BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY

20

BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BRISTOL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

No.20 | DECEMBER 1989

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The main feature of this issue is the report on the Club's own survey of common breeding raptors in Avon. This survey, the most comprehensive of its kind ever carried out in this area, will be a bench mark for future atlas work on these raptors in the county. Its overall conclusion that the three species are increasing or maintaining numbers compared with those recorded during earlier surveys is very encouraging. Many members and other local observers helped with the collection of the data and it is a fitting tribute to their hard, but we hope enjoyable, fieldwork that coverage was so good over most of the county. The awful gaping holes in north Avon show up in the reports of other common species, as any inspection of the regular reports in *Bird News* will reveal. Coverage of the area is a problem that will, perhaps, be overcome when regular field meetings can be arranged there.

The other two papers may take some members by surprise. The one on Turtle Dove decline is by a non-member, Derek Goodwin, who first sent his manuscript to Brian Slade (a regular contributor to the journal) suggesting to him that the Club might wish to publish it. The scarcity of the species in our area has virtually reduced it to the status of a rarity. We felt that many members would be interested to learn how the species is faring elsewhere in Britain and beyond, which helps to put our own paucity of records into context. So we decided to make an exception to the usual rule of accepting only contributions from Club members. Derek Goodwin is, amongst many other subjects, an authority on the pigeons and doves of the world.

Jeffery Boswall's contribution on the urban roosting of corvids in Uzbekistan gives an indication of how he manages to extract some useful and interesting facts during a brief visit overseas. Familiar species in a familiar environment, but behaving differently. Perhaps other members could provide us with their own original contributions of observations from home or abroad, preferably with some relevance to our area. We are happy to give advice to anyone who feels they need guidance. The short notes give a good indication of how straightforward observations can be presented, revealing their scientific value through the enquiring mind of a fascinated observer.

This issue contains eight pages of plates, most notably a series of photographs by Brian Thomas illustrating the plumage changes of the Ring-billed Gull that has frequented Chew Valley Lake for several winters. In addition, Keith Vinicombe has provided brief comments on some of the species' key identification features. Photographs of local birds, not necessarily rare, are always welcome for publication, particularly if a 'story' can be built around them.

The Reports on the Club's activities cover the three years from 1987 to 1989, although only the two earlier years are due to be published in this issue. We decided that since unavoidable delays, for which we sincerely apologise, have afflicted our editorial work, it would be wise to include the report for 1989 even though we are already planning the next issue for publication during next winter, 1990/91.

Ken Hall and Robin Prytherch, *Bristol Ornithology* Editorial Committee

A SURVEY OF BREEDING SEASON SPARROWHAWKS, BUZZARDS AND KESTRELS IN AVON, 1980–84

by Robin Prytherch

Introduction

During the late 1970s I was struck by the relative conspicuousness of the common raptors in Avon. They seemed to be breeding in greater density than might be expected from the status as given (for south Avon) in both Palmer and Ballance (1968) and the *Somerset Bird Reports* (which continued to report south Avon until 1978). This impression was most obvious in the Buzzard *Buteo buteo,* the species that I was then beginning to take a special interest in. I therefore suggested to the Club Committee that a survey of the breeding populations of the Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus,* Buzzard and Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* would be one to which many members could contribute. There would be no need for a special survey form since the Club's standard reporting slip system would suffice; indeed, to use the regular system would be an advantage, as it was one with which most members were familiar. It was agreed that the survey would be carried out over a five year period, 1980–1984, in order to obtain maximum coverage. The objective would be to count and map the breeding pairs of the three species throughout Avon. There have been no published statements on the numerical status of Sparrowhawk, Buzzard or Kestrel in the area of Avon but there was systematic coverage for *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (Sharrock, 1976) which I will refer to within the results accounts for each species. The survey attracted a great deal of support and many members made a special effort to gather information. All those who participated are listed below in the Acknowledgements.

Methods

For the period of the survey members were requested to make a special note of any Sparrowhawk, Buzzard or Kestrel seen during the period March to July (inclusive), extending to mid-August for the Buzzard. Members were also asked to make extra notes, other than of a simple sighting, on items such as display, territorial encounters, food carrying, flight direction and grid reference. The last was the single most important piece of information and with each appeal I stressed that without it the record could be almost valueless. Precision in plotting a sighting is vital when the results are expected to reveal individual breeding pairs or sites.

Other techniques were used (i.e. searches for nests) to add to the information and as an aid to obtaining as complete a coverage as possible. These are explained in more detail in each species account, below. The reporting slips and other records were passed to me after they had been used to collate *Bird News.* I then plotted the records on to master 1:50,000 maps of Avon, one map per species.

Results

The results for each year were published, cumulatively, as the survey progressed (Prytherch, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984a, 1985). I have looked over the records again and made a number of small corrections where information has either been misunderstood or added to. Coverage varied between species and was probably most complete for Buzzard with large gaps in north Avon for the other two. New sites were added each year (Table 1) and any tailing off that might have been expected in the final year was countered by a special effort to fill in gaps.

As the survey progressed a great many sites where breeding was suspected (i.e. probable) were gradually confirmed. But at the end of the final year there were still 30 suspected sites for Sparrowhawk, 13 for Buzzard and 45 for Kestrel. Given more time all of these would have been confirmed (and no doubt other sites would have been

Table 1. Number of confirmed sites discovered for each year of the survey

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	Total
Sparrowhawk	12	24	15	8	20	79
Buzzard	21	8	7	18	17	71
Kestrel	17	17	1	5	28	68

discovered) so it seems reasonable to combine the confirmed and suspected sites to give overall totals (Table 2). A typical suspected site would have several records of birds in a likely territory without signs of breeding or attempted breeding, including single records of displaying birds coupled with other sightings. Many other records of isolated singles of all three species have been ignored.

In the maps which follow (pages 170–175) I have attempted to plot the sites as accurately as possible. They are centred on the apparent territory rather than the location of nests (except for most Sparrowhawk sites), as the position of these can vary from year to year. In many cases, of course, the nest site was not known. It must be stressed that the results are for breeding sites, not pairs, although it is quite possible that all the sites could be occupied in one year (see below). I have also plotted the results by 2 × 2km tetrad and by 10km square alongside, for comparison, the results for Avon of the BTO's Atlas for 1968–72. Vertical shading indicates urban areas and diagonal shading land over 150m.

Table 2. Total number of sites found during the survey, 1980–1984

Sparrowhawk	109 (79 confirmed plus 30 suspected sites)
Buzzard	84 (71 confirmed plus 13 suspected sites)
Kestrel	113 (68 confirmed plus 45 suspected sites)

Other studies since 1980

Soon after our survey R. L. Bland organised the Avon tetrad survey of breeding birds during 1985–87 (Bland, 1988). Unfortunately, his maps include possible breeding as well as probable and confirmed breeding records. Direct comparison between his maps of Sparrowhawk, Buzzard and Kestrel and those of the BOC survey (Figs 1b, 2b and 3b) are, therefore, not possible. Even so, the distribution of records is not strikingly different.

In 1983, during the course of our survey, the BTO organised a national survey of the Buzzard. This was based on a selected number of 10km squares of which six were in Avon. I organised the survey locally and was able to provide information for all squares in Avon (not just the six they asked for) which, during that year, held a minimum of 51 breeding pairs (Prytherch, 1984b). There were undoubtedly more, but it was impossible for volunteers to find the time to check all the potential sites, it being unnecessary, anyway, for the BTO survey. The national results of this survey (Taylor, Hudson and Horne, 1988) indicated a continuation of the increase in population noted at the time of the BTO Atlas of 1968–72, but that the increase has been mainly through infilling and consolidation. This notion is confirmed by my own studies in a 60 sq km plot west of Bristol. The BOC survey revealed 20 territories in that area, with a maximum of 18 territories actually occupied (in 1984). In 1987 new territories had been filled, but with pairs missing from others, so that 19 out of 22 were occupied. By 1989 yet another territory was filled and others re-occupied so that 23 out of 23 were occupied, and there are yet more pairs in 1990. I estimate that there is room for another two, possible four, pairs to saturate the plot; a condition which will be achieved in two to three years time (i.e. 1992/3) if the present trend continues. Observations from outside my study area suggest that infilling is continuing elsewhere in Avon. My own studies are on-going.

