

Foreword

D. A. Ratcliffe

Chief Scientist, Nature Conservancy Council

This book depicts the development of British ornithology during the twentieth century, as a science, a hobby, and a key element in nature conservation practice. The rôle of the British Trust for Ornithology has involved all three aspects. In particular it has been the means of capitalising on the fieldwork of energetic and dedicated amateur birdwatchers, and welding together much of their effort in a coordinated form that has greatly advanced the science of ornithology. The Trust has adopted a positive and promotional rôle here, catalysing and focussing the interests of the membership in a highly productive way which has been the envy of other countries. The collecting urge has been poured creatively into bird ringing and recording, with the result that the distribution, numbers, movements and biology of our avifauna are probably better known than those of any other group of organisms. A selective summary of certain themes will indicate briefly the main directions which this endeavour has taken.

The work on ringing and migration has, in conjunction with that of the Wildfowl Trust, contributed substantially to the international effort in documenting the seasonal movements of birds. It has also provided an increasingly valuable information base about longevity and mortality for many species. The Common Birds Census has given a measure of year to year changes in bird numbers within the more developed agricultural and lowland environment and exemplifies the modern development of monitoring studies designed to detect and follow population trends. It also provides information about breeding density and habitat needs for many species. The Nest Records Scheme continually enlarges knowledge of nesting biology, especially on such topics as reproductive performance. Geographical or habitat-based surveys such as the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry and the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland have produced systematic, accurate and comprehensive statements of the distribution and numbers of birds in these categories. These have been complemented by individual species surveys, usually focussed on breeding distribution and population, which have given a detailed picture of the current status of some of our more localised birds. Most of the projects also serve the need for surveillance, by providing base-lines against which repeat surveys can be measured after appropriate time intervals. And many have been the means of identifying ecological

relationships and pointing to useful lines of study in a variety of problems.

The outstanding feature of the British Trust for Ornithology has, indeed, been its primary concern for the advancement of knowledge through corporate research projects. There has always been the need for a full-time professional staff of trained ornithologists to organise and collate the field contributions of the Trust membership in these collective investigations. Some of the individual species surveys have been run by Trust members, but the office usually provides much background support. *Bird Study*, launched in 1954 as the journal of the Trust, has catered for publication not only of internal papers but also of a wide range of outside contributions, and has a world reputation in the science of ornithology. The editor has usually been a member of the Trust staff. The data store built up at Trust HQ has been made available to outside workers, and has been an important source of information on many aspects of bird biology and ecology.

Max Nicholson, one of the founding fathers of the Trust, and later also of the Nature Conservancy, realised the enormous potential of the organisation for supplying scientific information highly relevant to the conservation of birds. It was also advantageous to have such information submitted by a neutral research organisation whose only commitment was to the quality of its science. By means of a research contract from the Conservancy, he forged a close link between the two bodies. His vision gave stability and career prospects sufficient to attract good scientists to the Trust, enabling them to build up a permanent complement with the capacity to maintain long-term projects but yet flexible enough to develop new themes as the needs arose. In return, the Conservancy received an assured flow of ornithological information tailored to the needs of its conservation programme, particularly on the advisory side.

The research contract became, in effect, an integral part of the Conservancy's funding programme. After the splitting of the Conservancy in 1973, the Trust contract was shared for a time between the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (the former research arm) and the new Nature Conservancy Council, but was eventually taken over wholly by the latter. The NCC has since 1973 had to obtain the bulk of its research by contract, and it has maintained its support to the Trust by this means. The Conservancy has always been mindful of the high value for money which accrues from the efforts of a large, unpaid labour force, and of the key place of birds in the overall interest of the concerned public in nature conservation. Successive Visiting Groups have endorsed the relevance and importance of the contract programme to the Conservancy on the one hand, and high quality and cost-effectiveness on the other.

To make the best use of the vast data store held by the Trust, the NCC provided a computer for Beech Grove in 1979. Under the guidance of the present Director, Dr Raymond O'Connor, this was quickly put to good use, and an enhanced flow of papers has followed the increased facility for data

analysis. The Conservancy itself has made increasing use of the rapidly available print-outs of information highly relevant to topical bird conservation issues, such as up-dated counts of waders on estuaries. The capacity of the Trust to conduct conservation-oriented studies is being utilised in other ways, such as the development of management options for birds in the Lincolnshire woods which have been the subject of detailed botanical investigation by the NCC. The separate contract for the Ornithological Sites Register was designed specifically to identify and report upon all those areas known to be important for breeding birds, so that appropriate measures for their conservation could be taken. It is gratifying that increasingly the Trust staff are translating the fruits of the contract work into excellent books, such as *Estuary Birds of Britain and Ireland* by A. J. Prater and *Bird Habitats in Britain* by R. J. Fuller.

It is with the greatest pleasure that, on behalf of the Nature Conservancy Council, I extend congratulations to the British Trust for Ornithology on the occasion of its Jubilee celebration, and gratitude for the fruitful partnership which has developed between our two organisations during the second half of this period. This book is a most appropriate expression of the occasion, and the record of a fine achievement, fascinating in its historical perspective and in its breadth of scope and vision. Its title is a timely reminder – so often are we caught up in stressful conservation issues or weighed down by the heavy objectivity of science – that enjoyment is, at bottom and to most of us, what our interest in birds is all about. Not that those attending Trust functions, and the Annual Conference in particular, could ever be in doubt of this. I have the happiest memories of these events, and remember the warmth and friendliness which greeted me when, as a young fieldworker, I was invited in 1960 to organise the Peregrine enquiry for the Trust. I am glad of the opportunity to pay my own tribute to the unfailing helpfulness and dedication which have so characterised the organisation as I have known it, whether as Council, Officers or Members. And, in looking to the future, I should like to think that the world of ornithology would join in hoping that the Trust's development and success will continue to grow as they have during its first half-century.

14 March 1983