ATTACKS BY PEREGRINES & SPARROWHAWKS ON

RACING PIGEONS *in* SCOTLAND



AN APPEAL BY
THE SCOTTISH HOMING UNION
SAVE OUR SPORT

✦

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The Save Our Sport Group.

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Introduction



If nothing is done our sport will die

The Scottish Homing Union (SHU) has been concerned for some time over the growing number of reports received from its members on the effect of attacks by birds of prey, particularly peregrines and sparrowhawks, during the training and racing of pigeons in Scotland. The SHU fully understands that pigeon fanciers have to accept that the nature of their sport carries a degree of risk from attacks by predators. However, it has become clear from reports made by members of the SHU that the risk of such attacks has become unacceptably high and will continue to increase unless urgent action is taken to address the problem. If such action is not taken, there is a serious risk that the sport in this country will suffer irreparable damage.

With the assistance of the Scottish Homing Union Trust, the SHU has, therefore, set up a special group, the Save Our Sport Working Group, to investigate the extent of the problem in Scotland. A survey of SHU members has been carried out and a factual analysis made of the data which have emerged from the survey. The purpose of this report is to provide details of the outcome of the survey and to suggest action which requires to be taken in order to prevent further damage to the sport. The report is being circulated to Scottish Members of Parliament and to organisations which have particular responsibilities in this field with a view to seeking their support.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Scottish Homing Union members have explored all avenues to alleviate the problems they face with peregrines and sparrowhawks, training and race sites are altered routinely, deterrents of all descriptions have been tried, yet despite their best efforts no solution has been found.

From the evidence gathered as a result of the survey carried out of its members by the Scottish Homing Union, it is clear that a major rethinking of the policy on the control of numbers of birds of prey is now necessary. The uncontrolled increases in the numbers of peregrines and sparrowhawks has a direct correlation to the levels of losses of pigeons being experienced by members of the SHU. Members do not dispute that their sport carries an element of risk of attacks by predators, nor do they advocate the uncontrolled killing of other species to accommodate their sport. The matter comes down to what is an acceptable level of risk and what are acceptable levels of control. A balance must be struck between the two.

Under the existing legislation, no provisions are available to members of the SHU through which they can take action to protect their pigeons. Yet at the same time, the legislation allows the uncontrolled growth in the numbers of predators to continue, regardless of the impact on other species. This head in the sand attitude which has held sway since the passing of the 1981 Act has potentially severe long term implications for the numbers of other species of birds, in addition to racing pigeons. If the population levels of other species fall to dangerously low levels that will diminish the food sources of birds of prey and bring about an uncontrolled reduction of their population levels. Thus, the very situation which those who oppose changes in the legislation are concerned to prevent will be brought about by lack of action.

The Scottish Homing Union, therefore, request that the Government carries out an urgent review of the operation of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 with a view to introducing changes which take account of the situation which has developed since the enactment of the legislation. The Scottish Homing Union would be pleased to contribute towards this review with the aim of achieving two main outcomes:-

- *In the definitions in the legislation, the granting of a status to pigeons which would enable their owners to legitimately protect their birds;*
- *agreement on population levels of birds of prey designed to achieve an acceptable ecological balance with other species of birds*

In requesting this urgent review, the Scottish Homing Union is, of course, aware that the Government has responsibilities and obligations under the terms of the European Wild Birds Directive 1979. The understanding of the SHU is, however, that the Directive authorises member states to make certain exceptions supervised by the European Union. There, thus, appears to be no good reason why the review sought cannot be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

This appeal to the Government is made earnestly and sincerely.

Please help us to Save Our Sport!

