people drinking from bottles wrapped in brown paper, sleepers, tumbling streams full of both birds and people washing themselves, mad people making enigmatic remarks at terrifying volume, and even birders. The maddest of the lot.

The oddest thing about Central Park is that it is full of lovely spots. It is the classic inner-city green oasis. And that is why it is more than usually good for migratory birds. There are enough secluded spots to maintain a decent population of breeding birds. Overhead, the blue jays scream incessantly; as much a sound of New York city as the rumble of the subway train and the rattle of the taxi.

But for migrating birds, the park provides a special treat. As they fly over the city they see an island of green, and drop down in their hundreds to rest, feed and prepare for the next stage of the journey. A far bigger problem than

fighting off the mass murderers is working out what birds you have seen. The British list has its problem groups, but if you want a serious identification challenge, try American warblers. For a start, they are liable to come at you in three different plumages: male, female and immature. And there are so many species: more than 50 are offered by the field guide.

We Brits think of warblers as dull olive birds, but some of these Americans are spectacular. The American redstart is as pretty a bird as I have ever seen. It really is a warbler, and not a thrush, like a redstart as Brits understand the term. The female, a pretty little scrup of nothing with golden patches, flirts a delicate tail that is fringed with golden yellow. The male is black, with bright orange instead of gold. A stunner.

Most of these are birds of the twitching fraternity who will kill to see, if they turned up in Britain as doomed, wind-blown vagrants. I would sooner see these birds in context, and Star and Central Park combined to give me black and white, Canada, yellow and Wilson's warblers, and another warbler called an ovenbird.

Central Park is a paradigm of all the wild places of the world. All the green places we have left are surrounded by civilisation now: wild places exist not because they are unconquerable, but because mankind has given them express permission to continue existing.

The park shows us a world under siege: the fortress is not, after all, the buildings that surround the park, it is the brief oblong of trees in the middle. The fortress is surrounded, like every other wild place. New York is unthinkable without Central Park, just as the world is unthinkable without wilderness.

SIMON BARNES



Warbling free: an exotic American redstart in Central Park

Brian Unwin

Offbeat and off course arrivals

HOPE that the exciting bird migration of early autumn would intensify has been well borne out over the past month. Rarities from Europe, America, the Arctic and, most notably, Asia continued to appear. There has been a massive arrival of commoner land bird species and record-breaking wildfowl and seabird movement.

High pressure became dominant over northern Europe during early October and the easterly winds produced an inevitable influx of passage birds from as far as north-east Siberia. Arrivals accelerated from the 10th when many winter-visiting Scandinavian thrushes became grounded on east coasts by dense fog.

Over the following days a host of rare species made their entrance, the most outstanding being the desert warbler on Flamborough Head, a variety officially recorded only four times in Britain.

Hopelessly off course, this tiny, pale sandy-brown scrub-dweller should have been making for south-west Asia after leaving its breeding territory between the Caspian Sea and Mongolia. Since then two more have turned up, one on the Isle of Wight, the other last Sunday in Kent.

From the second week of October there were several reports of Radde's warblers from Siberia, at least seven between Humberside and Shetland.

Asian arrivals did not have a complete monopoly: two red-eyed vireos from North America were found near Seaton Carew and at Barnes Ness, near Dunbar.

However, the Far East provided the main focus of attention, particular in late October, with Isabelle shrikes at Spurn and North Ronaldsay, and a pied wheatear at Torness.

Mid-October brought a deep depression from the Atlantic, pulling severe winds down from the Arctic as it pushed on across the North Sea, and this led to a phenomenal seabird movement on the 19th when 485 long-tailed skuas, the biggest daily total ever logged in Britain, flew past Flamborough.

Next day there was an awesome northward flow along the east coast as birds displaced by the gale took advantage of the gentler wind to make a quick return.

More than 1,700 little auks were counted at Flamborough, and along the coast the word was of unprecedented flocks of wildfowl.

The common scoter was especially prominent, with up to 2,500 a day passing several points. At least two rare American surf scoters were spotted during this spectacle.

This week's storms raised prospects of similar occurrences. Although the peak land bird migration period is over, there is still a chance of further offbeat arrivals.

First rule for the twitch report — keep it clean

FOR THOSE who regard twitching as a deadly serious business, it is essential that the ticks against their British wild birds species list should be scrupulously clean.

With at least 200 of these super enthusiasts now having more than 400 species marked up to their credit — and each of the 10 front-runners hoping to be the first to hit the as yet unattained 500 mark by the end of the century — nothing can be left in chance.

So, when history almost repeated itself last weekend and offered a chance to reinforce one "tick" over which there is a question mark, the highly competitive twitchers flocked from throughout Britain.

The bird that brought relief to many who feared they could lose ground in this whackiest of races was a pine bunting at Blakemoor Farm beside Cresswell Pond nature reserve in Druridge Bay, Northumberland.

This species, which breeds in Siberia and spends its winters mainly in Pakistan, north-west India and northern China, has been recorded about 20 times in Britain but has still managed to elude a number of determined list-

keepers. This is because, in the past 20 years, nearly all have either been on remote Scottish islands or have not lingered long enough for more than a handful of people to see them.

Then, in February 1990, there was a breakthrough when one was claimed at the more accessible Big Waters nature reserve, Newcastle. Lengthy queues formed as the dedicated streamer to the North-East from all corners of the land to view it during its month-long stay.

The only problem was that this bird, a female, looked just like a rather greyish yellowhammer.

Controversy over whether it actually was a pine bunting continues to this day and there is a possibility the sighting will not finally be accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee.

So the appearance of the Cresswell bunting, remarkably just 20 miles from Big Waters, led to much of the twitching fraternity returning to the North-East as insurance against the worst outcome.

There can be no doubt about the identification of this large sparrow-sized bird — watched by crowds of more

than 200 for much of Sunday — because it was a very distinctive male.

Its most striking feature, a basically chestnut head with contrasting white cheeks and central crown stripe, means it looks like nothing but a pine bunting.

Incidentally, it underlined how even a well-marked exotic feathered visitor can remain undetected in a country which has more bird-watchers to the square mile than anywhere in the world.

Almost certainly it arrived last autumn as part of the record influx of Asiatic migrants which, as it happens, included pine buntings on Orkney and, briefly, Humberside.

Whatever the situation, the bird did not come to light until the recent long frosty spell resulted in increased numbers of finches and buntings coming to tuck in at sheep-feeding troughs at Blakemoor Farm.

Its discovery ended the long run of nationwide twitcher inactivity since Britain and Europe's first Mugimaki flycatcher from Asia in mid-November. One can only wonder if other rarities have been similarly lying low and are yet to be found.

Slow to get off the ground

THE WOODPIGEONS are nesting in a cypress at the bottom of the garden. They are hardly in the peacock category of garden ornaments as they saunter across the lawn picking at the weeds, but, at close quarters, woodpigeons are an unexpectedly colourful in a subdued way.

Their plumage of blue-grey is enlivened with glossy green and purple on the neck that merges into the pink of the breast — even if the effect of the elegant colouring is rather spoilt by the piggy eyes and silly walk.

One of the most striking features of the pigeons' plumage is the bold white patches on the neck. These appear to function as an enhancement of signals to other pigeons.



During courtship, the male woodpigeon bows to his partner, and inflates his neck to show off the white patches surrounded by iridescent green.

