
 Saturday July 1 1933

OBSERVERS OF BIRDS

STUDY ON SCIENTIFIC LINES

A BRITISH TRUST FORMED

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—As birds are in several respects the simplest to observe, singly and in the mass, of all types of animal population, and as the British Isles are rich in good observers of birds, organized research in ornithology is gaining a peculiar importance among lines of biological advance in this country. Attempts have lately been made to create an organization capable of doing justice to the opportunities arising.

At Oxford, six years ago, a Bird Census was launched, largely on undergraduate initiative, which has steadily grown in importance. Aided by grants from the Empire Marketing Board, the Ministry of Agriculture, and from private sources it has surveyed during this period the rookeries, roosts, and economic status of more than 60,000 rooks on an area exceeding 900 square miles; worked (through a rota of observers) trapping stations at which more than 3,000 birds have been marked with rings and more than 600 recaptured; carried out significant homing experiments; investigated changes in bird population on typical Midland farmland, and, incidentally, sent out keen and practised young observers who have applied its technique with effect in at least four continents.

At this moment, when the work has outgrown its local character and become of much wider scientific importance, the Oxford University Research in Economic Ornithology is faced with the cessation of its existing Government grants. This emergency has led representatives of all the chief elements in British field ornithology to unite in forming a British Trust for Ornithology which may act as a perpetual trustee and co-ordinating body, and may prevent the waste and uncertainty arising from a piecemeal treatment of scientific needs. In America and elsewhere this function is performed by the State. Steps are being taken to seek registration for the Trust as a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee so that it may hold funds, land, libraries, collections of data, and so forth as a corporate charitable undertaking.

The Trust will apply any funds in the first place to establishing and supporting an Institute

of Ornithology at Oxford, taking over the existing scheme. This Institute, which has been assured by decree of status in the University, and will be under University administration, will carry out organized research upon the numbers, distribution, food, habits, migrations, and so forth of British birds, and will at the same time form a clearing-house and directive centre for all British bird-watchers who care to make use of it, for either team or individual studies. It will, in fact, try to do for field ornithologists what the British Museum of Natural History does for systematists. Co-ordination is assured by the presence on the initial Trust Council of the head of the Bird Section at the British Museum (Natural History). An experimental area of over 70 acres has already been placed at the Trust's disposal through one of the signatories to this letter, and intensive study has begun on it.

In order to establish the Institute and to ensure the operation of a minimum scheme of research over an initial period of five years, it is required to obtain subscriptions or grants to the total sum of £8,000, payment of which might be spread over the whole period. A permanent endowment must follow. In spite of the depression we cannot believe that for want of this sum a scheme of so much proved value to all interested in birds, and of so much economic importance to agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, will be allowed to lapse. We rely on a far-sighted understanding of the need for preserving from extinction during a temporary time of stress an instrument of proved worth which has taken years of effort to create, and which must be the nucleus of incalculable future scientific expansion. Those able to help by donations or subscriptions, by gifts of appropriate material or otherwise, are invited to communicate at once with the acting hon. treasurer, B. W. Tucker, M.A., University Museum, Oxford, or with the acting hon. secretary, E. M. Nicholson, 58, Petty France, London, S.W.1, who will be pleased to send details to anyone interested.

We are, yours faithfully,

DESBOROUGH.
 HUGH S. GLADSTONE.
 GREY OF FALLODON (Chancellor of Oxford University).
 JULIAN S. HUXLEY.
 T. G. LONGSTAFF.
 PERCY R. LOWE.
 P. CHALMERS MITCHELL.
 ROTHSCHILD.
 SCONE, M.P. (Chairman, British Trust for Ornithology).
 E. L. TURNER.
 H. F. WITHERBY (President, British Ornithologists' Union).

An Ornithological Trust

The appeal on behalf of the British Trust for Ornithology which we publish this morning deserves the support of every British student of bird life and of an even wider public. It bears the signatures of the leading British ornithologists and field naturalists who have formed the Trust in order to continue and to extend the admirable work done by the Oxford Bird Census, more recently styled the Oxford University Research in Economic Ornithology. Since its foundation by voluntary effort in 1927 this body has engaged in a series of investigations of problems connected with the bionomics of our birds. It has established stations where birds, especially migrants, are trapped, ringed, and then released. It has undertaken censuses of breeding pairs and colonies of several resident species, and of all birds in special areas, particularly where a change is in progress from rural to urban conditions or from arable to pasture. A measure of the support which it has obtained and the influence of its methods is that, while only 40 persons were available for researches near Oxford in 1927, ten times that number were engaged in the national census of heronries in the following year, and that observers whom it has trained have applied its technique in four continents.

It would be a thousand pities were the work so well begun to be restricted by the expected cessation of the Government grant to the University Research. The distinguished ornithologists who have gallantly risen to the emergency propose to employ the funds for which they appeal in establishing at Oxford and under the control of the University an Institute of Ornithology which "will try to do for field ornithologists what the British Museum of Natural History does for systematists." At present there is no clearing house for observations, no public library or collection of notes and records for observers, whose ignorance of what their colleagues are doing elsewhere leads to a wasteful duplication of effort. In these studies, indeed, Great Britain might lead the world since its area is not so large as to impede co-ordination, and the number of keen and competent observers is larger than in any other country. With sufficient support, the Institute should soon be in a position regularly to furnish the Ministry of Agriculture and the Natural History Museum with data of high economic and scientific value.

Such a scheme deserves generous support. Of its utility there can be no question. Anyone who has read the back numbers of magazines and periodicals concerned with sport and agriculture will be struck by the regularity with which certain vexed ornithological questions are continually raised by correspondence—and never definitely answered. Thus many farmers still seem uncertain whether the rooks' depredations in their cornfields are sufficiently atoned for by their attacks on wire worms and other pests. Gardeners still debate whether the song thrush consumes more snails than fruit. Anglers disagree whether the heron preys mostly on their pet aversion, the wriggling and predatory eel, or thins the shoals of nobler fish. Some game preservers would put every bird of prey—even the owl and the kestrel—on their black list; others contend that their attacks promote the survival of the fittest and fastest game birds and consequently benefit sport. And there are other points relating to the distribution and the protection of our rarer birds where the Institute will be able to assist the naturalist and the legislator. Fowling, game preservers and collectors have been rightly blamed for the extermination or decrease of some of our finest birds, but there are cases in which the multiplication of competitive species—of the jackdaw, for example, in the haunts of the chough—or the adoption of new agricultural methods may be more destructive than the oölogist or the gamekeeper. These are only a few of the problems which can be solved to the general advantage if the Trust receives the financial support which it sorely needs and richly deserves.