The Scottish Homing Union

The Scottish Homing Union (SHU) was formed in 1907 by Scottish pigeon fanciers who wished to create an independent governing body to regulate the sport of pigeon racing in Scotland. The aims of the SHU are:-

- To provide an organisation for persons interested in pigeon racing and showing in all its branches
- To provide uniform rules and regulations for the ringing and registration of racing pigeons, their ownership and transfer and the conduct of races and shows
- To promote races and shows, to provide financial and other prizes for these and to make donations for objects approved by the Annual General Meeting of the Union
- To trade in any items required for the provision and benefit of members as may be approved from time-to-time by the Annual General Meeting of the Union
- To provide agreed appeals procedures for the final disposal of all questions or disputes that may arise between and among its members and organisations
- To protect and advance the interests of its members in respect of any matter approved by the Council of the Union within the terms of the rules and constitution of the Union

The affairs of the Union are managed wholly by the Union's Council which is comprised of delegates from each of 23 area federations, stretching from the Orkney and Shetland Islands and Wick in the very north, to the border towns of Annan, Jedburgh and Hawick in the south of Scotland. Most Scottish towns have a local pigeon club flying into their area.



The Scottish Homing Union staff at work on the survey.

The office bearers of the Union are the President and two Vice Presidents, elected annually from within the membership of the Council. The work of the Union is supported by four members of staff, including the Secretary of the Union, based in Hamilton, South Lanarkshire.

The Save Our Sport Working Group

Members of the SHU have suffered a steady increase in attacks by hawks and falcons, particularly over the last 5 to 10 years.

In response to the concerns of its membership, the SHU established a special group, the Save Our Sport Working Group, to consider the concerns being expressed by members of the Union. The membership of the working group is:-

Mr George Kelly, President, Scottish Homing Union

Mr Alex Mitchell MBE

Mr Andrew Shearer, Secretary SHU Trust

Mrs Linda Brooks BA Hons, Secretary Scottish Homing Union



In the past, members of the SHU have found difficulty in making their voices heard on the issue of raptor predation of racing pigeons, mainly due to the lack of available research findings. The SHU, with the assistance of the SHU Trust, has, therefore, undertaken a survey of its members to quantify the extent of the problem in Scotland. A detailed questionnaire (attached as Appendix B to this report) was drawn up and members were invited to submit details of their experiences.

A detailed analysis of the returns received has been carried out by the SHU. The analysis forms the basis of this report, and, as is explained in succeeding sections, the factual content of the returns fully justifies the growing concerns which have been expressed by members of the SHU.

THE LEGISLATIVE POSITION

Birds are protected both under UK law (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 - "the 1981 Act") and European law (Wild Birds Directive 1979 - "the 1979 Directive") The 1981 Act was intended to implement the 1979 Directive and, as UK law, is subject to the 1979 Directive. Article 2 of the 1979 Directive requires Member States to take requisite measures to maintain the population of bird species at a level which corresponds to ecological, scientific and cultural requirements, while taking account of economic and recreational requirements, or to adapt the population of these species to that level.

Under the terms of the 1981 Act, a "wild bird" is defined as any bird of a kind which is ordinarily resident in or is a visitor to Great Britain in a wild state, but does not include poultry. The 1981 Act defines "poultry" as domestic fowls, geese, ducks, guinea-fowls, pigeons and quails, and turkeys.

The terms of the 1981 Act makes it an offence intentionally to kill, injure or take any wild bird or to damage a wild bird, live or dead, or its egg, except as permitted by the Act. Birds listed in Schedule 1 to the 1981 Act, including the peregrine, are protected by special penalties. Other wild birds, including the sparrow hawk, are protected by the power to grant licences contained in the 1981 Act. The Act sets out at length the circumstances under which its terms would not apply provided that any action taken against wild birds was within the terms of a licence granted in accordance with the provisions of the Act. At present it is also permissible under the terms of the 1981 Act for a protected bird, other than one listed in Schedule 1 to the Act, to be killed without a licence if it can be shown that the action was necessary for the purpose, inter alia, of preventing serious damage to livestock, foodstocks for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber, or fisheries.