The patches are also displayed to the full when a woodpigeon cranes its neck in alarm. This is enough to alert other pigeons, but they are surprisingly slow to take flight. If my pigeons spot the cat wandering through the garden, they are content to watch until it comes dangerously close. Taking off is an enormous effort for the heavy-bodied woodpigeon, so it is understandably very unwilling to commit itself to the air unless there is a real emergency.

Robert Burton

Rare birds home in on the range

DEEP in wooded flatlands near Thetford in Norfolk the Ministry of Defence has run the 30,676-acre Stanford Training Area since turning out the occupants of five villages in 1942.

"When they were told the area was needed for training they actually cheered," says Maj Peter Matthews, (ret'd) the range liaison officer. "I don't think that'd happen today, somehow; a different patriotism, I suppose."

The MoD gets its cheers now from film companies keen to pay handsomely for the chance to work their magic in a zone free of telegraph poles, crisp packets and the gawping public. Brigades of thespians can mix it with the Brigade of Guards because only 5,687 acres are designated "impact areas", where live mortar and artillery shells can land.

The rest, the MoD has kept point out is a vast, largely unspoilt habitat of mature trees, farmland, open heath, clean streams and untroubled wildlife. More than 185 species of bird and 811 insects find sanctuary in the area. The MoD knows; it has counted. The list includes the endangered nightjar and stone curlew.

Much of Dad's Army was filmed on the Frughill area, one of the largest traditional East Anglian heaths, known as Breckland. At least one log cabin built for the film "Revolution" remains intact by the clear-flowing River Wissey.

Rather less intact are the villages of West Toft, Stanford Tooting, Langford and Sturston. Grand houses, farms and vicarages have long

gone, testament to much enthusiastic training for the possibility of urban warfare across Germany.

Curiously, the churches remain diocesan property. The graves and Saxon architecture are maintained by the Ministry of Defence, although towers are coveted for observation or sniper training.

Stanford is used almost every day, except for a brief period around Christmas, and is rated by the Army as one of the finest infantry training grounds in Europe. About 85,000 people train on its patchwork of ranges — a negligible number compared with the 10 million who visit the New Forest every year.

Maj Matthews, who served with the Royal Regiment of Wales, must juggle the different needs of guardsmen, engineers, infantry, stone curlews and film crews.

"We're really great environmentalists," he says. "We have to be. If this place turned into a lunar landscape it'd be no good to anyone. That's why we've planted some 80,000 trees, most of them hardwoods, over the past three years."

The range is home to 20 of the 160 last nesting pairs of stone curlews (Norfolk plovers to East Anglians) in Britain. The curlew, a ground-nesting bird, needs a clear view across open heath.

As the Forestry Commission fells timber, Army engineers move in to restore the heath to its former state. They even take out the tree stumps.

"The last thing we want to do is damage a vehicle on night training," says the major.

Ulysses plots the end of the nenes

ALL THIS week, from eight in the morning until 10.30 at night, an international team of scientists has been slaving away at the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, on the water meadows beside the Severn, crunching numbers in their computers to predict the future of the world's waterfowl.

Outside the windows of the conference room, ducks were constantly taking off, wheeling across the sky and dropping into the ponds of the sanctuary created by the late Sir Peter Scott. Swans floated on the water and geese stood about on the grass banks. The scene was idyllic, marred only by the fact that the team indoors was plotting the demise of threatened species.

This sounds a gloomy way of describing their activity, but in fact they were doing exactly that: under the guidance of Professor Ulysses Seal, an expert from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, they were processing all available information to find out when various endangered species will become extinct unless humans step up their efforts to save them.

A simple chart, the Maclelland Criteria for Priority Categories, gave guidance on what to expect with bird populations of various sizes. Any species numbering 10,000 or more is considered safe. Any with fewer than 250 members, by contrast, is regarded as "critical", and will be extinct in 10 years if left unsupported. Between these extremes are those with 250 to 2,500 members ("endangered") and 2,500 to 10,000 ("vulnerable").

The end product of the week's exercise will be a document sent out to every zoo in the world, advising bird keepers on

how their resources can most profitably be deployed.

Although many species were considered, special attention was focused on the nene (pronounced *naynay*), or Hawaiian goose, with which Slimbridge has been involved for more than 40 years. A handsome and dignified bird, with a black top to its head, barred brown-and-white back, and bull-coloured breast, the nene is unique in several respects, not least the shape of its feet. These, having less web than other waterfowl, make the nene exceptionally nimble on land, and an excellent walker.

Nenes were once plentiful. The explorer James Cook found them such good meat that he filled the *Resolution* with them during his visit of discovery to Hawaii in 1778, and even in this century they featured on the menus of local restaurants there. It was Sir Peter Scott himself who put the birds into the international limelight in 1950, when he discovered that only 30 individuals remained in the wild, and 20-odd in captivity. He sent an expert to help the Hawaiians set up a breeding programme, and the emissary brought back two geese to found a reserve community in England.

But when, in the spring, they both began to lay eggs, it became clear that an error had crept in. Urgent telegrams produced a gardener, raising the British population to three, and from that modest base a whole new tribe has sprung.

There was a low period when the geese passed through what scientists call a "genetic bottleneck": fertility fell and eggs failed to hatch. Many species go under when they reach this critical stage, but the nenes came through it and drew away again

Country Matters

DUFF HART-DAVIS



so strongly that 200 could be sent back to Hawaii.

The spearhead of the Nene Recovery Action Group is Dr Jeff Black, a young American waterfowl ecologist who has been at Slimbridge for 10 years and is now the establishment's principal research officer. He follows geese all over the world: he has already made two field trips to Hawaii, and plans another for this winter.

His observations show that in their native habitat nenes live a most comfortable life. They wake up with the sun and graze for two or three hours on grass, berries or the shoots of other plants. Then, as the sun grows too hot for their liking, they move into the shade and remain there all day, "basically doing nothing but panting", and not shifting except to keep in their chosen patch of shade. In the evening they graze again before going to sleep.

Thanks largely to the efforts of Slimbridge and the Hawaiian biologists, the native population has climbed back to 500, but this week's computer simulation showed even that to be not a viable population: without increased human back-up, the species will die out in 20 years. One important aim of the research group, therefore, was to suggest ways of stepping up support. The trouble is that in Hawaii much has changed for the worse since the rescue programme was launched. Not only has a great deal of habitat been destroyed, for the sake of pineapples, sugar cane and hotels; also, many alien creatures have been imported, some inadvertently, some through misguided attempts to correct the balance of nature.

One disastrous introduction was that of the mongoose, brought in to kill rats. The mongoose has now established itself as a great menace, and preys heavily on the young geese. So do feral cats and dogs, and even wild boar, which were imported to provide sport, but bred out of control in the scrub on the mountains.

Another unwelcome immigrant has been the mosquito, which came in on ships and brought with it blood parasites, which killed off all the birds living below 1,000 feet. The remaining nenes sought sanctuary at higher altitudes, and because the survivors were found high in the mountains, scientists mistakenly thought that this was their natural habit. Only in recent years has it been appreciated that the geese fare better at lower level, where the feeding is richer.

Much can be done to help the nenes survive: predator-control

programmes can be launched, more geese can be reared in captivity, and better habitat found for those that are released. Many other species of wildfowl are in worse trouble, for instance, the white-winged wood duck, of which barely 200 are thought to survive.

This week's study gave a fascinating glimpse of the global efforts being made to save wildfowl. Not only had Professor Seal flown in with an assistant from Minnesota, but a pigtailed aviculturist from Hawaii, Dr Fern Dowall, had come over by courtesy of British Airways, and Slimbridge itself fielded a strong team to back them up.