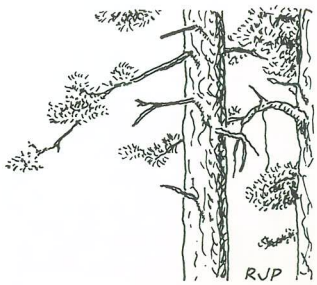
Acknowledgements

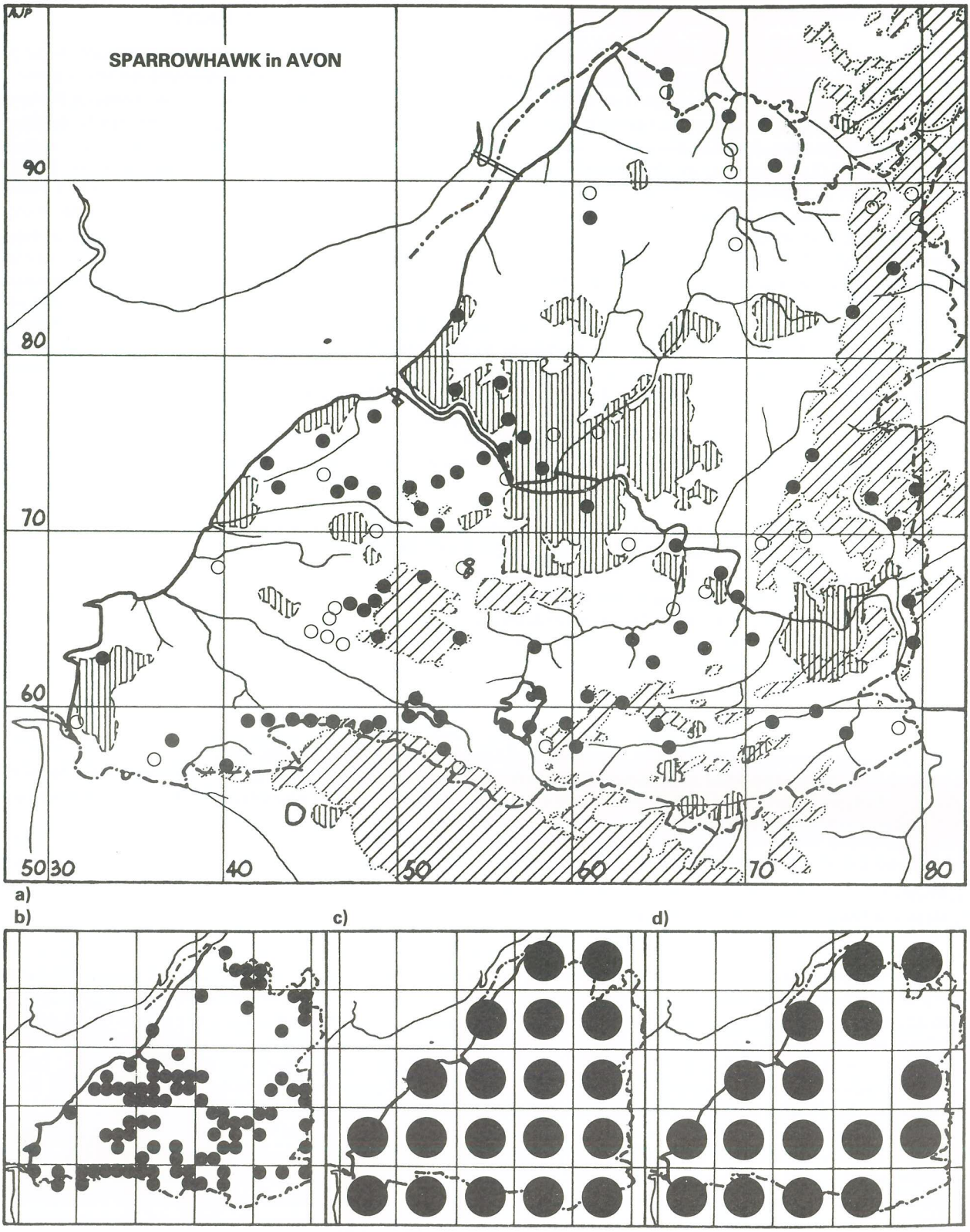
It is a great pleasure to thank all those members of the Club, and other people, who took the trouble to send in their sightings of birds of prey, particularly those who made a special effort to concentrate on the survey. I apologise to anyone who may have been left off this list: J. D. Aldridge, R. Angles, C. D. Aylwin, A. Bailey, J. Barber, N. H. Barrett, J. R. Best, K. F. Blake, R. L. Bland, P. D. Bowerman, D. J. Bowley, D. W. Bowring, M. E. Bridge, D. Buffery, G. H. C. Byford, D. V. Carr, P. J. Chadwick, J. C. Copeland, R. M. Curber, S. Curtis, G. Davies, A. H. Davis, C. J. Davis, W. E. Dickson, M. T. Dorgan, J. W. Duckworth, W. Earp, K. Edgell, R. J. Edmondson, D. Embling, P. G. Evans, G. J. Fewings, M. J. Flannagan, G. Gingell, J. Gould, V. Graham, P. A. & B. J. Gregory, R. F. A. Haggett, S. Hale, K. J. Hall, N. Hankins, J. Holmes, J. Holt, W. J. H. Hopkins, J. Humphris, K. Howard, G. Hudd, T. M. Hunt, H. V. Johnstone, P. B. Keddie, P. R. A. Kelly, M. S. Kemp, P. Kenchington, B. L. Kington, A. C. Kirchner, B. S. Kirk, J. Kirkwood, P. J. Knight, D. E. Ladhams, R. U. Lambert, B. Lancastle, H. R. H. Lance, N. Lethaby, T. W. G. Lewis, A. R. Lindsay, A. & M. Lord, R. D. Manvell, J. McGreal, T. McLellan, C. F. Matthews, A. Merritt, A. J. Middleton, R. Mielcarek, W. W. Moss, C. A. & P. H. Mulcock, C. J. Newman, P. F. Packer, J. Palfery, R. Palmer, D. H. & L. Payne, D. J. Perriman, V. Philp, A. Pollard, R. C. Pople, F. Quinney, B. Rabbitts, S. Randolph, A. P. Richards, T. Riddle, H. E. Rose, J. S. F. Rowe, T. B. Silcocks, B. E. Slade, E. S. Smith, E. V. Southam, D. E. Stainer, J. Stephen, E. P. Stephens, C. J. Stone, M. & P. Stone, B. Thomas, R. G. Thomas, J. R. Tottle, N. & L. A. Tucker, G. Upton, J. D. R. Vernon, K. E. Vinicombe, D. Walter, D. Warden, J. Warne, I. Watt, R. Webber, M. J. Willmott, L. J. Wreford, G. Youdale.

References

Bland, R. L. 1988. The Avon tetrad survey of breeding birds, 1985–87. *Avon Bird Report 1987:* 43–64.
Cramp, S. 1963. Toxic chemicals and birds of prey. *Brit. Birds* 56:124–139.
— 1980. *The Birds of the Western Palaearctic.* Vol. II. Oxford.
Newton, Ian. 1979. *Population Ecology of Raptors.* Berkhampstead.
Palmer, E. M. and Ballance, D. K. 1968. *The Birds of Somerset.* London.
Prytherch, Robin. 1981. Breeding season Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Kestrels. *Bristol Orn.* 14:138–139.
— 1982. Breeding season Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Kestrels. *Bristol Orn.* 15:174–175.
— 1983. Breeding season Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Kestrels. *Bristol Orn.* 16:42–44.
— 1984a. Breeding season Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Kestrels. *Bristol Orn.* 17:86–88.
— 1984b. The BTO Buzzard Survey, 1983. *Avon Bird Report 1983*: 45–46.
— 1985. Breeding season Sparrowhawks, Buzzards and Kestrels. *Bristol Orn.* 18:126–127.
Sharrock, J. T. R. 1976. *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland.* B.T.O./I.W.C.
Taylor, K., Hudson, R. and Horne, G. 1988. Buzzard breeding distribution and abundance in Britain and Northern Ireland in 1983. *Bird Study* 35:109–118.

R. J. Prytherch
23 Caledonia Place, Clifton, Bristol BS8 4DL.




AJP
SPARROWHAWK in AVON
90
80
70
60
50
30
40
50
60
70
80
a)
b)
c)
d)

SPARROWHAWK

The distribution of breeding sites (Fig. 1a) gives, when one investigates further, an excellent indication of where coniferous plantations occur in Avon. Sparrowhawks seem to prefer this type of tree and will choose larch *Larix* sp., where they are present, including the urban breeders. Other studies (Newton, 1979) have shown that Sparrowhawks space their nests very regularly and that individual pairs tend to build successive nests (they build a new one each year) in the same small area of woodland, usually within a radius of 50m. This would form the nucleus of the small nesting territory out from which they would hunt; the hunting ranges of adjacent pairs usually overlap. This behaviour made the search for nests relatively easy as once one pair was found a search could then be made of the next plantation at one or more kilometres range. Most plots of conifers in Avon are fairly small, often around 10 hectares or less, and these would only contain one pair, if any. The large plot at Wrington Warren (ST 46) provided a different problem and the ten sites there were found with much hard searching of the trees. Displaying birds would usually give a clue as to where to search for nests. Sparrowhawks will nest in deciduous woodlands and in hedgerows but these sites can be very difficult to find. I suspect that many such sites could exist in Avon but we lacked the time and skills to find all but a couple of them.

The main map (Fig. 1a) shows a good spread of the 109 sites with notable gaps covering virtually all of central north Avon and the levels in south west Avon. The pairs in the tight clusters on the north scarp of Mendip (ST 45) and Wrington Warren (ST 46) were no doubt using some of the adjacent levels to hunt over, and this could explain the absence of nesting territories there. The absence of records in north Avon is more puzzling and the lack of records either reflects a lack of birds or a lack of observers! The latter is the most likely, as perfectly suitable habitat does exist, even if the desirable conifer copses are not as widespread. Most strikingly there were no sites in the woodland complex at Lower Wetmoor (ST 78) where one would have expected at least one pair, if not three or four.

Our survey has neatly filled in the missing 10km squares of the BTO Atlas of 1968–72, which only showed possible breeding in those squares at that time (Fig. 1c & 1d). This probably reflects an increase of pairs over the eight-year gap rather than better coverage, as during the period of the Atlas, Sparrowhawks were still recolonising areas where they had died out following the effects of toxic chemicals (Cramp, 1963).

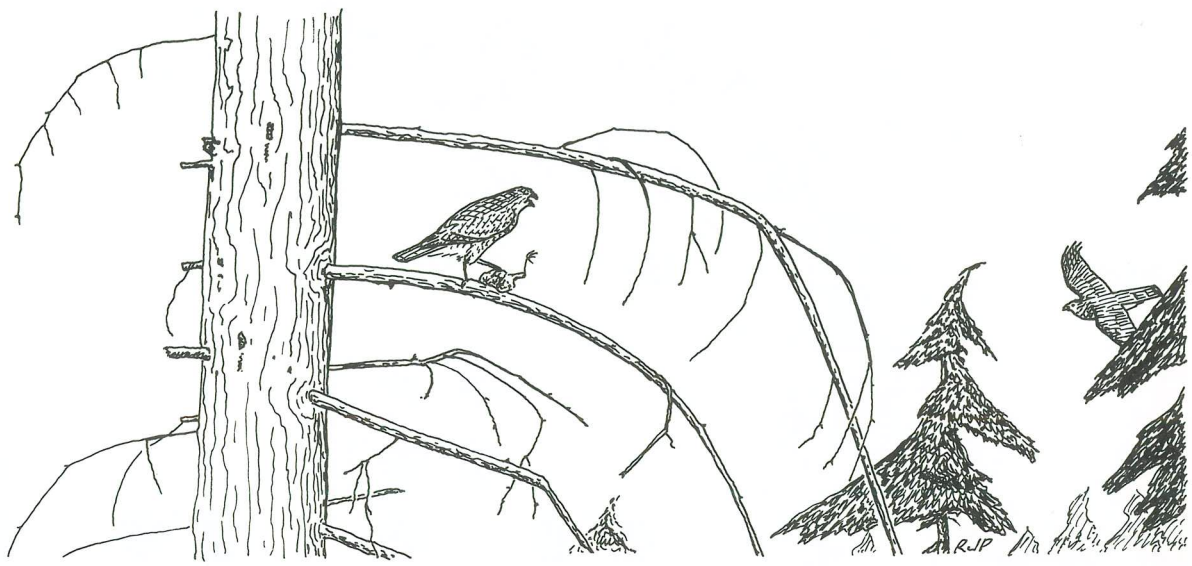
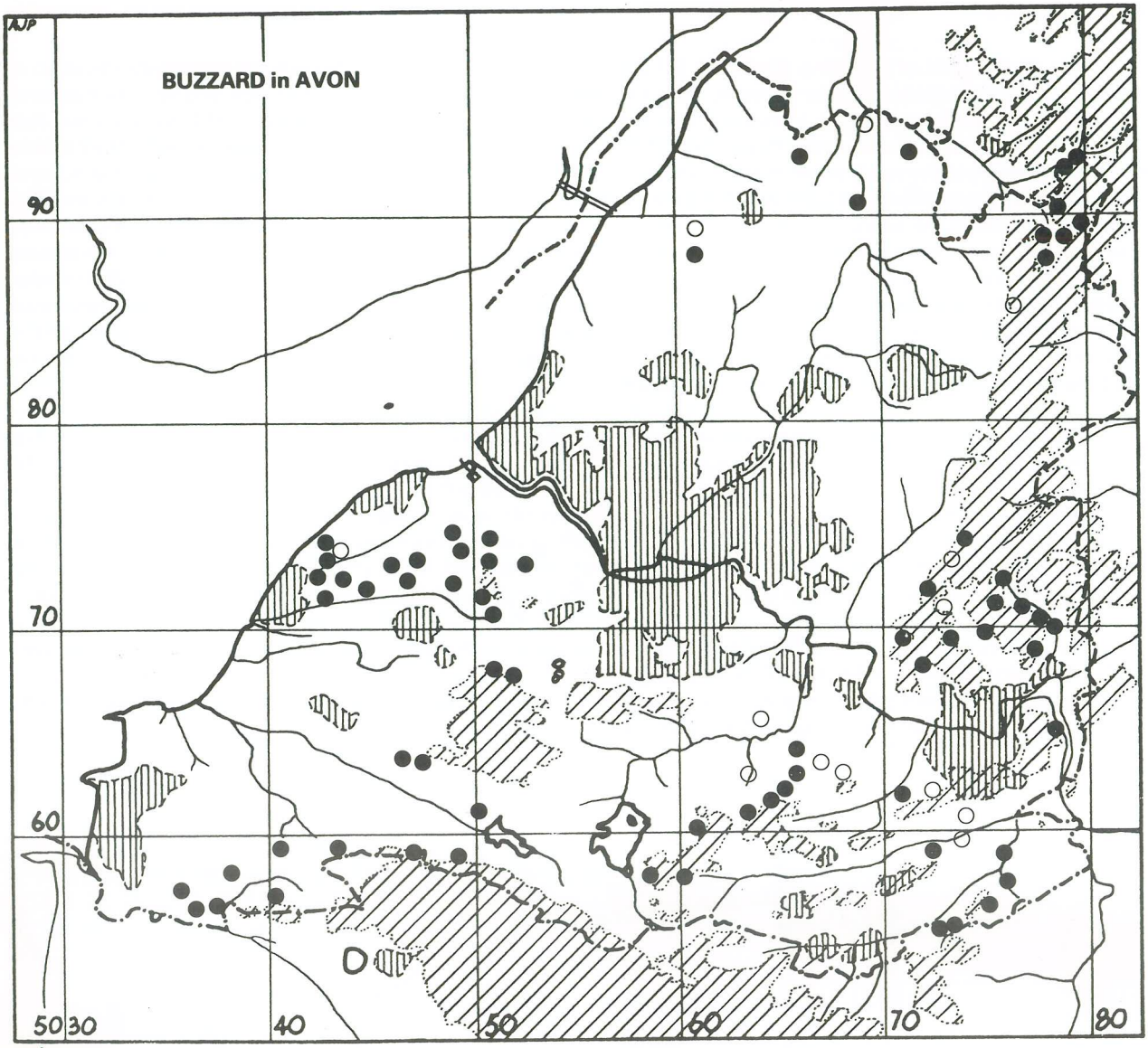
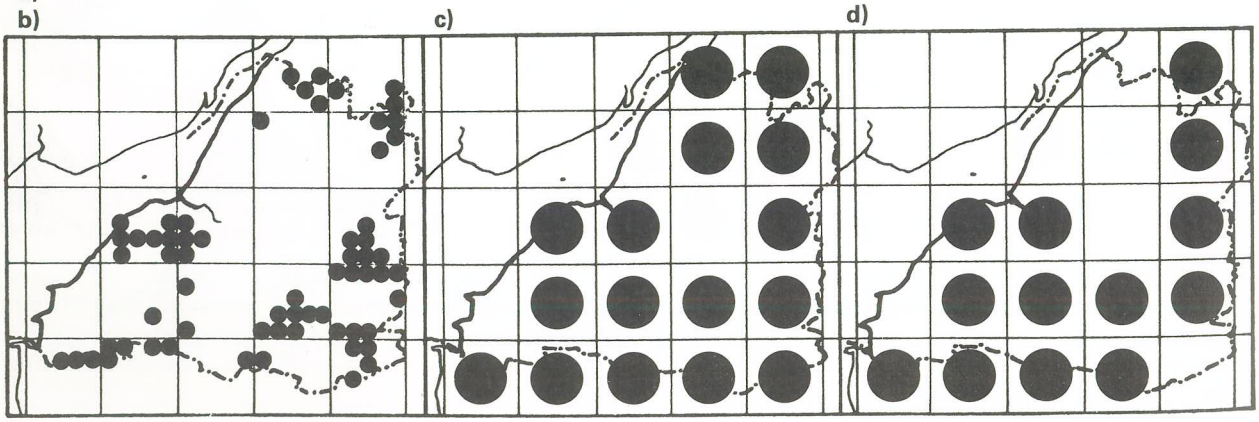