Within existing UK legislation no opportunity exists for those engaged in the training and racing of pigeons to legitimately protect their birds against attacks by birds of prey. Attempts have been made to discourage attacks through the use of deterrents but these have had negligible or limited success. The Scottish Homing Union believes, therefore, that the time has come to consider seriously amending the existing legislation to afford a degree of protection to pigeons against the growing level of predation. Later sections of this report examine the problem in more detail and suggest ways in which it can be addressed.

MAIN PREDATORS OF PIGEONS

The main predators of pigeons are peregrines and sparrowhawks. The following paragraphs discuss increases in the numbers of these two predators, their favoured food and their current geographical distribution throughout the country.

PEREGRINE



PEREGRINE POPULATIONS IN THE UK

PEREGRINE	BREEDING PAIRS
SCOTLAND	625
ENGLAND	283
WALES	259
N IRELAND	96
TOTAL	**1,263**

*Scotland has **50%** of the UK peregrine population .*

From the New Atlas survey (2) carried out in 1991, the estimated breeding population of the peregrine showed at least **1263** pairs in the United Kingdom, the highest ever recorded level.

Of those, Scotland had **625** pairs, **53%** of the total population in Britain.

A collapse in the peregrine population began in the 1940's and continued through into the 1960's, first, as a result of controls imposed by the Government during the Second World War and, secondly, because of the effects of organochlorine insecticides. The number of peregrines in the British Isles is now estimated at around 1300 breeding pairs, When unattached birds are taken into account, the total number is likely to be in the region of 4,500. Numbers are estimated to be the highest since records began. The peregrine population in 1991 showed an increase of over two thirds in ten years and it is estimated that the pre 1940 population level of 874 pairs was once again reached in 1985. The population has, therefore, more than recovered from its post-war nadir.

In terms of distribution and abundance, peregrines are to be found mainly in the west and central parts of Great Britain. The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988-1991 (Gibbons, Reid and Chapman for the British Trust for Ornithology, the Scottish Ornithologists' Trust and the Ireland Wildbird Conservancy) (2) indicated that numbers in parts of the E Highlands, S Scotland, England and Wales were then at least

double those ever known before. Significantly, in the latter three areas, this geographical concentration corresponds to areas where a substantial amount of training of pigeons takes place and which are crossed by major pigeon racing routes.The 88-91 New Atlas recorded an abnormally low annual mortality rate of 10 per cent in the established breeding population of peregrines in S Scotland. It is unlikely that the resulting increase in the peregrine population could be supported without an increase in the availability of food supply. The New Atlas suggested the main possibility was the availability of domestic pigeons, which in many districts are the primary food items for peregrines during the breeding season. If a steady supply of pigeons is available, peregrines will eat an average of 300 per year. At current population levels they are, in total, capable of disposing of over 1 million pigeons each year.

In an article in the January/February 1991 issue of the "Shooting Times and Country Magazine", a member of the North West Protection Group stated that, without doubt, peregrine populations within England, Wales and southern Scotland were either wholly, or to a major extent, supported at above saturation densities by their dependence on pigeons. The article also suggested that, from observation of lakeland nesting territories over a period of 27 years, the level of peregrine predation on the pigeon was as high as 95 to 98 per cent. Predation by lakeland peregrines on the racing pigeon has been brought about by the overall loss of heather cover and general reduction in game stocks throughout the area.

SPARROWHAWKS

Sparrowhawks are extensively found throughout Britain, nesting in areas where woodland and scrub are found. They nest most often in forests and larger woods but will nest in smaller wooded areas. In most of the country there are, therefore, suitable nesting areas. Exceptions to this are parts of the Scottish Highlands and some of the Northern and Western Islands where the sparrowhawk is not found. Population density levels of sparrowhawks are higher in lowland areas than in upland areas, reflecting the nigher numbers of songbirds to be found in fertile farming areas.