Throughout the scientists' deliberations, the English colony of nenes, 200 strong, was parading about outside as if it owned the place. The birds, tamer than chickens, stumped around the buildings in pairs, in and out the picnic tables, ignoring the human hordes and chatting to each other in companionable little droning noises (perhaps the phonetic origin of their name).

Jeff Black knows the species so well that he can interpret every sound. "He's calling to her to come on and follow him... if he didn't expect an answer, he'd be talking more quietly..."

In purely avian terms, that is no doubt a correct interpretation. But it is easy for a newcomer, taken with the sheer charm of the nenes, to imagine that they are lobbying their human benefactors with the simple but ultimate request, "Save our souls."

Details of the 'Support a Nene' programme can be obtained from The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, GL2 7BT.

NATURE NOISE

Sound of silence

COCK PHEASANT proclaim their territories with a loud crowing, followed by a rapid whirring of the wings. It is a familiar sound in spring as one pheasant calls and is answered by his rival.

On January 24, 1981, the ornithologist Z. A. Coward recorded an extraordinary amount of crowing and wing-whirring. He first attributed this to the silliness of the weather, but after receiving similar reports from around the country, and reading the newspapers, he realised that they must have been influenced by the Battle of Jagger's Bank.

It is well known that sounds and vibrations will trigger off cock pheasants, but the effects of gunshots of the British and German fleets were inaudible to human ears. Three-quarters of a century later, it has been found that some birds are sensitive to infra-sound — sound of a pitch that is below the threshold of human hearing.

The cock pheasant's ultra-calls apparently so quiet that they can be scarcely heard by humans at 200 yards, but they have a loud infra-sound component that must be audible to other pheasants.

The advantage of infra-sound is that it carries much further than the higher pitches of conventional bird-song, so it is used for long-distance communication between pheasants widely spread through the northern pine forests.

The American ruffed grouse has a wing-whirring display which produces infra-sound as part of its territorial display. If this is true for the pheasant's wing-whirring, it would explain why rumbles of thunder and distant explosions stimulate cock pheasants into proclaiming their territories.

Robert Burton

Drowning in alphabet soup

I spend a lot of time dealing with PR people, whose job it is to make something dull and unimportant sound frightfully interesting. I am beginning to suspect that there exists a rival profession: anti-PR people, whose job requires them to make something lovely and important sound mind-bogglingly tedious.

I am sure that one of the most important lessons anti-PR people learn is the Acronymic Defence. If you want to kill public interest in any subject, however delicious, swamp it with initials. At once, all readers' eyes glaze over. You can even manage this with war. Warfare is, whatever else, a compelling subject, but chuck in the initials of a dozen guerrilla groups and it's one-two-three, where's your readership?

The same thing happens with birds. Initial capital letters are crucial to the very backbone of conservation in this country — the system of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. They are called SSSIs — have I lost my readers already?

If still there, try adopting conservationist jargon, and call them triple-S-eyes. There are about 5,400 of them, accounting for 8 per cent of our land surface. Most of these

sites are in private hands. They enjoy statutory protection, and they are the finest wildlife areas in the country. They were invented in 1949, and the legislation was beefed up in 1981. So far, so fine and dandy. I was walking on a SSSI earlier this year: it was one of the most unattractive things I have ever seen. This was Thorne and Hatfield Moors, South Yorkshire, mined for peat by Fison's. It was like a stroll on the surface of the moon. But Fison's has every legal right to wreck the place: it has planning per-



mission dating back to 1950 and 1951.

Shell ran a pipeline across Morrhic More, a SSSI in Scotland. It did so against the advice of many conservationists. Building continues on

SSSI land at Canford Heath in Dorset, again the result of old planning permissions.

Clearly the entire system is packed with flaws and needs to be beefed up. This is just one of the many important points addressed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in a strongly worded document entitled "Action for Birds and the Environment: The RSPB Environmental Manifesto for the 1990s".

For the erosion of the SSSI system continues. Easiest, cheapest, most convenient: such arguments are often

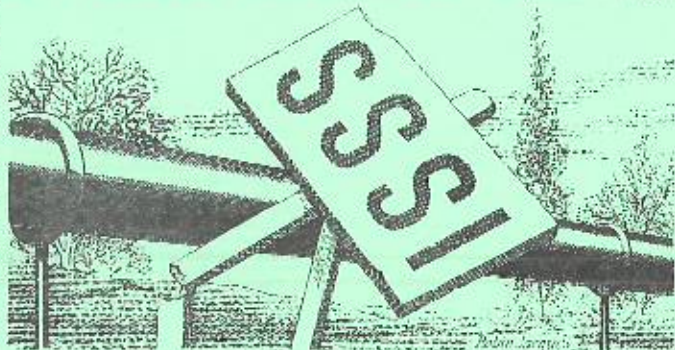
enough to win permission for their development for roads, factories, marinas. The RSPB says there should be a criterion of urgent national interest, and the complete lack of an alternative, before an SSSI is developed. Any proposed development should be subject, they say, "to rigorous environmental assessment and a local public enquiry".

You mean it isn't already? You would have thought so, but it is not. The very fact that this information comes as news to many of us is the finest demonstration possible of the efficiency of the Acronymic Defence. Places we treasure are being eaten up before our eyes, for unfortunately our eyes have glazed over.

SSSIs are our national and natural heritage. Government advisers have worked out that it would cost £300 million to secure the best sites for the nation. But I expect we will get another motorway instead.

SIMON BARNES

What's about *Birders* — watch for flocking goldcrests. Listen for high-pitched squeaking in woodland and garden. Watchers — red-breasted goose at Caerlaverock on the Solway Firth with a flock of 12,000 barnacle geese. Details from *Birdline*, 0898 700222.



Is your garden bereft of birds? **John Lucas** looks at a book that could help you woo them back

WHEN my cat Tess died, there were no bird twitters of relief among the local bird population. Nevertheless, all is still silent in my own area of a garden: the starlings, sparrows, lark and the Siskin-ovate house martins, with their engineering marvel of a triple wall-nest, all seem to be holding off.

But rescue could well be at hand: if I follow the advice in Les Stocker's new book, *The Complete Garden Bird*, my garden may yet earn reinstatement. Les is the founder of the bizarrely named wildlife hospital St Twiggyswinkles, so he should know. He's the St Francis of Aylesbury, saviour of birds as well as the hedgehogs for which he is renowned.

His book's message is that we can all play a part in his bird conservation crusade. British householders don't recognise their gardens for what they are, he says: 15 million plots and each one a mini-nature reserve. We should set out to attract birds not only by growing the right kind of trees and shrubs to encourage nesting, but by providing proper bird tables and nesting boxes — which he describes and illustrates in detail.

And these should carry the right kind of food, too, particularly in harsh weather. In one severe winter, bird tables saved a million of the smaller birds, so it's a real kindness. But, like man, birds cannot live by bread alone, so diets should be varied with berries and salt-free nuts, fruit maize and sunflower seed. If we use bread, break it up and soak it first; otherwise it will simply swell in the birds' crops.

There's a section on bird identification, too, so that you can distinguish between the species of tit and finch and tell a starling from a thrush and a redstart from a redbreast. By the way, starlings deserve a better press, according to Stocker. Their numbers are falling, which is bad news for gardeners, for it's the leatherjacket larvae to which our lawns are heir that help starlings survive.

