OBSEVERS 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 an 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 nests on an area exceeding 900 square miles; worked (through a route of observers) trapping stations at which more than 3,000 birds have been marked with rings and more than 600 recaptured; carried out significant breeding experiments; investigated changes in bird population on typical districts; 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 backed by degree of status in the University, 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 £4,000, 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 readiness 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 inestimable 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,

DEBOROUGH.

RUGG S. GLADSTONE.

GEORGE F. FALLODEN (Chancellor of Oxford University).

JULIAN S. HUNLEY.

T. G. LONGSTAFF.

P. CHALMERS MITCHELL.

ROTHEL.

SCHOOL, M.B. (Chairman, British Trust for Ornithology).

E. L. TURNER.

H. P. WITHENRY (President, British Ornithologists' Union).

An Ornithological Trust

The opening as beholding of the British Trust for Ornithology which we publish this evening deserves the support of every British student of bird life both for study and for public purposes. 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 started the Oxford University Research in Economic Ornithology. Since its foundation by voluntary effort in 1937 this body has engaged in a series of investigations of problems connected with the biotops of our birds. It has established stations where birds, especially migrants, are trapped, ringed, and then released. It has undertaken censuses of breeding pairs of columns of at least four species, and at all birds in special areas, particularly where a change is in progress from rural to urban condition or from fence to pasture. A measure of the support which it has obtained is the inclusion in its membership, in that while only 40 persons were available for consultation near Oxford in 1937, ten times that number were engaged in the national census of herons in the following year, and that observers in whom it has trained have applied its technique in four continents.

It would be a thousand pilcks to mention any services it will do to save species and service the general public. It will be struck by the regularity with which certain weird ornithological questions are continually raised by correspondents—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 white beetles and other pests. Gamekeepers still debate whether the song thrush consumes more small fruits than fruit. Anglers dispute whether the barn geese preys mainly on their pot aquatic, the weightling and predatory eel, or almost the shoe-sized fiddler. Since gannets were preserved thetrap birds now sell only over the and the kites—from their black list, others contend that their attacks prima facie ratio the finest and fastest game birds and consequently benefit sport. And there are other points rising to the discussion and the protection of our wild birds where the Trust will be able to assist the naturalist and the legislator. For example, gannets and petrels have been liable to be attacked by the birds; and the adoption of new agricultural methods may be more destructive than the ocellator or the gannet. The number of the problem is only a few of the questions raised to the general advantage if the Trust receive the financial support which it surely needs and richly deserves.

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