

News and views

Moving forward

The start of a new year is an appropriate time to review the direction in which an organization is going. The Society has seen a number of major changes over the last two years and many members might find it useful to have some insight of our thinking on the way forward. Those of us who are in regular touch with the day-to-day operations of the Society like to consider for organizational purposes that we have two main areas of activity. One is concerned principally with servicing and maintaining the membership, while the other is largely concerned with the development and management of conservation projects. Much of the servicing activity also has an important conservation role, including staff and council input into a variety of discussions and co-ordinating sessions with other like-minded bodies and through our journal.

We have never been a wealthy society, nor have we used a large proportion of our resources on fund-raising campaigns, choosing a mix of grants, gifts, subscriptions and legacy income to fund what we feel are the priorities of the moment. It was with this mix of income that the now well-known conservation programmes for bats, and reptiles and amphibians were started. These have made a considerable impact on public awareness and practical conservation of these originally poorly-supported groups of animals. After four years Council felt that the prime objectives of these projects had been achieved and that it was time to pass them on to more specialist organizations that will support the initiatives that the Society, through its staff, has worked so hard to achieve. The Bat Project is moving under the umbrella of The Vincent Wildlife Trust and its work will be ultimately allied with that of the Mammal Society.

Along similar lines, it is expected that within the coming year a new specialist organization will be formed to look after the interests of reptiles and amphibians. This group will be primarily concerned with British needs, but will also keep an eye on the wider European scene.

Although in recent years we have addressed a number of British conservation issues, especially where other bodies were not involved, Council

now feels that we should revert to spending a higher proportion of our time and effort on international work, principally because there are so many more gaps to fill abroad. This is not to say that we have neglected the overseas side of our activities. We perform very effectively in that well-known role of ours, the provision of small grants to a variety of high-priority projects all over the world.

Support for the Mountain Gorilla Project in Rwanda continues at a high level and the Society is one of a team of organizations working on this most successful of African projects. Our intention is to expand these activities to other mountain gorilla populations and to explore the situation of the eastern lowland gorilla in Zaire. In parallel we are launching a new project in South East Asia, focusing on the conservation problems of the orang-utan as a 'key' species.

Having reviewed at the December meeting where we currently stand financially and in terms of our contribution to conservation, Council will use the next two meetings, including a special one arranged for January, to examine carefully our objectives for the future.

No review of this kind would be complete without mention of the staff who effectively make these things happen. Unfortunately, John Gooders, the Executive Director, felt that he could not continue with us after the end of his initial six-month appointment. We are not going to replace him in the immediate future while Council's strategic reviews are undertaken, but I am confident that our key staff, Amanda Hillier in charge of the office and Jacqui Morris in charge of *Oryx*, will be more than adequately looking after our interests. They are ably supported by Roger Wilson on a part-time basis, who provides the advisory input on the larger projects. We owe a great deal to the efforts of Tony Hutson and Tom Langton for the development of the bat and herpetological projects; they leave us to continue their work wearing other hats. Finally mention must be made of all those members of Council who provide the Society with support in many different forms; without their assistance the Society would be a much less effective organization.

David Jones, Chairman of Council.

Die-hard whalers, but not all, carry on

It was heartening to hear the news that both Japan and Norway held whale-watching trips for tourists in 1988. Norwegian whalers welcomed several hundreds of tourists aboard their former whaling vessels in the summer. The venture appears to be only the second industry of its kind to start up in Europe in the past few years; tourists have been watching sperm whales off the coast of Sardinia since 1986. In Japan a whale-watching tour was arranged as part of the 20th anniversary celebration of the return to Japan of the Bonin Islands and it was so successful that others were planned for 1989.

Less welcome was the news that Norway and Iceland carried out research whaling in 1988 despite the fact that neither proposal had been approved by the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission. Iceland began in June and by the end of the summer had killed 68 fin and 10 sei whales. In June whale meat from Iceland was intercepted in Finland on its way to Japan and was returned to Iceland in July, although under Finnish law and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora regulations it should have been confiscated. An international boycott against Icelandic fish led by Greenpeace is hurting the defiant whaling nation; sales are being lost and the boycott has the potential to cripple Iceland's troubled economy, which derives 60 per cent of its foreign exchange from fish. In a bilateral agreement in June the US endorsed Iceland's 'research' kill and on 3 August 19 US conservation and animal welfare groups filed a major lawsuit in the federal court charging the Secretaries of State and Commerce with numerous violations of the law in their approval of Iceland's whaling.