Fig. 1. (Opposite) The distribution of breeding season records of Sparrowhawks in Avon. a) shows the sites of pairs (dots) and suspected, or probable, pairs (circles) found during the BOC survey, 1980–84), b) shows all the same sites by 2 ×2km tetrads, c) shows all the same sites by 10km squares for comparison with d), which shows the BTO Atlas of 1968–72 (excluding possible breeding records).



a)

b)



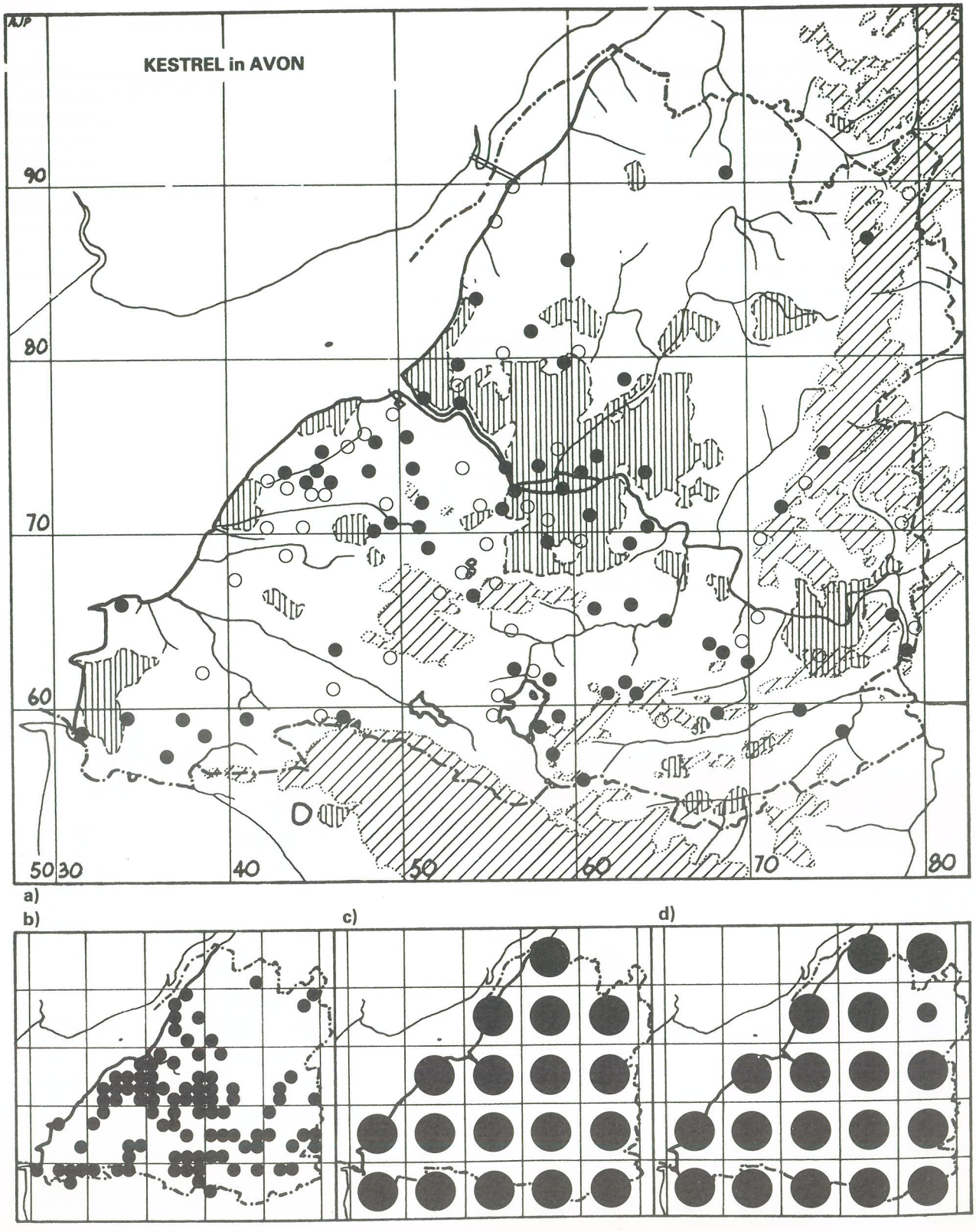
BUZZARD

Buzzards prefer gently undulating or hill country with a good mix of woodland, rough grassland and a minimum of intensive agriculture. Our birds are no exception and the sites (Fig. 2a) give an excellent indication of where this type of habitat is in Avon. Buzzards are territorial, the area defended being adequate for the pair to live in throughout the year. Defence of the territory is active and conspicuous mostly during late winter and early spring. Aggressive interactions are almost exclusively directed towards young birds which spend a great deal of time flying across occupied territories. The interactions gave vital information about both the location and size of the territories. During indifferent or poor weather Buzzards can be very inconspicuous and so before eggs were laid likely areas were searched for nests. In some territories the same nest may be used regularly, and if so is often very large and conspicuous until leaf cover obscures it. A freshly dressed nest would indicate occupancy and subsequent watches revealed the extent of the territory. In July and August freshly fledged young can be very noisy and remain with their parents during this period, and this offered a further opportunity to confirm the presence of pairs.

The 84 sites discovered are shown in Fig. 2a. The only real gap where Buzzards might have been expected was on the Cotswold ridge east of Chipping Sodbury and the woodland complex at Lower Wetmoor (ST 77/78). There was also room for more pairs in the areas occupied and in particular south-west of Bristol and along the southern edge of the county east of Blagdon Lake. Since most of these gaps were covered quite well during the survey the sites shown probably represent more than 90% of the true figure.

Buzzards in Avon have been increasing slowly since the severe disruption to the population caused by the decimation of the Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* by myxomatosis in the mid 1950s, which happened nationwide. Rabbits are now locally very common but still subject to occasional outbreaks of the virus. From the little evidence available (personal) our birds are taking a great variety of prey and do not seem to be affected by fluctuations in rabbit numbers. The increase of Buzzards is continuing to this day and was even evident during the period of our survey. Comparison of our survey with the BTO Atlas of 1968–72 (Fig. 2c & 2d) shows that three new squares show confirmed breeding.

Fig. 2. (Opposite) The distribution of breeding season records of Buzzards in Avon. a) shows the sites of pairs (dots) and suspected, or probable, pairs (circles) found during the BOC survey, 1980–84, b) shows all the same sites by 2 × 2km tetrads, c) shows all the same sites by 10km squares for comparison with d), which shows the BTO Atlas of 1968–72 (excluding possible breeding records).

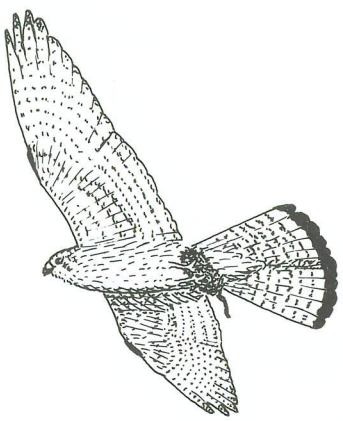

AJP
KESTREL in AVON
90
80
70
60
50
30
40
50
60
70
80
a)
b)
c)
d)

KESTREL

The scatter of sites for Kestrel show no particular pattern (Fig. 3a) apart from slightly denser clusters in Bristol and Gordano/Failand (ST 47/57). This is not surprising as Kestrels should be able to find breeding opportunities throughout the county. Kestrels, like Sparrowhawks, will defend a territory which will contain their nest site but not the hunting range, which extends beyond and may overlap with adjacent pairs (Cramp, 1980), although I gained the impression that some pairs in the Gordano Valley (ST 47) were defending territories that included the hunting range. Despite occasional noisy episodes with much calling, and their conspicuous fluttering flight, Kestrels can be very inconspicuous in their breeding territories. Patient watching of hunting males would often provide the best evidence. Prey, once caught, will often be carried straight back to the female at or near the nest site, or to the newly fledged chicks. Some nest sites, in buildings or holes in trees, are traditional and will be used year after year; these were easy to confirm. Other pairs may have to find an old nest of Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* or Magpie *Pica pica* (they never build a nest of their own) and these can be more difficult to tie down, as proved to be the case during our survey. A great many records were of hunting Kestrels and some of these were clustered along the M5, the section south-west of Filton down to the county boundary, in a very striking way but few of these sightings contributed to the survey. If it had been possible to follow these up many other sites would have been found. Kestrels were more conspicuous than Sparrowhawks even if the total sites (113 and 109 respectively) might suggest little difference.

