

## **‘pursued steadily, quietly, unfalteringly’: The Work of Wild Bird Protectionists in Britain during World War One<sup>1</sup>**

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Addressing its members in 1915 via its newsletter *Bird Notes and News*, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [RSPB] declared,

A year and more ago, when the horrors of War descended upon Europe, it was supposed by some person that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was one of those institutions which, however excellent in time of peace, would not weather the storm. The Society is an institution of humanity and civilisation, and humanity and civilisation were ceasing to count. It is an outcome of the refined and aesthetic emotions of mankind, like poetry and pictures, and life had no longer a place for the aesthetic. Birds must, as one correspondent puts it, “take a back seat”. They must get along as best they could while man was at death-grips with man. The Council of the Society decided otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

Supported by just 2,000 affluent members and with a sole interest in wild bird protection, this was a bold intention by Britain’s premier bird protection agency, especially given the unique exigencies wrought by the new conflict. The demands of war in Europe went far beyond the battlefield and its immediate surrounds as the full economy, including natural resources, became geared towards fighting the first full industrial war. It might be supposed then that the RSPB’s statement of intent would quickly fall by the wayside. Indeed, as Richard P. Tucker has observed, wartime nature conservation has had a tendency to be ‘entirely derailed’.<sup>3</sup> This would seem to be a plausible argument. The environmental history of warfare is a relatively recent discipline, but already the growing body of literature addressing the broader relationship of warfare and the environment visibly demonstrates how eras of conflict produce unique stresses on the natural environment.<sup>4</sup> This is especially so with regard to the effect of warfare on the physical landscape caused by the direct consequences of military engagement, as several studies, including those addressing World War One have demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> Systems and policies geared towards a war-footing economy

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<sup>1</sup> *Bird Notes & News* (hereafter *BNN*). VI/7 (1915): 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VI/7 (1915): 97-100.

<sup>3</sup> Richard P. Tucker, ‘The Impact of Warfare on the Natural World: A Historical Survey’, in Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell (eds.), *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004); p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: the Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012); Tucker and Russell (eds.), *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally*; Edmund Russell, *War and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Bill Freedman, *Environmental Ecology: The Ecological Effects of Pollution, Disturbance, and Other Stresses* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph P. Huppy, ‘The Environmental Footprint of War’, *Environment and History*, 14 (2008): 405-21; Tait Keller, ‘The Mountains Roar: The Alps during the Great War’, *Environmental History*, 14/2 (2009): 253-74; Dorothee Brantz, ‘Environments of Death: Trench Warfare on the Western Front, 1914-18’, in Charles E. Cloosmann (ed.) *War and the Environment*, pp. 68-91 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).

left a much wider ecological footprint than that on just the immediate conflict zone as multiple agro-economic studies of conflict's impact of agricultural output establish. Despite this work, as Coates *et al* point out, studies by environmental historians of warfare and its impact upon the 'beyond the battlefield' are scant, an observation also made by Tucker, who notes analysis of 'military operations in relation to state, society, economy, and ecology' is only now emerging.<sup>6</sup>

Responding to these calls for inquiry, this essay contributes to this nascent field identified by Tucker by addressing the 'home front' during conflict, albeit through a relatively narrow lens of study, that is, the work of bird protectionists, in particular, the RSPB.<sup>7</sup> Given that the Society's campaigning bearing, as regards bird protection issues, was very much steered by reacting to broader economic, agricultural or cultural agendas that were themselves distorted by the demands of conflict, then this essay concerns itself with not just environmental history, but also the much broader historiography of civilian life in wartime, for which there are multiple accounts.<sup>8</sup> In the trauma of war, it seeks to consider whether there was popular sentiment for the causes pushed by bird preservationists during this particular conflict and by assessing whether the Society remained committed or reneged on its 1915 declaration, this study explores how the issue of wild bird protection was conducted throughout the

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of World War One studies see, Reginald Lennard, 'English Agriculture since 1914', *Journal of Political Economy*, 30/5 (1922): 597-622; P.E. Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War* (London, Routledge, 1989), 23-35; Edith H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Volume VIII 1914-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 70-108; Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Sheail, 'Land Improvements and Reclamation: The Experiences of the First World War in England and Wales', *Agricultural History Review*, 24/2 (1976): 110-25; John Sheail, 'The Role of the War Agricultural and Executive Committees in the Food Production Campaign of 1915-1918 in England and Wales', *Agricultural Administration*, 1 (1974): 141-54; John Sheail, 'Changes in the Use and Management of Farmland in England and Wales, 1915-1919', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 60 (1973): 17-32.; Peter Coates, Tim Cole, Marianna Dudley & Chris Pearson, 'Defending Nation, Defending Nature? Militarized Landscapes and Military Environmentalism in Britain, France, and the United States,' *Environmental History*, 16 (2001), 458. Richard P. Tucker, 'War and the Environment', in J.R. McNeil & Erin Stewart Mauldin, (eds.), *A Companion to Global Environmental History*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); pp, 319-20.

<sup>7</sup> For an early environmental history study of the 'home front', see Rauno Lahtinen & Timo Vuorisalo, 'It's War and Everyone Can Do as They Please!' An Environmental History of a Finnish City in Wartime', *Environmental History*, 9 (2004): 679-700. A number of studies, in contrast to Tucker's supposition, demonstrate that nature conservation during conflict was very much active. For example, Frank Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John Sheail, 'War and the Development of Nature Conservation in Britain', *Journal of Environmental Management*, 44 (1994): 267-83; Kurk Dorsey, 'Compromising on Conservation: World War II and American Leadership in Whaling Diplomacy', in Tucker and Russell (eds.), *Natural Enemy*, pp. 252-69; Robert Wilson, 'Birds on the Home Front: Wildlife Conservation in the Western United States during World War II', in Charles E Closmann (ed.) *War and the Environment* pp. 132-49, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009). Warfare has had direct effects on some conservation movements leading to later consequences for scholarship. German bombing during World War II destroyed RSPB minute books covering 1914-18.

<sup>8</sup> The historiography of 'war and society' has rapidly expanded, since its emergence in the 1960 and 1970s. For World War One, see Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Richard van Emden & Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain during the First World War* (London: Headline, 2004); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Terry Charman, *The First World War on the Home Front* (London: Carlton, 2015).

war period in Britain.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, when the nation would have much more pressing priorities, did war disrupt or even enhance the work of the RSPB and the cause of bird protection?

The relationship between birds and World War One has not been ignored. Almost immediately after the armistice, the Scottish ornithologist Sir Hugh Steuart Gladstone (1877-1949) published *Birds and the War*. Environmental historians have overlooked this work, drawn from Gladstone's accumulation of wartime newspaper and magazine clippings. This is unfortunate as this valuable contemporary account offers much scope for further research, being a documental record of the effect of conflict on birdlife demonstrating well the deep implications warfare has on the natural environment. Subjects addressed included 'sufferings of birds in the war'; 'behaviour of birds in the war zones', and the 'effect of the war on birds'. Gladstone's study over five chapters was wide, and he admitted frustration in marshalling his sources into this work, omitting much. This paper will not attempt to rework the wide field covered by *Birds and the War*, but will not ignore Gladstone's work entirely and draws on his study of the 'utility and economy of birds in the war' to offer a deeper analysis of the workings of the RSPB than that afforded by Gladstone.<sup>10</sup>

Hugh Gladstone was the archetypal Edwardian 'country gentleman naturalist' combining a first-rate expertise with the sporting gun with a keenness to chronicle and protect birdlife through legislation and active membership of field clubs. This included the British Ornithological Union, Scottish Naturalists and as a RSPB representative on the Home Office Departmental Committee. Gladstone also committed his passion to print. His *Birds of Dumfriesshire*, published in 1910, remains an outstanding county avifauna. Nature study and writing did not occupy all of Gladstone's time. For over forty years he served as a Dumfriesshire county councillor, interrupted with spells of military service, beginning with the 3<sup>rd</sup> King's Own Scottish Borderers in the South African War, and then in the Intelligence Department in the War Office during the 1914-1918 War.<sup>11</sup> Gladstone was thus well placed to research and publish *Birds and the War*, and his reference to *Bird Notes & News* shows the RSPB to be active throughout the 1914-18 conflict to varying degrees.

### **The Feathered Millinery Campaign**

By 1914, the RSPB had become a significant force for bird protection. Founded in 1889 to campaign against the feathered millinery trade, granted a royal charter in 1904 and whilst keeping the plumage industry as its prime concern, the Society had greatly expanded its operations. These included school educational programmes,

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<sup>9</sup> Although the work of the RSPB's anti-feather millinery campaign has been appraised we still lack a satisfactory account of its history and broader conservation work. Robin W. Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Alan Haynes, 'Murderous Millinery', *History Today*, 33/7 (1983): 26-30; Penelope Jane Law, 'The Long-Run Development of Environmental Interest Groups in Britain: Two Case Studies', (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2000); T. Samstag, *For the Love of Birds: The Story of the RSPB* (Sandy: RSPB, 1989). Law's work is the most critical as Samstag's 'official' account is basic at best.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh S. Gladstone, *Birds and the War* (London: Skeffington, 1919).

