

## **TVBAP. ANNUAL GATHERING TALK. Vic Fairbrother.**

### **INTRODUCTION.**

They have gone, almost all of them, first one or two then a trickle, and eventually a flood of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands. You probably barely noticed this departure of our summer migrants: - warblers, flycatchers, martins, swifts, cuckoos and wagtails.

If they had left in daylight and all together it would have been a sensation. People would have flocked into the streets and the event would have been highlights of our newspapers and television.

But will they return next Spring and if so where to and in what numbers?  
How will we know?

### **THE BREEDING BIRDS OF CLEVELAND.**

**SLIDE 1.**

When Sue invited me to speak today about the publication of the **Breeding Birds of Cleveland** and how it could contribute to conservation I said fine, OK, but then she said you have only 15 minutes. Ah!

Well we are speaking here about what could be one of the most important books on the natural history of this area published in the last hundred years.

The book is the outcome of an ambitious attempt to produce the first ever comprehensive survey of the breeding birds of Cleveland. It involved fifty volunteers in over 5000 hours of fieldwork and it is riveting reading.

### **TETRAD MAP.**

**SLIDE 2.**

The volunteers surveyed every tetrad in Cleveland in order to be able to map the number and distribution of 127 species of breeding birds.

### **BLACKBIRD MAP.**

**SLIDE 3.**

**This is the most widespread bird in Cleveland**, found in 91% tetrads. Once the fieldwork was complete the huge task of processing and analyzing the data was begun, followed by the writing of the species accounts and all the supplementary material.

**LITTLE OWL.  
Introduced into Britain in the 1870s.**

**SLIDE 4.**

Historical data from 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was gleaned from the limited resources available and together with detailed records from fifty years of Teesmouth Bird Club annual reports this helped to place the current survey into a fascinating historical perspective.

Relevant data from national atlases and breeding bird surveys was included for each species together with any observable trends in order to place the local survey in a national context.

**LITTLE OWL MAP.**

**SLIDE 5.**

SO WHY COULD THIS BOOK BE SO IMPORTANT?

It provides an invaluable benchmark at the start of a new century.

Is a useful starting point for future targeted surveys.

Can assist in establishing priorities.

In deciding on conservation action.

In monitoring future progress against actions and changing circumstances.

It has already been used in support of conservation during 2009/10.

It was used in the review of bird criteria for the selection of local wildlife sites and provided data to assist in the eventual selection of some of the local wildlife sites.

It has proved to be a major asset in responding to the growing number of planning applications, at least one per month since publication concerning pipelines, wind farms, power lines, quarries and housing developments.

**LONG-TAILED TIT.**

**SLIDE 6.**

**This species benefits greatly from mild winters.**

The book reveals the fluctuations in numbers of local breeding birds. But it is more than about birds. It is about the remarkable range of local habitats, our farmland, urban and industrial areas, water bodies and wetlands, coast and woodlands and their varying ability to support our breeding birds.

It provides invaluable information which contributes towards assessing the condition of these local habitats. We only have time for a brief look at each.

The long-term problems facing **FARMLAND HABITATS** are well documented and it is sad that after a brief leveling off period the decline in farmland birds continues. With the recent addition of Lapwing and Yellow Wagtail, 10 of the 19 species on the farmland bird index are now on the red list of high conservation concern.

Entry Level Stewardship is clearly struggling to reverse farmland bird declines. Most are yet to show any response and a number continue to decline further. We do now though have a Cleveland benchmark against which to monitor future trends in farmland birds.

### **CORN BUNTING MAP.**

**SLIDE 7.**

This is a UK and local BAP species following a national decline of 80% between 1970 and 2001 and a continuing decline of 39% between 1994 and 2006. 100 years ago Nelson found it common in coastal fields. In 1977 the estimate was 50-100 pairs; the most extensive breeding area was from Boulby to Redcar and extending inland between Marske and Wilton.

This survey found only 23 pairs with only 2 of the 13 tetrads holding more than two pairs and no records from the former coastal strongholds.

In 2006 only three territorial males were recorded.

A joint RSPB and Natural England initiative just outside our area at Farnless farm near Bishop Middleham is producing encouraging results. Based on an enhanced Stewardship Scheme developed to benefit Corn Buntings and other farmland birds this is an excellent example of targeted species action based on detailed local data.

### **STOCK DOVE MAP.**

**SLIDE 8.**

**TBC estimated 10-20 pairs in 1978 and 1984.**

Not all of the UK's farmland birds are in decline. Jackdaw, Goldfinch, Greenfinch Wood Pigeon and Stock Dove show stable or increasing trends.

