

THE BIRDS OF THE LONDON AREA

A NEW NATURALIST SPECIAL VOLUME

The aim of THE NEW NATURALIST series is to interest the general reader in the wild life of Britain by recapturing the inquiring spirit of the old naturalists. The Editors believe that the natural pride of the British public in their native fauna and flora, to which must be added concern for their conservation, is best fostered by maintaining a high standard of accuracy combined with clarity of exposition in presenting the results of modern scientific research. The volumes in the main series deal with large groups of animals and plants, with the natural history of particular areas or habitats in Britain, and with certain special subjects. THE NEW NATURALIST SPECIAL VOLUMES, on the other hand, cover, in greater detail, a single species or group of species. In both the main and special volumes the animals and plants are described in relation to their habitats.

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THE NEW NATURALIST

THE BIRDS OF
THE LONDON AREA
SINCE 1900

BY A COMMITTEE OF
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*Illustrated with 40 photographs
and 6 maps and diagrams*



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THE LONDON AREA

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EDITORS' PREFACE

WE PRESENT this remarkable book as a Special Volume in the New Naturalist series; and, indeed, it is special in many ways. It is, first of all, a local avifauna. Such books now cover the British Isles in a mosaic that extends from Shetland to Cornwall, from Ireland to Kent. Most of them are primarily of interest to the ever-growing band of local bird-watchers, or to geographical ornithologists working on comparative distribution and habits. But a precise and scholarly avifauna of some special areas deserves special publication, and special attention in scientific circles. Such an area lies within a twenty miles' radius of St. Paul's Cathedral — for many years the special province of the London Natural History Society. With the possible exception of the parish of Selborne in Hampshire, immortalised by Gilbert White, London has the longest continuous history of ornithological observation in the British Isles.

Since ornithology became popular, London, with its vast population, has probably had more bird-watchers than any other part of Britain; and its unique environment has provided them with much to see. The list of London birds is an extraordinarily large one. It contains many rarities, and many birds of great scientific interest, like the black redstart and the little ringed plover, which have colonised the London area within the memory of most of the present generation of bird-watchers. The great London reservoirs are the best places in Britain on which to see some of our rarer winter wildfowl visitors. Within London are all sorts of fascinating ornithological problems — for instance, the roosting of the starlings in central London, and the problem of the origin of this starling population.

Bird-watching in London in the twentieth century has been no desultory affair of scattered observations and casually gathered notes. On the contrary, it has been a highly organised business, managed by the recorders of the London Natural History Society, carried out with great expenditure of energy and time, chronicled with scientific accuracy and meticulous care. The final result is a picture in detail of wild bird distribution and habits which those who are interested in changes in animal life, distribution and habits will quarry for years ahead. This book's information will still interest and gratify enquiring scientists, we predict, another half-century from now; and will unquestionably stagger the present-day reader with its demonstration that London not only has

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a fascinating (and extremely complex) natural history, but a cadre of enthusiastic naturalists worthy of it.

The group of distinguished workers who have contributed to this book, have managed a most gratifying evenness of approach and treatment. Readers will scarcely believe that it has been the product of so many eyes and hands.

Particularly notable in their evenness of treatment are the introductory and ecological chapters, which are in many ways the most important feature of the book — at least to the general naturalist rather than the ornithological specialist. No book on an avifauna has ever been blessed with such a profound analysis of its physical setting, its different habitats, its communities, its seasonal changes. It was these introductory chapters that commended *The Birds of the London Area Since 1900* as particularly suited to the New Naturalist Series. Our contributing authors are evidently many things besides accurate field-men, historians, zoologists, botanists and students of the literature. Unquestionably this book will inspire bird watchers far beyond the London area; it is a natural history in which the word history has a real meaning.

In praising the introductory ecological third of this book, we would not wish to suggest that the brilliant systematic section is of secondary importance; for here are its bones and muscle. Each species treated with the utmost lucidity and economy; so that every important record has been condensed without being maimed. We know of no better example of the disposition of a quart in a pint pot.

Although throughout the preparation of this book Richard Homes — the London Natural History Society's President at the time of completing this book — has been at pains to advise us that it has been a co-operative work of which he has been spokesman and amanuensis, we feel that his able colleagues will be certain to echo our sentiments when we say that his guiding and co-ordinating hand has been responsible for much of the evenness and crispness in the presentation of all sections of this book.

The Birds of the London Area Since 1900 is a living proof of the standing of British amateur natural history. Only in a remote sense can any of its contributors be said to be of professional status in the world of natural history. Most of them, including their Chairman, are purely amateurs who earn their living in all walks of life — mostly in business.