Because of the post-war introduction of organochlorine pesticides into agriculture, by the late 1950's the population of the sparrowhawk had declined significantly. In some farming areas, where use of pesticides was greatest, the species had almost disappeared. Following the decrease in the use of pesticides there has been a steady increase in the population level of the sparrowhawk. It is estimated that there are around 34,500 pairs of sparrowhawks plus unattached birds. It is probable that this level of population is the maximum that can be supported by habitat and food supply.

Sparrowhawks have a particularly nasty way of dealing with their prey by eating them alive. It can take twenty minutes for a pigeon to die while being eaten alive, bit by bit, by a sparrowhawk. Sparrowhawks have voracious appetites. They will eat, on average, three songbirds per day. In a year one sparrowhawk will eat 1,095 song birds. Each year sparrowhawks dispose of over 100 million song birds. If there are no song birds available, they will attack pigeons. Were the rate of increase in the sparrowhawk population to be maintained, a further 2 million song birds, or the equivalent number of pigeons, would disappear each year.

Contrary to suggestions put forward by those who advocate the total protection of birds of prey, the sparrowhawk is not named in Annex 1 to the EC Wild Bird Directive. Nor is the sparrowhawk protected under the Wild Life and Countryside Act, other than as a wild bird.

The sparrowhawk is not listed in Schedule 1 to the Act. The lack of response to the concerns of pigeon fanciers as regards the sparrowhawk can therefore be interpreted as being due to a lack of will on the part of those in authority who are in a position to act.