**The Stock Dove is a bird of parkland, wooded farmland and forest edge.**

Previously under recorded with estimates of 10-20 pairs in 1978 and 1984 this is also a species on the increase. This systematic survey found it to be fairly widespread with 284 pairs in 91 tetrads.

### **TREE SPARROW & HOUSE SPARROW.**

**SLIDE 9.**

The red listed Tree Sparrow is a UK and local BAP species following a decline of 95% between 1977 and 1994, the largest fall of any farmland bird

during this period. Since then the BBS has recorded an encouraging 15% increase. We do need to remember that they are recovering from a very low base and for every one we see today there were 20 in the 1970s.

### **SPARROW MAPS.**

**SLIDE 10.**

**(This survey found 261 and 14,423 pairs in 57 and 150 tetrads.)**

A UK BAP species, the House Sparrow has for long been one of the most common birds of our **URBAN & INDUSTRIAL HABITATS**. Whilst still widespread and common, worrying declines were first noticed in 1980 and a 50% decline in 20 years led to the red listing of this once abundant species. [The current status of the House Sparrow emphasizes the need to monitor even common birds.](#)

### **COLLARED DOVE MAP.**

**SLIDE 11.**

An incredible suburban success story is provided by the Collared Dove. Until 1930 presence in Europe was restricted to the Balkans. A rapid spread across Western Europe followed reaching Britain in 1955 and Cleveland in 1960. Only 50 years after its first arrival in Cleveland this survey found a remarkable 2,733 pairs in 139 tetrads (70%).

### **GREAT CRESTED GREBE.**

**SLIDE 12.**

**This exotic grebe increased from 1 pair in 1944 to 25 pairs in this survey.**

This one of only several success stories coming from our **WATER & WETLAND HABITATS**. There have been encouraging developments at Preston Farm on the river Tees and we shall be hearing more this afternoon about exciting developments at Bowesfield Marsh and RSPB Saltholme which can only benefit more of our water and wetland birds.

### **POCHARD.**

**SLIDE 13.**

A single brood on the North Tees Marshes in 1986 heralded the start of a gradual increase leading to 20 broods in 1999.

## **POCHARD MAP.**

**SLIDE 14.**

This survey found 32 pairs in just 4 tetrads. This is a nationally scarce breeding bird and importantly for local conservation planning the survey reveals that Cleveland holds 7% of the British breeding population.

## **GADWALL.**

**SLIDE 15.**

**Before 1948 only 5 records for Teesmouth but now there are 28 breeding pairs.**

The first local breeding record was of 3 broods in July 1994. In 1998 there were single broods at Cowpen Bewley, Saltholme Pools and Haverton Hole. This survey located 28 pairs in 8 tetrads and in the context of local conservation action it is important to note that this is 3% of GB breeding population. Wintering numbers are also of national importance increasing steadily from 108 in 1998 to 511 by 2005 peaking usually in November. In most winter counts this is the most abundant duck on the Reclamation Pond an important breeding, feeding and wintering area which is now scheduled for destruction.

## **COMMON TERN.**

**SLIDE 16.**

This is a species which has benefited from conservation action with the provision of nesting rafts on inland waters, islands created on non-operational industrial land, and some successful relocations. This beautiful tern increased from **only 9 breeding pairs in 1986 to 550 pairs** in 2007.

## **AVOCET.**

**SLIDE 17.**

Beautifully demonstrating the need for ongoing recording and surveying, no sooner was fieldwork for the atlas concluded than **two pairs of Avocets bred in 2008, the first records for Cleveland.**

## **LITTLE EGRET.**

**SLIDE 18.**

Earlier this morning we heard about climate change from Leanne Wilson. Climate change is already having an impact on the distribution of breeding birds such as Little Egret, Cattle Egret and Spoonbill. The historical data, recent trends and current survey data in the Atlas provide invaluable benchmarks in plotting local changes in distribution. **Little Egrets first bred in**

England in 1996 and with local sightings increasing a local breeding record cannot be far away.

**GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER.**

**SLIDE 19.**

Numbers of widespread and common woodland species such as Blue Tit, Great Tit and Chaffinch are equally at home in most urban environments as in **WOODLAND HABITATS** and continue to increase. The Great Spotted Woodpecker is also benefiting from adapting successfully to parkland and suburban gardens in addition to its traditional habitat.

**GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER MAP.**

**SLIDE 20.**

**TBC estimated only 20-30 pairs in 1979.**

This survey indicates a fairly healthy population of 173 pairs in 91 tetrads.

