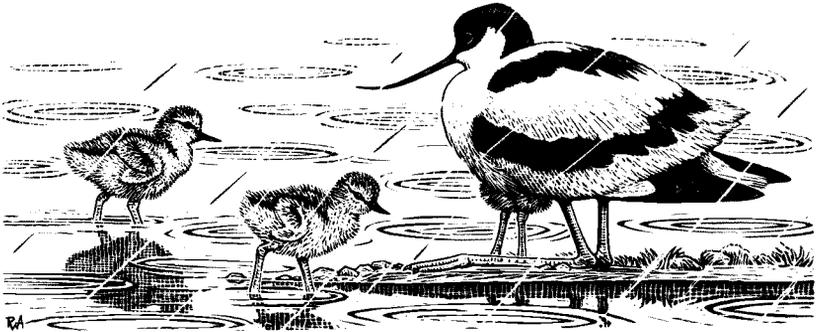


The Rare Breeding Birds Panel

Robert Spencer and the Rare Breeding Birds Panel



In 1968, the RSPB Council established a subcommittee which it named the Rare Breeding Birds Panel. It was small, but from the outset had both a Nature Conservancy Council and a *British Birds* presence. Five years later, a report commented 'While many records were received by the Panel, the response was less complete than had been hoped' and, as a result of this limited success, in December 1972 it was reconstituted as an autonomous body, separate from the RSPB, financed jointly by the BTO, the RSPB, *British Birds* and, somewhat later, by the NCC. At this stage the Panel's role was publicly defined as follows: 'The aims of the Panel are to collect in one place all information on rare breeding birds so that changes in status—both increases and decreases—can be monitored, and so that essential information is not lost (as has happened in the past) through the deaths of those keeping rare breeding records secret.'

The Panel's wide associations, continued to this day, are important in that they have encouraged the support of observers who formerly hesitated to impart their data to any single body. The autonomy of the Panel, likewise, helps to secure the widespread acceptance of its status and mission, for it is thus able and willing to collaborate with conservation bodies while avoiding allegiance to any one of them. It can maintain a considered balance between the confidentiality appropriate to scarce breeders, and adequate conservation action for them. Such an arrangement has proved better able to serve the interests of the birds than relying solely on the wisdom and actions of many individual observers of rare breeding birds.

Members

The autonomy of the Panel is secured because its members are appointed in a personal capacity: to be effective as gatherers and receivers of confidential data, they must have the trust and goodwill of observers and recorders. At the same time, each is also selected because of his or her knowledge of the interests and needs of one of the sponsoring bodies. Thus, each prospective member must not only be acceptable to all the existing members, but the appointment must also be approved by all the

sponsoring bodies. Members' names are published annually in the Panel's report.

Funding

Until 1991 the Panel received most of its funding from the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and the RSPB, but the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (see pages 121 & 122) has now taken over the NCC's former role. Small annual contributions are also made by the BTO and by *British Birds*.

Administration and publication

The day-to-day affairs of the Panel are managed by an administrative secretary, whilst the Panel members meet at intervals to determine courses of action and to finalise outline reports. A detailed report is prepared each year for the guidance of the NCC and the RSPB, and a summary, designed to enable readers to take an intelligent interest in trends and their implications, and as feedback to contributors, is published annually in *British Birds*.

Species

What is a 'rare breeding species'? Today, the Panel collects annual records for species with average breeding populations below 300 pairs in Britain. Certain species (such as Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* and Quail *Coturnix coturnix*) have populations which may fall below this level in some years, and are therefore included. For a few species, records are collected from only part of the range—for example, Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* away from the Northern Isles. A list of Panel species is set out in the Appendix, to which should be added any wild species breeding in Britain and Ireland for the first time, or for the first time in recent years. Many of the species in the list do not breed with us annually, whilst a few others have yet to be proved to breed but summer fairly frequently in habitat apparently suitable for breeding. Records for such species are collected by the Panel because they may be the first indication that colonisation is a possibility. For conservation purposes, the most important data are those for rare but regular breeders.

Collecting the data

Panel data are collected from three major sources and one minor one. The single most important source is the network of county and regional recorders, who, year by year, collect reports from field observers and pass them on to the Panel. The second important source lies in the returns to the NCC of those who hold licences to disturb Schedule 1 species and are obliged as a condition of receiving a licence to report their findings. Thirdly, the RSPB and the NCC staff supply data, either from reserves or gathered during the course of specific field surveys. Finally, a small number of report forms are received directly from individual observers, often—in the case of holidaymakers—because they do not know who is the relevant recorder.