<sup>11</sup> A.B.D., 'Obituary: Sir Hugh Gladstone 1878-1949', *Scottish Naturalist*, 61/1 (1949): 63-4; A.B.D., 'Obituaries: Sir Hugh Gladstone (1877-1949)', *Ibis*, 91/3 (1949): 520-1; Hugh S. Gladstone, *The Birds of Dumfriesshire* (London: Witherby & Co, 1910); RSPB, *24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1914*: 4.

guarding breeding birds, agitating for stronger bird protection legislation and challenging cruelty to birdlife. The first two of these activities were rather innocuous, and kept the RSPB to its 'business as usual' promise. The annual elementary school Bird and Tree Challenge Shield essay competition continued without any real issues, although the Society's competition for public schools was suspended in 1916, as the Society thought the war would cause a diminished number of entries thus devaluing the event. The war created greater challenges for its Watchers' Committee of paid stationed individuals monitoring rare breeding birds. This included dwindling funds as RSPB income fell, the encroachment of military camps, patrols and exercises onto protected areas leading to some habitat destruction, and some watchers of military age being conscripted. That said, the conflict benefited some breeding birds. The Society reported, with some pleasure, that 'the absence, in uniform, of young men of the villages has perhaps been no bad thing for the birds, and coast regions on which the collector casts his longing eyes have been rendered inaccessible to the public'.<sup>12</sup>

To campaign for improved bird protection and tackle abuses of wild birds, the RSPB regularly turned to using the popular press to its advantage to reach a wide audience, but its prime means of communication was through its quarterly journal, *Bird Notes & News*. This continued to be published throughout the war and in common with many newspapers was reduced in content because of paper shortages. Press content was also strictly controlled by the government's Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which stifled specific discussion of sensitive war matters and saw some press titles heavily censored for exceeding this remit. DORA's wide-ranging legislation, introduced in August 1914 and expanded as the war progressed, conferred unprecedented and undefined emergency powers over the citizen, and managed minute aspects of their lives. As well as press censorship, this included tight control of agriculture, trade and food supplies, actions that then had consequences for the natural environment and would then exercise the RSPB.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which military matters were reported in *Bird Notes & News* only went as far as ornithological notes from 'the Trenches'. Yet the RSPB pushed DORA press controls quite heavily by criticising the government's handling of military or agricultural matters if they negatively affected birds. This disparagement of efforts to win the war, of which there appeared little government censure, suggests the Society was not wholly supportive of the war and the impression given is that the conflict appeared merely inconvenient to the RSPB. For example, complaints were made about habitat loss and disturbance to birdlife by the creation of essential army camps. Then, in 1917, the Society rather inappropriately labelled the 'tragedy' of the 'hideous destruction of trees and woods and every sort of cover in the progress of war' to fuel the war effort in Britain, an action that it lamented lacked systematic forestry planning.<sup>14</sup>

The RSPB did not fight the bird protection campaign alone. The Royal Society for the Protection of Animals [RSPCA] had long fought the cause, but in stark contrast to the RSPB's often-critical stance, it had a much broader agenda and vigorously supported the official war effort via its *Animal World* magazine. The vast majority of illustrated covers in 1915 and 1917 had a jingoistic military theme, picturing a regimental animal

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<sup>12</sup> *BNN*, VII/1 (1916): 5; *Ibid.*, VII/ 4 (1916): 41-4. Notices of the deaths of previous Public School Essayists who had gone onto serve and then killed in action were posted with depressing regularity in *BNN*. *Ibid.*, VII/3 (1916): 34.

<sup>13</sup> Marwick, *The Deluge*, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> *BNN*, VI/6 (1915): 87, 92; *Ibid.*, VII/8 (1917): 106

mascot alongside a uniformed figure. RSPCA workers also joined the army and the Society offered animal welfare lectures to troops as the Society looked to reduce sufferings of injured horses.<sup>15</sup> The plight of these creatures was a populist cause, demonstrating well the deep public sympathy for ‘innocent’ creatures during conflict. Approved by the Army Council, a RSPCA Fund for Sick and Wounded Horses was established in November 1914 and street collections exceeded, in some instances, the charitable efforts for the Red Cross, prisoners of war, or Belgian refugees. The scheme eventually totalled £250,000 towards equine care. Despite this busy schedule, the Society did not neglect its domestic duties and it continued to uphold animal protection legislation by prosecuting thousands of offenders. This included individuals transgressing bird protection legislation, such as the labourer fined in 1914 for three caged goldfinches taken during the close season.<sup>16</sup>

Court proceedings reflect the progress of bird protection. Public opinion was moving away from the exploitative mindset of the nineteenth century towards a more appreciative value towards birdlife. A burgeoning protection movement had driven this by pursuing school education schemes and successfully pressing for legislation to conserve a range of bird species and their eggs within a close protection period.<sup>17</sup> Although legislation was in place, as prosecutions demonstrated, there was widespread abuse and still much to do. Offenders were not just over-enthusiastic egg-collecting boys, but collectors seeking rare specimens, trappers supplying the aviculture trade, and gamekeepers killing birds of prey on the premise of interfering with shooting interests. Prosecutions, brought by both the RSPCA and RSPB, continued through the war years confirming a degree of continued normality for both agencies’ operations for their supporters and a continued willingness by the judiciary to see justice, set against the background of social upheaval caused by the war and the needs of the wider populace.<sup>18</sup>

In early 1914, a further piece of bird protection legislation also looked likely to be enacted just before the outbreak of hostilities. From the mid-nineteenth century, millinery sporting some form of feather adornments had become highly fashionable amongst women of all classes. Promoted by the growth of fashion magazines, hat designs incorporated plumes, wings and whole birds. This prompted increasing objections from growing number of individuals and associations concerned with preventing animal cruelty, both in Britain and North America, where the depletion of once very numerous bird and animal species was reaching the public conscience and the first Audubon Society, formed in 1886 and then revived in 1896, took up the anti-

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<sup>15</sup> *Animal World*, X (1915); *Ibid.*, XII (1917); *Ibid.*, X/114 (1915): 68-9; RSPCA, *91<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 1914*:15-18; Arthur W. Moss, *Valiant Crusade: The History of the RSPCA* (London: Cassell, 1961): 120-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Animal World*, XXII/141 (1917): 99-103; Moss, *Valiant Crusade*, 123; Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 233; RSPCA, *91<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 1914*: 23.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Bonhomme, ‘Nested Interests: Assessing Britain’s Wild-Bird Protection Laws of 1869-1880’, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 19 (2005): 47-68; James Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980) 39-40, 124-8; Frederick S. Milton, ‘Taking the Pledge: A Study of Children’s Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Birds and Animals in Britain, c. 1870-1914’, (Ph.D. diss., Newcastle University, 2008), *passim*. The ‘close time’ periods varied considerably between different counties, county boroughs, and then different species of birds. In some areas, birds were protected from the end of January to September, whereas in others protection came into force from mid-March and then lasted until mid-August. RSPB, *24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1914*: 76-82.

<sup>18</sup> For example, *BNN*, V/8 (1913): 127-8; *Ibid.*, VI/2 (1914): 39-40; *Ibid.*, VIII/1 (1918): 8.

plumage fight. In Britain, both RSPB and RSPCA worked to heighten public revulsion against the trade. Despite intense opposition from milliners, who labelled campaigners as sentimentalists, campaigners achieved some high profile successes.<sup>19</sup> Queen Alexandra, for example, pledged to abandon wearing the breeding plumes of wild birds in 1906. Although welcome, to cripple the trade, campaigners sought international legislation banning plumage imports. In North America, the 1900 Lacey Act prohibited interstate transport of birds illegally killed for their feathers. Thirteen years later, two Federal Tariff Acts, a migratory bird law and a non-importation law of wild bird plumage, prevented the import and the selling of feathers. Despite loopholes which were readily exploited, and that the actual wearing of feathers was not outlawed, it was enough to effect price falls, although not sales, of feathers and skins in London and Berlin. The same year, the RSPB sounded out fellow European campaigners to gauge attitudes for European action. German replies were very positive and supportive of RSPB action as the Society for Medical and Scientific Research pressed the German government for an import prohibition ban. Prof. C.C. Schillings, the leader of the German anti-plumage movement, assured the RSPB that if England banned the feather trade his country 'certainly will follow'. He confidently predicted that the market for plumes would collapse following the implementation of an international ban, although he believed that France would never enact feather importation legislation. Indeed, the French correspondent, Monsieur Pichot, reported that the Parisian fashion trade was mustering a 'league' to fight curtailments of their business. Clearly pleased with the support from Germany, and in marked contrast to what was to follow, the RSPB Council agreed the Society should 'make every possible use of these statements and opinions'.<sup>20</sup>

In early 1914, a Bill outlawing the importation of feathers was approved by a large parliamentary majority and had moved to the committee stage, although obstructive tactics from members with plumage interests hindered progress. The outbreak of war stalled any chance of breaking the deadlock as parliamentary priorities shifted, leaving the Bill slumbering in the Commons library during the conflict. Although the autumn edition of *Bird Notes & News* called for cooperation between Britain and Germany after Prof. Schillings' assurances, there was a conspicuous shift in the RSPB's rhetoric towards Germany by the time the Society held its AGM in March 1915. The RSPB lamented, 'For the moment the Kaiser and the Plume trade triumphed together'. Despite this setback, the Society was determined its work towards banning the plumage trade was not in vain. It immediately refuted the sincerity of German pre-war assurances for 'it was well known that German dealers

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout this essay, the word 'conservationists' is avoided where possible, as its use with reference to nature preservationists has not been located in the contemporary primary sources researched for this essay. Instead, 'protectionists' is used when referring to individuals and institutions campaigning on behalf of birds. Both the RSPB and their opponents also frequently used the term 'bird lovers' to refer to those who took a positive interest in the welfare of birds. Given this rather maudlin idiom, it is not difficult to see why they were dismissed as 'sentimentalists'. The thorny issue of defining 'conservationists' and 'preservationists' has been briefly tackled. Thomas R. Dunlap, 'Conservationists and Environmentalists: An Attempt at Definition', *Environmental Review*, 4 (1980): 29-31.