The 113 sites are plotted in Fig. 3a and these show a strong bias to south Avon and Bristol. Even in south Avon there are gaps, in particular the area north-east of Weston-super-Mare across to the high ground of Wrington Warren and south to the area around Blagdon Lake and south of Chew, and the strip along the south-east border. As with Sparrowhawk, the absence of sites in north Avon is probably explained by a lack of observers as the habitat appears to be perfectly suitable.

The population of Kestrels in Avon appears to be relatively stable and at the 10km scale this is confirmed by comparing the BOC and BTO Atlas results (Fig. 3c & 3d). The blank square of the BOC survey (ST 79) may well have had a breeding record from Gloucestershire in the BTO Atlas.



RJP

Fig. 3. (Opposite) The distribution of breeding season records of Kestrel in Avon. a) shows the sites of pairs (dots) and suspected, or probable, pairs (circles) found during the BOC survey, 1980–84, b) shows all the same sites by 2 × 2km tetrads, c) shows all the same sites by 10km squares for comparison with d), which shows the BTO Atlas of 1968–72 (the smaller dot indicates probable breeding).

DECLINE OF THE TURTLE DOVE

by Derek Goodwin

In a letter published in the November 1985 issue of *British Birds* (Goodwin, 1985), I stated that over the past 25 years or so, I had noticed a great decline in numbers of Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* in those parts of Kent and Surrey that I most often visit, and requested information from other dove-addicts as to whether they had, *or had not,* noted a decline of this species.

Twenty people were kind enough to respond to my appeal. (See Goodwin (1987) for a summary of the results.) Seventeen of these letters dealt with various localities in England. Of these one recorded no change; two very slight declines; one no change until 1984, then a sharp decline, and two no change until 1985, then a sharp decline. The other 11 letters all told of marked decreases over (variously) the past five to 30 years, with the Turtle Dove now present in only small numbers in, or completely absent from, areas where it formerly bred in abundance.

A letter from Spain and one from Holland recorded similar marked declines in Turtle Dove numbers in those countries. Another gave interesting recent information on Turtle Doves and the worsening climate in the Sahel region of western Africa. Not one letter recorded a marked increase of numbers anywhere or that the Turtle Dove was now breeding in any place where it did not formerly do so. I think, therefore, that there has been a considerable decline in the species' numbers in England and that at least up to the present, this decline is continuing.

My informants were: Mr Hedley Bell (Cheshire), Mr Rob G. Bijlsma (Holland), Mr Robert Evison (Yorkshire), Mr Victor Green (Kent), Mr Tom Gullick (Spain), Mr John D. Magee (Hertfordshire), Mr John A. McGeoch (Somerset), Mr Chris Mead (B.T.O. Data), Mr Bernard D. Moreton (Kent), Mr David Noakes (Leicestershire), Mr S. G. Perry (Oxfordshire), the late Dr K. B. Rooke (Dorset), Mr Michael Seago (Norfolk), Mr David E. Sergeant (Cambridgeshire), Mr A. J. B. Thompson (Northamptonshire), Mr H. Uilkatis (Yorkshire), Mr Frank Walsh (West Africa), Mr R. B. Warren (Suffolk), Mr Michael R. Whiteside (Cheshire), and Mr Michael Wilson (Oxfordshire). I am most grateful to all of them and also gratified that so many birdwatchers are interested in doves.

I give hereunder a brief synopsis of the information, for England, given to me on a county basis.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE. No drastic decreases noticed but in 1981 far fewer were seen than in 1946 and 1947 and in 1981 sightings of Turtle Doves were 'practically confined to nature reserves', in contrast to the situation in 1946 and 1947 when the species was widely observed. Mr Sergeant thought that lack of suitable nesting cover might be the reason.

CHESHIRE. Already in the 1950s the Turtle Dove had shown a great and widespread decrease from its abundance in the 1930s. This decline has since continued, especially on the eastern side of the Cheshire plain (H. Bell). In North Cheshire, Mr Whiteside observed one or two pairs at a site near Frodsham up to about 1979. At a site near Kingsley, two miles south of Frodsham, there were two to three pairs each year up to about 1980. At a site in Delamere Forest four miles south west of Frodsham, the species has declined since 1980 from three to four pairs to one pair and then only a single individual seen (and none heard calling) in 1985.

DORSET. In the area around Cranborne, Wimborne, on the Dorset/Hampshire border, a substantial decline over the past 30 years. Formerly abundant and widespread but now only a few scattered pairs, except on Martin Down where there is (or was) still a good number in cultivated downland. Where Turtle Doves still occur there are few or no Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* but their decline started before the Collared Doves began to increase and Dr Rooke did not think interspecific competition is involved.

HERTFORDSHIRE. Mr Magee, who has lived all his life, until 1985, in the Watford area recorded a great decline in Turtle Dove numbers 'in Herts and the Home Counties generally'. He observed intense shooting of the species on migration in Majorca, but in the 1970s before the worst of the decline. I worked in Tring from 1971 to the winter of

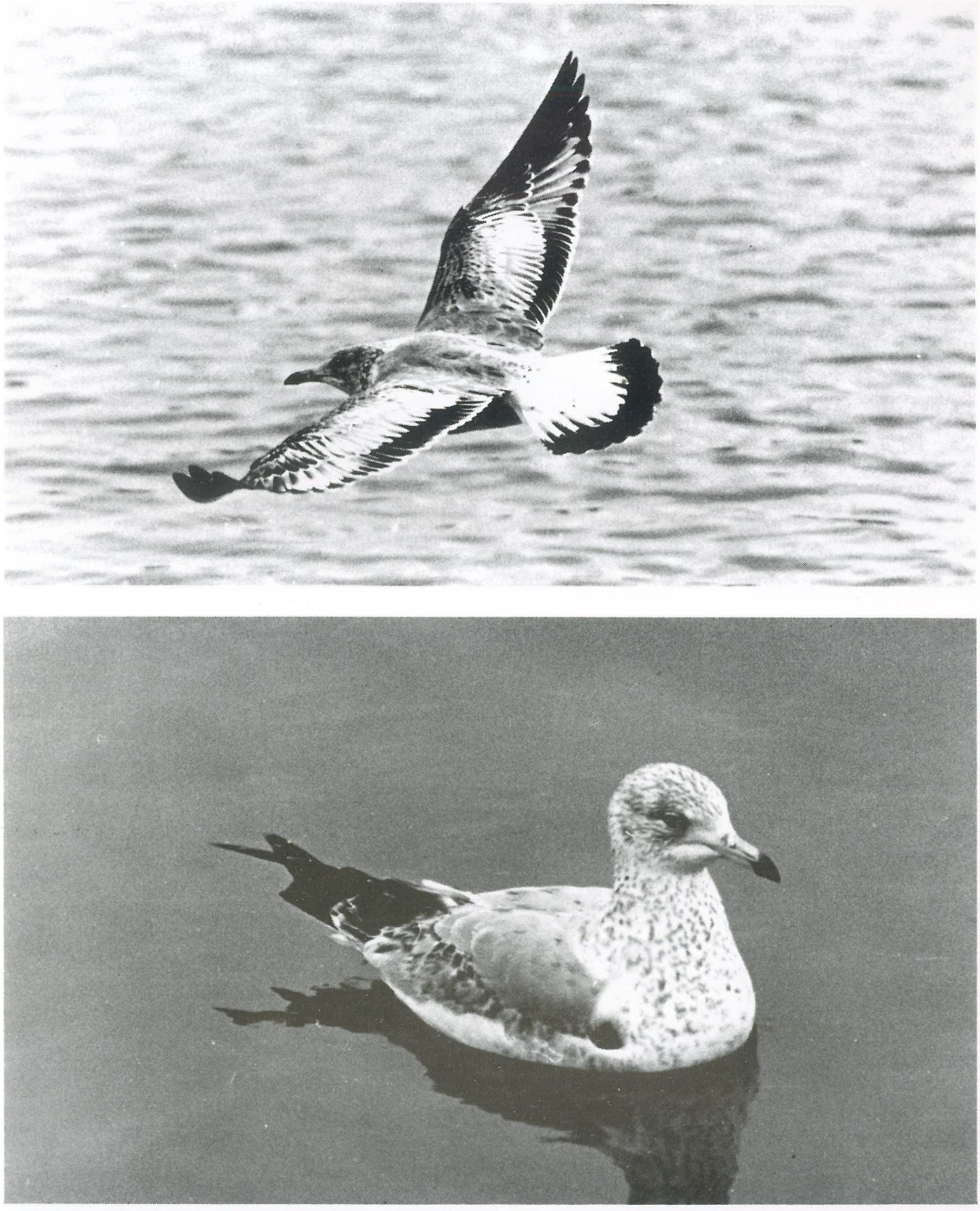
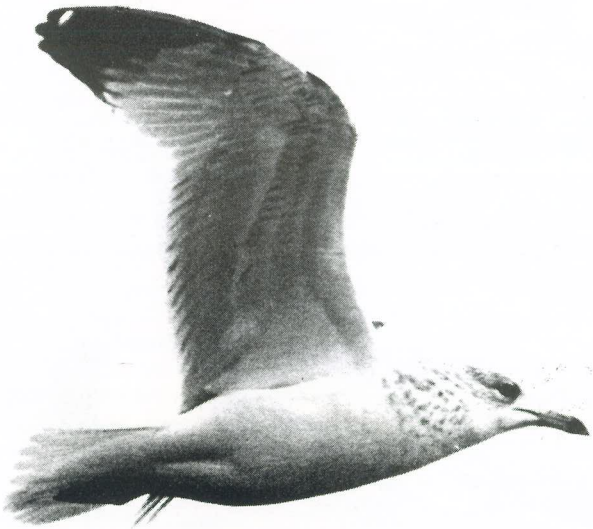


Plate 5. First-winter Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* at Chew Valley Lake. Top: in flight, February 1987; bottom; swimming, December 1986. This bird first appeared at Herriotts Bridge on 26th December 1986 and remained until 13th May 1987 and gave many observers an excellent chance of becoming familiar with the species' most 'difficult' plumage. Note the heavy bill, extensive spotting on the head and neck, the pale unbarred greater coverts, the narrow tertial edgings, the lack of a contrasting 'saddle', and the black of the tail band intruding into the white tail base along the outer webs of the tail feathers (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).