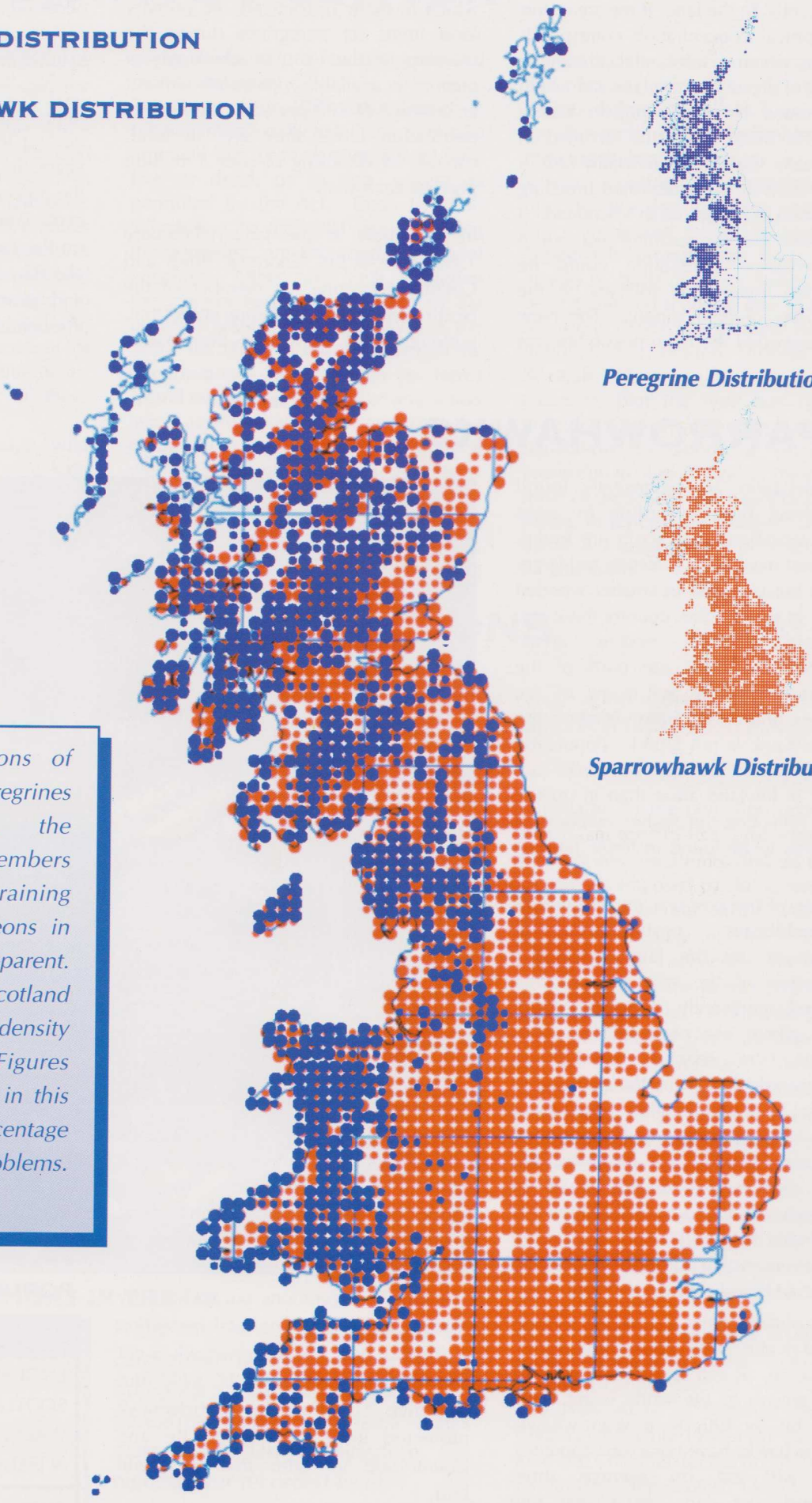
SPARROWHAWK POPULATIONS IN THE UK

SPARROWHAWK	BREEDING PAIRS
ENGLAND	22,000
SCOTLAND	7,000
WALES	3,000
N IRELAND	2,500
TOTAL	**34,500**

*Scotland has **20%** of UK Population of sparrowhawks.*

PEREGRINE DISTRIBUTION

SPARROWHAWK DISTRIBUTION



Peregrine Distribution

Sparrowhawk Distribution

When the populations of sparrowhawks and peregrines are superimposed, the problems facing members regarding keeping, training and racing their pigeons in raptor free areas is apparent. The North East of Scotland has a slightly lower density than other areas. Figures show that federations in this area have a lower percentage of members with problems. *(see map on page 7)*

What the Survey Confirms

The survey was carried out by the SHU during 1996/7 and reflects members' experiences during a pigeon racing season. The objectives of the survey were to:-

- (a) address the problems with which members of the SHU were having to deal;
- (b) determine if these were as widespread as they appeared to be;
- (c) gather evidence in a report which would help highlight the extent of the problems;
- (d) suggest possible solutions to the problems.

A total of **250** Clubs (**94.69 per cent** of all clubs in Scotland) forwarded completed questionnaires . The number of lofts returning questionnaires was **1,937** - this represents just over **47%** of lofts in Scotland. (equivalent to **2420** members,) Of these **1,752, (90.49 per cent)** stated they had a problem with birds of prey. Mention was made in small numbers of some other birds of prey but by far the largest number of problems reported were with sparrowhawks and peregrine falcons.

Table 1 Numbers of returns received

FEDERATIONS	NO. OF LOFTS STATING THEY HAD NO PROBLEM	NUMBER OF FORMS
23	184	1,937

These figures have been converted to percentages and are shown in geographic areas on the map below.

Federations have prefix letters. Prefix letters are shown on the map to illustrate the geographic location of each federation.