<sup>20</sup> Doughty, *Feather Fashions*, 92-152; Haynes, 'Murderous Millinery': 26-30; Leslie Kemp Poole, 'The Women of the Early Florida Audubon Society: Agents of History in the Flight to Save Birds', *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 85 (2007): 297-323; Carolyn Merchant, *Spare the Birds!: George Bird Grinnell and the First Audubon Society* (London: Yale University Press, 2016) 15-45; RSPB Archives, Sandy: 'RSPB Council Minute Book: January-December 1913', 5 December 1913; *BNN*, V/8 (1913): 114.

were the main buyers at the London feather-auctions' and that it was inconceivable that 'these German merchants were not unconnected with the determined opposition raised to the Plumage Bill in the Committee Stage in the House of Commons'.<sup>21</sup> By quickly attaching a pejorative anti-German invective to the plumage campaign, which became more graphic as the war progressed, *Bird Notes and News* kept a topical spotlight on the issue. A 1915 editorial warned that 'women have accepted as many falsehoods on this subject as even the Germans could supply, but the feathered headgear remains the Hun-headgear, typifying slaughter of the helpless and harmless; the "osprey" still stands for the Baby-killer among the shot-out homes of Heron and Egret'.<sup>22</sup> This was one of a series of overt harangues by the Society, mirroring the propagandist rhetoric of alleged instances of German atrocities committed on the Belgians filling the pages of the popular press and stoking a fervent, and frequently violent, anti-German public mood.<sup>23</sup>

Although the 'Plumage Bill' remained in abeyance, like the RSPB, anti-plumage MPs now used the war to their advantage and pressed the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Board of Trade to prohibit the importation of feathers as a luxury unbecoming a wartime economy. The Board prevaricated, asserting that imports from France merely filled returning empty vessels, but by 1917, a DORA Board of Trade Prohibition banned the importation of plumage, even if its effectiveness was nullified by exclusions admitting plumage still in transport and then an Anglo-French agreement relaxing some of the restrictions on feather imports.<sup>24</sup> This backward step intensified RSPB rhetoric, at a time when the unrestricted submarine campaign hardened press opinion against Germany. By 1918, the Society warned that the 'plume-trade is essentially alien-born and Hun inspired; that the "Osprey" is essentially a Boche production, obtained by the killing of parent-birds and young'.<sup>25</sup> The osprey plume was commonly known as the '*Aigrette*' and London and Paris were the hubs for the plumage trade, so it is doubtful that the RSPB's accusations of Germans being style leaders had much credence. Claims that German dealers drove the trade and hindered anti-plumage legislation might have had substance. Tens of thousands of Jews of Eastern European origin were heavily involved in the feather trade as traders and industrial workers and were concentrated in London's East End, where Jews of German extraction also settled. As the war progressed, the line between anti-Semitic and anti-German popular sentiments became increasingly distorted, leading to anti-Jewish rioting in some urban areas, including the East End.<sup>26</sup>

The campaigns by bird-protectionists branding feathers as cruel had already taken their toll and demand was slackening. The RSPB believed it could then drive down

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<sup>21</sup> *BNN*, VI/3 (1914): 41; Moore-Colyer, 'Feathered Women': 69-70; RSPB, *24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1914*: 3-4, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *BNN*, VI/7 (1915): 100. The term "osprey" refers to decorative tufts of white dorsal feathers commonly taken from egrets, a species of heron. Doughty, *Feather Fashions*, 10-12.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory, *Last Great War*, 40-69; Alice Goldfarb Marquis, 'Words as Weapons: Propaganda in Britain and Germany during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13/3 (1978): 467-98.

<sup>24</sup> *Hansard*, 5/LXXX, c. 1891-2 (14 Mar. 1916); *Ibid.*, 5/LXXXVIII, c. 1846-7 (22 Dec. 1916); *Ibid.*, 5/XCII, c. 435 (28 Mar. 1917); *The Times*, 26 Feb. 1917; Doughty, *Feather Fashions*, 119; *BNN*, VII/7 (1917): 102.

<sup>25</sup> Marquis, 'Words as Weapons': 488; *BNN*, VIII/3 (1918): 19.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 13; Gregory, *Last Great War*, 238-41.

demand further by using the war to its advantage to capitalise on popular feeling. Whether this explicit anti-German invective contributed to further declines in feathered millinery is difficult to assess, as the DORA trade restrictions probably were more significant. There was a significant decline in exotic feather imports, from a peak of 1,539,531lbs in the years 1905-1909 to 440,564lbs during 1915-1919. Contributing to this 'feather crash' were the increasing numbers of women joining the workforce and wearing more utilitarian clothing. The end of the war did not spark a revival in the taste for plumage and the trade never recovered from its wartime decline. Fashion had moved on, becoming less decadent and more simplified, and the feather importation trade then was dealt its fatal blow with the enactment of the Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Act in 1921.<sup>27</sup>

### Progressive Bird Conservation Work

Fighting the plumage trade was not just about promulgating negative invective. One successful RSPB progressive tactic sought to encourage a greater appreciation of birdlife through encouraging the public to erect bird-nesting boxes. Newspapers carried instructions for their construction and the RSPB advertised a wide range of designs for sale. Some were imported from Germany, following a bored log design mimicking a woodpecker's nest cavity. This was a tested model devised by Baron Hans von Berlepsch who erected boxes in his woodlands to encourage breeding insectivorous birds to control caterpillar pests defoliating trees. The box became an accepted symbol of bird protection. In 1910, the RSPB granted Berlepsch 'Honorary Fellow' in recognition of his conservation work. The outbreak of war immediately ended this affable relationship, as the Society announced that 'needless to say that the RSPB stock of nesting-boxes will not be replenished this autumn from Germany. Bird lovers...are asked to excuse possible delay in meeting requirements'.<sup>28</sup> German manufacturers offered to export their equipment to the United States, but the equipment was too heavy, so the Germans sanctioned production of their designs by American manufacturers. The RSPB did not consider such consensual patent niceties and they quickly found a Kent company capable of mastering the German designs, blustering that this was firm evidence that 'England can meet and beat the German manufacturer'. This success, the RSPB blustered, was despite the demands of the War Office that left real shortages of workmen, machinery tools, transit difficulties, and wood, which the Society lamented just happened to be the 'exact diameters...needed for military purposes'. By early 1915, the Society's efforts had paid off and a new British manufacturing industry had been established so that 'nesting-boxes will be among the thousand and one things for which German makers will never again pocket British money'. Notably, the Society appeared to ignore the very real 'timber supply crisis' provoked by unprecedented demands for wood by the conflict and it continued to offer and promote nesting boxes for sale via *Bird Notes & News* throughout the entirety of the war. Clearly, such insignificant victory provided great propaganda value, heralded as it was by the jingoistic tag line 'British Homes for British Birds' and proof for the RSPB and its supporters that it was visibly aiding the war effort.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Moore-Colyer, 'Feathered Women': 62; Stein, *Plumes*, 19, 23-4; Hayes, 'Murderous Millinery': 30.

<sup>28</sup> B. Campbell, 'Birds in Boxes', *Countryman*, 75 (1970): 264-72; *Bristol Guardian*, 26 Nov. 1910; *BNN*, IV/7 (1911); RSPB, *20<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1910*: 29; *BNN*, XI/3 (1914): 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, VI/4 (1914): 57; *Ibid.*, VIII/4 (1918): 32; RSPB, *31<sup>st</sup> Annual Report 1921*: 19; *BNN*, VI/5 (1915): 79-80; A. Joshua West, 'Forests and National Security: British and American Forestry Policy in the Wake of World War I', *Environmental History*, 8/2 (2003): 270-93.