Stocker favours a knowledge of first aid for wild birds, too, which is often necessary. He himself has treated damaged eyes, broken beaks, broken wings and broken legs, as photographs prove, striking many a protective chord. By learning first-aid techniques, and using his basic kit, you could graduate from being a mere bird feeder to a Complete Garden Bird Person.

For just as charity begins at home, so conservation begins outside the back door.

© "The Complete Garden Bird", by Les Stocker (Allen & Unwin, £9.99).

WHEN OWLS KNOW BEST

A list of what British people dislike most about the condition of their countryside would include the replacement of grass pasture by arable crops; the absence of verges, hedgerows, coppices and other rough ground to interrupt the endless deserts of intensive farming; and the decline in wild plants, animals, insects and birds which need that rough ground. A list of what British barn owls dislike most would be identical.

Because the land is no longer so hospitable, their numbers are estimated to have fallen to fewer than 5,000 breeding pairs, below half the total before the war. Clearly owls and people should join forces — and it would not be the first time the two species had combined for their mutual benefit.

Not long ago the virgin forests on the north-west coast of the United States were steadily disappearing into the timber mills, emptying the hills and valleys of Oregon and Washington State of trees and wildlife. Conservation campaigners were powerless to arrest the advance of the lumberjack — until they made common cause with the North American spotted owl, a resident of these ancient mixed forests whose habitat was fast vanishing. Saving the spotted owl became the cause which caught the public imagination, until the state authorities themselves had to pay heed. By campaigning to save the owl, conservationists had saved the forests.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds launched its campaign on behalf of British barn owls yesterday. Given that its aim encompasses nothing less than the reform of the European common agricultural policy, the RSPB is going to need all the leverage it can get. The CAP's budget is £25 billion a year; to defend the owls the RSPB is appealing for less than £400,000 over four years. Not much of a threat to big business there — which is no doubt how Oregon's

timber barons reacted when they first saw spotted owl lapel-buttons and T-shirts. More fools they: not for nothing is the owl the representative of wisdom.

The CAP straitjacket has encouraged high productivity in farming. Now, through the set-aside scheme, it is also starting to reward zero productivity. Such market-rigging subterfuges should be seen as a necessary transitional evil on the route back to economic and ecological sanity. Subsidised over-production led to the creation of monotonous landscapes bereft of everything except a monocrop. Such farmers need a financial inducement to manage their land less ruthlessly, to restore hedges and small woods so that even if the land between them remains in production, the wildlife has more and better habitat.

Land set aside will gradually become more friendly to nature, but farmers need a financial incentive to manage it properly by treating landscape and wildlife as an alternative "crop" produced for the public benefit. The Countryside Commission has pilot schemes for special areas (confined at present to East Anglia), and the RSPB's call for them to be available nationwide and on a much larger scale is timely. In selecting land to set aside farmers ought to take conservation fully into account, rather than simply choose land with the lowest crop yields.

The rethinking of the CAP is crucial to the look of the British countryside and to its capacity to support wildlife. Given the traditional British love of landscape and nature, it is the direction in which Britain should be pulling in Brussels, against the French insistence on redistributing subsidies mainly to encourage French family farms. Their cause is irrelevant to the quality of the British landscape, as it is to the interests of British barn owls.

LET BEETLES BOOM

No beetle is an island. Any beetle's death diminishes everyone, because it is ubiquitously involved in mankind in its most necessary activities. This week's Social Trends survey reveals that 142 different species of native British beetle are at risk of extinction. Beetles are generally neither as fluffy as the red squirrel nor as cute as the dormouse. None the less, is this the end of civilisation as we know it?

There are an awful lot of beetles in Britain. They are the dustmen and necessary small businessmen of the planet. Most feed upon other animals or plants, some eat decaying matter, to put it nicely. They constitute a quarter of all known organisms, a definition that includes daffodils as well as elephants. In the wide world there are about 400,000 described species of beetle, and up to eight million species that nobody has yet got around to describing. They include the largest and smallest of buzzers in the order of insects. They were clever enough to invent a kind of cricket-pad to wear upon their forewings. In the United Kingdom something like 4,000 species have been described so far, and there are plenty more waiting for description by unacquainted postgraduates.

Little old beetles have done worthy work for English letters. The verb to beetle, meaning something between to jut over and to threaten, was coined by Shakespeare in *Lear* for the cliff that beetles o'er its base into the sea. This was formed from the epithet *beetle-browed*, meaning having shaggy eyebrows, like Denis Healey's. Nobody knows what this comes from, but the best bet is that it refers to the tufted antennae, which, in

some beetles, stand straight out from the head, and are not much fun to meet, for the nervous. Beetles have done their bit, from Gray's *Elegy*, where they wheel their drooping flight, to the *Dream*, where they are invoked to approach not near, and quite right, too.

Since there are so vastly more species of beetle than any other organism, the Darwinian view is that the disappearance of a mere 142 species can be tolerated with equanimity. Let other beetle species fill the gap in the market-place. There are aesthetic, economic, and moral arguments against this line.

The heritage argument is that the places where beetles are vanishing are irreplaceable ancient woodlands, native fenlands, and coastal sites slummed over by seaside holidays. If such habitats are lost, they can never be replaced. The economic argument is that because there are so many of them, and because they are so easily traceable, beetles are the best indicators of what is happening to the ecology. They are the keystone order. Nobody knows what useful chemicals may be there in undescribed beetle species. Take out chomping and busy beetles, and a whole ecosystem may collapse.

In June in Rio de Janeiro there is to be a United Nations conference on bio-diversity, which will establish conventions for saving the vanishing species of the planet. It will come down on the side of beetles. They may be prolific and busy, but they are useful. The moral argument is that the poor beetle that we tread upon, in corporal suffrage finds a pang as great as when the giant dies. Beetles are more useful than giants. Tread softly, for you tread on our beetles.

Tracking down the secrets of birdland



THE code of *omerta* has been broken. The secrets of the birding world have been laid bare, available to all.

Birding has grown enormously in recent years, and it has become democratised. The greatest living joys the country can offer are there for anyone to experience. All you need is a good bird guide.

The key to all this is a sense of place. True, you can find birds almost everywhere, and that is joy number one. But some places are much better than others, and the places themselves differ hugely. Different places attract different birds: this is one of the first principles of ecology and of birding.

This is brought vividly home to you once you decide to visit one of these special places. There are thousands of spots worth visiting for the birds themselves: teeming estuaries in winter, teeming woods in the spring. Once you have established the habit of visiting the right places at the right time, you are on the threshold of discovering hordes of new delights. And new birds, too.

You must travel to see more birds. You are unlikely, after all, to find gannets in your back garden and golden eagles soaring in the thermals above the high road. Birds have a great sense of place. Understanding place is the key to understanding birds.

This, in a way, is what conservation is all about. If you cannot safeguard these birdy places, then you lose your birds, and a great deal more. Take estuaries; we live on a wiggly island with miles and miles of coastline, and we have dozens of estuaries which, because of the food they contain, are vital to birds all over the world. To destroy them, to pollute them, to turn them into marinas or industrial sites, is as disastrous for the Siberian birds that visit them in winter as it is for our own breeding population.

This vital importance of place is the key to conservation — and to enjoying birds. A visit to an unspoiled estuary with good views of good birds is a personal pleasure and a great reinforcement of conservation principles.

How to know which estuary? Or which wood? Sim-

ply. Splash out a few pounds and the secrets of the birders' world are yours. A few years ago, knowledge of the special sites was available only to insiders. They would keep the knowledge to themselves, for the pious reason of wishing the birds to remain undisturbed — and to keep the wild places for themselves.