Apart from its introductory third, which will be read with appreciation and delight, this book is not designed to be consumed at a sitting. Its systematic two thirds constitutes a well-arranged storehouse of information to which all London naturalists will be compelled to go in the future. We predict that when they do go — to check the status of a species or a group of species — they will inevitably linger by the way, and read

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around, and ponder to themselves — spending some hours that they never intended to spend. They will find that nature has few more devoted and scientific chroniclers than the members of the London Natural History Society, who have made something far more than a hobby out of their spare time.

THE EDITORS

Part One

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK has been prepared by a committee of the London Natural History Society with the object of tracing the changes since 1900 in the very varied population of birds in and around London, the largest urban agglomeration in the world. As long ago as 1908 an Ornithological Research Committee was formed by one of the two bodies that combined in 1914 to form the present Society, which adopted as its *Area* a circle of 20 miles' radius from St. Paul's Cathedral. It is this *Area* which we have used for our purpose, as a study of the effects of building and the many other forms of development associated with big cities requires the inclusion not only of the whole of the built-up districts but also of a stretch of the surrounding country for comparison.

Departure from the usual convention in local natural histories of adhering to administrative or geographical boundaries is essential in order to study the impact of London on bird life, and our circle, which embraces over 1200 square miles, covers all of Middlesex and parts of Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Surrey. Assuming that close building stretches more or less uninterruptedly for an average of ten miles from the centre, this inner part of the circle still only covers about a quarter of our province and the rest, though more built over than most other parts of the country, retains a considerable extent of typical rural scenery. The relative size of the inner and outer zones can be appreciated by reference to the diagrams on pages 110 and 111.

Our reasons for choosing 1900 as a starting point are threefold. The Society's own records go back as we have seen to about that time; books on the birds of Surrey and Kent appeared in 1900 and 1909 respectively and summaries appeared for several counties in the *Victoria County Histories* published about that time. We have carried the story to the end of 1954 wherever possible.

With the theme of the effects, direct and indirect, of London on bird life, we have given not only the usual systematic list with accounts of distribution throughout the *Area*, but have also devoted a much higher proportion of the total space than is usual in works of this nature to

chapters on the principal habitats, on migration and on roosts and flylines where these are of special significance. A general description of the physical features is given in the opening chapter, which serves as an introduction to the more detailed accounts of the various habitats, of which Inner London has pride of place since it is the part most affected by man. Within the forty square miles, defined by A. Holte Macpherson as Inner London, 160 different species have been recorded during this century and 37 have bred, 20 of them regularly. The tufted duck, pochard, kestrel, coot, jay, black redstart, pied wagtail and goldfinch have been gained as breeding species, and only the rook, of those which once bred regularly, has been lost. The number of rare visitors which have been seen at one time or another is quite remarkable in view of the depth of the built-up zone on all sides.

In the suburbs any quantitative survey of bird population is extremely difficult owing to the presence of innumerable small plots of private property to which there is no access; we have tried, however, to show what species have succeeded in adapting themselves to the highly artificial conditions, and we include a summary of one valuable study of a district before and after housing development, showing in particular the great increase of starlings.

Foremost among the various water and marsh habitats are the reservoirs, and it was about the turn of the century when the great expansion of these was taking place with far-reaching results that were little appreciated at the time. From just over 500 acres in 1900 they now occupy over 3000: at peak periods in winter they harbour most of the 10,000 or so ducks then in the Area, and nearly 100,000 gulls spend the winter nights on the larger waters. Although before 1922 only scattered observations at the reservoirs were published, chiefly for the Lea valley, they were watched more and more regularly as time went on and changes in the status of many of the ducks and grebes can be traced. At one reservoir there were once over 400 great crested grebes, and during migration periods over a hundred black terns have been seen at one water in spring and 300-500 common or arctic terns in autumn.

The reservoirs, with their wealth of birds, are a direct consequence of London's expansion, and so are the gravel pits which have increased in number tremendously with the greater use of concrete for building. A survey of selected pits undertaken by the Society has provided valuable material for our purpose. The pits have been an important factor in the spread of a new breeding species, the little ringed plover, and provide nesting sites for over half the Area's great crested grebes. One of the chief habitats for reed warblers, yellow wagtails and other marsh species, they do much to compensate for the lack of natural marshes.

The surroundings of the Thames below London have long been well-drained, but the grazing fields with their accompanying dykes and the mixture of saltings, clay pits, refuse dumps and other rough ground still harbour a number of the commoner marshland species; there is actually a colony of over a hundred pairs of reed warblers only about ten miles from St. Paul's.

Like the reservoirs the sewage farms are yet another result of London's growth whose ornithological importance was until comparatively recently appreciated by very few observers. From a large number of small units—another series of artificial marshes—these farms are being gradually closed down and amalgamated into a few modern works which in their final state are much less attractive to birds. At one farm, Perry Oaks, old-fashioned and modern conditions exist side by side, and since the last war 33 kinds of waders have been seen there including no fewer than four American species. To watch the autumn passage and rarities such as these only a few hundred yards from the constant passage of arriving and departing air-liners at the adjoining London Airport seems incongruous in the extreme.