Encouraging the public to feed wild birds was another positive strategy and by the early twentieth century, this had become highly popular as it brought nature back into close contact with the urban populace and the practice was imbued with charitable notions of kind-heartedness and pity for seemingly vulnerable creatures, especially during harsh winters. Despite these altruistic aims, bird feeding ran counter to the growing need to conserve wartime food. Britain entered the war with the ability to produce just one-third of the food required by its populace, relying on imports for the remainder. Significantly, the acreage of and under arable cultivation had continually declined since the 1870s with Britain now importing four-fifths of its wheat and of deepest concern, there was no prepared plan for raising food production. A series of bad harvests, reports that German farmers appeared to be able to produce more than twice as much corn as their British counterparts from 100 acres of cultivated land, and the new unrestricted German ‘submarine havoc’ meant that by late 1916, one government committee reported the country to be in ‘special difficulties’ as regards the acute food situation. This prompted the creation of a DORA imposed Food Department at the Board of Trade and the appointment of Lord Devonport to the new ministerial post of Food Controller.<sup>30</sup>

Among the Ministry’s new concerns was the sensitive issue of food wastage that prompted parliamentary questions. William Orde-Powlett MP believed the country to be on ‘short bread rations’ and challenged Charles Bathurst, the new Secretary to the Ministry for Food, as to whether feeding bread to ducks and sparrows in parks constituted wastefulness. Bathurst denounced this, stating there would be no need for an official order if the practice simply ceased. However, by May 1917, DORA legislation outlawing waste of ‘wheat, rye or rice, or any products of these cereals’ was implemented, with Bathurst now signalling his intention to outlaw the ‘wanton destruction of food of any description’.<sup>31</sup> Although an all-encompassing Waste of Foodstuffs Order was not instigated until February 1918, the prohibition on cereal wastage had ramifications for anyone intending to look after birds, whether domestic or wild, as a baking company director was fined £50 for providing waste bread for feeding poultry. The authorities also appeared unable to avoid the lure of the trivial, prosecuting those feeding wild-birds without seemingly any pity. Seventy-six year old Sophia Stuart argued that her birds were fed with unclean crusts and vowed to carry on as she sought great solace from the birds to ease her own personal tragedy, pleading ‘the birds are my children... and I have a dog which is my son, I have nothing else to love since my poor boy was killed in Mesopotamia’. Stuart was fined £2, as was Henry Bush, who threw out just half a slice of bread and, despite having a son held in a German prisoner of war camp, Bush argued he was penalised because his wife was German and this was just the latest in a line of petty persecutions he had been subjected to.<sup>32</sup> As the press reported both cases, the vexed issue of the morality

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<sup>30</sup> David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 209-10; Beveridge, *British Food Control*, 1-18; P.E. Dewey, ‘Food Production in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918: The Alexander Prize Essay’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5/30 (1980): 71-2; Sheail, ‘Changes in the Use and Management of Farmland’: 18; Jose Harris, ‘Bureaucrats and Businessmen in British Food Control, 1916-1919’, in Kathleen Burk (ed.), *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914-1919*, p. 138 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); Reconstruction Committee, *Part I of the Report of the Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee* (London: HMSO, 1917): 4-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Hansard*, 5/XCII, c. 435 (28 Mar 1917); *Ibid.*, 5/XCIII c. 708-709 (7 May 1917).

<sup>32</sup> Beveridge, *British Food Control*, 238-9; *Daily Mail*, 10 Jul. 1917; *The Times*, 11 Jun. 1917.

of feeding wild birds was publicised, but such coverage, and further pleas for at least stale crusts or crumbs to be spared for bird-feeding featured in several newspapers, supporting the argument that there remained a lasting sentiment for feeding birds, despite the privation and legislation.<sup>33</sup> The RSPB did not challenge the prosecutions, but the inclusion of the Stuart case in *Bird Notes & News* cautioned members not to fall foul of the law and the Society issued a plea that natural food, such as berries, remain unpicked and be left for wildlife. It also advised those wishing to feed birds could circumvent the Food Controller's restrictions by providing dog-biscuits, seeds and the meanest food scraps, presumably from the 'Food Stands' that continued to offered for sale via *Bird Notes and News* under the banner 'Feed the Birds'.<sup>34</sup>

### The Food Supply Crisis

This trivial court action raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the government's management of the food supply. This has raised scholarly comment. P.E. Dewey confidently concludes that food control measures ensured no substantial deficiencies. This must have been a close run thing. Although official figures for food supply suggest apparently it was sufficient, contemporary accounts of public anxieties over severe food shortages in shops and lengthy queues in the 1917-18 winter, tell a different story. In some poverty-stricken areas, the situation was dire, leading to malnutrition and starvation, especially among young children. Such privation provoked desperate attempts to steal crops and exploit even dandelion weeds. These were not just a few desperate individuals eking out meagre sustenance. Recognising the crisis, the Ministry of Food investigated wild plants, reporting the young shoots of bracken to be 'wholesome' but otherwise unpalatable. By contrast, nettles were recommended as an excellent spinach substitute.<sup>35</sup>

The availability of sufficient affordable food for the poor had always been marginal, influenced as it was by inclement weather, meagre harvests and downturns in the economy leading to wild birds, some as small as sparrows, supplementing the diet of the poor. Although the 'Bread First' policy maintained working-class diets during the war, rising food prices and supply difficulties led to declines in per capita consumption of many diet staples, including meat. The *Manchester Guardian* of 1917 summed up the lot of the rural poor enduring a life of misery driven by low wages, increased fuel costs and high meat prices seeking out sparrows and starlings as vital diet supplements.<sup>36</sup> The RSPB first became concerned with this issue following the influx of Belgian refugees into the country and their ignorance of British bird laws. The Society was concerned that cultural differences would lead these immigrants to take wild birds for the pot, and in early 1915, it distributed thousands of multi-lingual warning notices to 'acquaint refugees... with regulations in force in this country'. By 1916, as the food crisis deepened, the taste for wild birds was not just restricted to Continentals. Passerine birds, such as blackbirds and thrushes, began appearing in British shops. Although these species could be legally taken outside of the 'close

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<sup>33</sup> Charman, *First World War*, 180; *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 27 April 1918.

<sup>34</sup> *BNN*, VII/6 (1917): 88; *Ibid.*, VII/7 (1917): 89-90.

<sup>35</sup> R Dewey, 'Food Production and Policy': 86; Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 213-6; Emden & Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front*, 193-205.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell, 'The First World War and Working-class Food Consumption in Britain', *European Review of Economic History*, 17/1 (2013): 71-94; *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Feb. 1917.

protection' period, their appearance for sale in towns provoked protest letters to *The Times*. Yet, as Montagu Sharpe, Chairman of the RSPB's Council, pointed out, the class of individuals buying this fare did not appear to be ostensibly affected by war-time shortages. Instead, he suggested they were taking advantage of 'some novel tit-bit or gastronomic flavour to titillate into existence an imaginary appetite'.<sup>37</sup> The birds supplied to shops were of very poor quality, only being caught as they were weak from starvation, leading the RSPB to question the worthiness of offering such desultory fare. Of far more worry, a much deeper resonance had now been triggered. At the 1918 RSPB Annual meeting, supporters were warned that eating Skylarks destroyed 'the line of demarcation between the Englishman and the Italian peasant'. These objections had some effect as the upmarket London store, Messrs Whiteley, advised that 'we have no desire to continue a practice that may be contrary to the wishes of the majority of the British public, and in the circumstances we have given instructions that, in future, Thrushes and Blackbirds are not to be sold in our establishments'. However, not all stores succumbed, as even after the War, according to one *Times* correspondent, thrushes, and blackbirds were still available in one west-London retailer.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, this was a taste not just exceptional to wartime and there remained customer demand, but the RSPB, by creating negative publicity, could claim some success in birds being removed from sale by at least one retailer.

This furore by bird-lovers also had much more wider consequences as it broadcast a very public admission of real food shortages. Gladstone, given his Intelligence Department office, was all too aware that accounts of eating wild birds handed a vital propaganda coup to the Germans who 'devoured [them] with avidity'. According to the *Daily Express*, *Zeitung am Mittag* newspaper used these articles to refute British claims that the German U-boat campaign was having no effect. Germans were told that as Londoners had resorted to eating smoked seagull it was absolute proof that the 'terror of starvation is palpably evident' in the 'wretched islanders'. Eating habits proved to be a two-way propaganda battle. Conveniently ignoring their own people's paltry diet, British newspapers triumphantly claimed the German government sanctioned the killing of crows, sparrows and starlings for human consumption.<sup>39</sup>

Whether seagull found its way onto the British menu is indeterminable, although any members of the public taking gulls for the pot had to take care not to transgress the gamut of complex bird protection laws that varied considerably both geographically and seasonally. For example, following action by a 'lady member of the Society', the RSPB reported that Alfred Hughes was fined for shooting a seagull in Southampton, despite his protest that in Cornwall orders had been given for the birds to be shot. Demonstrating further the intricacies of the law, gull eggs could be legally taken by 1917. The government was evidently taking no chances with the perilous food supply issue. It rolled back 'close time' protection orders to 21 June for selected counties to allow the harvesting of the eggs of various species of seabirds. Via 'Food Production Leaflet No. 30', the public were given special guidance for collecting gull eggs. Newspapers called for excursions to the remotest areas of Britain to harvest seabirds' eggs, but despite the enthusiastic press accounts forecasting the new eggs would undercut the cost of hen's eggs, this wild food supply proved too expensive. Priced at 6d. each, seabirds' eggs had few takers, given the already expensive 4d. price of

<sup>37</sup> *BNN*, VI/5 (1915): 78; *The Times*, 31 March 1916; *Ibid.*, 4 April 1916.

<sup>38</sup> RSPB, 27<sup>th</sup> *Annual Report 1917*: 9; *BNN*, VII/4 (1916): 49; *The Times*, 14 Feb. 1919.

<sup>39</sup> Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 49; *Daily Express*, 28 Mar. 1917; *The Times*, 11 Jun. 1917.

ordinary eggs.<sup>40</sup> Surprisingly, given the RSPB's frosty reception towards most of the Board's directives concerning birds, its response was somewhat muted. It merely cautioned that only authorised persons should collect, and that the order should not be regarded as a mandate for wholesale abuse of the protection laws. This tame response may also have been because gulls lacked the sentimental appeal of more familiar songbirds that visited gardens and parks. Further slackening of legislation included the extension of shooting seasons for gamebirds. In 1917, DORA regulations brought forward the shooting of grouse to 6 August, instead of the traditional 'Glorious Twelfth'. Although grouse were 'plentiful', limitations on cartridge sales meant many grouse escaped the guns.<sup>41</sup> This revision in prompted no response from the RSPB, who, given their general upper-class backgrounds, might have privately welcomed a few more days shooting, although the conscription of beaters into service and increased price of cartridges also rendered redundant this extension.