No longer. With the upsurge of interest in birding, the information has been made public. You can buy books that tell you where to go.

DETAILED instructions will take you to places where you are almost certain to see special birds, often in vast numbers. The compilers of the books do not give information that would endanger birds vulnerable to disturbance. What they give is details of access to some of the great birding sites of this country.

Some are quietly famous; others are secret places known only to birders. There are also books that give you local information on sites that may or may not have anything special in national terms, but are perfect in their own way. I owe to my Hertfordshire book the discovery of an ancient wood that, in May, positively echoes to the songs of garden warbler and blackcap. This is

not a twitcher's paradise: it is a never-failing delight to me.

Some places are perfect for the uncommitted: a lovely walk with birds thrown in. Others are for the enthusiast: I would not take anyone sane to Staines reservoir in Surrey. Peering through a telescope at little black dots 500 yards away is not everybody's idea of fun.

But a little judicious reading of your book will give you a good idea of what to expect. The first thing is to get out to the birds' places of resort and to enjoy them for all you are worth: for birding places are accessible to everyone these days. The second thing is to remember that we must continue to make them accessible to birds.

There are a few good bird guides on the market. I use *Birdwatching in Britain: A Site by Site Guide*, by Nigel Redman and Simon Harrap (Helm, £12.99), and *Where to Watch Birds in Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire*, by Brian Clews, Andrew Hervey and Paul Trodd (Helm, £9.95). The latter is part of a series that takes in most areas.

SIMON BARNES

● What's about Birders — Small numbers of pied flycatchers, redstarts and whinchats can be seen along the east and south coasts, and large numbers can occur during certain climatic conditions called a "fall". Twitchers — a bouted warbler at Spurn, Humberston, a lesser grey shrike at Potter Higham on the Norfolk Broads, and an American wigeon at Helston, Cornwall. Details from *Birdline* 0898 700222.

RSPB gardening, back page



Robin Jacques

Free for all: bird guides have spread the delights of birding

Funny you should ask

● A series on outdoor matters in which you provide the questions — and the answers.

In reply to Dr Worthing's question about how to keep grey squirrels out of his garden, Mary Kirby, Sutton, Surrey writes:

One large ginger cat called Orlando has to my knowledge killed eight — each one brought in through a cat-flap and laid out stomach up, head towards door, killed by biting the neck. Perhaps he also knows something about John Bickmore's enquiry as to where birds go when they die.

And thanks to Dr Neil Stewart, of Burton

upon Trent, Staffs, for the following:

Buy or make a squirrel trap and catch a couple. Word soon gets back to the squirrel population to keep clear of your garden and trouble the neighbours instead.

Now, a question from Cliff Bryant, of Sutton, Surrey:

Why do many herds of cows face the same direction when grazing?

Please send your answers, and your questions, to *Funny You Should Ask*, Weekend Times, The Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN.

NATURE NOTE

DIPPER, duck and dabchick are nicknames for the little grebe, and they refer to the readiness with which this smallest of our grebes plunges under water. It is a shy bird, yet its skulking habits enable it to live where there is frequent disturbance. At the first alarm it submerges with a shower of spray and, although it can stay under for little more than 15-20 seconds, it has the trick of pushing only head and neck above the surface, taking a quick breather and going under again. You have to be quick to spot it. Another favourite habit is to surface among vegetation and stay hidden with

only head and neck above water. The little grebe combines the tactics of a submarine with the patience of a cat for staying still.

This is the best time of year to spot little grebes. There is less cover to hide them and they sometimes gather in flocks. Look down into the water and you might see one swimming submerged with the air trapped in its feathers, giving it a quicksilver appearance. When it is on the surface it paddles like a duck, but underneath it rows itself in rapid jerks, like an overgrown waterpostman.

Robert Burton



NATURE NOTE

DOUBLE inconvenience to life in the Scottish Highlands is that the rain encourages midges. If it were not bad enough that the mountains are obscured by falling water, it is worse that clouds of midges are trying to bite you. They prefer dim light, so they are particularly active in cloudy weather.

There are many tiny insects known as midges. Some are harmless, but the female Highland midge, like mosquitoes, needs a blood meal before laying her eggs. The meal takes three or four minutes and, given the stinging sensation it imparts, it is rather suicidal.

From the way that a cloud of midges gathers the moment you step out of house or car, blood meals must be in short supply. Cattle, deer and birds are alternative sources of blood but, if a midge cannot find any, she can still lay a few eggs.



The eggs are laid in damp ground, of which there is no shortage in the Highlands, so there is no getting away from midges. Yet it is possible to plan a relatively comfortable holiday here. First, choose a year when a drought in early summer has reduced the population by depriving the larvae of their homes, then arrive in a period of sunny weather which deters the remaining adults from flying.

Robert Burton

-Spot the rare Twitcher birds-

By PETER RICHARDSON

To be a Twitcher is to be blessed with an uncommon devotion to a favourite pastime. Call them bird spotters ... and you do so at your peril.

For this flourishing and elite band of men, and occasionally women, are dedicated to first sightings of those foreigners who literally make flying visits to our shores.

As such they are a rare breed in themselves. There is the Maillat approach to life - any place, any time, anywhere.

Miniefields

Ian Lewington has been there as well. He has an excuse, however, since he earns his living as an illustrator of the world's feathered inhabitants.

He has brushed with military police, slept rough in the Pyrenees and walked through Israeli minefields in pursuit of his profession.

Not for nothing has he been

made British Bird Illustrator of the Year.

But he needs neither pen nor paint to illustrate the single-minded approach to life which Twitchers take.

Like many of Britain's bird-watching enthusiasts he heads for the Isles of Scilly come the autumn, where the natives, grateful that the tourist season has been extended, host the annual Birders Ball and a Birders v Islanders soccer match.

Ian, a former football pro, made his team debut last year.

"Unfortunately I was left on my own," he recalls. "The whole team left the island after word got round that there was a red-breasted nuthatch in Norfolk!"

When I spoke to him at his home in Didoct, Ian had been out the previous night in the hope of spying a rare owl

reportedly knocking about the vicinity of Newbury.

He was not alone. For word had spread via a special telephone number known, somewhat amusingly because of its 0800 prefix, as Birdline ...

"We got every detail down to a grid reference, even which bush," he says. "But despite that no one saw it."

The best example of what some might term mild eccentricity came when a spectacular American bird rejoicing in the name of Golden Winged Warbler, chose to land upon the car park of Tesco's in Maidstone.

Somewhat fortuitously, since this was the first time such a bird had been seen in the whole of Europe, the four-lakh celebrity was spotted by a bird-chaser on his way to post a letter.

That Saturday there were 3,000 twitchers on the car park!

The decision of a Nashville warbler to flutter into Laud's

End provoked a not dissimilar response, while a Sandhill crane in the Shetlands proved something of a challenge to the well-heeled end of the twitching fraternity.

"There were those with enough time and money who got a plane from Heathrow to Aberdeen, then another from Aberdeen to Shetland and then a taxi out to see the bird," says Ian.

More than 500 rare species have been recorded in Britain - ship hoppers, migratory off-shoots or those blown in by freak winds from the USA or Asia; while the figure including our more common feathered friends is around 850.

Recorder

Birdwatching enthusiasts populate Lancashire as densely as anywhere else.