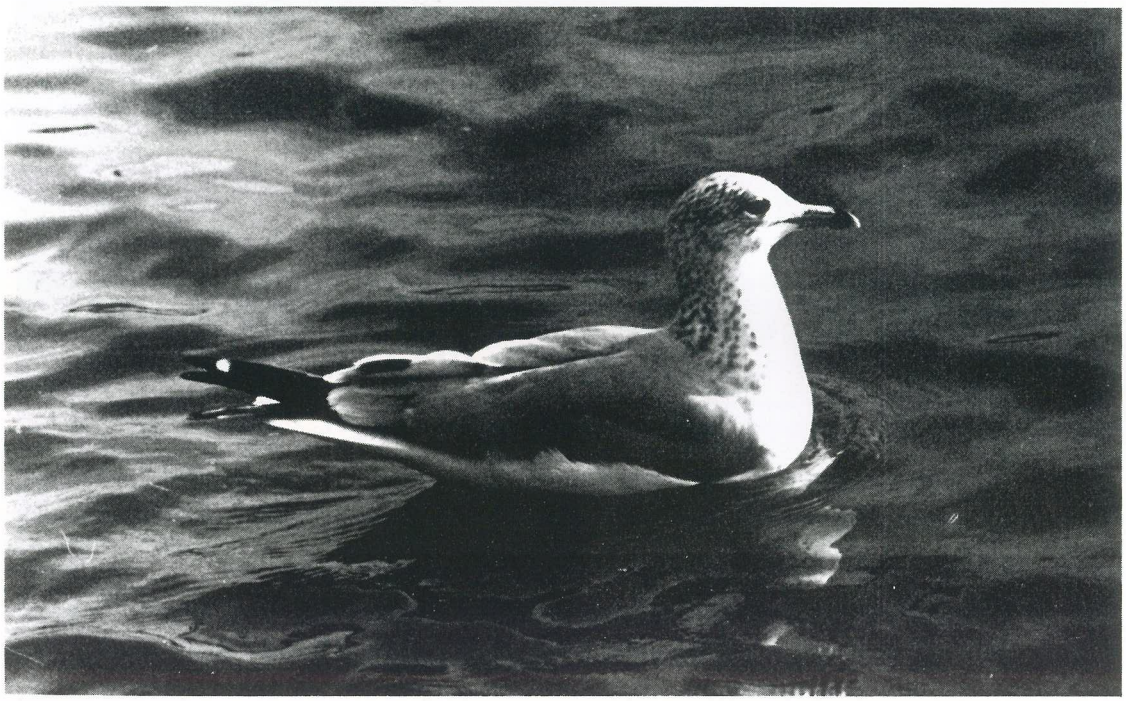


Plate 6. Ring-billed Gull at Chew Valley Lake, now in second-winter plumage. Top: in flight from below; bottom: swimming. It remained from 13th November 1987 to 6th April 1988 but both of these pictures were taken in December 1987. Note single small 'mirror' on the outermost primary (Common Gull *Larus canus* usually has two large 'mirrors'); also the heavy bill with broad dark band at the tip, and only a narrow white crescent on rather square tertials. In contrast to some individuals, this bird lacked most of the dark marks on the tail (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).

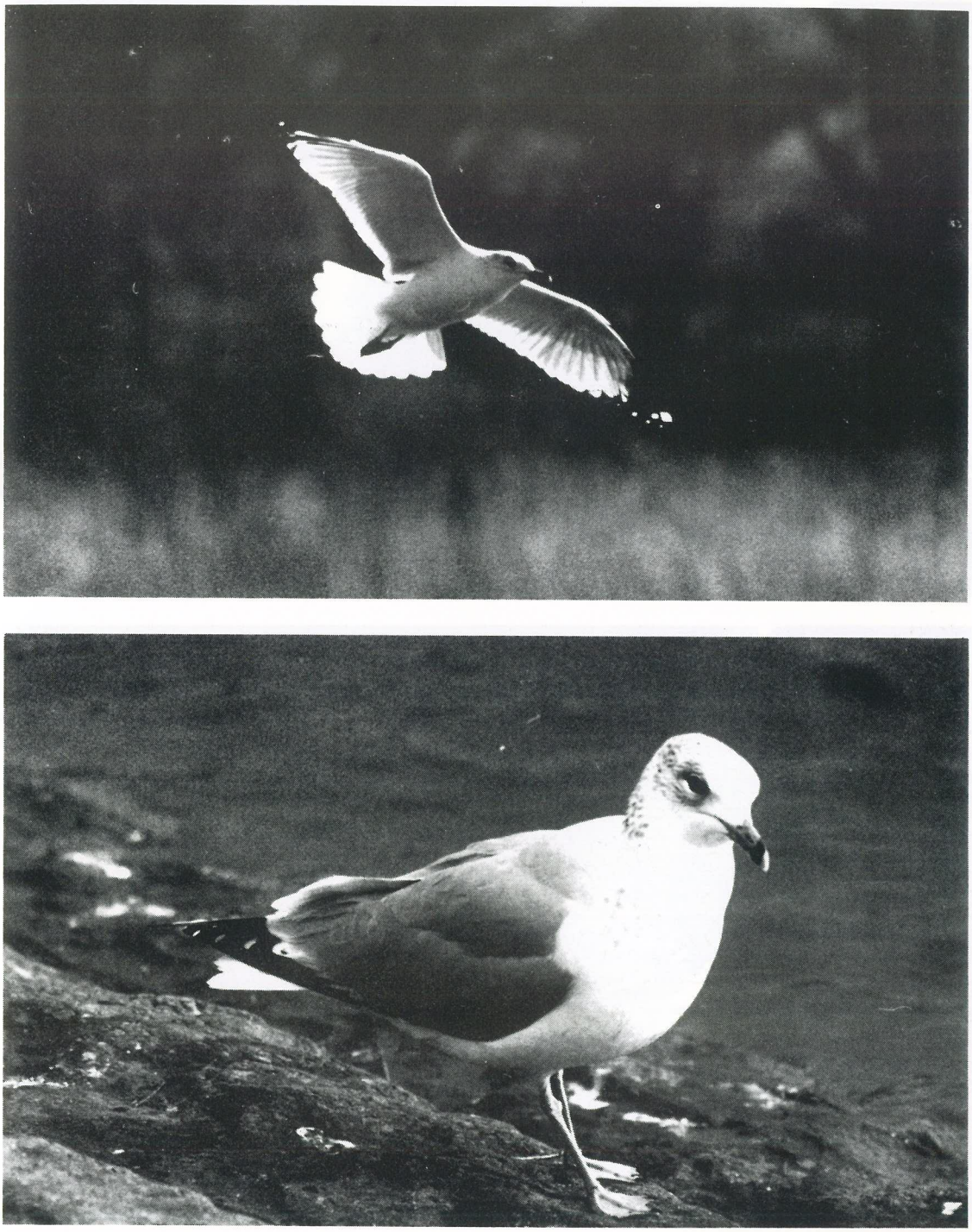


Plate 7. Same Ring-billed Gull as in Plates 5 & 6, present at Chew from 12th November 1988 to 26th March 1989, now in third-winter plumage. Top: March 1989; bottom: November 1988. Broad dark sub-terminal band on bill well-developed, and tertials grey with only a narrow white crescent visible at rest. 'Mirrors' in the wing-tip relatively small, and closed wing shows only small white primary tips. Third-winter plumage is the same as adult although *slight* traces of immaturity may be retained (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).

Plate 8. Top: Ring-billed Gull at Chew Valley Lake, January 1990, now in adult plumage. Arrived 18th November 1989 and seen until 25th March 1990. Essentially the same as in Plate 7, but pale eye easier to see. Heavy bill, with distinct gonys, as well as with broad dark band showing well. Pale mantle and narrow tertial crescent make swimming adult (relatively) easy to pick out from adult Common Gull. Bottom: juvenile Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini* at Chew Valley Lake, September 1988. Note brown mantle and wing coverts, strongly barred paler, and pale legs (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).

Plate 9. Top: same Sabine's Gull as in Plate 8, now in flight, showing characteristic wing pattern and dark tail band. Note that, when spread, the tail appears square, the central tail feathers projecting slightly beyond the others. Even when closed, the tail fork was shallow and difficult to see. This bird was present from 29th August to 11th September, arriving just ahead of gales which also brought a second one to the lake for a few days. Bottom: same individual swimming, showing very clearly the diagnostic brown sides to the neck (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).

Plate 10. Top: juvenile Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* on Steep Holm 27th September 1986, one of five seen in Avon that autumn, the first records for the county, and part of a national influx during several periods of light easterly winds between late September and mid November (*Photo:* Tony Parsons). Bottom: Siskin *Carduelis spinus,* which occurred in large numbers in the winter of 1985/86, following the largest irruption into our area for over 20 years. In contrast, only low numbers were recorded in 1986/87 and 1987/88. There were more in 1988/89 but again low numbers in 1989/90, the fluctuations presumably following those of the spruce, birch and alder seeds on which they feed (*Photo:* Brian Thomas).

Plate 11. Top. Hovering Kestrel, a female, at Blagdon Lake. A familiar sight alongside main roads and open countryside throughout our area (*Photo:* Robin Prytherch). Bottom. Nestful of Sparrowhawk chicks on the Mendip Hills in July 1981. This Sparrowhawk nest, like the majority of those located during the Club's survey of breeding raptors in Avon, was in a well-grown larch (*Photo:* Ken Hall).

Plate 12. A feeding flock of Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus* at Herons Green Bay, Chew Valley Lake, Avon, on 29th May, 1988. Top photo shows a part of the large flock of about 180 grebes. In the middle photo two grebes can be seen engaged in vigorous head-shaking at the rear of the group. Bottom photo is a closer view of a part of the flock. See page 185. (*Photos:* Brian Thomas).

1981/2. In two areas near Tring station there were a total of about four to six breeding pairs of Turtle Doves in the early 1970s but by 1976 they were gone. Coincidentally the numbers of Collared Doves had increased and an old orchard that had harboured first two pairs of Turtle Doves, then one pair, had been destroyed and a housing estate built on the site.

KENT. In the area near Longbeech Wood, Challock, Mr Moreton had noticed no regular decrease. On the contrary there was a big increase from 1982 to 1984 although this was followed by a sharp decline in numbers in 1985. Writing of the area around Marden, near Tonbridge, however, Mr Green noted a decline in numbers over the years and this was particularly evident in 1985. I have noticed a great, although rather gradual decline in numbers in the Darent Valley and adjacent hillsides between Eynsford and Otford over the past 20 years or so. In the mid-1960s and even up to the early 1970s, I expected to see a score or more of this species (often many more if a good feeding place was located) in the course of a few hours rambling, interspersed with periods of sessile observation. For the past five or six years I have usually seen at most three or four Turtle Doves in a like period. In areas near Petts Wood and Farnborough, where formerly Turtle Doves were regularly present, probably four to six or more pairs breeding in both localities, numbers steadily declined and in the past four years (when, being retired, I have spent much more time in the field) I have only seen or heard odd birds and have seen nothing to suggest successful breeding.

LEICESTERSHIRE. Mr Noakes wrote that the Turtle Dove 'has certainly declined in Leicestershire over the past 35 years – by as much as 75%'. He specifically remarked that where local reports do not suggest such a decline this is probably due to increased 'coverage'.

NORFOLK. As I said in my letter, many people had told me that Turtle Doves were still 'as common as ever' (or words to the same effect) in Norfolk and Suffolk but a friend who spent a touring holiday in those counties in May 1985, only saw seven individuals (and heard about five others) although he was especially looking out for them, as he had never seen the species before. It would seem, however, that at least in Norfolk, the Turtle Dove is *not* so plentiful as it formerly was. Mr Seago tells me that there has in fact been a considerable decline, both in the numbers summering in Norfolk and in the numbers of passage migrants passing along the coast.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE. Mr Thompson's detailed records, mostly from Northants although a few casual ones for other localities were included, show a long-term decline in numbers to 1955–57, then numbers increasing again to 1970–71 and since then a general decrease.

