

Foreword

Knowing how many birds of each species exist or breed in a particular area is of fundamental importance, not least because globally and locally bird numbers are in decline. As the numbers of birds diminish, so too does the quality of human life. Birdwatchers in particular are acutely aware of the changes in abundance of once common species like the House Sparrow, realise that the dawn chorus is only a whisper of what it was thirty years ago or more, and know that vast tracts of the British 'countryside' are virtually devoid of birds.

Birds have always been an essential part of our culture and we engage with them in many different ways. It may be as simple as the pleasure of listening to spring bird song, or the visual spectacle of swirling Starlings before they go to roost. But birds also drive human creativity – just think of those writers, painters, photographers, poets, film-makers, musicians and biologists inspired by birds. Without them – birds or creators – our cultural life would be so much poorer.

Monitoring – essentially counting – birds, is at the very heart of conservation. Without knowing how many birds we have and whether their numbers are stable or going up or down, we don't know what we are trying to protect. The first attempts to count birds in the UK occurred in the mid-1800s: a project proposed by Alfred Newton, the grand old man of British ornithology (and founding member of the British Ornithologists' Union), was carried out by A. G. More and reported in the *Ibis* of 1865. Despite this promising start, progress was slow and it was almost another 100 years before standardised census methodologies were developed by the British Trust for Ornithology, for example. It still amazes me that when I started my research on Common Guillemots in the 1970s, no-one knew how to count them either.

It is a measure of how far we have come that local birdwatching groups like the SBSG have, for the past thirty or so years, conducted their own surveys of bird distribution and numbers and, together with national surveys, made a major contribution to our understanding of bird populations.

A survey like the *Breeding Birds of the Sheffield Area: A New Atlas 2003-08* represents considerable human effort and the fact that so many individuals have committed time and energy to this project is a cause for celebration in itself. The term 'citizen science' has become popular in the last decade or so, but SBSG members have been doing this kind of survey work since the Group's inception in the 1970s. The commitment necessary to produce an Atlas like this one constitutes a significant engagement with nature, and exemplifies many of the advantages that accrue from that engagement. The main motivation is an enjoyment of seeing wild birds, but also it also includes concern for and interest in their fortunes. In addition, societies like the SBSG provide a network of like-minded people and opportunities to share experiences and ideas. The book itself is both an inspiration and a permanent record of changing bird populations. It is also a project that I hope will continue to be adopted by successive generations of bird enthusiasts.

The Sheffield area is blessed with a wonderful diversity of habitats and, accordingly, with a good diversity of bird species. As this publication shows, the total number of species breeding in the Sheffield region is now slightly greater than it was in the last Atlas. That's good news. Much less good news is the fact that the total number of individual birds is considerably lower than it was in the past. The Sheffield area has gained a few rare species, but lost rather more common species. A recent estimate by BirdLife* shows that in Britain as a whole we now have some 44,000,000 fewer individual birds than we had in the 1970s. That staggering number is a call for action, not complacency.

Professor Tim Birkhead

*(<http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/userfiles/file/sowb/countries/UK2012report.pdf>)



Roosting Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) - Middleton Moor: just one of many avian wonders on offer within the Sheffield area (David Wood).