Shopkeeper Maurice Jones, of Lytham St Anne's, is the county bird recorder for the Lancashire and Cheshire Fauna Society. "When I started birdwatching 40 years ago the RSPB had perhaps 3,000 members. Now it's more like 600,000."

Recorder

Mr Jones believes twitchers are so called because they are supposed to twitch with excitement upon first encounter with a previously unlisted bird, which conjures up a rare old picture of one southern based businessman. He holds the current twitching record of 470 birds.

Deeply competitive, twitchers are wary of "flushers" who get too close to the bird, and "stringers" who simply live about what they've seen.

And having recently discovered a stringer who photographed a stuffed Siberian thrush in a tree, they police themselves fiercely.

There are disasters, too, as in the case of a rare US Grey Chokebird Thrush which was happily posing before 200 photographers until a cat pounced!

Well, I would speak in terms of the Darwinian's maelstrom myself and say that the bird was singing so that it could pass on its immortal genes to the next generation.

But now I think of it, we are both saying the same thing. Birdsong is wonderful, and an explanation does not diminish its wonder. It is the same with life, is it not?

Beetles and turtles



Traders' wings need clipping

The only way to squash a myth that has been part of our way of thought for two centuries and more is to pile fact on fact on fact. Pelson on Ossa, until the lie is overshadowed.

The myth persists that the third world is a bottomless pit of goodies. The trade in wild birds is just one small example of the myth in action. As birds are killed in their millions, and species are harried to extinction, so the trade continues. Useful money for developing countries? No fortunes for dealers in the developed world.

Now facts have been assembled in an attempt to slow the pace of death and devastation. This week the result of a year's investigation into the trade has been published. It was compiled by the RSPB, the RSPCA and the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA).

Five countries were investigated: Argentina, Guyana, Indonesia, Senegal and Tanzania; the biggest exporting nations. Everywhere you find a mess of illegalities and corruption. Everywhere you find birds dying in huge numbers.

The three biggest markets are the United States, Japan and the EC. Britain imports 185,000 birds a year. About 12 per cent of these die after arrival; about three-quarters of all captured birds die before reaching the pet shops. The end-users are pretty frivolous: collection freaks and those with a fancy for modish exoticism in the conservatory.

This is a numbers game: those in the trade know that if you ship enough birds enough will survive to ensure a profit. Death comes from the shock of capture, terrible caging, awful transportation conditions and incorrect feeding. The sheer wastefulness of the trade is absurd in every aspect but money.

The campaign against the trade has prompted the EC into action. It has formed a committee. Last September, the European parliament voted without dissent to end wild bird imports to the EC. But there is a long way to go before this becomes law, for the whole business now goes "into committee". In the light of the report, it is

time for member governments to press for the matter to be expedited. The present legislation does not work, and the longer the trade is regulated in the old way the more birds will be killed, and the faster species will tumble towards extinction. The Malayan cockatoo is almost there; the blue-fronted Amazon (another kind of parrot), Fischer's lovebird and Goffin's cockatoo are heading rapidly closer. Spix's macaw and the red lory are now all but extinct in the wild.

The current laws mean that enforcing officers need to differentiate between Goffin's cockatoo and Major Mitchell's cockatoo, and to tell Fischer's lovebird from the Nyasa and the peach-faced lovebirds. This is beyond the scope of most Customs men. And most UK courts do not take the matter with any great seriousness. One recent case involved a parrot smuggler; the birds were worth £16,000; investigations cost £20,000. The smuggler was fined £250 with £250 costs.

A blanket ban on the trade in wild birds is the only answer. This would harm no one but dealers; third world trappers catch birds as a sideline, and for peanuts. More than 40 international airlines, including British Airways, have stopped carrying wild birds. New Jersey has followed New York state in banning the trade.

A European ban on the import of birds caught in the wild is clearly necessary. In the EC alone it would prevent more than two million useless deaths a year.

Dave Curry, the executive director of EIA, says: "We travelled the world in 1991 following the trail of suffering and death. The statistics of the wild bird trade are now crystal clear and there is no excuse for inaction. The government must ensure the European Commission bans this brutal trade now."

SIMON BARNES

● What's about: Birders - check damp and boggy places for jack snipe. Twitchers - laughing gull at Walcott, Norfolk. Black scoter at St Bride's Bay, Newgate. Dyed in useful insurance tick! Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.

existence of birds proves evolution never happened.

The crux of the argument is that birds are enormously different from reptiles; therefore they could not have descended from them.

This argument is not an argument at all. When you are talking about 140 million years of modification, there is scope for change and difference on an impressive scale. But there is no arguing with entrenched belief.

Which brings me to the famous story of Bertrand Russell giving a public lecture. He was informed by a member of the audience that the earth was a giant plate resting on the back of a tortoise. "Madam, what is the tortoise standing on?"

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The man in question was Richard Dawkins and this was part of the riveting Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. Dawkins wrote *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*. I commend these books to anyone who is interested in such matters as the meaning of life.

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RISK TO BIRD LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Environmental degradation

Over-grazing by sheep and over-burning degrading heather moors. Birds at risk: golden plovers and merlins.



Marine

Poor management of sandeel fishery threatens breeding seabirds. At risk: puffins, arctic terns and kittiwakes.



Loss/mismanagement of pinewoods

Red deer overgrazing Highlands is preventing pines re-generating. At risk: crested tits, Scottish crossbills and capercaillies.



Water supply problems

Fluctuating water levels and acidification of freshwater lochs threaten breeding success of rare birds. At risk: black-throated divers and Slavonian grebes.



Agricultural change

Abandonment of traditional land management. At risk: dunlins, corncrakes, redshanks and snipe.



Coastal management

Poor strategic approach to coastline management leads to damage and loss of intertidal areas. At risk: pintails, dunlins and knot.



Over-grazing

Throughout Wales. Loss of heather moorland and poor regeneration of oakwoods. At risk: black grouse, red kites, hen harriers and merlins.



Marine

Poor management of fishing industry causes deaths of sea birds in gill nets. At risk: razorbills and guillemots.



Grassland loss

Drainage and ploughing of grasslands in southern England. At risk: redshank, snipe and stone curlews.



Raptor persecution

Illegal use of pesticides throughout the UK kills some of the rarest birds of prey. At risk: hen harriers and red kites.



Agricultural change

Reduction in grazing in Breckland makes grass heaths too long. At risk: stone curlews.



Lack of management

Lowland heath threatened in Dorset, Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire. At risk: nightjars and Dartford warblers.



Source: RSPB

Bittern: only 16 pairs left

RSPB admits mix-up over bittern count

By A J McIlroy

FEARS were expressed yesterday for the survival of the bittern in Britain after the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds admitted over-estimating its numbers.

The society disclosed that instead of 60 pairs recorded by experts "the actual number is a catastrophic 16".

"Our scientists were taking census by going from site to site recording the mating call of the male bird because we could not get an accurate visual count in the reeds of the bittern's natural habitat," a spokesman said.

"We thought that this was giving us a true picture, but we did not realise at the time that the male bitterns were also moving from site to site and we were counting the same birds more than once.

"The mistake came to light when researchers discovered that the sound spectrographs of the electronic recordings showed the mating call of one male bittern is never exactly the same as another's."

"They established that the unmistakable 'boom' sound that the male birds emit is as identifiable as a fingerprint, and the print-outs showed clearly that the same birds were being counted more than once.

"A new census at the bitterns' remaining UK sites — in East Anglia and near Morecambe in Lancashire — confirmed that instead of 60 pairs we are now down to an alarming 16."

