

The fate of European Rollers in our area.

Readers of the recent story about exotic avian visitors to our area (a European Roller at Beal) might like to know that there have over the past 150 years been several sightings of the roller here. Reports of these, which are given in the History of Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, are interesting because not only do they record time and place, they record the change in attitude towards the wild world that has taken place especially over the past half century.

The first record is of a young male roller shot at Dalhousie, near Lasswade, within ten miles of Edinburgh, by Mr Dickson, gamekeeper on 14th October 1874. Another, appearing the following year in almost exactly the same place on 4th October, was also shot.

A 'fine female of this rare and beautiful species' fared no better when she appeared at Scremerston on 22nd of September 1875. The account of her fate is given as follows: 'When first seen it was perched upon a stook from which it alighted on the ground now and then. When the stomach was opened it was full of beetles.'



Nature-lovers may be dismayed by her fate, but much of what we know about wild creatures, not just birds, was obtained by killing and dissection, especially in 19th Century when the quest for knowledge was almost frenzied. The skins were often preserved for scientific use, and sometimes the specimen was stuffed and mounted for display.

In 1867 a roller was shot by a gamekeeper at Howick while another specimen was found dead near that village. Hulne Park is mentioned as having played host to rollers 'at various times' before 1905, but what happened to them is not recorded.

The most extensive account of the appearance of the roller is to be found in the History for 1952 and is worth quoting in full. 'The outstanding event of the year was the appearance of a roller (*Coracias garrulus*) near Westruther. On 17th July Mr W. Cairns, Spottiswoode, was informed that there was a strange, brilliant blue

bird on Raecleugh Farm. This proved to be a roller in splendid plumage. The bird remained in the neighbourhood till 23rd July, and was seen and studied by ornithologists from the Borders and Edinburgh. It appeared to be feeding on grasshoppers, craneflies and other insects, which it picked off the grass. Its favourite perches were the posts bordering a newly cut hayfield, and the poles of the telephone line to Raecleugh Farm. As the roller flew about the fields it presented a gorgeous spectacle, the brilliant light and dark blue, green and purple contrasting with the bright chestnut of the back. This is the first recorded occurrence of the bird in Berwickshire.' And readers will be heartened to know that this bird was not shot.

Indeed, the account expresses that same delight that recently drew birders from Cornwall and Devon to that roadside at Beal where powerful scopes allowed them to observe that even a frog can form part of a roller's diet.

Will climate change bring rollers to visit us more frequently in future? Or will we be waiting fifty years for another?

Philomena, 25th October 2006.