Confidentiality

Almost by definition, rare breeding birds are vulnerable to the illegal activities of egg-collectors, certain bird-keepers of all descriptions, the occasional rogue gamekeeper and, it must be admitted, birdwatchers and bird-photographers. Not unnaturally, therefore, those who discover and monitor breeding pairs of rare birds are anxious to protect them by exercising the utmost secrecy. The Panel understands and supports the need for secrecy, and county recorders are routinely enabled to indicate to the Panel the degree of security they feel to be appropriate for each record. This may be a matter for negotiation: circumstances can arise where the presence of rare breeding birds needs to be divulged to a third party in order to prevent some form of development which would be inimical to their well-being. But the accepted need for secrecy can pose problems of verification. A sight record of a rare vagrant is likely to be vetted by a county records committee, and probably also by the *British Birds* Rarities Committee. Reports of rare breeding birds reaching the Panel via a recorder are, as a minimum, checked by one person who is familiar with both the habitat concerned and the competence of the observer in question. Data drawn from licence returns, or from forms sent directly to the Panel, may have to be taken on trust. Both for this reason and to reinforce the county network, it is the Panel's policy to invite all observers to report in the first instance to the appropriate county recorder.

The widespread concern, shared by the Panel, is that knowledge of breeding sites will leak out. The Panel's own security is therefore extremely strict, and only exceptionally are sites named in published reports—e.g. Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* at Havergate—and then only with the permission of the observer or recorder concerned. For a number of species, not even the county is named, but instead a region such as 'SE England', whilst, for a few, only the country is named: for example, the normal practice is to give only two population figures for the Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*, one for England and Wales, and one for Scotland.

Data storage and retrieval

From the earliest days of the Panel, the physical security of the data has received much attention, bearing in mind the risks of both fire and theft. As a precaution against fire, two sets of forms are kept in safe accommodation in two different localities, with access at each strictly limited to Panel members. In the early years of the Panel, this system was entirely satisfactory, but in recent years the volume of forms has come to pose serious problems. Today, the combined annual number of Panel report forms and Schedule 1 licence returns may total one hundred for a much protected species such as Goshawk, while the sum total for all species may exceed one thousand and require three new lever-arch files to store a single year's intake. This volume of data makes increasing demands on the secure storage, and poses considerable problems when it comes to manual analysis—even the simple analysis involved in the preparation of the annual report. To extract biological data—such as

clutch size, or habitat preference—is today a much bigger task than it was a few years ago, and is much more time-consuming.

For reasons similar to this, in 1988 the RSPB, which is a major supplier of data to the Panel, decided to computerise its own information about rare breeding birds, and has been able to do so in a way that, even if a storage disk were stolen, its contents could not be read by an unauthorised person. In the light of the unqualified success of the RSPB's computerisation exercise and the unremitting growth in volume of the Panel's files and the associated problem of providing secure storage, the Panel has, after careful assessment, concluded that it, too, must computerise all its data. The system chosen is one which will closely match the advantages of the RSPB's already effective system, with absolutely no chance of hackers penetrating it because there are no lines to the outside world. Site-related data are stored at the level of six-figure grid-references, but can be plotted or otherwise assessed on a range of scales so that confidentiality of individual sites can readily be preserved. Data can be sought through the use of a number of 'fields', either individually or collectively. These include species, date, location, site survey type, grid-reference, county, region and country. The computer is free-standing, with no link to any other, and its records are accessible only to those with a key, with the password, and with knowledge of the system. Those county recorders who have already adopted the use of personal computers to facilitate their work will require no convincing of the advantages which will result from the Panel's decision to computerise.

Conservation uses of Panel data

Monitoring the breeding fortunes of rare birds contributes to an annual audit of the health of British wildlife. Rare breeding birds are particularly important in this respect because they tend to be sensitive to adverse changes in their environment. Such an audit is important because it is the route to highlighting problems and seeking remedies. It is needed not only in detail by conservation organisations, but also, more broadly, by the Government, for the monitoring of rare European breeding species is obligatory.

The conservation uses of data collected through the Rare Breeding Birds Panel are as follows:

- (a) Declines in numbers can alert ornithological, conservation and research bodies to the need for conservation action, which might include further survey or ecological study. Species recently highlighted for such needs have included Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedipnemus*, Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Cirl Bunting *Emberiza ciris*, which are now all subject to detailed research and targeted conservation action.
- (b) Knowledge of status and changes can assist conservation bodies in determining their priorities. The recently published book of *Red Data Birds* draws on information from the RBBP in setting out a programme of conservation priorities for Britain's most important and most threatened bird populations.
- (c) If a species is threatened, details of changes in different areas can help the understanding of likely causes so that conservation actions can be recommended. Studies of Stone-curlews, Bitterns and Cirl Buntings have compared habitats in areas where declines have been more or less severe and suggested likely causes, which are being

studied further. Comparisons between different Avocet colonies have revealed the role of water salinity in determining whether food supplies are adequate for breeding.

(d) Conservation actions are expensive and it is important to test how well they are working and whether they need changing. This is done by continuous monitoring of vulnerable populations.

(e) When status changes are identified, legislation may be altered, such as by adding species to Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act or to Annex 1 of the EC directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds.