Mr Ken Smith, research biologist with the society, said: "The mating call of the bittern travels two miles or more across the stillness of the reed beds at a low frequency."

Researchers got to know them through their voice-prints, "and of course, we have given them names. An example is Basil, at Leighton Moss, the RSPB site on the edge of Morecambe Bay."

The bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) has been declining with the loss of its habitat. It became extinct in Britain in the 19th century, but was re-established by the 1920s.

Two off-course black storks which landed on Lewis in the Hebrides three weeks ago are thought to have starved.

Police have advised people to steer clear of a European eagle owl which escaped from a Norwich aviary.

NATURE NOTE

FOR a few weeks now, flocks of Redpolls and Redwings have been patrolling the countryside. They are familiar immigrants from Scandinavia that appear every winter when that region is gripped by frost. The size and number of the flocks depend on conditions in these birds' native homes. Severe weather or falling food supplies set more on the move in the search for an easier life.

It is not at all obvious that these are only a few of the invaders that see the harsher climate of northern and eastern Europe to spend part of the winter in the British Isles. The immigrants include flocks of starlings (surely we have enough already) and chaffinches, more spectacular short-eared owls and hen harriers, and a scattering of robins, tits and song thrushes. Even tiny wrens



and goldcrests manage to cross the North Sea.

The newcomers blend in with residents of the same species and are not obvious as foreigners. An expert eye can see that Continental blue tits are larger and brighter than the natives, and will recognise that a flock of chaffinches in a field is foreign while individuals in the garden are more likely to be year-round residents.

If we have a cold spell, our own birds will be forced to move. Some head for the West Coast and into Ireland, where the moderating influence of the Gulf Stream is stronger. Others head south to France, Spain and Portugal.

Robert Burton

Minister for wildlife wanted by RSPB

A SECRETARY of State for Wildlife with Cabinet rank in Government should be created, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has recommended, writes Toby Moore, Environment Correspondent.

It believes Mr Heseltine, the Environment Secretary, who is currently responsible for wildlife, is "too swamped" by other demanding areas to give species protection a high priority.

The radical suggestion from the RSPB follows from their concern that 117 of Britain's native bird species,

more than half the total, are officially classified as rare or threatened.

The problem, they say, is land use and development; afforestation in the Scottish uplands threatens the hunting grounds of birds of prey, while building pressures in the south of England eats into lowland heath, home to nightjars and Dartford warblers.

"We really need someone in Cabinet with sole responsibility for overseeing environmental protection," said Mr Mike Everett of the RSPB. He would evaluate the policies of his colleagues

and produce "green audits" on their achievements. "We have got good basic legislation in place on paper to protect birds and the same could be said for habitats. Where it breaks down is in the application. A very good example is the fact that some 32 different Government authorities deal with marine management of coastal areas," he said.

The society is particularly concerned about low land use and development is gnawing away undisturbed habitats for wading birds in estuaries such as the Humber and Mersey.

Kites in a Welsh sky

FEATHER REPORT

tion, they are increasing from a nadir of three or four pairs. Human persecution was the main reason for their decline.

Their flight is a matter for poetry, but not their eating habits. In spring they like the afterbirth of lambs; at all seasons they love carrion; at any time they love rubbish and rubbish tips. They were once London's street cleaners, and Ebsmore's too. "I should have hated all the region kites with this slave's offal," says Hamlet, in one of the earliest literary references to the bird table.

Which brings us back to the finest bird table in Britain. It was once a rubbish dump, near the

town of Tregaron. It is surrounded by handsome trees — a combination that made the place a splendid winter roost for the kite. In recent years, more and more of them have spent their winter nights perched, hunched and glowering in the trees of Tregaron.

Then, a few years ago, the council closed the rubbish tip; a bonus for some local residents, no doubt, but a disappointment for the kites. So a local woman has taken to dumping butcher's rubbish there. She is as anxious for her anonymity as for the welfare of the kites, but every day she dumps horrible bits of dead animal on the site and the kites descend in their hordes as if it were the body of treacherous, lecherous Claudius. Her offal-dumping has ensured

that the kites stay in this tradition at roost; a good aspect of it species' long relationship with mankind. The bird, once poison and shot to the verge of extinction in this country, is now a source of great local and national pride.

Yes, attitudes have changed. Red kites are no longer treacherous villains, nor are they birds of near-mythical rarity. This is skirmish that the conservationists are winning and very pleasant to applaud, especially standing it the great bird table of Tregaron.

To cheer such things is good — as long as we do not let such small victories persuade us that the tide has turned once and for all. The price of conservation is vigilance.

SIMON BARNE

What's about Birds — listen in for updates in woods and garden. Tel: 01474 700222. Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.

Not every British birder sees a shoebill before he or she has clapped eyes on a coal tit. Coal tits are jolly bird-table birds: the tit with a natty white badge stripe down the back of its head. The shoebill is one of the weirdest birds in Africa, and the competition for that accolade is pretty intense. Shoebills specialise in the art of eating lungfish, and to help them along they have a beak the size of one or both — of my beaten-up Timberland boots.

As it happens, the birder who came with me to Wales the other day has done most of his birding in Africa, and he has seen some of the wonders of the world: bateleur balancing in the thermals; carmine bee-eaters setting the sky on fire; the African fish eagle striking like a Barnes-Wallace bomb.

But in a Welsh pub he was struck close to silence: "I don't think I have ever seen anything to

beat what we saw today," he said.

He was not talking about the coal tit. We had just visited the finest bird table in Britain and had seen one of our rarest breeding birds. In fact, we saw 23 of them, roaring down like the Luftwaffe. Red kite.

Can any raptor, even bateleur, match this effortless flight? Long wings, deeply-notched tail, cruciform silhouette: the bird not only uses each wing independently, but also each prong of its forked tail. The sight of a single bird is spectacular, but 23 of them together took our breath away.

They were once the commonest raptor in the country, but human persecution has reduced them to a stronghold in north Wales. Here, with protection and reintroduc-



ing the battle: red kite

Radicals in tweed jackets



Breeding threat: green-shank, golden eagle and merlin

the forces against conservation that have moved.

The pace of destruction has increased, and with each increase the RSPB's duty to fight it becomes more important. By simply sticking to its guns, the society has had to become increasingly radical.

This particular issue concerns the Cairnholm and the Flow Country in Scotland, habitat for breeding green-shank, dotterel and snow bunting, and for golden eagle, hen harrier and merlin. These birds are threatened by as neat a piece of bureaucratic juggling as you could wish to see. New procedures mean that more than 150 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in Scotland can now be challenged by a few wealthy landowners.

This goes back to the government's great anti-conservation coup of a couple of years back, under which the Nature

Conservancy Council (NCC) was disbanded and replaced by regional organisations for England, Scotland and Wales: trebling bureaucracy, wasting resources, and generally being a thoroughly effective piece of divide-and-rule legislation.

In the face of much criticism, from the RSPB and elsewhere, a special co-ordinating body was established, and ministers said again and again that the commitment to the protection of the SSSIs would be unwavering. The SSSI system is the legal backbone of conservation efforts in this country. But in Scotland it is being undermined, says Ms Young. A new statutory committee is being set up, and it will be able to review the decisions of the Scottish Natural Heritage Agency (formerly NCC Scotland). In other words, decisions on SSSIs can be

summarily overturned, even retrospectively. This opens the way to conservation disaster.