Norway, faced with the threats of sanctions against its fish exports to the US, sent its revised plan, not to the Scientific Committee of the IWC as it should have done, but to the US. It proposed to kill 30 minke whales, from a depleted stock classified by the IWC as protected, and proceeded to do so. President Reagan approved the plan in September, after the whales had been killed, and the threat of US trade sanctions was removed.

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Japan announced that its whaling fleet would sail to Antarctica in November to kill 825 minke and 50 sperm whales. If the new proposal is submitted to the IWC Scientific Committee at its meeting in November or December there will not be time for the results of the postal vote required by the Commission to be announced before Japan starts whaling. Japan obviously intends to go whaling before this process is complete, just as happened last year.

Rediscovery of the small Travancore flying squirrel

by G. U. Kurup

Close on the heels of the rediscovery of the Malabar civet *Viverra megaspila civettina* (Kurup, 1987), I have great pleasure in reporting yet another rediscovery also from Kerala state, India. This time it is the extremely rare small Travancore flying squirrel *Petinomys fuscocapillus fuscocapillus*, one of several species of small flying squirrels in India, but the only one in southern India. Described in 1847 by Jerdon, this subspecies was known to be collected only twice again until now (Jerdon, 1874; Wroughton, 1915), both presumably around the same time in last century, once by Rev. Baker and the second time by the better known forester and botanist Mr Bourdillon, both of whom were Englishmen living in Travancore at the time. The type specimen was lost soon after the species was first described (Wroughton, 1915), and the only specimen known to exist until recently is a mutilated skin in poor condition in the British Museum (Natural History) presumably the one collected by Bourdillon. However, Hutton (1949) included this subspecies in his account of the mammals of High Wavy Mountains in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu state and it is now understood that the Bombay Natural History Society has one specimen collected by him, whose locality is labelled merely as 'Travancore'.

The present specimen, a female, the second one to be collected this century, was caught from within the crown of a coconut palm at a place called Vennikkulam (76° 37' E and 9° 23' N) in Pathanamthitta district of central Travancore in Kerala, during a Zoological Survey of India district faunal survey.

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The small Travancore flying squirrel, photographed for the first time ever (G. U. Kurup).

Vennikkulam is a riverside village on the banks of Manimala river, with a small trading centre. The nearest forested area is about 24 km away to the east in the Ranni Forest Division. The area is cultivated with coconut, arecanut, sugar cane, paddy, and additionally, of late, cocoa. There is also some riverine vegetation, thick in places, along the banks of the river. The plot of land from which the squirrel was collected had all these vegetation types. Though the area was further explored, especially the crowns of all the coconut palms in the area, no other individual was seen. However, the area remains to be explored further with some intensive surveys in the Ranni Forest Division.

The preserved specimen (skin and skull dry, and the carcass wet preserved) has been deposited in the National Zoological Collections of the Zoological Survey of India, at Western Ghat Regional Station, Calicut, Kerala.

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G. U. Kurup, Zoological Survey of India, Western Ghat Regional Station, Calicut - 673 006, Kerala, India.

Saving the Seychelles brush warbler by Michael Rands

The Seychelles brush warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis* is one of nine threatened endemic bird species found in the Republic of Seychelles. Until 23 September 1988 it was confined to the 27-ha island of Cousin, from which it almost disappeared in the 1950s. The species has never been widespread: late in the last century it was reported from three small islands in Seychelles (Cousin, Cousine and Marianne), although it subsequently disappeared from the latter two. It may also have occurred on Mahe and Aride, but since the early 1900s no breeding population has been reported from anywhere but Cousin.

By 1958, when Cousin was run as a coconut plantation, only 30 Seychelles brush warblers were counted and the species appeared in imminent danger of extinction. Ten years later Cousin was purchased for the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), which has subsequently run it as a nature reserve. A primary management objective has been to increase the warbler population. Research into their food, foraging behaviour and breeding requirements has shown that the natural vegetation of Cousin, when allowed to regenerate, provides a highly suitable habitat for the species. Consequently, reserve management has attempted to reduce coconut regeneration and enhance the spread of native shrubs and trees. Maintaining the exclusion of introduced predators (especially rats and cats) and controlling barn owls have also been essential for the conservation of the warbler. This management has resulted in a steady increase in the warbler population; by 1975 an estimated 274 birds occupied some 120 territories. In 1987 430 individuals were counted.