OXFORDSHIRE. Mr Perry had noticed no decline in two areas, Stanton Harcourt and Buscot. On the contrary there may even have been a slight increase in 1984 and 1985. On the other hand, Mr Michael Wilson wrote, 'I am sure you are right about Turtle Doves . . . not many (now) near Oxford.'

SOMERSET. Mr McGeoch reported a marked decline with only one or two birds now to be seen or heard where one would have seen 'up to 15' in the late 1960s. There has (contrary to the case in some other areas where the species has also declined) been extensive habitat destruction in his area.

SUFFOLK. Observations by Mr Warren, mainly but not entirely in the Ipswich/Felixstowe areas gave no indication of decline but some for an increase up to 1980, when a total of 257 Turtle Doves were seen by him. The numbers seen from 1981 to 1974 were 146, 167, 139 and 151 but in 1985 they dropped to only 60.

SURREY. On and near the North Downs near Guildford, between Pewley Down and Newlands Corner, the Turtle Dove was an abundant breeding species between 1950 and the early 1970s, at which latter date I and a friend saw one May morning about a hundred feeding in or resting near a recently tilled field. A single Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* was with them and this, not their numbers, made the incident stick in our memories. After the early 1970s I tended to see fewer and fewer Turtle Doves in this area and of recent years have seldom seen more than two or three, more often none, at a visit. On the south face of the Downs to the west of Dorking, Turtle Doves never seemed to be numerous as nesting birds although I often saw a hundred or so feeding or resting at a farm where many pigs were kept in late summer. In the past five or six years I have only occasionally seen a single bird or a pair in this area.

YORKSHIRE. Mr Evison has observed a considerable decrease on the western edge of the plain of York. Where, in the early 1960s it was usual to see from 12 to 20 Turtle Doves around farm buildings and in stackyards, there are now only Collared Doves. Mr Uilkatis, however, wrote that in south Yorkshire east of Sheffield, the Turtle Dove is still quite common – at most there has been a very slight decrease which has coincided with loss of habitat. He finds it still very common north of Doncaster and in nearby north Notts.

Discussion

If, as I and many others think is the case, there has been a big decline in Turtle Dove numbers in Britain (and elsewhere), it seems worthwhile to comment on possible causes. I shall include my own opinions and my reasons for them. They are, admittedly, mere unproved speculations but will, I hope, at least serve to arouse interest in and concern for this most beautiful of all *Streptopelia* species.

Modern farming methods: More than one correspondent suggested that these might be a major factor. That the food supply of the Turtle Dove, and of other seed-eating farmland birds, must have been greatly reduced as a result of modern methods seems certain. All the same, I doubt if this has been a main factor in the Turtle Dove's decline because, in those parts of Kent and Surrey where I have made observations, there has been no apparent diminution in the numbers of 'fielding' Feral Pigeons *Columba livia,* and no decrease of Stock Doves *C. oenas* (since the partial recovery of the 'crash' around 1960, due to toxic seed dressing) that could not be clearly correlated with the local destruction (by government or council officials, not by farmers!) of the old trees which supplied nest sites for this species. Also the Collared Dove has greatly increased during much of the latter part (c. 1960–1976) of the Turtle Dove's decline.

Competition with the Collared Dove: The Collared Dove is now abundant in many places where the Turtle Dove was formerly common but is now less numerous or absent. It is, however, also abundant in many places – such as some towns and many suburbs – where the Turtle Dove was always absent or very few in numbers. The only ways in which it would seem that the Collared Dove might have adversely affected the Turtle Dove are by competing with it for nesting habitat, by competing with it for food, or by adversely affecting human attitudes towards it.

I have only seen a few recorded instances of Collared Doves driving Turtle Doves from their (the Turtle Doves') nesting territories and only one for England (Fletcher, 1979). One would, however, expect that the two might attempt to exclude each other from their breeding territories and that the Collared Dove, which has usually taken over its breeding territory long before the arrival of the Turtle Dove in late April or (more often) May, would have the advantage. I know of three areas, in Hertfordshire, Surrey and Sussex, that in the early 1970s harboured breeding Turtle Doves and at the end of that decade held only Collared Doves. There are, however, very many areas of apparently suitable nesting habitat where Turtle Doves formerly bred and no longer do so regularly (if at all) although no Collared Doves have replaced them. I do not, therefore, think that in England competition with the Collared Dove for nesting sites or nesting territories can have been of much, if any, over-all significance.

Collared Doves, as is well known, habitually forage in farmyards, around barns, silos, pigstyes and in open-topped poultry runs, for grain and grain-based foods that have been spilled, provided for livestock or otherwise made accessible to them. So do Turtle Doves, and the extent to which they formerly did so, especially upon and soon after their arrival in late April and May, is often not realised by younger generations of birdwatchers or, for that matter, by the many of older generations who have little or no interest in doves.

Modern methods of harvesting and storing grain and of exploiting domestic fowls and pigs have almost certainly decreased the number of such feeding sites but where they still exist Collared Doves are now usually the most numerous and often the only *Streptopelia* species making use of them. Even although at such places House Sparrows *Passer domesticus,* and if the food available is of a softish nature also Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris,* are commonly present in much greater numbers and biomass than both species of dove, it is probable that the latter directly compete with each other. If such 'artificial' feeding sites were formerly of importance to the Turtle Dove in England, this competition may well have been one adverse factor. Nothing I have seen or been told of suggests serious competition for food between Collared and Turtle Doves when feeding in the fields. Both species often feed on recently

harvested grain fields in late summer but there the spilled grain (and possibly also weed seeds taken) are temporarily superabundant.

Worsening weather in England and Africa: Like most other people I know, I have the impression that, in spite of its variability, Britain's weather has shown an accelerating tendency towards wetter and colder springs and summers over the past 30 years or so. As the Turtle Dove in Britain has always been (and still is) most numerous in the relatively dry eastern and south-eastern regions, this tendency to wet and cold may well have been disadvantageous to it. Mr Frank Walsh pointed out that it is still more likely that weather conditions in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa may have had, and are probably still having adverse effects on wintering and migrating Turtle Doves.

To quote, briefly and selectively, from his most informative letter to me on the subject: '. . . this (the drought) has been going on for 16 to 20 years. . . . It seems likely that 1985 has had more rain than the long term average (1931–1960), the first year since 1964 to have done so. I feel sure that the drought has pushed Turtle Doves further south in West Africa than they previously went. The only substantial flock seen in Ghana was in the 1972/3 dry season following a severe drought year (Walsh and Grimes, 1981). Frequency of observations of Turtle Doves in Ouagadougou (12°22'N, 01°27'W) has increased during the last ten years. Presumably they now have to resort to areas that cannot be considered as ideal . . . First, in spring, the distance which must be flown in a single non-stop flight (over the desert) may now be 200 or even 300km greater than it was 20 years ago . . . this year (1985), in March, West Africa was blanketed in dust-laden winds from the Sahara. There was a period from 1st to 3rd March with reduced visibility, northerly winds, etc. This affected Odienne (9°36'N, 7°42'W) where I was based. Such conditions occur there in December or January, but are very rare indeed in March. From 12 to 16 March there was another period of harmattan (the name for this weather condition) of unprecedented severity. . . . it is easy to imagine that conditions in the Sahel and desert proper were such as to be insupportable for some birds. Certainly any birds caught while on migration over desert must have perished.'

Even in earlier times Turtle Doves were known (e.g. Moreau, 1972) sometimes to suffer great losses on their trans-Saharan migrations. It may well be that, as Mr Walsh suggests, recent weather conditions are 'perhaps the infamous "last straw".' However, bad as their effects may be, *some* Turtle Doves are still getting through. There may be, and I think there is, another at least equally important reason for their decline.

Human predation: Homer compares the maidservants cruelly murdered by order of his brutal and mendacious hero Odysseus to doves caught in a net spread in front of a thicket where they come to roost. From the context it is likely that the bird he had in mind was the Turtle Dove and, if so, gives some idea of how long this species has been persecuted by man.

It is certain that for at least a century or more migrating Turtle Doves have been shot and netted in great numbers from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, and also in the Persian Gulf area. Extensive shooting of Turtle Doves in West Africa by tourists now takes place and the locations of major roosts and feeding areas are well known to the sportsmen (Morel, 1987).

I understand that France and Greece have of recent years legalised, or re-legalised the shooting of Turtle Doves in May. This will have put local breeding stocks as well as birds still on passage at risk. More happily, Mr Tom Gullick informs me that in Spain spring shooting of this species is banned and the prohibition is obeyed. Mr Gullick attributes the Turtle Dove's decline in Spain to excessive shooting elsewhere, particularly in Morocco, where the birds are shot in large numbers right into June.

In parts of Britain the Collared Dove is considered to have become a pest and has, of course, provided a perfect 'mistaken identity' excuse for anyone who shoots a Turtle Dove. However, although I have seen pigeon-shooters in Kent fire at passing Turtle Doves (and also at Racing Pigeons, white Fantail Pigeons and Fieldfares *Turdus pilaris*) when their ostensible quarry, the Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus,* was not in sight, I do not think that significant numbers of Turtle Doves are now shot or trapped in Britain.

Some will argue that since mass predation on the Turtle Dove by man has gone on so long without, so far as is known, previously causing it to decrease, this cannot be a factor in its present decline. I do not think this is likely

to be true. It seems probable that in the past the vast numbers of Turtle Doves killed by man may have been counterbalanced, at some periods such as the early years of this century perhaps more than counterbalanced, by other human activities that created more and/or better feeding and breeding habitats for the Turtle Dove and that reduced the numbers of its non-human predators. Shooting interests in Britain (and probably elsewhere as well) formerly resulted in a massive reduction, especially in the eastern counties, of the numbers of raptors and corvids. The welcoming lessening of predation by man on corvids and raptors, with little or no 'let up' in his predation on Turtle Doves, may well now be increasing 'natural' predation on the species (and on some gamebirds) and modern farming and forestry activities are likely to be as adverse (at least as compared to former farming methods) to the Turtle Dove as to many other birds.

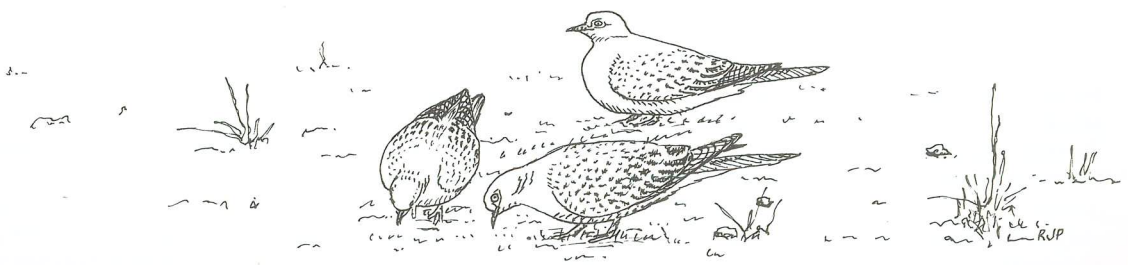
The continual increase in the numbers of people, the probably much more widespread ownership of shotguns and the undoubtedly more widespread ownership of cars make it likely that more people are spending more time hunting Turtle Doves and that many of them are able to reach more quickly any areas whence numbers of passing or resting migrants are reported. Here it must not be overlooked that whereas when birds are trapped, netted or limed, the uncaught usually escape unharmed, shooting, *especially* when of a 'sporting' nature, inevitably wounds many birds that escape immediate death and causes considerable stress and disturbance to those who do escape undamaged.