AYRSHIRE	=	A	94%
ABERDEEN	=	AB	69%
ANGUS	=	AF	56.5%
BALLOCHMYLE	=	B	92%
CENTRAL	=	CA	88.5%
DUNDEE	=	DF	60.9%
EAST OF SCOTLAND	=	E	86.4%
FIFE	=	F	87%
GLASGOW	=	G	93%
HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS	=	HI	80.6%
KYLE & DISTRICT	=	KD	90%
LANARKSHIRE	=	L	93%
MIDLAND	=	M	97%
MIDLOTHIAN	=	ML	94%
MORAY FIRTH	=	MF	100%
NORTH OF SCOTLAND	=	NE	87%
NORTH WEST	=	NW	96%
PENTLAND HILLS	=	P	91%
RENFREWSHIRE	=	R	92%
SCOTTISH BORDER	=	SB	90.6%
SOLWAY	=	S	99.4%
SOUTH LANARKSHIRE	=	SL	96%
WEST LOTHIAN	=	W	94%

This map shows % of lofts in federation areas who answered "YES" to the first question on the survey form

"Do you have a problem with Hawks/falcons"



(A) Attacks by predators at the loft



1,752 lofts stated they had problems with raptors, of these, 1,587 were witnessing attacks by hawk/peregrine in the immediate loft area, a total of 90%.

828 lofts **(52%)** suffered attacks by peregrine

1424 lofts **(89%)** had suffered attacks by sparrowhawk (see Table 2)

Many lofts had suffered attacks by both sparrowhawks and peregrines.

The frequency of attacks was not requested in the SHU questionnaire, nor were the numbers of pigeons lost or killed because of these. Nevertheless, over **100** lofts advised they had lost or had pigeons killed due to attacks; of these, **57** stated the actual numbers they had lost or which had been killed as a direct result of these attacks. This small cross-section of lofts indicated that **570** birds had been killed or lost - an average of **10** pigeons per loft.

The survey shows that there were 54 incidents witnessed where birds of prey attacked pigeons by landing on the pigeon loft itself. Of the 54, only 8 cases were recorded in which a bird of prey had actually entered a loft. These figures indicate that a high level of loft security is maintained by members of the SHU.

In the majority of cases, members of the SHU situate their pigeon lofts in their gardens. It is here that most attacks will be witnessed purely because the member is present at the loft for much of the time, and because his home is likely to overlook the loft and garden area.





This is an example of a newly built loft. Most are purpose built and fitted to suit individual owners. Doors would normally only be open when the fancier was present

Some lofts use an "open door" system whereby birds enter by large door openings in the front of the loft. This is a direct and fast way to time pigeons from a race and is therefore popular with many members.

Below are some examples of "trapping systems". These methods of holding a pigeon in a confined area allowing the fancier to catch the bird easily, and remove the rubber race ring quickly to time the bird in from the race. No members reported birds of prey entering these traps.







Types of traps

Loft Environment

The loft environment has to be one in which the pigeon feels comfortable and secure. Food would be the main incentive for a young bird to return to the loft, but old birds require more than just food and shelter. The loft is where they make their home and rear their young. Pigeons will not race well to a loft which is overcrowded, or where there is a bad atmosphere. They become stressed when they are disturbed or frightened.

Attacks by birds of prey in the loft area are disastrous for the wellbeing of a team of racing pigeons. Birds which have been badly frightened will often refuse to leave the loft for exercise, and for pigeons flown on the "widowhood" system, flying round their loft area forms the bulk of their exercise.

"Widowhood" birds will fly out usually for an hour or so early in the morning and then again in the evening. These birds are generally supremely fit maintaining this level of fitness with little intervention by the member. However birds will not take exercise if they are being attacked. In these circumstances if they are forced to exit the loft they are inclined to "go to ground" where they remain watching the sky.

Under these conditions, there is no incentive to return to the loft. It is no longer perceived as a place of comfort and safety by the birds. Birds returning from races are often nervous about approaching the loft since it is in the garden and loft area where attacks are most frequent.

Attacks by Peregrine

Attacks at the loft by peregrines showed an increase the further west and south west that lofts were located. Lofts located in Strathclyde and the South West of Scotland had 70 per cent of the attacks, but all federation areas, from Solway in the south, to Highlands and Islands in the north, suffered attacks.