The birds of the woodlands and agricultural land differ little from those of similar country elsewhere. Although the woods nearer in to London have suffered from the reduction of undergrowth where public access has not been restricted, the decline of gamekeeping has been a compensating advantage to the birds of prey and some of the Corvidae. Apart from the disappearance of the corncrake as in other parts of the country, the most striking changes on farmland have been the decline of the lapwing and the enormous increase of wintering gulls.

The last group of habitats discussed consists of the undeveloped land not used for agriculture or building—the heaths, commons, parks and downs. Here the chief change has been the great reduction in numbers of the ground-nesting species that has accompanied the increase of human population. The ploughing-up of much uncultivated ground during the Second World War accelerated the decline of some species, but a notable exception to the general trend has been the woodlark.

The two final chapters deal with migration and with roosts and fly-lines. The first brings together many scattered references elsewhere in the book, and puts the seasonal movements through the Area into perspective. It also discusses the results of several years of planned migration watches at vantage points in London during the late autumn immigration. That much can be seen of diurnal migration, even over the heart of London, will perhaps be surprising to those who have not taken part in these watches, and the results open up a field that would well repay further attention. The discussion of roosts and flylines also contains the results of much

original research, especially the summary of an intensive study of the starling roosts in central London, in the course of which over 3000 birds were ringed at the roost in Trafalgar Square. The results from nearly 300 recoveries have shown that the vast majority of the starlings that fly in to London are resident birds from the suburbs. This conclusion is strengthened by the discovery that the greatest numbers—close on a hundred thousand—are in mid-summer, just after the breeding season when no Continental birds could be present. The little known roosts of house sparrows and crows are also discussed.

Throughout this book we have concentrated on those aspects of the subject which have special significance in relation to London, and within our allotment of space it has been impossible to discuss features of behaviour or distribution which are of more general application. If much valuable detail has been omitted it has been done of necessity, and we have been obliged to give terse treatment to the rarer vagrants in order to devote more space to the species that really belong to the Area, and to keep our material within one volume at a reasonable price. We have to thank our publishers, and particularly the editors of the *New Naturalist*, for their co-operation in helping to reconcile our needs for space with the bounds of practicability.

The systematic list includes 245 full species, excluding crane and pratincole, of which the exact species could not be determined with certainty, and the feral pigeon which we have discussed in some detail as it is as much a feature of London (and other cities) as any species admitted to the British list. The 245 do not include various species in square brackets which have been mentioned for the sake of completeness. Some other species where the identification was in doubt are deliberately omitted. During this century 110 species are known to have nested in the Area, and about 100 still do so, or are believed to do so, annually.

In the systematic list we have been faced again and again with the difficulty of assessing changes in status owing to the enormous differences in the volume of observation at different periods. For the first quarter of the century our knowledge of status and distribution depends very largely on a relatively small number of experienced observers recording for the most part from restricted localities. For much of the Area, including the reservoirs, there is very little on record at this time, except for Hertfordshire which had from the outset an annual report on birds in the *Transactions* of the county Society, and excepting also a large number of arrival and departure dates of migrants. From about 1925 there was a slow improvement which gathered momentum during the thirties, when there was a very great increase both in observers and in the interest shown in recording. Although there was no falling-off in the number of observers

during the Second World War there was a marked drop in the volume of records. After the war bird-watching became very much more popular than ever before, and there are now almost three times as many contributors to the *London Bird Report* as there were in the thirties.

It follows from the greatly varying intensity of observations over the years that the chances of rare visitors escaping detection early in our period and during the two wars were much more than they are to-day, and where the number of records for any particular species is given it is obviously a minimum with a biased distribution in time. Such totals of occurrences are based, however, on a very considerable quantity of data and they do provide some measure of the relative frequency of visits by related species. Where an opening summary of status is given; "very rare" implies less than 10 records, "rare" covers 10-24, "scarce" 25-49 and "occasional" 50-100 occurrences.

Full use has been made of the Society's own extensive records, and abstracts have been taken from all the books known to us which have dealt with London birds however sketchily. All the major periodicals concerned have been abstracted also, but by the very extent of the Area and its enormous population there must be casual references scattered in the local literature that have not come to our notice. We trust, however, that the many thousands of items indexed will have given a true picture of all the resident species and regular visitors, and if a few records of the rarer ones have not come to light this is of less importance.

The illustrations have almost all been taken in the Area, and have been chosen to illustrate characteristic features of the environment rather than to provide a wealth of portrait studies. A few of these have been included, however, mainly of birds that are of special interest in the London Area.