Despite this sustained and dramatic increase in numbers, the species remained vulnerable due to its confinement to one 27-ha island. Both King (1978–1979) and Collar and Stuart (1985) proposed the establishment of the warbler on

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another island as an important long-term safeguard. In 1987, following 18 months of intensive study of the warblers, which concluded that Cousin's current carrying capacity had been reached (Komdeur, in press), ICBP instigated a feasibility study for the transfer of warblers to Aride island, some 12 km to the north of Cousin. Aride was selected because it is completely protected as a nature reserve (run by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation) (RSNC) where natural vegetation is being encouraged to regenerate, rats and cats are absent, and staff are available to research and monitor.

Between May 1987 and March 1988 parallel studies of variation in insect abundance and vegetation structure on Cousin and Aride were conducted by Jan Komdeur for ICBP and Ian Bullock for RSNC. The results showed that the total vegetation cover and the abundance of ground flora (important for foraging juvenile warblers between 4 and 8 months of age) was similar on both islands throughout the year, although Cousin had a greater variety of tree species. The abundance of preferred insect prey varied in synchrony on the two islands, with overall abundance being higher on Aride.

Following these studies and two years' intensive research on the breeding biology, foraging behaviour and population dynamics of Cousin's warbler population (Komdeur, in press), ICPB, in consultation with the Seychelles Government and the RSNC, decided to attempt a transfer from Cousin to Aride. Between 23 and 27 September 1988, 29 Seychelles warblers were caught in mist nets, transferred in small wooden cages by boat and immediately released. The timing was chosen to coincide with a peak in insect abundance when birds would also be in good condition. All birds transferred were over one year of age, but were not, in most cases, from the dominant established pairs in Cousin's territories.

The initial results are startling. By 24 September, only one day after the first transfer of birds, a pair on Aride was found nest building. By 10 October 7 territories were established on Aride, four pairs were nest building and one completed nest contained two eggs! The chicks are due to hatch in November.

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The lessons learnt from this project may well prove helpful in conservation efforts to save the world's other 900 or so bird species endemic to single islands.

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Michael Rands, ICBP, 32 Cambridge Road, Girton, Cambridge CB3 0PJ.

European Bustard Symposium in Vienna

by Paul Goriup

The main outcome of the sixth meeting of the European members of the International Council for Bird Preservation Bustard Group, held in Vienna recently, was the development of a policy for the conservation management of the great bustard *Otis tarda* in central Europe. The species is suffering a drastic decline in East Germany and Hungary as successive severe winters have driven the birds to less favourable areas in western Europe, northern Yugoslavia and eastern Italy. There the birds perished from lack of food and shooting. The Hungarian population numbered over 3000 birds in the late 1970s, but the latest census in 1988 gave a count of fewer than 1600 birds left. The situation in East Germany is just as bad, with scarcely 300 birds remaining from a population that once numbered thousands. It may not be long before the great bustard follows the little bustard *Tetrax tetrax* into extinction in central Europe.

The symposium participants identified habitat loss through agricultural intensification as the single most important cause for the decline. This has been exacerbated by too heavy a reliance on captive rearing as a means for restocking and propping up the wild population, a technique

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Great bustard: declining in Europe, but help is on the way (Andrzej Bereszynski).

that seems not to work in the case of the great bustard. Accordingly, the new policy recommended by the Group emphasizes the importance of protecting the habitats used by bustards, both during the winter and breeding seasons. Thus, areas of winter green crops, including rape, alfalfa, cabbages and clover, have to be reintroduced in intensively cultivated areas to provide winter feeding grounds. In the breeding season, large plots have to be left fallow, where the males can display and females can approach them for mating without disturbance. The recent addition of the great bustard to Annex II of the

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Bonn Convention on Migratory Species of Animals, and the introduction of farmland set-aside schemes in many central and western European countries, provides an opportunity for conserving this majestic lowland grassland species, even within the context of modern agricultural practice.

The symposium welcomed the news that houbara bustards *Chlamydotis undulata* are now being regularly bred in captivity in Al Ain Zoo, Abu Dhabi. The birds have even been bred to the second generation, for the first time. Another first for the zoo was the successful captive breeding of kori bustards *Ardeotis kori*.

On a more technical level, news was given of the first trials of tracking bustard movements in Saudi Arabia using satellite telemetry. A tag applied to a captive male houbara bustard had succeeded in locating the bird to within 500 m over a test period of seven days. An improved transmitter is now being developed for use on wild males in 1989. Eventually, the movements of bustards will be cross-referenced to satellite images in order to determine habitat preferences during winter, summer and on migration.