Attacks at the loft location by peregrine were exceeded substantially by those by sparrowhawk. See table 2

Table 2

FEDERATION	LOFTS BEING ATTACKED	PEREGRINE ATTACK	SPARROWHAWK ATTACK
ABERDEEN	30	7	25
ANGUS	11	6	8
AYRSHIRE	89	53	88
BALLOCHMYLE	65	54	56
CENTRAL	74	26	54
DUNDEE	23	14	18
EAST OF SCOTLAND	58	26	54
FIFE	149	45	143
GLASGOW	54	37	52
HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS	21	17	12
KYLE & DIST	31	14	24
LANARKSHIRE	208	96	192
MIDLAND	102	71	90
MIDLOTHIAN	91	34	77
MORAY FIRTH	10	7	10
RENFREW	51	29	49
SOLWAY	153	115	134
SCOTTISH BORDERS	39	18	37
STH LANARKSHIRE	52	39	47
NORTH OF SCOTLAND	51	21	50
PENTLAND	43	11	39
NORTH WEST	123	65	113
WEST LOTHIAN	27	9	23
INDIVIDUAL CLUBS	32	14	29
TOTALS	**1587**	**828**	**1424**

One of the most important ingredients for successful pigeon racing is to create a good environment at the loft, the pigeon's home, this is impossible at present because of the panic and terror caused by attacks by peregrine and sparrowhawk.

ATTACKS BY SPARROWHAWK

Sparrowhawks must now be regarded as the most significant danger to the successful continuance of pigeon racing since, in numbers terms, they are the largest killers of pigeons. Unlike the attacks by peregrine, which vary in terms of volume between different areas, the survey shows that attacks by sparrowhawk are frequent at loft locations throughout Scotland.. These returns reflect the density in numbers of sparrowhawks throughout the country. Highlands & Islands Federation was alone in reporting more peregrine than sparrowhawk attacks (see Table 2).

The table shows the number of lofts suffering attacks by sparrowhawk and peregrine in federation areas. It also shows that a significant number of these lofts suffer attacks by both sparrowhawk and peregrine. If it were the case that each loft had only suffered one attack they would number 2,252. It can therefore be concluded that the lofts reporting attacks in table 2 suffer them on a regular basis.

One such pigeon killed by a sparrowhawk at the loft was Champion "Lodge Express".

Owned by Mr G Harris of Denny, this pigeon broke all records when winning the race from Frome (1997) in the Scottish National Flying Club.

The pigeon's velocity of 2095 yards per minute is the highest ever in the history of the 100 year old club. "Lodge Express" was 5 years old and had won numerous races, flying thousands of miles in his career only to be killed at home a few months after his success. Although priceless to Mr Harris, this pigeon would be worth an estimated £10.000



"Season 1995, 7 killed in the garden whilst out exercising (March/May). Season 1996, 7 killed during same period. When the pigeons are out flying the sparrowhawks strike at the batch and drop to the ground with the bird and hold on until they butcher it. As my garden is large and has many trees and bushes in it, it is sometimes difficult to get the pigeon before it is killed. During the summer months I work cutting grass and garden maintenance throughout Fife/Tayside. During this season, I have counted over 50 kills on the grass areas maintained (pigeons, thrushes and turtle doves etc.)

J HUTCHISON 101578 LEVEN

"I have had five birds killed by a hen sparrowhawk working the area around my loft. Even the budgie was attacked when his cage was put out in the sunshine. I have had quite a few birds come back to the loft with tail feathers missing (hawk strikes). I know that not all my losses are due to the hawks but the problem is a serious one in Moray."

R RICHARDS 106066 FORRES

"I only wish to comment that I have been racing pigeons for 50 years. There has always been a slight problem with hawks, but during the last 15 years the problem seems to have got a lot worse."

W FINDLAY & SON 104970 CAMBUSLANG

"Have had a hawk trying to get into my loft, now I can't operate open door system 100%."