For the above reasons I think that human predation may be an important and perhaps a main factor in the apparent recent decline of this species. Let us hope that the Turtle Dove will not go the same way as the Passenger Pigeon *Ectopistes migratorius,* which was still being shot for sport and netted for food and sport (trap shooting) in tens of thousands, a decade or so before it became rare in the wild, and less than 30 years before it became extinct.

References

Fletcher, M. R. 1979. Aggression by Collared Doves to Turtle Doves. *Brit. Birds* 72:346.
Goodwin, Derek. 1985. Turtle Dove decline. *Brit. Birds* 78:598.
— 1987. Decline of the Turtle Dove. *Brit. Birds* 80:637–638.
Homer. *The Odyssey.* Translated by E. V. Rieu (1946 Penguin Book edition).
Moreau, R. E. 1972. *The Palaearctic-African Bird Migration Systems.* London.
Morel, M. Y. 1987. La Tourterelle du Bois, *Streptopelia turtur,* dans l'Ouest Africain. *Malimbus* 9:23–42.
Walsh, J. Frank and Grimes, L. G. 1981. Observations on some Palaearctic land birds in Ghana. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 101:327–334.

Derek Goodwin
6 Crest View Drive, Petts Wood, Orpington, Kent BR5 1BY.



URBAN ROOSTING BY CORVIDS IN TWO UZBEK CITIES

by Jeffery Boswall

In January 1985 I had the opportunity to visit two Uzbek cities (Samarkand and Bukhara) and during my short stay noted that several bird species roosted overnight in them. The Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan lies between the Aral Sea and the northern border of Afghanistan, in a latitude roughly similar to that of the western Mediterranean. The winter weather, though, is much harsher and the mean temperature in January, the coldest month, is −6°C. Under such conditions birds may well find that the shelter and warmth provided by the urban environment are to their advantage, quite apart from the convenience of the buildings or trees which serve as perches.

The term urban roosting, taken literally, can only mean the sleeping by birds in a town environment. Ornithologically, I define it as the roosting in an urban setting of birds that have either (a) spent the day within that habitat, or (b) spent the day a significant distance away from their urban roost site usually in the surrounding countryside, though it may have been in a suburban area. In Britain, House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Feral Pigeons *Columba livia* will usually fall clearly into the first category, and Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* and Pied Wagtails *Motacilla alba* into the second. The location of the roosting site is usually in the well-lit centre of the built-up area (pers. obs.).

Urban roosting in Samarkand

In the city of Samarkand (39°40'N, 66°57'E, population 500,000) the town populations of such birds as Feral Pigeon, Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus,* Starling, Common Mynah *Acridotheres tristis* and Palm Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* no doubt roost in the city. Indeed, a number of each of the last four species were seen assembling at about 17:30 hrs at the heating vent of the Samarkand Hotel on Gorky Boulevard on 5th January 1985. Each evening (4th, 5th and 6th January) thousands of Rooks *Corvus frugilegus* and Jackdaws *C. monedula* assembled to roost in a few selected trees (often Oriental Planes *Platanus orientalis*) in Gorky Park and on Gorky Boulevard. The main period of assembly was 17:55–18:35.

In the morning the birds departed between 07:25 and 08:10. The dispersal of the birds (mainly to the east) was a most impressive sight. It seems clear that most of the Rooks moved well beyond the built-up area for the day, though some did remain within the city. I travelled some kilometres to the Zeravshan River and saw many Rooks, but no Jackdaws. In all there could easily have been ten thousand birds involved in the roosting movements, the proportion of Rooks to Jackdaws being approximately 4:1.

The trees along the boulevard and in the park were planted in 1898, and were occupied by wintering corvids at least as early as 1937 when Abdulla K. Sagitov came to Samarkand as a zoology student (the nearest roosting tree is only 20 metres from the Biology Department building). Birds roost only in the very tops of the trees in what one can only suppose are the most exposed positions. In each tree they perch in fairly tight clusters, a few birds giving the impression of body-to-body contact. Certainly they are not spaced with two wing lengths between neighbours for easy individual take-off. Each occupied tree is 'capped' with a tight assembly of birds.

Urban roosting in Bukhara

Rooks and Jackdaws also roost in the city of Bukhara (39°47'N, 64°26'E, population 200,000). On the evening of 7th January 1985, from 17:25, I watched several thousand Rooks and Jackdaws (in the ratio of about 10:1) assemble near Bukoro Hotel and settle for the night in the surprisingly low trees of Hamza Street leading from 40 Years of October Street to the Lenin statue on Taras Shevchenko Street. Others were moving towards Kirov Park where there is apparently another roost. The next day while at Bukhara airport, only five kilometres from the city centre and

within the residential area, I saw a couple of thousand corvids trooping steadily by, only 30 metres above the ground, between 17:45 and 18:00. The next morning at the same location the earliest outward-bound individuals passed over at 08:40 and by 08:45 thousands filled the sky as well-spaced birds, flying on a broad front at about 200 metres height, passed over.

About 300 Magpies *Pica pica* were assembling in Kirov Park at 17:30 on 7th January. It is not known whether they comprised a town-feeding population or not, but it seems unlikely that many move out of town. The Feral Pigeon, however, may not be exclusively urban. I formed the impression that in Bukhara it is very much a park bird rather than a town square bird. (The pigeon of the street and market is the Palm Dove.) From an assembly of well over a thousand Feral Pigeons on a large building near the Bukoro Hotel, flocks departed as if heading for destinations beyond the urban limits and S. B. Bakaev said he thought they would be flying several kilometres to seek food.

A roost of 15 Hooded Crows *Corvus corone* in a well illuminated tree at the airport was probably comprised of locally-feeding birds. During the day some Rooks (scores) remain in the city, sharing the built-up area and the parks with Feral Pigeons (hundreds), Tree Sparrows and Palm Doves (scores), Magpies (tens), Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* (ones and twos), Hooded Crow, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata,* White Wagtail *M. alba,* Blackbird *Turdus merula,* Black-throated Thrush *T. ruficollis atrogularis* and Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* (all singles). During a drive through many kilometres of open countryside on 8th January, Rooks were commonly seen along the roads and on the agricultural land. Apart from a few larks and sparrows, the Rooks were the only birds to be seen *between* the towns and villages. However, a more thorough investigation of the narrow irrigation canals might have revealed other species. Many wintering species in this region appear to depend heavily upon man.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Abdulla K. Sagitov and to Fyodor P. Glushenko of the Department of Vertebrate Zoology, University of Samarkand, for hospitality and practical assistance; similarly to Savriddin B. Bakaev in Bukhara.

Jeffery Boswall
Birdswell, Wraxall, Bristol BS19 1JZ.

NOTES

Brambling attempting to use nut-feeder

Nut-feeders, primarily designed for use by tits *Parus* spp., have increasingly over recent years been used by other species which have adapted their feeding habits to cope with the difficulties provided by this unnatural food supply. In the garden of my previous house in Failand, near Bristol, the feeders were regularly used by House Sparrows *Passer domesticus,* Greenfinches *Carduelis chloris* and Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris,* as well as Siskins *Carduelis spinus.* Spencer and Gush (*Brit. Birds* 66:91–99) documented the rapid spread of this habit in Siskins around the country.

On many occasions, Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* attempted to land on nut-feeders in the garden, frequently flying up to them from the ground or a nearby perch, and often feeding on the ground below, darting after pieces of peanut dropped by other birds using the feeders. On 18th March 1984, I noticed that a female Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* was feeding on the ground below a nut-feeder hanging from the bird table. Two Greenfinches were clinging to the feeder and pecking at peanuts, pieces of which were falling to the ground. The Brambling stood with head cocked, watching the feeder and darting forward each time it spotted a piece of nut fall.

On several occasions, the Brambling flew up and attempted to cling to the feeder, hovering rapidly alongside. On a couple of occasions when it seemed that it must succeed, feeding Greenfinches showed aggression and caused it to fly off. As the day progressed, the Brambling focused its attention more directly on the feeder, using the bird table and nearby branches as a base from which to fly to the feeder and attempt to land. It was not seen to succeed at any time, despite much energetic hovering and various aerial manoeuvres.

This was a mild winter and food for finches would not seem to have be been in short supply. The Brambling had clearly identified this food source, however, and one wonders whether a harsher winter and more desperate hunger would have lead to the bird mastering the technique. This species, by virtue of its normal feeding habits, seems much less suited to this type of feeding than, say, a Siskin, but perhaps it may eventually become another habitual user of nut-feeders.

Terry Bond
20 Ham Close, Charlton Kings, Cheltenham GL52 6NP.

Ivy berries and birds in spring

In early spring ivy berries are normally the only available natural fruit. They have been quoted as an important food source for some resident species during this season, but their potential importance for newly arrived summer migrants has not perhaps been fully realized. The following observations may illustrate this point: they were made during spring 1986 at Uphill, near Weston-super-Mare, Avon, in an area of sycamores, hawthorn hedges and large bramble patches.

During much of April and May the weather was cold and generally very unseasonal. Very few invertebrates had yet emerged, virtually everything was a couple of weeks later than normal. The variable numbers of migrating *Phylloscopus* warblers present (mainly Willow Warblers *P. trochilus*) were feeding by probing with their bills into closed tree and bush buds, presumably after small prey hidden inside. A female Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* was seen to use the same technique, probing delicately into the tight buds of the sycamores.

A pair of Garden Warblers *Sylvia borin* which had just arrived were seen on the 8th, 11th and 16th May. They did not appear to be able to utilise the above food source and seemed to be feeding almost exclusively on ivy berries. The birds were seen pulling the fruit off with strong jerky movements of bill and head, and then swallowing the fruit whole. Various of the larger *Sylvia* warblers are well known to feed on fruit during the winter months and Garden Warblers are no exception to this but they will normally be hunting for insects on their arrival from the south in spring, the timing usually coinciding with warmer weather and an increase in insect activity. In cold springs ivy berries could prevent many casualties amongst newly arrived birds due to its 'unseasonal' fruiting.

Ivy in general has great value for wildlife: as a nesting and roosting site for birds, providing year-round cover; mid-winter flowering makes it the only naturally available nectar source, with some moths, flies and hoverflies depending on it – this, in turn, providing food for insectivorous birds.

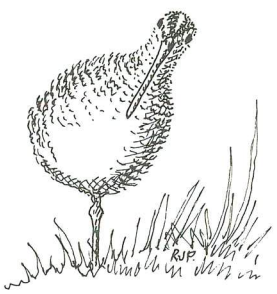
Philip Amies
16 Sunnyside Road, Weston-super-Mare, Avon BS23 3QF.

Sunning by a Common Snipe

During a visit to Minsmere, Suffolk, on 26th August, 1985, I watched a Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* adopt two different sunning postures. The bird, an adult in heavy moult, was about 15 metres from one of the hides at the north end of 'The Scrape' on the RSPB reserve. I had the bird in view for 30 minutes, between 10:30 and 11:00 BST. The weather was fine, mild, but with a brisk south-west breeze. It was mostly sunny with occasional small white cumulus clouds drifting over. Out of the breeze the sun was very hot. I suspect that it was this intense heat which stimulated the snipe to posture. The bird kept to a marshy patch, about only five square metres in extent (although, of course, there was much more marsh immediately adjacent).