### Addressing 'Vermin' Control

The RSPB's wartime work thus far was unlikely to have courted controversy. Feathered millinery was regarded as an unnecessary ostentatious luxury during a period of increasing austerity and the campaigns against it were just about on the cusp of success, whilst the building of bird boxes and provision of bird food were trivial matters at best, despite the shortages of timber. This small-scale unobstructed work seemed perfectly suited to the bird protection society that reassuringly appeared to be carrying on 'business as usual'. Although the appearance of wild birds in food shops was unsettling, this was, in reality, an extension of the fare of rural people and troubled the sensibilities of more sensitive upper-class urbanites divorced from the more practical attitudes of the countryside. Yet this distrust of country-folk led the Society into a bitter and much bigger battle of words with a government department.

Bird-protectionists and farmers had long maintained a quarrelsome relationship centring upon claims of the usefulness of certain species of birds to agriculture as biological pest control agents. The RSPB went as far as producing its own leaflet, 'Farm, Garden, and Birds' to show growers 'how to protect crops without the destruction of bird life'.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, agriculturalists blamed a range of bird species for crop depredation and engaged with a new branch of academia, 'economic biology' that applied biological knowledge to agricultural problems, including surveys analysing the economic usefulness of birds to growers. Given publicity by the increasingly influential newspaper press, this vexatious debate surfaced with heightened intensity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as empirical studies whittled down the number of so-called pest species to just a handful, with one bird species, above all, inflaming opinion.<sup>43</sup> The house sparrow, or 'avian

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<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 5 May 1917; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIV (1917-18): 1238-41; Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 61-3; *BNN*, VIII/1 (1918): 5; *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1918. The close time period, in which birds could not be killed, although generally fixed as 1 March to 1 August, varied considerably county by county, and could be as late as 1 October in Denbigh for instance. This caused immense confusion and ignorance for bird protectionists and the public. *The Times*, 30 Aug. 1906; *BNN*, VIII/4 (1916): 56.

<sup>41</sup> *BNN*, VIII/1 (1918),: 5; Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 52-8.

<sup>42</sup> RSPB Archives: *Farm, Garden, and Birds: How to Protect Crops without the Destruction of Bird Life*, (London: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Holmes, 'The Sparrow Question: Social and Scientific Accord in Britain, 1850-1900', *Journal of the History of Biology*, (2016) doi:10.1007/s10739-016-9455-6; Alison Kraft,

rat', was widely regarded by farmers as a granivorous thief. With the Board's official blessing, in the first decade of the twentieth century, a rash of 'Rat and Sparrow Clubs' were formed to deal with sparrows. The apogee of this campaign was the creation of the Incorporated Society for the Destruction of Vermin in 1908.<sup>44</sup> Bird-lovers, regarded by agriculturalists as misguided sentimentalists, campaigned hard against these pest-control institutions, leading one RSPB supporter to warn that the Society was 'taking an extreme view on the question of Sparrows'. The RSPB was not naive as to believe that all sparrows were entirely innocent as debate at an annual meeting demonstrates. The RSPB's President, the Duchess of Portland, acknowledged that although cereals formed part of the house sparrow's diet, because the bird fed its young with insects, it was therefore an undoubted asset during the crucial growing period of March to August. Instead, the real crux of the RSPB's argument was that as 'spadger' was the generic name applied to miscellaneous birds and sparrow clubs paid cash for kills of birds, then numerous 'innocent' species would be killed.<sup>45</sup>

By 1915, with plumage legislation in abeyance, the Society turned its full attention towards what it regarded as 'incompetent' individuals who 'ignorantly' shot birds that consumed harmful grubs. This was a direct challenge to a government agency charged to maximise food production. Since the outbreak of war, official policy towards farming had been *laissez-faire* at best, with the government merely pressing farmers for greater output of cereals. Farmers were highly reluctant to comply. They felt they had been ignored by the State during the Agricultural Depression and that livestock production was far more profitable than arable farming and, according to one government report, farmers simply asked 'to be left alone'. This was impossible. Officialdom concluded that voluntary efforts were ineffective and any break down of food supplies would inevitably, and very quickly, lead to military defeat. This prompted the new Lloyd George government, in December 1916, to take a direct interventionist role in agriculture. A new Food Production Department of the Board of Agriculture was created, with County Agricultural Executive Committees as its agents with stringent powers forcing farmers to cultivate.<sup>46</sup> This need to extract natural resources to supply war economies has already been the subject of scholarly enquiry.<sup>47</sup> However, what is overlooked is any commentary on the secondary effects

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'Pragmatism, Patronage and Politics in English Biology: The Rise and Fall of Economic Biology 1904-1920', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 37 (2004): 213-58. For economic biology reports concerning birds and their relationship with agriculture see, for example, Charles F. Archibald, 'Wild Birds, Useful and Injurious', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 68 (1907): 17-32; Walter E. Collinge, 'The Feeding Habits of the Rook, *Corvus Frugilegus*', *Journal of Economic Biology*, V/2 (1910): 49-67. Debate also raged in North America, see Matthew D. Evenden, 'The Laborers of Nature: Economic Ornithology and the Role of Birds as Agents of Biological Pest Control in North American Agriculture, ca 1880-1930', *Forest & Conservation History*, 39 (1995): 172-83. For a very detailed assessment of the long-term persecution of birds and animals in Britain, see Roger Lovegrove, *Silent Fields* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> *Journal of the Incorporated Society for the Destruction of Vermin*, I/1 (1908): 53-7; E.L. Jones, 'The Bird Pests of British Agriculture in Recent Centuries', *The Agricultural History Review*, 20 (1972): 107-25; John F.M. Clark, 'The Irishmen of Birds', *History Today*, 50/10 (2000): 16-18.

<sup>45</sup> RSPB, *20<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1910*: 21; RSPB, *26<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1916*: 23-7; BNN, III/5 (1909): 57-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, VI/7 (1915): 97-100; Reconstruction Committee, *Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee*, 13; Lennard, 'English Agriculture since 1914': 607; Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War*, 23-35; Whetham, *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 70-108; Sheail, 'Land Improvements and Reclamation': 110-25.

<sup>47</sup> A. Joshua West, 'Forests and National Security: British and American Forestry Policy in the Wake of World War I', *Environmental History*, 8/2 (2003): 270-93; J.R. McNeil, 'Woods and Warfare in World

of such habitat change, for instance the resultant environmental impact and whether this faced opposition. In Britain, the first task of the revised government strategy was to reclaim grassland into land capable of food production, which saw the area in tillage rise from 8.4million acres in 1916 to 10.2million acres by 1918. This halted the downward trend in cereal production, but Gladstone observed the attendant effect on habitat was ‘indiscriminate destruction’ at the hands of what he acerbically termed ‘expert advisors’ of the Board. The breaking up of established pastures led to an abundance of wireworms and leatherjackets causing heavy crop losses. The RSPB was quick to comment, replicating an article from the *Dundee Advertiser* that opined that this rapid transition of field use had been ‘ill-balanced’. Partly to blame for the upsurge in insect pests had been the inadvisable, but official, sanctioning of the collection of the eggs of the lapwing, a species renowned for feeding on wireworms.<sup>48</sup> Here the Society’s response was rather tempered, but the same could not be said when it considered other aspects of the Board’s policies.

In this drive to maximise agricultural production, there was a heightened priority for controlling vermin, both furred and feathered. This reignited a previous hostility between bird protectionists and agriculturalists that had relatively abated by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1916, the Board of Agriculture issued instructions for the ‘Destruction of Farm Vermin’ and encouraged landowners and farmers to instigate prizes for sparrow destruction. As an example of good practice, the 23,445 sparrows destroyed by the Tring and District Sparrow Club was highlighted.<sup>49</sup> The following year, instructions for pest control were appreciably widened as agricultural committees were urged to reinvigorate Rat and Sparrow Clubs. County Orders were drawn up for the destruction of rabbits, pigeons, rats, rooks, and sparrows. A certain amount of paranoia is evident in the Board’s pronouncements on vermin. For example, wasps were accused of damaging fruit crops, and annoying horses and cattle. To combat this, trapping queen wasps and adulterating nests with cyanide was advised.<sup>50</sup> To ensure compliance, farmers who failed to protect their crops from vermin faced stiff fines of £50. Separate DORA legislation was introduced by the Board to deal with selective pest species. To control rooks, a crow species regarded as highly destructive for its omnivorous diet of grains, fruits and seedlings, the Rookeries Order of May 1917 authorised their shooting and destruction of ‘rookeries’ if birds were causing damage to crops. In the event, the order was rarely enforced, and in some cases, led to accusations of trespass.<sup>51</sup>

Positive articles in the agricultural press obviously supported the Board. Correspondents to the *Field* called for action on the ‘sparrow plague’, complaining that urban bird lovers were ignorant, as ‘the average person has [not] the slightest idea

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History’, *Environmental History*, 9/3 (2004): 388-41; Chris Pearson, ‘“The Age of Wood”: Fuel and Fighting in French Forests’, 1940-1944’, *Environmental History*, 11 (2006): 775-803.

<sup>48</sup> Gladstone, *Birds and the War*: 30; Sheail, ‘Land Improvement and Reclamation’: 122-3; *BNN*, VII/8 (1917): 117.