**HAWFINCH MAP.**

**SLIDE 21.**

All is not well in many of our **WOODLAND HABITATS** however and a number of woodland birds have been in serious decline for some time including Willow Tit, Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Now Lesser Redpoll, Tree Pipit, Wood Warbler and Hawfinch have been added to the red list of conservation concern.

A UK BAP species the Hawfinch has declined to only 5 pairs in 3 tetrads. The phased felling and re-stocking of Guisborough Forest has begun and survey data on local woodland birds was used to comment on the Guisborough Forest Plan and further information will be available to feed into the Tees Valley, Ancient Woodland, ecological condition project.

**KITTIWAKE.**

**SLIDE 22.**

It may surprise some of you that this is **our fourth most abundant species in Cleveland.**

There is now a new and welcome focus on our **COASTAL & MARINE HABITATS** with the arrival of The Marine and Coastal Access Act which provides for the establishment of Marine Conservation Zones including one for the North Sea called Net Gain. Information we can provide on our seabird colonies will be excellent indicators to contribute to our understanding of the health of our local coastal and marine habitats.

### **KITTIWAKE MAP.**

**SLIDE 23.**

**7,100 pairs in only 9 tetrads so vulnerable.** It is important to note that The Seabird Monitoring Programme reveals a 48% decline in Kittiwake numbers in the UK which may be caused by failures in sand eel stocks possibly linked to rising water temperatures in the North Sea.

### **LITTLE TERN.**

**SLIDE 24.**

**The presence of local wardens has provided vital protection for this beach nesting species.**

Geoff Barber has already described this epic struggle.

Older members of the audience will remember how *Silent Spring* written by Rachel Carson in 1963 shocked the world into urgent action against the indiscriminate use of pesticides exposed by its devastating impact on raptors at the top of the food chain.

### **PEREGRINE FALCON.**

**SLIDE 25.**

This spectacular falcon **returned to breed locally in 1999.**

### **SPARROWHAWK & KESTREL.**

**SLIDE 26.**

Our two most common raptors provided very similar results with 130 Sparrowhawks **in 93 tetrads** and 131 Kestrels **in 105 tetrads.**

Now a new book *Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo* by Michael McCarthy is focusing attention on a new threat to the English Spring amidst growing concern for our long distance migrants. He describes some alarming declines between 1995 and 2008:

Swift 29%, **Spotted Flycatcher** 39%, **Cuckoo** 44%, Pied Flycatcher, **Yellow Wagtail**, Nightingale and Whinchat over 50%, **Wood Warbler** 61%, and **Turtle Dove** 70%.

### **TURTLE DOVE.**

**SLIDE 27.**

I began by referring to the departure of this years summer migrants. The **Turtle Dove** a UK BAP species **last bred in Cleveland in 1996** and the Pied Flycatcher no longer returns to breed in Cleveland. Could we really have to even contemplate saying goodbye to the Cuckoo?

Simon Barnes is an award winning sports writer but he also writes most effectively and with great insight on wildlife and the environment. I was fascinated by a recent riveting article with a very apt conclusion.

He described how an aircraft will continue to fly if it loses a rivet, and will continue to fly safely if it loses several rivets, but there will come a point as further rivets are lost when the plane will fall out of the sky. Birds happen to be some of our more obvious local wildlife rivets.

## **THE BREEDING BIRDS OF CLEVELAND. THE END? SLIDE 28.**

Although a book of counts, numbers, percentages, trends it is also a book of wonder and includes stories of life and death, epics of endurance and resilience, stories to warm your heart. It is a beautiful book filled with delightful sketches and superb photographs and it has already done much to rekindle a delight in the wonderful birds which also call our Tees Valley home.

The Breeding Birds of Cleveland is an invaluable benchmark and used wisely along with other data and research demonstrates the value of detailed surveying and monitoring which can do so much to establish conservation priorities and help to implement and monitor effective conservation action.

But there is another endangered species I have not mentioned. We are desperately short of volunteers willing to develop the skills and spend the time in recording and monitoring the changing status of our plants and trees, butterflies and moths, birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

There is no sign that human pressure on habitats is abating and climate change is an additional challenge at a time when the economic situation indicates that funding and other resources are going to be scarce for the foreseeable future.

A continuing flow of good quality biodiversity data has never been more important if scarce resources are to be used to maximum effect.

The Breeding Birds of Cleveland largely mirrors some worrying national trends. You may remember the ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol. The Breeding Birds of Cleveland provides a unique view for us, of *Summers Past*, *Summers Present*, and a glimpse of *Summers Yet to Come*. The exciting challenge before us is to generate something akin to Scrooge's transformation in attitudes, behavior and action if local habitats are to flourish and realize their potential.

