

22nd March - Tom Cadwallender of the British Trust for Ornithology.

If ecology is the religion of our times, then it does seem appropriate that BTO should have its headquarters at the Nunnery in Thetford, Norfolk. And just as there was a concentration of worthy souls in the Nunnery of old, so nowadays scientists are gathered there, devoted to the welfare of birds.

To what end, you may ask. Well, we know now that it is essential to our own welfare to know what is happening with birds, and when and where. Birds are, it seems, an indicator species. We are beginning to realize that when birds go missing from usual habitats, or decline suddenly in large numbers, this has implications for our environment and, ultimately, for our own well-being.

On the 22nd March Berwick Wildlife Group gathered to attend a presentation by Tom Cadwallender of the British Trust for Ornithology. BTO for short. We found his programme a scientific and bird-specific follow-on to our recent visit to Borewell Farm.

On that field trip we had learned of herbicides discontinued, of stubble left through winter so that weed seeds may provide birds and other wildlife with a varied diet. Now, at an indoor meeting we learned what use is made of the many kinds of survey organised or sponsored by BTO, not only on farmland such as Borewell Farm, but throughout UK.

BTO is essentially concerned with data collection and analysis, but its work and its success depends upon a network of volunteers. The number and variety of bird surveys organized by BTO is staggering. There is one to appeal to every sort of human participant from the semi-invalid who keeps note of visitors to her bird table, to diehard outdoorsmen eager to record waterfowl at low tide, or able to 'identify all birds seen and heard'.

It is this cooperation between professional and amateur work that gives us volunteers certainty that our time and effort are put to effective use. BTO data is used to guide government policy on environment and agriculture. It is also put to use by RSPB, and has resulted in the drawing up of the Red, Amber and Green Lists, which rate birds according as they are in danger of extinction, threatened or, more cheerfully, holding their own. Understanding the causes is a subject for research.

Surveys have brought some odd facts to light. Memory is not deceiving you if you think blackbirds nest earlier than when you were young. Surveys of breeding birds have shown that they are indeed nesting two weeks earlier than twenty-five years ago. And those of us privileged to have witnessed those thousands of chattering starlings that thronged the ledges of city building in Newcastle in the 1960s, can be assured that after a population crash in the 70s, starlings recovered; though they are once more in decline. It is only through consistent surveying and recording that such patterns can be known.

Tom Cadwallender spoke from personal experience of bird ringing, and the audience were anxious to know whether the procedure, or the wearing of a leg ring, imperilled the birds in any way. No more than a wedding ring or a wrist watch endangers you, thought Tom. On the positive side recapture of ringed birds, or even report of a ring number seen through a well-placed 'scope, can provide valuable and often unsuspected facts of bird movement. A pied-flycatcher that came to the nest box in Tom's own garden was the very bird he'd ringed there the previous year. Just don't forget this little bird had flown south of the Saharan to over-winter in between!

And if your pet that 'never catches birds', brings home a feathered trophy bearing a ring on its dead leg, don't bury the evidence right away. Make note of the ring colour/kind and number and report them. Such details, death and ring number, all contribute to the vast picture that is emerging from the painstaking work of the British Trust for Ornithology.

You can make a difference.

Make a start right now by checking out their website www.bto.org

Philomena, March 2006.