

Who Will Save Them?

A Note on Kestrels and Barn Owls

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All owls and hawks with the exception of the buzzard and the sparrow hawk are protected by Law, yet on the occasions that I have spoken to gamekeepers they invariably tell of the damage done to game by owls, kestrels, etc., which they shoot on sight. Although there are some exceptions these gamekeepers appear to be a law unto themselves in matters like this, even though they may not have studied the bird close enough to ascertain exactly what damage it does. There was a case brought to light in the Irvine Valley recently where a man was fined £2 for baiting and using a pole trap, which is in itself forbidden by law, for the purpose of catching owls and which in fact it did. This killing of protected birds happens only too often and in the majority of cases escapes detection. To satisfy myself that this killing is totally unnecessary I did a survey on the kestrel, because it seems to be getting the brunt of the battle at the moment; and the barn owl, because there are so few in my district, and there is a danger of them becoming extinct as a breeding species.

KESTRELS

The first bird I studied was the kestrel. In all I had six nests under observation, although I will illustrate the breeding cycle of one particular nest, which should also interest you as it gives some idea of the rate of reproduction, breeding hazards, etc., and is the best method of studying what kind of food is being consumed.

I found the nest on May 19th, forty-five feet up a perpendicular cliff which rises from a river bed. In it were five buff eggs, thickly mottled with brown, laid in the slight depression on a bare soily ledge which constitutes the nest. Three days later I revisited the nest and found it now contained three young and one egg. When they heard me the young birds, looking rather ungainly in their white fleecy covering, sat back upon their legs and opened their rather broad curved beaks, expecting perhaps a field mouse or shrew for their tea. I returned to the nest a week later, on the 29th May, to see how they were progressing and to ring them if possible. When I arrived I could see that the other egg had vanished, probably thrown out of the nest, and that the young had almost doubled their size. I went down the cliff face, with

the aid of a rope, as the nest was only about twelve feet from the top, but their feet were too overdeveloped to ring at this stage. This visit gave me much valuable information, however, because I was able to collect from the nest various remains of their food for identification. This proved to be a long job, but I was able to conclude that their diet consisted of about 65% mice and voles, insects, daddylonglegs, butterflies, earthworms, and certain very small birds like sparrows. Other additions on this list are said to be cockchafer, grasshoppers, lizards, and frogs.

16th June was the next opportunity I had of seeing the nest, but there was nothing in it the first time I looked, so I went away and returned later. This time there was a young fledgling in the nest, indicating that it had only left the nest on its first flight a few days previously.

It is interesting to note that this nest was found by the gamekeeper later that year and filled in with large stones. From observing the six nests, three of which were built in cliffs and three in tall trees, I found that it takes from 50-54 days till a young kestrel can fly from the time the egg is laid and that it takes from 22-24 days from the time the egg is laid until the young bird hatches. If two nests are hatched on the same day and one has three young and the other five, the nest with the three young will be flown four days before the one containing the five, assuming, of course, that these are in the same district with roughly the same supply of food available.

Out of the twenty-eight eggs which were laid in the six nests eleven young were successfully reared. Four eggs were lost due to natural causes and thirteen eggs were destroyed by boys. Of the thirteen eggs five fell into the hands of egg collectors and eight were smashed through vandalism. A tree with a nest in six eggs was chopped down by a small boy.

When the young kestrel has learned to fly it must then learn to hunt and kill for itself. Each kestrel has a daily hunting routine which it follows, perhaps along a river bed then across a stubble field to a fir wood. After the wood it might take in a sweep of moorland then return to its starting point, the whole route taking three to four hours to complete.

Its method of killing a bird is to drop like a stone on the unsuspecting victim and catch it round the neck with its claws, death usually being instantaneous. I recently was well placed to witness a house sparrow being disposed of in this manner. The sparrow was flitting back and forth along a fence when I first saw it. Then I noticed the kestrel above it. It hovered lower

and lower, intent on its victim; then it dropped. There was a puff of feathers and a triumphant screech from the kestrel as it snatched the sparrow and flew off to devour its prey.

BARN OWLS

The first place I saw the two Barn Owls that I studied was in a ruined cow-shed. They were perched up in the darkness of the rafters, and when I approached they stared down at me with a kind of childish innocence peculiar to owls, their white rounded face and breast assuming an almost ghost-like appearance. As I advanced further into the shed the owls fluttered on to a beam adjacent to an opening in the roof, pausing only long enough for their eyes to become accustomed to the light before taking flight.

Once out into the open the owls split up. One glided silently on rigid wings down a reed-covered gully, entered a wood of young trees and was soon swallowed up by the dark undergrowth. The other made for an ash tree near the ruin, poised for a second in mid air, then closed its wings and dropped into the bole of the tree through a twelve-inch opening in the trunk. A truly safe refuge.

The method I used to determine the kind and amount of food consumed by the barn owl was to examine the numerous casts to be found underneath its roosting place. An owl eats its prey whole then separates the skin, fur and bones from the meat and ejects the inedible particles in the form of a cast. I cleared the area where the casts were lying and returned at the same time a week later, by which time I found that ten casts had been deposited under the roosting place. I selected five average sized casts and dissected them, noting all bones, skulls, etc. In all I identified the remains of nine shrews, ten field mice, one mole, one rabbit and numerous beetles. As the experiment was carried out with two owls the five casts give an accurate picture of the food consumed by one bird in one week. When extended to yearly figures I found that 1,092 vermin are consumed by one bird in one year. It must also be remembered that this is a minimum figure as allowance has to be made for casts that might have been deposited elsewhere, or an increased consumption when feeding young. The barn owl incidentally can be taken as a typical example of the other owl species with regard to food consumption.

It seems apparent to me therefore that these birds are being needlessly persecuted. In a recent lecture on conservation given by David Stephen he quoted an incident in Inverness-shire where a grouse moor supported about 400 brace of grouse and the keeper (newly appointed) reckoned that by killing two falcons on the estate that were killing the grouse he could double the yield inside

a year. This was done, but the cliff formerly occupied by the falcons was taken by a colony of jackdaws who are very partial to grouse eggs. The result was that the yield of grouse was halved instead of doubled. The sequel to this was that the landowner had to advertise in the papers for a pair of falcons to release on the estate, which he did, and within a few years the population returned to normal. This will, I hope, help to illustrate that a great deal of research and thought should be given before any alteration is made to the balance of Nature.

Although this article may not have a direct effect on the people concerned, it will at least illustrate to enthusiasts for Natural History the inter-relations that takes place daily between Law and Nature.