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The introduction and naturalisation of birds

Proceedings of a conference organised jointly by the
British Ornithologists' Union and the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee

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Concluding remarks

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Naturalised populations of birds now occur in many parts of the world as a result of accidental or deliberate release. They may have a variety of impacts on native species and habitats ranging from deleterious, to neutral. Some naturalised bird populations may even be beneficial, either ecologically or perhaps economically. This conference has demonstrated how widespread the release of birds has become and also how long such translocation and release activities have been carried out. This review is particularly relevant and timely since the process of species becoming feral, introduced, re-established (re-stocked) or established (stocked) has become the subject of scientific debate and considerable public interest. In such an applied and complex area of bird ecology it is important to define clearly and precisely what is meant by particular terms and descriptions. One key conclusion is therefore the standard method of description for naturalised birds as used above and summarised in the Preface to this volume.

Cases where considerable change to the natural environment has been brought about by man through the manipulation of species populations in the relatively recent past demonstrate the need to apply particular caution to any further releases. We have seen that for the UK, national legislation exists which limits the opportunity for further potentially damaging releases of species. Several international Conventions and Directives require the limitation of release activities also. It is, however, important to realise that legislation is capable of change over time and that new situations may arise where legislation may need to adapt to control a particular situation. An example of such evolution of legislation may be the placing of additional alien species onto Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, with Section 14 of the Act making illegal the release of certain species other than under licence from government. The ecology of naturalised species is such that other changes may be required in the future to balance the desire to release species against other needs of the countryside in general. This should clearly be kept under active consideration by legislators.

In order to track the fate of species naturalised in the UK it is important that adequate monitoring of their populations is undertaken. While the UK has a long

tradition of survey and monitoring of birds, naturalised and introduced species have until now been largely missed. Detailed surveys of individual species and groups have been carried out, but the feeling from the conference was that more should be done in a systematic way to determine what bird species have become naturalised, where they are in the country and what (if any) impact they are having. The need for such monitoring in other countries is apparent also to allow a fuller picture to be seen. The British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee tracks the additions of naturalised species to the British and Irish List and has reported an increase in the numbers of species and in the spread of their populations. This continues to worry those concerned with the conservation of our native biodiversity. The need to monitor species kept in captivity was stressed also; these are the potentially naturalised populations of the future. Do we really monitor their captive populations adequately?

The conference heard a range of cases where naturalised species may be causing problems for nature conservation. There are, however, also cases where the release of individuals is of considerable benefit to the species as a whole. The continuing work on the re-establishment of the red kite and the white-tailed eagle serve as good examples of where releases may be beneficial in restoring numbers and range of particularly threatened species. It is important in undertaking such activities that the internationally recognised criteria for re-stocking produced by IUCN are strictly adhered to.

The conference heard various reviews of which species have undergone or are undergoing naturalisation. Generally, release activities have concentrated on waterfowl and game birds. Waterfowl have become naturalised after either deliberate or accidental release while in most cases, release of game birds has been intentional (primarily for economic reasons). It is perhaps surprising that other avian groups appear not to have been subject to the same degree of manipulation or have not been able to survive once released in the UK. The examples of the common waxbill in Portugal and of several species in Mauritius, demonstrate that this is not always the case elsewhere however. For both wildfowl and gamebirds the issues divide

broadly into the introduction of alien species e.g. ruddy duck or chukar partridge or the restocking of native species e.g. mallard or mute swan. Clearly the manipulation of the species may cause increased competition with other native species, may increase parasite transmission, and in some cases hybridisation with others may occur. The conference heard of the need to improve our understanding of the real and potential impacts of such manipulations.

There are a range of techniques available to help in the study of the ecology of naturalised species, and to help in determining what impacts they may have. Genetic analysis to investigate hybridisation was highlighted as were techniques that help predict possible consequences at the population level. These were seen as having increasing relevance and potential as the technologies in this area improve. Similarly the role of mathematical modelling of population growth was clearly recognised as being relevant. Population models are not always complex and could be used more often in an exploratory way to help demonstrate possible scenarios for the increase or decrease of species populations given certain actions by man.

While the study of naturalised birds still requires a systematic approach to monitoring of all populations there is a history of detailed case studies on the spread of individual species. The conference heard the examples of Canada geese, ruddy duck, golden pheasant, northern goshawk, common waxbill in Portugal, rose-ringed parakeet and the birds of Mauritius, this last subject being a good example of where re-establishment of populations has had enormous conservation value.

A common theme underpinning the history of most of the cases where problems have arisen is the lack of understanding of the possible ecological consequences of such releases. This is understandable in many cases, especially where the releases were undertaken some time ago. It does, however, heighten the need for improved education and awareness of the problems to the general public now. Linked to this is the need to be extremely cautious about any new releases. Recent work has shown that a single species may cause problems in several different ways; the Canada goose for example may cause damage to agricultural crops, damage amenity sites (e.g. parks), may cause damage to water bodies and in some areas close to airports may pose a hazard to aircraft. We should not therefore underestimate the ecological or economic

damage which may occur.

In light of the papers given and the discussions held at this conference what are the key actions to improve our understanding and focus our efforts in dealing with naturalised species? The following are offered for consideration:

- i. Existing legislation should be strictly enforced, and the precautionary principle applied to the release of any species.
- ii. Adequate survey and monitoring of naturalised birds should be undertaken across the UK.
- iii. Particular issues known to be causing problems should be investigated and early action taken.
- iv. A thorough review of the extent of populations of naturalised birds in the European Union should be undertaken to evaluate the extent of the problems at that level.
- v. The BOU is currently undertaking a review of the naturalised birds in the UK. The results of this review should be communicated as soon as practicable to government and the statutory conservation agencies.
- vi. The potential impact of the release of large numbers of captive-bred or translocated individuals of naturally occurring species should be given further consideration.
- vii. The need to educate the public on issues surrounding naturalised species is obvious. Future action should focus on improving the understanding of the issues and of the need for potential remedies.

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