<sup>49</sup> Holmes, ‘The Sparrow Question’; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXII (1915-16): 1162-5; *Ibid.*, XXIII (1916-17): 159, 1271

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIV (1917-18): 250-2, 370; Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service: ‘Bedfordshire War Agricultural Executive Committee’, PC Maulden 9/5; Sheail, ‘Land Improvements and Reclamation’: 121-2.

<sup>51</sup> William H. Beveridge, *Economic and Social History of the World War: British Food Control* (London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1928), 239; *The Times*, 5 Jun. 1919; Sheail, ‘Land Improvement and Reclamation’: 121.

of the enormous damage' done by sparrows. These exchanges spilled over to newspapers, leading one *Daily Mail* letter writer to suggest that all Bird Protection Acts be suspended in favour of a 'Tame Human's Preservation Act' and another exhorted readers to 'Shoot the Birds', as they had 'multiplied at a great ratio during that last few years'. Given this, the Board could reasonably argue that it was simply responding to popular opinion, and more importantly, acting upon complainants to the agricultural press of the immense damage caused by sparrows. *Agricultural Gazette* correspondents, for example, variously reckoned this to be approximately one-fifth of the corn grown in England, amounting to more than seven million quarters of corn, at a cost of £8million.<sup>52</sup>

Despite strong support, given the extensive vermin control measures, it was not surprising that the Board's actions drew reaction. The conservative RSPCA, which proactively supported the war effort, delivered a tempered caution against what it regarded to be 'sweeping accusations' that all birds were responsible for destroying crops and called for 'careful inquiry and consideration'. This guarded approach typified the RSPCA's opinion as regards sparrows as it had a tendency to slip into anthropomorphism, presenting 'Philip Sparrow' as a cheeky creature carrying out some positive work during the breeding season. *Animal World* did not ignore the harsh realities of agro-economics, suggesting some limiting of sparrow numbers was probably necessary. *Bird Notes & News*, by contrast, remained steadfastly against controlling house sparrow numbers and refrained from sentimentality. The RSPB clearly had the *Daily Mail* (and probably its working-class readership) in its sights, issuing a vitriolic attack on the 'halfpenny papers with their screams of "Kill the bird"'. Notably, the Society conveniently ignored similar letters to the more upmarket *Times* and instead it selectively reproduced articles and letters from this and other 'respectable' newspapers calling for bird protection to substantiate its campaigns.<sup>53</sup>

Farmers did not have the luxury of debating vermin control as they were threatened with prosecution for non-compliance with additional sanctions of fines or land confiscation for those accused of 'negligent farming' and not producing enough. Possibility desperate, some chose to exceed the law. The first bird protection act outlawed the use of poisoned grain in 1863. This was ignored by the *Agricultural Gazette*, which carried advertisements for grains soaked in a 'solution of strychnine' as an ideal means to kill sparrows. The 1915 prosecution of a Welsh farmer for using strychnine-laced grain demonstrates poison being readily used, but it also shows animal protectionists, in this case an RSPCA inspector, were active. Possibly, because of this, the Board warned that it would not sanction the use of adulterated grain for controlling sparrows for fear of poisoning other bird species.<sup>54</sup> Alternatives suggested included systematic destruction of semi-colonial sparrow nests and wire sparrow traps. To incentivise, the Board offered financial inducements and supported prizes for the 'largest numbers destroyed', including '1/- per dozen rats' tails; 3d, per dozen

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<sup>52</sup> *The Field*, CXXIX/3342 (1917): 65; *Daily Mail*, 4 Jan. 1917; *Ibid.*, 10 Jan. 1917; *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXV/2258 (1917): 231; *Ibid.*, LXXXV/2259 (1917): 247.

<sup>53</sup> *Animal World*, XII/136 (1917): 38; *Ibid.*, XII/138 (1917): 62, 66; *BNN*, VII/6 (1917): 84; *The Times*, 18 Sep. 1915.

<sup>54</sup> *An Act to Prohibit the Sale and Use of Poisoned Grain or Seed*, 26 and 27 Victoria, C. 113, (28 July 1863); *Animal World*, X/116 (1915): iv; *Mark Lane Express Agricultural Journal*, 118/4495 (1917): 521; *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXV/2262 (1917): 303; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIII (1916-17): 869.

heads of fully-fledged house sparrows; 2d per dozen heads of unfledged house sparrows, and 1d. per dozen house sparrows' eggs'.<sup>55</sup> Given the drain on labour, children were enlisted to the task. The Board had already given instructions for how elementary schoolchildren could make valuable contributions to supplement food supplies by growing food in school gardens, raising poultry or collecting wild fruits, and by 1918, as many as 50,000 children were engaged in farm work. Pressing this young workforce into further action seemed logical, especially as rural children had long controlled sparrow numbers. Flora Thompson's recollections of life in 1880s Oxfordshire recalled how village lads regularly went 'spadgering' or sparrow killing.<sup>56</sup>

In January 1917, a *Times* correspondent reported pupils of one country school killed 8,000 sparrows in the previous eight years. Children appeared to be enthusiastic devotees to the task, so it is conceivable that the Board simply believed that it should just officially sanction this work. It suggested that children should assist in the 'destruction of sparrows...under the direct supervision of the schoolmaster or schoolmistress'. However, the Board overlooked the new climate of nature preservation that taught children to regard all wild birds as sacred. This clashed with traditionalists, who blamed educational work and children's fear of the new bird legislation for contributing to the perceived abundance of pest species. Furthermore, by officially legitimising children to kill birds, and then offering reward, the Board quickly drew condemnation from the RSPB who feared the creation of 'Huns-in-little and to resolve to make the Birds the Belgians of their hysterical wrath'. Letters voicing these objections and urging restraint were sent to War Agricultural Committees, Food Production Committees, agricultural societies, and local councils. Although it blamed the Board, it is noticeable that the RSPB's prejudice towards the rural poor, which it believed held stubborn attitudes towards wild birds, quickly surfaced. It opined that because 'village folk, and boys and children [were] wholly untaught' they were more easily swayed by the Board because they were ignorant of bird protection laws, and the 'young barbarian[s]' of 'possibly that of the lower class of parents' were more likely to kill sparrows because of the pennies on offer. These comments formed part of the 1917 summer edition of *Bird Notes & News* that was largely devoted to condemning the Board. Fearing the 'German spirit' was catching, among the RSPB accusations was that the Board deliberately played on the fear of 'food panic' in order to manipulate the 'rural population only too ready to lump all wild things together as "vermin"'. Once this killing had begun, it snowballed and was, the Society concluded, impossible to stop.<sup>57</sup>

More powerful opposition also spoke up. MPs were incredulous that the Board considered forming 'children's sparrow clubs' and they darkly warned of an increased demoralisation of children that would lead to an enhanced proclivity for killing. Rowland Prothero, President of the Board of Agriculture, denied children were

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<sup>55</sup> *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXV/2259 (1917): 247; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIII (1916-17): 869; Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service: 'Bedfordshire War Agricultural Executive Committee', PC Maulden 9/5.

<sup>56</sup> *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIII (1916-17): 33-40; Pamela Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales* (London: Athlone, 1984) 230-1; Flora Thompson, *Lark-Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 153.

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, 26 Jan. 1917; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIV (1917-18): 251; *Ibid.*, XIII (1906-7): 665-71; *BNN*, VII/6 (1917): 73-87.



admitted to sparrow clubs, but deflected the issue by telling MPs that this was a matter of ‘national interests’ best left to ‘local authorities’. Not satisfied, MPs pressed Herbert Fisher, the President of the Board of Education, to confirm if sparrow killing was to be added to the school curriculum. Fisher assured MPs that any killing would be done under strict supervision and carried out by children ‘whose natural proclivities might incline them to take part in the destruction of sparrows and share in the rewards’. The House rather fudged the issue, making no move to rescind the order, although according to the RSPCA, some schools refused to follow the Board’s advice, citing objections of using children to kill birds.<sup>58</sup>

Given the furore, it is likely that the Board thought it wise not to record the number of sparrows killed by children. Although its *Journal* omitted tallies, this did not prevent speculation. The RSPCA was concerned that children seeking payment would pass off any small birds as sparrows as schoolboys were ‘delighted to be set free on work which usually they had to do in secret’. The fear was of an indiscriminate slaughter of all small birds and their nestlings, especially the hedge sparrow, a sparrow-like species in appearance, but completely unrelated to ‘true’ sparrows and entirely insectivorous. Anxiety also spread to the Board. Its *Journal* made clear that ‘the sparrow that does injury to crops and that requires to be destroyed is the common house sparrow’. Similar clarifications were carried by the *Agricultural Gazette* that specified differences between the eggs and nesting habits of these alike species, warning that bird nesting should be limited to eaves and barns where house sparrows inhabited, and that under no circumstances should payment be made for fledglings other than ‘true house sparrows’.<sup>59</sup> If the claims of one *Times* correspondent had credence, then there might have been justifiable alarm. It was ventured that 19 out of every 20 nestling birds killed were species other than sparrows. The figures cannot be corroborated and could have been speculative scaremongering, as a cull on this scale would have made pages of the ornithological journal *British Birds*. However, it was pertinent that Sir Richard Winfrey, Parliamentary Secretary to the Board, refused to be drawn on the matter when quizzed in Parliament. If this calculation had credence, then set against the ‘official’ sparrow tallies, the persecution of ‘innocent’ species would have been frighteningly high, and complaints justified. For example, in 1917, the Newmarket and District Sparrow Club claimed it had destroyed 161,058 sparrows and their eggs over a three-year period, and in 1918, the Hertfordshire Executive Committee reported 68,472 sparrows and eggs had been destroyed.<sup>60</sup>

This bird cull coincided with further agricultural problems. By summer 1917, newspapers reported alarmingly high numbers of insect and caterpillar pests. Cecil Warburton, the Royal Agricultural Society’s zoologist, recorded ‘unusually severe’ attacks by farm and garden insects, including unprecedented attacks by weevils and small white butterfly caterpillars. One incident was noteworthy. In June 1917, there was an extraordinary increase in the numbers of antler moth caterpillars in the upland pastures of the Peak and Lake District. The Board and the Royal Agricultural Society investigated and concluded that the caterpillar infestation had been caused by a

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<sup>58</sup> *Hansard*, 5/XCII, c. 2383-84 (25 Apr. 1917); *Hansard*, 5/XCIII, c. 381 (2 May 1917); c. 706-708 (7 May 1917); RSPCA, *94<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1917*: 118.