(f) The NCC uses information on the status of rare birds to assess the implications of granting licences for photography and scientific nest visits. Regional implications are considered. It is important that scientific licencees give the best return for the disturbance they may cause, which is why the NCC and the RBBP seek to reconcile returns and ensure that the information on rare birds that has been collected under licence is actually used for conservation benefit.

(g) Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) can be declared to protect habitats and species. This can be done only if the information is known to the NCC. Sites supporting Britain's small population of Slavonian Grebes *Podiceps auritus* have recently been declared as a result of cases being made, supported with survey data.

(h) SSSI and reserve boundaries or management might be changed as a result of the presence of a rare breeding species. It is also possible to reach agreement with private or state landowners (such as the Forestry Commission) to safeguard rare-bird sites. Secrecy is unreliable as a security technique, as is shown by recent cases of felling of the nesting tree of Honey Buzzards *Pernis ptilorvus* in England and destruction of the breeding site of Spotted Crakes *Porzana porzana* in Wales. In both cases, the information was known locally to individuals, but had not been passed to anyone in a position to take action to safeguard the sites. Successful protection has been negotiated with landowners for Red Kites *Milvus milvus*, Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, Goshawks, Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* and many other species.

The way ahead

Since the Panel was reformed in 1972, the emphasis placed on its work has changed markedly. There does remain an archive element—of preserving a record for posterity—but the cost of running the Panel could not be justified for that reason alone. There is a statutory application, in that some of the data collected by the Panel are needed by Government to meet its obligations under the terms of the European Community directive on 'The Conservation of Wild Birds' (paper 79/409/EEC). Most importantly of all, however, as the previous section makes clear, there is the often urgent application to the needs of conservation—to detecting declines at a sufficiently early stage for causes to be investigated, solutions proposed, and individual sites protected. There are individual observers, and occasionally county recorders, who co-operate with the Panel by reporting numbers but do not name sites, because they believe that they can deal locally with all potential threats, or possibly from the conviction that the fewer people who know of the presence of rare breeding birds the safer those birds will be. Their intentions are exemplary, yet experience has proved repeatedly that their assumptions are wrong: both sites and breeding pairs have been lost (e.g. those Spotted Crakes and Honey Buzzards noted earlier).

With the splitting in April 1991 of the NCC into three separate bodies, one each for England, Scotland and Wales (*Brit. Birds* 84: 396), nationwide activities such as national monitoring have become the special province of

the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and it is this body which, appropriately, is now the major funder of the Panel's work. No less than the NCC, it will look to the network of voluntary observers, channelling their results through the Panel, to provide it with the biological data on which to base its planning. Two developments could enhance the excellent co-operation which already exists. One would be a more prompt pattern of reporting (a few counties may take up to 17 months after the end of a breeding season before submitting any data). The second will occur when those individuals who still cannot bring themselves to name sites overcome their misgivings and fall into line with the overwhelming majority of the Panel's contributors. Local voluntary action can, and does, give temporary security to nests. Specialist groups can, and do, play a vital role in checking all suitable habitat for signs of presence or evidence of breeding. In either situation, to allow the information collected to form part of a national picture can only enhance its value, and thus justify ever more the effort of collecting it.

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Appendix. Species currently monitored by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel

Species nesting in the United Kingdom even less frequently than these are also on the Panel's list

Red-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Slavonian Grebe <i>P. auritus</i>	Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>
Black-necked Grebe <i>P. nigricollis</i>	Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	Red-necked Phalarope <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Mediterranean Gull <i>Larus melanocephalus</i>
Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	Roseate Tern <i>Sterna dougalli</i>
Garganey <i>A. querquedula</i>	Black Tern <i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	Snowy Owl <i>Nyctea scandiaca</i>
Scaup <i>A. marila</i>	Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>
Common Scoter <i>Melanitta nigra</i>	Wryneck <i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Woodlark <i>Lullula arborea</i>
Honey Buzzard <i>Pernis ptilorvus</i>	Shore Lark <i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
Red Kite <i>Milvus milvus</i>	Black Redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
White-tailed Eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Fieldfare <i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Redwing <i>T. iliacus</i>
Montagu's Harrier <i>C. pygargus</i>	Cetti's Warbler <i>Cettia cetti</i>
Goshawk <i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Savi's Warbler <i>Locustella luscinioides</i>
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Marsh Warbler <i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>
Hobby <i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Dartford Warbler <i>Sylvia undata</i>
Quail <i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Firecrest <i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Spotted Crake <i>Porzana porzana</i>	Golden Oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
Corncrake <i>Crex crex</i>	Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>
Crane <i>Grus grus</i>	Brambling <i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Serin <i>Serinus serinus</i>
Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	Parrot Crossbill <i>Loxia pytyopsittacus</i>
Stone-curlew <i>Burhinus oedipnemus</i>	Scarlet Rosefinch <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Lapland Bunting <i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>
Dotterel <i>C. morinellus</i>	Snow Bunting <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Temminck's Stint <i>Calidris temminckii</i>	Cirl Bunting <i>Emberiza cirulus</i>
Purple Sandpiper <i>C. maritima</i>	