

Small Raptors 1964

Title

Small Raptors and Crows 1964

Description and Summary of Results

A survey of the Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* in 1961 had shown that it had undergone a very rapid decline since 1955, studies of the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* had demonstrated an unprecedented drop in its breeding success in a wide area of the western Highlands of Scotland since 1960, and there were many local reports, particularly from southern and eastern England, that showed a similar decline in numbers and/or breeding success of some of the smaller birds of prey. Attention was focussed at a conference held in Cambridge in March 1963, when it was found that there was 'conclusive evidence of an alarming decline in the numbers of birds of prey in Britain over the last six years'. The BTO therefore decided to conduct a survey to obtain more detailed information.

A total of 141 completed questionnaires were returned -- 108 referred to England, 19 to Scotland, ten to Wales, one to the Isles of Scilly, one to the Isle of Man, two to Northern Ireland and one to Guernsey.

In general all the birds of prey had decreased, especially Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, but the crows had all increased. The most stable species was the Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*. The change in numbers of breeding Sparrowhawks had been sufficient to affect its distribution in 60% of the counties in which a change had occurred. Overall there were many specific gains and losses noted. Most changes especially the decreases were considered to be recent (late 1950s onwards especially 1959-1960) rather than longer term and especially in eastern England. Most contributors thought that toxic chemicals were primarily to blame except for Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (myxomatosis) and Merlin *Falco columbarius* (loss of habitat). The increase in crows was longer term and thought primarily due to reduction in game preservation activities. The general position with regard to the birds of prey in Britain was considered to have deteriorated.

Methods of Data Capture

The relevant information was thought mainly to be in the records of local ornithological groups and societies and it was decided, therefore, that the most appropriate method would be to send a questionnaire to the regional representatives of the BTO, editors of County Bird Reports and officials of local Natural History Societies. The enquiry was also publicised in *Bird Study*, and directly to people with a particular local knowledge of the species concerned. The species included were: Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Merlin, Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Barn Owl, Tawny Owl, Carrion/ Hooded Crow *Corvus corone* and *C. cornix*, Magpie *Pica pica*, and Jay *Garrulus glandarius*. The Corvidae were included for comparison with the birds of prey.

The method employed had to fulfil three special conditions: (i) rapid response, (ii) utilize a large number of scattered and varied sources of information, and (iii) cover as much of

Britain as possible. Questionnaires were sent out early in 1964 and referred primarily to 1953-1963.

The questionnaire asked several questions: 1) and 2) information about the observers and the area to which their answers referred; 3) whether breeding numbers of each species had increased, remained stable or decreased in the previous 20 years; 4) if change was slight, moderate or very marked; 5) any changes in distribution; 6) the present status; 7) the timing of any change (recent or part of a longer term trend); and 8) gave a list of possible factors with contributors asked to note which had had or were having an effect and to note the three most important: more or less disturbance; more or fewer road deaths; more or less disease; increase or decrease in conservation activity; destruction or planting of hedges; other loss or gain in habitat; increase or decrease of toxic chemicals; other changes in agriculture; increased or decreased breeding success; change in bird habits; increase or decrease in food supply; more or less enlightened keeping; increase or decrease in game preservation; increase in unorganised shooting; Protection of Birds Act (1954); hard winter; egg collecting; abolition of gin trap; deaths on railways; industrial pollution; abolition of cage traps and live bait; reduction in Grey Squirrels; any other.

Contributors were also asked to obtain the views of other local naturalists, local farmers, gamekeepers and foresters to supplement their own observations.

Purpose of Data Capture

To obtain an up to date report on the status (numbers and distribution of breeding birds) of all smaller birds of prey, and crows, in Britain.

Geographic Coverage

All of UK with reports covering most of England, but only just under half of Wales and Scotland, two reports from Northern Ireland, one from Isle of Man and one from the Channel Isles.

Temporal Coverage

The questionnaire was sent out in 1964 but the data returned referred to 1953-1963.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

Organiser(s)

Ian Prestt

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Prestt, I. 1965. An enquiry into the recent breeding status of some of the smaller birds of prey and crows in Britain. *Bird Study* 12: 196-221.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 17 (results of testing of the methods) and 20; and in *Bird Study* vol.10 (for 1963) December issue and vol. 11 (for 1964) March issue.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 folder containing reports and a few letters.

Notes on Access and Use**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**