Of the previous writing on the subject we have already mentioned the histories of Kent and Surrey birds, but since 1900 there have also been W. E. Glegg's *Histories of the Birds of Essex* (1929) and *Middlesex* (1935). There has been no full county history of Hertfordshire birds, but an annotated list by H. H. S. Hayward appeared in the *Transactions* for 1947 of the Hertfordshire N.H.S. and Field Club. Sections on birds are included in most of the Victoria County Histories early in the century. The birds of central London have had a fairly extensive literature, which is referred to in the chapter on Inner London. Among the other more important works of which we have made use are Beadell's *Nature Notes of Warlingham and Chelsham* (1932), Walpole-Bond's *The Birds of Bromley (Kent) and its Neighbourhood* (1901), Collenette's *A History of Richmond Park* (1937), Dixon's *The Bird Life of London* (1909), Fitter's *London's Natural History* (1945) and *London's Birds* (1949), Harrison's *The Birds of Kent* (1953), Power's *Ornithological Notes from a South London Suburb* (1910) and a chapter by H. J. Turner

in Grinling's *A Survey of Woolwich and West Kent* (1909). Much important information has come from the journals of the Essex Field Club, Essex Bird-Watching and Preservation Society, Hertfordshire N.H.S. and Field Club and the Selborne Society, and from the periodicals *British Birds*, *Country-Side*, *The Field*, *Middle Thames Naturalist*, *South-Eastern Bird Report* and *Zoologist*. Finally, a long series of papers and notes have appeared in the *London Naturalist* and the *London Bird Report*, of which an index for the years 1916-1948 was published in the *L.B.R.* for 1948.

The authorship of the various chapters has been given, but the systematic list is the responsibility of the editorial committee. Its preparation has been largely the work of C. B. Ashby, R. S. R. Fitter, R. C. Homes, E. R. Parrinder and B. A. Richards, with contributions from Miss C. M. Acland, L. Baker, C. L. Collenette, S. Cramp, D. Goodwin, P. A. D. Hollom and W. G. Teagle. It is particularly gratifying that the committee should include C. L. Collenette, the secretary of the Society's first ornithological committee in 1908.

Assistance has been received in various ways from many members of the Society. E. M. Nicholson has made valuable comments on the chapter on Inner London, and P. W. E. Currie has done the same for several chapters. F. H. Jones and H. P. Medhurst have often interrupted their work on the current records to assist us with the last few years. L. Baker, W. D. Melliush, P. R. Griffiths, and Mrs. R. E. Teagle have devoted considerable time to drawing the maps. For special reports or manuscript notes covering a great many years we are particularly indebted to C. H. Andrewes, H. G. Attlee, T. L. Bartlett, C. H. Bentham, J. F. Burton, the late J. E. S. Dallas, R. W. Hayman, G. E. Manser, G. K. McCulloch, H. Murray, H. E. Pounds, R. Spencer, G. Taylor, Professor E. H. Warmington, R. B. Warren and C. A. White. Mrs. Sylvia Lloyd generously placed at our disposal the valuable notes of her late husband, Bertram Lloyd, and we have derived much useful information from the detailed notes compiled by the late W. A. Wright in his long and valuable study of the Lea valley reservoirs. For statistical information about the London reservoirs we have to thank the Metropolitan Water Board to whose officials the Society owes a great deal for their co-operation. We are grateful to the Hampstead Scientific Society for permission to use their records and to the Wimbledon N.H.S. who presented to us their complete records. To the many others who helped us with original information, we apologise for the lack of space for full acknowledgment. For the same reason we have often been obliged to omit observers' names, especially when the records have already appeared in the *London Bird Report* to which reference is only made in exceptional cases. For assisting with the typing of the manuscript our thanks are due to Miss A. M. Davis,

Miss R. Davis, A. V. Pettit, T. G. Nordal and particularly to F. J. L. Mitchell. Again this list is not complete and we thank also those other members of the Society who helped from time to time.

The nomenclature used is that of the *Check-List of the Birds of Great Britain and Ireland* (1952) for Latin names. The English names are those given in the Check-List as amended in *British Birds*, 46: 1-3. In particular we have deliberately omitted, following the practice of that periodical, the hyphens separating birds' names after a noun used as an adjective.

In describing the normal periods of migration individual contributors have used the method which they have considered most appropriate to the data. To obtain the median date given in some accounts the annual first (or last) dates are arranged in chronological sequence, the median being the middle date of the series.

References in frequent use have been abbreviated as follows:—

<i>B.B.</i>	..	<i>British Birds</i>
<i>L.N.</i>	..	<i>London Naturalist</i>
<i>L.B.R.</i>	..	<i>London Bird Report</i>
<i>N.H.S.</i>	..	<i>Natural History Society</i>
<i>Zool.</i>	..	<i>Zoologist</i>