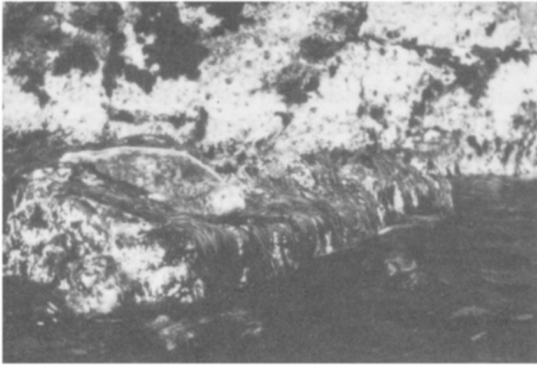
The symposium was attended by 25 participants from 12 countries: Algeria, Austria, German Democratic Republic, German Federal Republic, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Spain, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States of America. It was hosted by the Institut für Angewandte Öko-Ethologie with the support of Verein für Ökologie und Umweltforschung, Forschungsgemeinschaft Wilhelminenberg and ICBP-Austria.

Paul Goriup, *The Nature Conservation Bureau, 122 Derwent Road, Thatcham, Newbury, Berkshire RG13 4UP, UK.*

Death in the North Sea

More than 14,000 common or harbour seals *Phoca vitulina* died in the North Sea and in the Baltic in 1988. The first deaths occurred in the Kattegat channel between Denmark and Sweden when 100 seal pups were born prematurely. Adult seals started to die, and by mid-May hundreds of dead seals were washed ashore in the Kattegat and on the North Sea coast of West

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Common seal on the Isle of Man, UK; how many will survive the virus? (Philip Steele/ICCE).

Germany. By mid-August seals were also seen sick and dying on the east coast of England and Albert Osterhaus and Lise Vedder, working in the Netherlands, reported that the disease affecting the seals appeared to be caused by a virus indistinguishable from that which causes canine distemper. By the beginning of September dead seals were reported from Scotland and from Northern Ireland and by October the death toll was expected to continue to rise, although, in the Kattegat where the outbreak started there was evidence that the epidemic was dying out and that about 30 per cent of the seals there had survived.

The source of the virus had not been identified at the time of writing, but a range of hypotheses had been put forward. They included Greenland, where a number of huskies that had died from canine distemper had been dumped in the sea, and Lake Baikal in the USSR, where 10 per cent of Baikal seals *Phoca siberica* appear to have died from a similar viral infection. The virus could be spread by arctic foxes or polar bears, which travel long distances. Tests now under way in a number of European laboratories are expected to provide an answer to this question soon.

With the deteriorating health of the North Sea a current cause of concern, it was inevitable that questions would be raised about links between pollution and the deaths. It has been known for some time that seals from the Baltic and the Wadden Sea are contaminated with PCBs and pesticides, and that these substances are responsible for reproductive failure in these populations. Experiments have also shown that PCBs suppress

the immune systems of certain mammals. It is possible that pollution may have played only a small role in the current epidemic; the greatest number of deaths did not occur in the most polluted parts of the Wadden Sea and the Baltic and the dead seals analysed so far have not shown unusual levels of PCBs or pesticides. However, analysis has not yet been done for other compounds known to impair the immune system and a three-year programme of research has been drawn up by a number of European laboratories to investigate the effects of potentially toxic substances.

Certain sections of the media in Britain and West Germany generated a great deal of sympathy for the dying seals and raised hundreds of thousands of pounds. It was obvious that people wanted the seals rescued, treated and cured if at all possible. A small proportion of pups can be nursed through the disease, but most adults die and such care can save only a limited number. There was talk of vaccination programmes but so far these are unrealistic. The existing vaccines against the virus use a live but weakened form of the virus and if they were used on wild seals other wildlife could be infected. Two vaccines based on an inactivated virus are being tested on seals, but most inactivated vaccines require two injections at least four weeks apart and are thus impractical for use with wild seals. Even if vaccination became feasible it is unlikely that conservationists would consider this to be a wise move. It could cause more disturbance and damage to populations than letting the disease run its course. It is possible that such outbreaks are natural. In 1955 viral pneumonia killed large numbers of crab-eating seals in Antarctica and 450 seals died off the east coast of the US eight years ago. It might be difficult to convince certain sections of the public that their generous donations would be better spent on less visible work – continuing research on the effects of pollution for example – but the press has an ideal opportunity to do just that when reporting wildlife matters. We need a human population that cares about wildlife, but we also need an educated one, which can recognize that the suffering seals are perhaps a symptom of a much wider problem, one that cannot be solved overnight by syringes and seal hospitals.

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