<sup>59</sup> *Animal World*, XIII/138 (1917): 66; *Ibid.*, XIII/145 (1918): 10-11; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIV (1917-18): 251; *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXV/2262 (1917): 303.

<sup>60</sup> *The Times*, 14 Jun. 1918; *Hansard*, 5/XCIV, c. 572 (11 Jun. 1917); *The Times*, 17 May 1917; Dewey, *British Agriculture*, 192.

combination of DORA moorland grass management regulations preventing the annual burn of moorland, cold weather, and the scarcity of birds, especially lapwings, rooks and starlings known to keep insects in check. This seemed a fair assessment. The 1916-17 winter was severe with long periods of frost and the lowest mean temperatures for over 20 years.<sup>61</sup> Extensive periods of frost cause heavy mortality amongst small birds and the severity of this winter led to a detailed assessment by *British Birds* that reported that the cold had almost exterminated some insectivorous species in several counties. Decreases of 40-90 percent for great tits, 80 percent for treecreepers and between 80-90 percent for wrens were recorded, whilst lapwing numbers, particularly in the Derbyshire antler moth trouble spot, had been reduced by 80-90 percent. Given the agitation and reports of sparrow 'plagues' destroying crops in 1917, it is notable that despite the cold, *British Birds* found that sparrows 'showed little or no decrease except in the extreme north'.<sup>62</sup>

The RSPB did not wait for objective analysis. Instead, *Bird Notes & News* latched onto the Board's measured analysis of the caterpillar problem and carried a page of reports of insect ravaged crops. Notably, the freezing winter was alluded to only briefly. Instead, the insinuation was that the Board's order to destroy birds had solely caused this decline in bird numbers. Throughout the remainder of 1917, the RSPB kept up its criticism, comparing the situation in Britain with America, where the Audubon Association produced posters urging individuals to protect birds and not to repeat the 'ignorant onslaught' on Britain's birdlife. By early 1918, a righteous air now pervaded the RSPB's newsletter. It called the 'Feathered Food Controller' to account for the numerous complaints regarding insect ridden crops. The Board was urged to reconsider its previous advice to agriculturalists, and deem birds as worthy allies in ridding insect pests.<sup>63</sup> RSPB members and the public were encouraged to speak up, and academic opinion garnered. Headed by the Duke of Bedford, a *Times* letter signed by an alliance of scholars and campaigners called for gardeners, farmers, and, conspicuously, elementary and secondary schools, to serve the 'national interest' by 'checking the destruction of useful birds and their nests and eggs, and the preservation of insect-eating species'. Conspicuously, this measured letter did not implicitly make the link between the destruction of birds and the resultant increased numbers of insect pests, nor did it directly point the finger at agriculturalists. The RSPB, by contrast, freely promulgated its belief that this was an entwined chain of events sparked by the Board, although by 1918 it at last recognised the effects of severe winter. Even here, the RSPB suggested this weakened wild bird population was then decimated further by the Board's misguided instructions to kill birds and as the Ministry of Food brought thousands of acres into cultivation, it caused plagues of insects to attack the increased crop.<sup>64</sup>

Bird-protectionists quickly sought evidence substantiating their arguments. Support from agriculturalists was especially valued. *Animal World* reported that the Surrey Farmers Union refused to kill sparrows, regarding the previous Board advice to be

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<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 8 Jun. 1917; *Daily Mail*, 13 Jun. 1917; *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 78 (1917): 129-38; 209-19; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXIV (1917-18): 514-26.

<sup>62</sup> *British Birds*, X/11 (1917): 267-8; *Ibid.*, X/1 (1917): 24; *Ibid.*, XI/12 (1918): 266-70; *Ibid.*, XII/2 (1918): 26-35; *The Field*, CXXX/3369 (1917): 106.

<sup>63</sup> *BNN*, VII/6 (1917): 84; RSPB, 27<sup>th</sup> *Annual Report 1917*: 8-9; *BNN*, VII/7 (1917): 94; *Ibid.*, VII/8 (1917): 116; *Ibid.*, VIII/1 (1918): 1-2.

<sup>64</sup> *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1918; *BNN*, VIII/1 (1918): 1-2.

‘idiotic’ as they were now suffering from infestations of ‘caterpillars, and all the green stuff has disappeared’. Was this a widely held belief by agriculturalists? A review of their press during 1917 when the ‘sparrow war’ was well advanced shows strong support for tackling sparrows. One correspondent complained he was forced into giving up growing wheat owing to a run of abysmal harvests blamed on depredations by birds, especially sparrows, which were consuming a quarter of his crop.<sup>65</sup> These complaints overlooked one obvious consequence of this increase in production. As Wilson has shown with regard to increased rice production and migrating wildfowl in North America during World War Two, increasing the amount of ideal habitat and growing a super abundance of food merely exacerbates the problem of ‘pest species’. Conservationists and agriculturalists implemented imaginative solutions, including the provision of alternative food supplies to divert birds away from crops and adopting harassing techniques. The killing of birds was outlawed.<sup>66</sup> During World War One in Britain there is no evidence of discussion of this enlightened approach, although a lack of resources and restrictions on food probably would have curtailed any efforts.

Vermin species clearly caused farmers real problems, as illustrated by advertisements for ‘Corvusine D.G’ marketed as the ideal seed dressing to prevent the ‘farmer’s nightmare’ of hoards of pests destroying his work. A review of the agricultural press gives the impression of a frustrated, undervalued and undermanned industry under huge pressure to deliver increased production by turning even the poorest ground over to crop production and incessantly harassed by misguided newspaper contributors and self-styled experts. Farmers, previously indifferent to the Board of Agriculture, were now compelled by county war executive committees established in 1917 to improve land husbandry and increase production. Understandably, the welfare of small birds, and the protests of a handful of bird-lovers, did not feature highly on many agriculturalists’ agendas or occupy vast columns of their press, which largely remained silent with regard to the Board’s vermin control measures. That said, agriculturalists were not entirely without sympathy for the plight of birds. *Farm and Home* magazine urged readers to provide food, for they are ‘our best friends, and keep down insect pests’.<sup>67</sup>

Arguing, as the RSPB did, that birds controlled insect numbers was not contentious, nor was this a claim ignored by agriculturalists. Summarising 1918, the Royal Agricultural Society concluded ‘caterpillar attacks were severe’ and there were ‘unusually destructive’ cases of common pests, including a reappearance of antler moth caterpillars attributed to the cold weather killing birds. Some rethinking also took place at the Board. Its Food Production Department confessed that ‘birds are admittedly of great value’. However, what was at issue was the extent to which the RSPB, and to a lesser degree the RSPCA, overplayed their beliefs. In a thinly veiled attack on its critics, the Board noted that, ‘the opinion seems to be widely held that birds are the most important factor, if not the only factor, in keeping in check caterpillars and other insect pests, and this has led to the expression of exaggerated view on the importance of birds in preserving Nature’s balance’. It pointed out that

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<sup>65</sup> *Animal World*, XIII/148 (1918): 37-8; *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXV/2260 (1917): 260; *Mark Lane Express Agricultural Journal*, 117/4472 (1917): 549; *Farm and Home*, XXXVII/1850 (1917): 519.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson, ‘Birds on the Home Front’, p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> Sheail, ‘Role of War Agricultural and Executive Committees’: 141; *Mark Lane Express Agricultural Journal*, 118/4491 (1917): 432; *Farm and Home*, XXXVII/1826 (1917): 130; *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXVII/2297 (1918): 6; *Farm and Home*, XXXVIII/1876 (1918): 93.

weather conditions and parasitic flies were also capable allies in combating pests. Clearly exasperated, the Board made a ‘plea for more balance in considering the subject’.<sup>68</sup> Reprinting this, the *Agricultural Gazette* added ‘we are glad to publish this note as the imputation that farmers are destroying the birds is without foundation’. This demonstrates that there was a high level of irritation towards bird-protectionists by the readers of the agriculturalist press and followed an acerbic editorial for the ‘stir being occasioned by the depredations of caterpillars all over the country, and the so called “bird lovers” are trotting out their favourite theories as to “our feathered friends”’. The *Gazette* was similarly unimpressed with the arguments stirred up by the ‘sparrow war’. It observed that ‘it has also been urged that the starting of sparrow clubs in the various districts has been responsible for the wholesale destruction of the eggs of all kinds of other birds; just as if the school children in the rural districts and the club committees do not know sparrow’s eggs when they see them. We do not underrate the value of many species of birds to agriculture, but we are also well aware that many other birds are little but unmitigated nuisances’.<sup>69</sup> In all fairness, the agricultural press had maintained a dignified silence under constant RSPB sniping and these editorials probably belied years of pent up frustration by farmers.