The first posture (A, see Fig.) was adopted when the snipe moved onto a slightly raised area which was sheltered from the breeze. With its left side to the sun it stood with head raised up, left wing slightly drooped and left leg raised (so that the tarsus and foot hung, apparenty limply, or, the tarsus was slightly angled and the foot folded). The feathers of its crown, back of neck, mantle, back and upper-tail coverts were all raised. The tail seemed to be in the normal posture, but it could have been slightly fanned and tilted to the sun; the angle of view made this point impossible to see. The bird stood thus, on its right leg and leaning slightly away from the sun, initially for only two seconds (alerting me to the activity) and then again almost immediately for about 15 seconds. Later, during a bout of feeding, it adopted the posture briefly a further twelve times (always with the left side facing the sun).

A



B

A second posture (B) was adopted, again when the snipe was sheltered from the wind, but this time the bird faced its right side to the sun. The posture seemed to be a slightly less intense version of A, and occurred during a period of sleeping and preening. The bird stood on its left leg, the right one was stowed in the body feathers, with head raised and body leaning away from the sun. Because of the angle of view, I could not see if the right wing and tail were in a different position from normal. Some neck and upper flank feathers were raised but I could not see others on the upper surface. The bird adopted this posture for one spell of about 30 seconds and several others very briefly and intermittently between the sleeping and preening. It was often switched 'on' or 'off' from both postures (A or B) by the departure or arrival of cloud cover.

These are lateral sunning postures which fit within phase 3 of the five sunning stages outlined by Simmons (1986). He notes a record of simple sunning (phase 1 – sitting bird with wings drooped) recorded by Bernard King, but only one other of specialised sunning for a Common Snipe (Mason, 1950). These are the only records of sunning by any scolopacid wader.

References

Mason, A. G. 1950. Sun-bathing by Common Snipe. *Brit.Birds* 43:160.
Simmons, K. E. L. 1986. *The Sunning Behaviour of Birds.* Bristol.

Robin Prytherch
23 Caledonia Place, Clifton, Bristol BS8 4DL.

Early summer feeding flock of Great Crested Grebes at Chew Valley Lake

On the morning of 29th May, 1988, at Herons Green Bay, Chew Valley Lake, Avon, I came upon a remarkably large gathering of feeding Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus*. About 180 grebes, in full breeding plumage and in two adjacent groups of approximately equal size, were close inshore just off the road. One group was a loosely knit flock of alert stationary birds. The other group, which was closer inshore, was more compact and the grebes were swimming around very excitedly, shallow-diving and re-surfacing (Plate 12 top), all the while calling with a low growling sound. This triggered off similar behaviour in the passive group which then joined in the general mêlée of rapid chasing, diving and surfacing. The activity continued on and off for about 30 minutes during which a few couples separated from the flock and began vigorous head-shaking (Plate 12 middle, at rear of group) before drifting apart and rejoining the flock. Eventually the whole flock moved further out into the bay and settled down quietly.

Great Crested Grebes frequently gather into large flocks during winter; at Chew they often contain several hundred grebes. Flocks of flightless, moulting grebes also form in late summer when feeding congregations of 100 or more are regulary recorded at Chew (Simmons, 1974). The flock of 502 recorded there in September, 1988 (*Avon Bird Report 1988*), no doubt included grebes in moult. This feeding aggregation of grebes in late May is, however, unusual and can probably be attributed to falling water levels causing many of the birds to abandon nesting (*Avon Bird Report 1988*) and to gather together to feed on dense shoals of small fish in the shallows.

Reference

Simmons, K. E. L. 1974. Adaptations in the reproductive biology of the Great Crested Grebe. *British Birds* 67: 413–437.

Brian Thomas
8 Southfield Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS9 3BH.

CLUB ACTIVITIES, 1987, 1988 & 1989

1987 began on a sad note with the death of our first life member, Bernard King, ornithologist extraordinary and writer of a veritable deluge of notes to *Bristol Ornithology, British Birds* and other journals. Bernard, who had lived with his wife in Cornwall since his retirement, may not have been anything more than a name to more recent members, but was a unique character in the eyes of those of us who knew him well. Many of his friends attended the memorial meeting — he would have wanted nothing in the way of a 'service' — held by the Club at the Newman Hall in June.

More happily, the Club's major venture into publishing, Ken Simmons' *Sunning Behaviour of Birds* proved highly successful. Not only did all members receive a copy free at the end of last year, but it was not long into '87 before the treasurer could report a profit.

The year was peppered with the usual indoor and field meetings, with eight of the former and 29 of the latter, and there were weekends in Lancashire and Norfolk, plus a week on Islay, for those fortunate enough to take part.

For the first time, too, midweek meetings were attempted for those able to take advantage of them. Initial results were considered favourable. Coach trips continued to draw a mixed response, with those planned for the Gwenffryd and Pagham Harbour having to be cancelled because of a lack of 'customers'.

Roger White, unaware that he was to become Chairman in December, launched a House Martin survey in the spring; and was delighted with the response. About the same time current Chairman, Kim Howard, announced he would have to stand down at the annual meeting — under the Club's unwritten three-year rule he still had a year to go! — because he was off to Leicester Polytechnic for 12 months or so to read for a Masters degree in communication technology.

Club member David Buckingham travelled even further, though for a lesser period, when he joined an expedition to Thailand to establish the current status of Gurney's Pitta. We helped sponsor the study in a small way with a £25 donation from the conservation fund. Nearer home, £50 was donated to Avon Wildlife Trust's Folly Farm Appeal.

Don Walter, a former Chairman and committee stalwart, retired at the annual meeting. But there was no rush to take his place on the committee. Existing members had to nominate a replacement and elections remain few and far between. Fortunately another job which few members would care to take on continues to be done willingly and cheerfully — not to mention promptly — by Ann Humphreys, who each month types *Bird News* and by so doing saves the Club a great deal of money annually.

Although Club membership had remained remarkably steady in the eighties, **1988** was the year when the committee decided it might pay to advertise. And so Robin Prytherch, founder member, former Chairman, on the committee from the very beginning, and creator of our Pied-billed Grebe logo, put pen to paper to draw up a suitable poster for display in libraries, educational establishments and bird hides — anywhere likely to be visited by birders or potential birdwatchers.

Since that date the posters have continued to be displayed and while it is not possible to quantify the result, there is no doubt that many more people are aware of BOC than might otherwise be the case.

As if the posters were not enough, the genuine article arrived for a long stay at Kenfig, in Glamorgan, and also helped to 'sell' the Club. Steve Moon, warden at the nature reserve there, and a long-standing member, asked for a supply of BOC car stickers and successfully boosted Club finances by selling them to birders from all over Britain who had come to tick off this delightful American. The grebe was gracious enough to still be in situ the day the Club had a field meeting at Kenfig, one of 29 held during the year.

Three weekends were also spent in various parts of the country by Club members — the popularity of these intensive birding occasions remains undiminished, so much so that there is usually a waiting list of those who did not book in time.

Our summer social was less successful. Apart from the fact that the event took place on one of the wettest days of the summer, it was further marred by a locked gate which prevented those who did turn up reaching the appointed place. The warden had gone out for the evening, forgetting all about his intended 'guests'.

Some members became authors, writing about their own local patches for a series of 'Where to Watch Birds' for *Bird News.* This was planned to help newcomers and beginners find their way to some of the best spots in our area, and to ensure they visited them at the best time of year. Ken Hall, another long-serving committee member and former Chairman, went several better by co-authoring *Where to Watch Birds in Somerset, Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire,* one of the Croom Helm guides which will eventually cover just about every birding area in Britain. Ken's contribution involved three-quarters of the counties, with only Wiltshire falling to his fellow author.

After years of handling the monthly sightings section of *Bird News,* treasurer Chris Newman handed over the onerous job of assembling every record for publication to Steve Hale.

Finding someone worthy of receiving the Stanley Crick Award — for the best fieldwork or most progress shown by a young member or a beginner — is no easy task. But this year the committee had no hesitation in awarding it to Matthew Willmott for his 'Diaries of a Juvenile Twitcher'.

Several donations were made in the name of conservation — with sums going to the fight against the Taff Estuary barrage scheme at Cardiff, and the River Derwent Appeal, aimed to prevent unspoiled upper reaches of the Yorkshire river being used by motorboats and other craft. The Club also contributed towards a new ringing station at Chew Valley Lake. *Bristol Ornithology 19* was published during the year, which ended with a rise in subscriptions (to £8.50) for 1989 — the first since 1983.

For the handful of lucky members able to take part, **1989** will be remembered as the Morocco year. The Club's first holiday abroad since 1984 took in 2,300 miles by minibus, and was neatly summed up by Vaughan Southam as 'very hectic, extremely enjoyable, highly educational and very productive'. It was not the only holiday of the year, though. In the autumn another productive and enjoyable week was spent on Holy Island.

Seven indoor meetings, 27 field meetings and three weekends made up the BOC itinerary, with Lancashire, Pembrokeshire and Norfolk visited by the weekenders. Coach trips were less successful, and those planned for the London reservoirs and Pagham harbour had to be cancelled owing to lack of interest.

The indoor meetings had their problems, too, with two cancellations at short notice. Robin Prytherch more than filled the gaps, though, with talks on the Falklands and his long-term study of Buzzards in Avon. Members with hearing problems should find things easier at indoor meetings from now on, following the decision to buy a new sound system to amplify the voices of speakers.

Mike Dorgan, who had run the coach trips for nine years, retired from the committee before the end of the year because of pressure of work.

Indoor meetings

19.2.87	Members' Evening
5.3.87	Beginners' Meeting — Question Time
19.3.87	Birds from Texas to Maine — Malcolm Sainsbury
17.9.87	Birds of the Wyre Forest — John Robinson
15.10.87	Waders and Coasts — Nigel Clark
19.11.87	Birds of the Sacred Mountain — David Cottridge
17.12.87	Annual General Meeting

14.1.88 What's the Use of Rare Birds — John Waldon
28.1.88 Beginners' Meeting — Bird Identification
18.2.88 Members' Evening
17.3.88 The Barn Owl — Colin Shawyer
15.9.88 Cormorants in the Severn Valley — Robin Sellers
13.10.88 Birds and Gardens — Patrick Thompson
17.11.88 Shetland Spring and Scilly Autumn — David Cottridge
15.12.88 Annual General Meeting

12.1.89 Forests of Madagascar — Andy Hawkins
16.2.89 Members' Evening
2.3.89 Beginners' Meeting — Identification, Plumages
16.3.89 From Ruddy Ducks to Shelducks — David Salmon
21.9.89 Bird Island, South Georgia: Wildlife Paradise — Simon Pickering
19.10.89 Buzzards in Avon — Robin Prytherch
16.11.89 International Bird Preservation — Nigel Collar
14.12.89 Annual General Meeting

Corrections

In John Aldridge's paper on the 'Birds of the Keynsham Area'(*Bristol Orn.* 19 (1987): 131–145) the Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus* recorded on 13 April 1982 should read 13 December 1982.

The record for Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* was inadvertently omitted from Andy Davis' paper 'Birds at Blagdon Lake, 1963–1983 (*Bristol Orn.* 18 (1985): 102–116). This should have been included on page 105 after the entry for Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and read as follows: 'Usually seen in small numbers, highest count nine on 21 December 1980.'

Line drawings by Robin Prytherch.
Published by Bristol Ornithological Club, 1989 (J. Barber, 37 Spring Hill, Milton, Weston-super-Mare, Avon BS22 9AX).
Typeset by Wayside Books, Clevedon, Avon BS21 7JG and printed by Severn Graphics, Clevedon, Avon BS21 6RR.