"It is not hard to conclude that in Scotland a small number of landowners now direct the government's conservation policy," Ms Young writes. "The RSPB has a professional approach. Where government is concerned, our dealings are based on trust, which has to be worked at. When ministers announce a decision we agree with, we praise them. When they choose a counter course, we comment accordingly."

"Dozens of sites are now open to review, including those we battled long to protect... Once the government could claim the high moral ground... No longer can it do this. Ministers have abandoned all their pledges, broken the trust established with the RSPB and weakly capitulated to one interest group. Are conservation sites really safe in their hands?"

The RSPB has always been a frightfully respectable organisation. The more it stands firm against the forces of anti-conservation, the more respect it deserves.

SIMON BARNES

A traffic in hypocrisy

A YEAR ago, the government brought out a white paper on the environment. It was a remarkable document. And the remarkable thing about the contents was that there were no contents.

The white paper professed to tackle the most pressing issue on the political agenda, and it did so with the force of Woody Allen tackling the entire All Black rugby team. It was full of vague assurances, backed up by sterner requests for information and investigation. In short, it was half-baked.

Now, a year later, the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC) has produced a report on the effects of the

paper, and called it "The Great White Hypo". The white paper "was a surprisingly unambitious statement embodying a strategy which aimed to solve the environmental problems of the late 20th century. It is clear that the government identified amazingly low hurdles to clear. In spite of this, they have still tripped up and failed to negotiate many of them."

The RSNC is yet another example of a once-genteel organisation that has become increasingly radical simply by sticking to its guns in the face of government indifference.

In fact, the main significance of burgeoning environmental concern is that it has given politicians a wonderful new area for hypocrisy. Let us make kind statements about wild places. And then let us slap a motorway through the lot.

Overstating my case, am I? In Dorset, current schemes for by-passes threaten no less than seven Sites of Special Scientific Interest - these SSSIs being the backbone of conservation legislation in Britain. Town Common, for example, holds breeding populations of Dorset warbler, wood-lark, a wonderful singer, and the mysterious, spooky nightjar. Avon valley is the winter home for white-fronted geese, and the glorious Bewick swan. Special places, special birds: under threat.

And on, as ever, to the M25, that vast circling folly. As I write these words, I can hear a robin

sing above the distant hum of motorway traffic. Further plans for the road will damage or destroy five more SSSIs in Surrey alone. Staines Moor is one, as is the nearby Staines Reservoir. This wonderfully grim site holds large numbers of wintering duck - pochard, teal, goldeneye - and many a curlew turns up. I saw white-winged black tern there once, not bad, eh?

You don't have to be a heroic Greenpeace activist, smiling as you chain yourself to a raw sewage outlet, to care about conservation. This is not a minority concern. There are millions who care about

wild places and wild creatures. Yet the government continues to feed us on the chameleon's dish. We eat the air, promise-grammated. You cannot feed capons so: the capon is my Bird of the Week.

In fact, the most significant move for wildlife in recent history has been oppositional. This was the division of the Nature Conservancy Council into regional bodies. Divide and rule works: it is how you destroy your enemies. Interestingly, then, that government regards conservation bodies as enemies.

The white paper was a matter of fudging; now its modest guidelines have themselves been fudged. At the highest levels, it would seem that environmental issues are not taken with any degree of seriousness: they are the electorate's passing fad. We will grow out of it better humour us until we do. I wonder how much will be destroyed before governments realise that this is no passing fad: it is a concern that will continue beyond our lifetimes, as long as there are wild places left to conserve, and wild birds to sing in them.

SIMON BARNES



The wild goose mudlark

Wild geese. These words still give a frisson of excitement. Perhaps less than they used to: geese seem to have been devalued a little by the buccaneering ubiquity of Canada geese, introduced birds that have gone native.

Instead of the long, dramatic migrations they made on their home ground, the British Canadas improvise a year-round living in this country, attracting all kinds of xenophobic ire as they do so. I have a soft spot for Canadas: any bird that can spread and prosper in Britain, let alone in the face of so much hostility, must have something going for it.

The second most commonly seen goose is another introduced species: the greylag. These have dodged much of the hostility the Canadas get: they are less individual-looking and do not have the disadvantage of a foreign name.

I am not anti-greylag any more than I am anti-Canada. But if you seek the magic, the pure romanticism, the frisson that comes in that phrase "wild geese" you must look elsewhere. Try mud.

So, a few days ago, I stood on the edge of the Wash, at the superb RSPB reserve at Snettisham, Norfolk. Paul Fisher, the warden, was apologetic: an odd combination of weather conditions had given us unexpectedly low water at the crucial moment. The famous gigantic wader flocks - there are 78,000 knot on the Wash right now - had not come into sight. There were just tiny specks out on those unending acres of glorious estuarine mud.

We had had a magnificent afternoon, as it happens, but Paul Lewis, the RSPB Information officer for East An-



Jacques

Wild wonders: from top, greylag, Canada and pink-foot

gla, wanted me to leave his patch with something special. And then it happened. The air started to vibrate. Our ears were filled with sound: Agai! Agai! Wild geese. And they were upon us: thousands of them, skein after skein, coming down through the dusk to roost on the shallow waters of the Wash: each complete skein a series of bifurcating sub-skeins. Truly wonderful. They took maybe 15 minutes to pass and to sink down to the Wash, lifting my heart as they did so.

Two thousand. Mr Fisher reckoned. To be warden on the Wash you need to be something of a genius at bird-counting. There are a lot of birds to count: go there and look for 250,000 right now: geese, ducks and waders.

These heart-lifting 2,000 were pink-footed geese, or pinkfeet, in birders' jargon. They breed in Greenland and Iceland, and winter on the Wash, and at various estuaries in Scotland and northwest England. No good being parochial when it comes to conservation: British mud is of international importance. But it is hard to sell the concept of mud to those who do not already understand its beauties.

Estuarine mud is more important for birds than many an expanse of hills, but its joys are more elusive. And estuaries all over the country are under threat from every direction: disturbance, recreation pressure, marina construction, barrages, land reclamation, port

and industrial expansion, bait-digging, wild-fowling and pollution. But that mud is essential to life, and the birds have first claim on it.

If you don't believe me, go and see for yourself. At a big expanse like the Wash, the closer you get to a "good" tide, the more birds you will see. The RSPB will happily pass on details about the best tides on the Wash. Estuaries need all the friends they can get.

Snettisham was full of good things that afternoon: merlin, short-eared owl, long-tailed duck, Slavonian grebe, also goldeneye (Britain's naughtiest duck) and red-breasted merganser (the scruffiest). And huge, dramatic wader flocks. "Come back," Mr Lewis said. "Try for those 78,000 knot."

I will. I don't suppose it will beat the sight of those 2,000 pinkfeet but who's competing? Mud: that's the stuff vital mud and a wild goose chase.

ON NOVEMBER 23 "Feather report" spoke of the need for a legal framework for marine conservation: there is no law to prevent gill-net fishermen killing seabirds. Philip Oppenheim, MP for Amber Valley, Derbyshire, is putting forward a private member's bill containing this reform. The bill has the backing of the agriculture, fisheries and food department, and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has expressed sympathy.

SIMON BARNES

• Tide information for the Wash from RSPB, 97 Yarmouth Road, Norwich, NR7 5HF.

• What's about Birds - look out for hard-weather birds such as snipe and red-tailed grebe. Teitichens - red-throated pipit on the Isles of Scilly; black scoter in Dorset, Highlands Details from Birdline, 0898 700222.



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