As was usual, the RSPB responded, seeing this volte-face as a ‘back-handed apology for the Board’s blundering action with regard to bird-life’. Indeed, with regard to bird protection, it would seem that the Board’s position was little altered, for in September 1918, it published a study conducted by Walter Collinge, one of the founders of economic biology, and a regular adviser to the Board. Collinge assessed the food preferences of nine species of birds, including house sparrows. Analysis showed the diet of nestling sparrows to contain 88 percent ‘injurious insects’, but the 75 percent grain content found in the diets of adult house sparrows was damning, leading Collinge to decree sparrows be exterminated.<sup>70</sup>

Given this latest damnation, it was not surprising that the cessation of Western Front hostilities, in November 1918, did not lead to an armistice between the RSPB and the Board. The Society rejected the Board’s 1919 press communiqué ‘denying the allegation that the department is conniving at, if not actually encouraging the indiscriminate slaughter of all kinds of small birds. Such policy is likely to do far more harm than good in the interests of food production’. This public denial demonstrated that the Board had been severely stung by the various campaigns. Gladstone thought a possible solution to the impasse lay in legislation, which might mirror the lead taken in North America. A treaty between Canada and the United States specifically protected birds deemed vital to agriculture, but the RSPB was convinced that there was an inherent trait in the mindset of the ‘countryman’ to regard all birds as pests and education was the only solution to invert this stubborn and ignorant opinion.<sup>71</sup>

The complaints of British bird protectionists hinged upon their belief that innocent species were being destroyed and this caused wider environmental damage. This argument had received press coverage amid concern that upsetting the biological

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<sup>68</sup> *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 79 (1918): 258-63; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXV (1918): 476.

<sup>69</sup> *Agricultural Gazette*, LXXXVII/2323 (1918): 44; *Ibid.*, LXXXVII/2320 (1918): 504.

<sup>70</sup> *BNN*, VIII/3 (1918):18; *Journal of the Board of Agriculture*, XXV (1918): 668-91.

<sup>71</sup> *BNN*, VIII/6 (1919): 41-2; Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 40-1; *BNN*, VII/6 (1919): 42.

balance would have deeper consequences. For example, in 1865, *The Times* reported an overkill of small birds had led to disastrous agricultural effects in France. However, this argument was controversial and many remained sceptical. When reviewing Collinge's research, the ornithological journal *British Birds* warned that it was 'extremely difficult to come to a right conclusion as to the economic status of a bird, and how dangerous it may be, from an economic point of view, to attempt any drastic interference with nature'.<sup>72</sup> There is no doubt that birds play a vital role in controlling insects, and similarly any heavy handed government intervention can wreak havoc. Mao's 'Four Pest' eradication campaign is a case study of this *in extremis*. Enthusiastic schoolchildren were mobilised to the cause, leading to the deaths of millions of tree sparrows before it was realised the birds played an integral role in combating noxious insects. An infestation of grain crops followed in 1959, contributing to widespread famine and the deaths of 50million Chinese. In the early twentieth century, the RSPB and RSPCA believed they had strong evidence and arguments, but both overplayed the worth of birds, leaving them open to criticism. The Board was charged with averting a food crisis and military defeat; it was unlikely to take much notice of a bird protection society, whose arguments were seeped in emotion rather than sound evidence. Yet what is so unexpected is that the RSPB, a 'respectable' organisation that counted amongst its supporters titled individuals, senior military officials, and MPs, including Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary (1905-1916), employed such strong accusatory rhetoric, towards the Board of Agriculture, a vital Government department.<sup>73</sup> This criticism of government policy appeared to be without any apparent repudiation by the DORA press regulations. *Bird Notes & News* was issued gratis to members subscribing 5s. or more or available via mail-order to the Society, and thus not within a wide public sphere. We can only speculate whether this limited readership drawn from the well-educated classes, made and formed RSPB opinion, and then may have had a tempering effect on government policy. Any attempt at official control may have drawn wider publicity in general and led to greater disputes with agriculturalists.

To its credit, the Board toned down its persecution strategies. Gladstone, a government official, but also staunch RSPB supporter, was firmly of the opinion this shift was a consequence of campaigning pressure. This was applied by the RSPB and the RSPCA, in frequent and not always accurate, condemnatory articles in their own journals and occasionally in the wider press, which intermittently carried the birds-agriculture debate. A *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* correspondent declared that public opinion was shifting towards the utility of birds because of the appearance of insect infestations. Whether there were further shifts in public mindsets during the war years is difficult to assess. The arguments surrounding the feeding of birds demonstrated public sympathy for birds already existed. However, if we consider the popular press as a barometer of public opinion, then it is noticeable that even its waspish elements, including the *Daily Mail*, which had hitherto encouraged bird control, now carried a far more conciliatory opinion. In 1918, the paper warned that the sparrow clubs might 'work far more harm than good', and called for individuals to discriminate between bird species to ensure pigeons and sparrows were killed. Press correspondence quantifies this change further. In 1917, *The Times* carried ten letters advocating sparrow control; by 1918, just four letters supported persecution, although just five

<sup>72</sup> *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1865; *British Birds*, VIII/8 (1914): 223-4.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86-93; RSPB, *25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1915*: 1.

letters in two years actually protested the innocence of sparrows, suggesting that bird-protectionists held unrealistic opinions of sparrows.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

That the Board and elements of the popular press revised their opinions of birds could be regarded as a victory for the RSPB, which could be said to have had a ‘good war’, maintaining its school essay competitions, nest protection duties and pursuing prosecutions, for example. As non-RSPB members were engaged with these activities, magistrates and teachers, for example, then it can be concluded that there was still wider support for bird protection. Additionally, the RSPB’s efforts to secure nest box manufacturing also demonstrates continuous demand for this product, as well as public sentiment for the needs of wild birds, as also shown by the continuation of bird feeding and the government required to act on this. With an ostensibly elitist membership, the RSPB was divorced from the desperate privations endured by some of the poorest brought on by the war. Songbirds, as far as the Society was concerned, were to be enjoyed and not eaten, and campaigns against the eating of wild birds ignored the fact that people, generally the poorest, only turned to such food as a last resort, a factor that also drove the government to amend its own protective legislation. The RSPB’s most vociferous campaign had been against plumaged millinery, the war gave its agitation extra bite as anti-German tropes were added to its publicity. Whether this was effective is debatable, as the war fatally compromised the demand for luxury goods, including plumaged millinery, leading to a non-reversible decline for feathers. Not all of the Society’s wartime concerns actually came to pass. In 1915, it fretted that the war would present a ‘Keeper’s Opportunity’ as gamekeepers, free from the restraining hands of overseeing landowners who had taken up uniform, would step-up persecution of birds of prey. Although the Society reported an initial upsurge in trapping, there was little further mention of this issue. Instead, the War marked the decline of the traditional kept game estate and actually led to increased numbers of birds of prey as early as 1918.<sup>75</sup>

Gladstone devoted the concluding chapter of *Birds and the War* paying homage to the eminent ornithologists and naturalists, from both sides, lost to the conflict, lamenting that their ‘deaths, often in the prime of their lives and at the commencement of promising scientific careers, are therefore the more to be deplored’. This wartime loss of life of so many workers for birds had a stifling effect on the RSPB, which once it claimed victory against the plumage trade in 1921, lacked real direction thereafter and continued to be managed by its Edwardian personnel until the early 1930s. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the War, the Society felt justifiably proud, especially that 1919 marked a review of bird protection legislation. It concluded that ‘in the late days of 1914 it seemed more than probable that the whole effort for the Protection of Birds must be swept into oblivion. It has been the steady purpose and task of the Society to keep that effort still to the fore, and to demonstrate its importance to a nation in these fateful times, even apart from scientific, aesthetic, and humane considerations. The work has been more than justified’.<sup>76</sup> War, for this institution, ensured that it remained

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<sup>74</sup> Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 39; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 3 Jul. 1918; *The Times*, 1917-1918; *Daily Mail*, 4 Mar. 1918.

<sup>75</sup> *BNN*, VI/6 (1915): 85-7; *British Birds*, XIII/2 (1918): 32; Lovegrove, *Silent Fields*, 290-1.

<sup>76</sup> Gladstone, *Birds and the War*, 165-9; Law, ‘Long-Run Development of Environmental Interest Groups’, 122; RSPB, *29<sup>th</sup> Annual Report 1919*: 3.

constantly alert to the welfare of wild birds and taking on an active policing role to openly challenging official government policy, whilst its members, and the judiciary, enforced the bird protection legislation in place. DORA legislation, in respect of bird preservation and the RSPB, was a mixed bag. On one hand, DORA played a positive role in the plumage campaign and the RSPB's published output seemingly escaped censure, but on the other, it led to bird protection measures being relaxed and harsh pest control directives. Despite, this, there was never any question of the subject of bird protection slipping into abeyance. Instead, the RSPB made good its 1915 declaration by not standing quietly on the sidelines. Instead, it remained fully engaged with its campaigning work, the agenda for which was shaped by the war and the Society ensured its campaigns were very publicly elaborated, contested and debated by parliamentarians, its membership, newspapers and agriculturalists.