J BLAKE 103708 LARKHALL & DISTRICT

"I first moved to my present home on the outskirts of East Kilbride in 1977 where for several years thereafter my pigeons were allowed unlimited freedom, I could take them on training flights in any direction without fear of them being attacked by birds of prey. I could also restrict the number of pigeons that I bred as I didn't lose too many in races. In recent years I have had an increasing number of pigeons killed or injured in the vicinity of my home by a female sparrowhawk. More recently, I have witnessed on two occasions, my pigeons being killed by a peregrine falcon in the vicinity of my home. In the week prior to the first occasion, 5 other pigeons disappeared and I suspect the peregrine killed them also. In recent years I have lost increasing numbers in racing and I suspect that some are being lost to peregrine falcons in the racing routes"

D MCDOUGALL LOFT NO. 101254, EAST KILBRIDE

"In 1989 open loft system, successful until 1991. Hawks were taking them (pigeons) from around our house and 15 were killed within the space of 3 weeks by sparrowhawk. Now confined to 1 hr morning/evening exercising when I can be present"

G HANNAH LOFT NO. 103222, PEEBLES

"Each winter/spring sparrowhawks kill my pigeons in the garden and surrounding area. Some years over 20 birds, in the winter of 95-96, 11 were killed in the garden"

R CARRUTHERS, LOFT NO. 103326, BONNYBRIDGE

For further comments on attacks in the loft area, see supplement " comment booklet"

(B) Attacks by Predators during Training

Pigeon racing is seasonal during the months of April to September. Weather permitting, races are flown on a Saturday, but to achieve the level of fitness needed for peak performance, pigeons are trained before and between races by being liberated, on average, 20-40 miles from home. Some pigeons cover more miles per season on these short training flights than they do in actual races. Before the increase in the populations of the peregrine and sparrowhawk, very few pigeons were lost or returned injured from these flights. Table 3 below, compiled from survey returns, indicates that this is no longer the case.

Table 3

FEDERATION	NO OF LOFTS REPORTING BIRDS INJURED IN TRAINING DUE TO ATTACK	NO. OF BIRDS INJURED
AYRSHIRE	120	533
ABERDEEN	41	166
ANGUS	11	61
BALLOCHMYLE	71	322
CENTRAL	73	361
DUNDEE	24	107
EAST OF SCOT	61	356
FIFE	151	622
GLASGOW	56	285
HIGH & ISLES	25	127
KYLE & DIST	30	106
LANARKSHIRE	204	1,109
MIDLAND	105	541
MIDLOTHIAN	95	476
MORAY FIRTH	11	44
NORTH OF SCOT	55	277
NORTH WEST	117	733
PENTLAND	42	231
RENFREWSHIRE	51	281
SCOT. BORDER	46	269
SOLWAY	147	907
STH LANARKS.	46	236
WEST LOTHIAN	26	131
IND. CLUBS	36	87
TOTAL	**1,644**	**8,368**

The figure of **8,368** pigeons reported in the survey as injured would all show classic signs of attack, though this number is likely to be understated since not all returns stated numbers of pigeons injured. Where no number was stated only one bird was counted as injured. Pigeons may hit obstacles such as wires, trees or even the ground in their panic to escape an attack, in these cases the fancier could not be certain the injury was caused as a result of an attack by a bird of prey. The actual number of pigeons injured by birds of prey in attacks would likely be considerably higher than those shown in Table 3

Table 4

FEDERATIONS	LOFTS USING OWN TRANSPORT	LOFTS WITNESSING ATTACKS	**LOFTS NOT USING OWN TRANSPORT**	**LOFTS WITNESSING ATTACKS**
23	**1,466**	**1.,101**	**313**	**199**

The table above shows members who do not use their own transport on a regular basis to take their pigeons on training flights, therefore they will only occasionally be present when their birds are released for training The numbers who nevertheless still witness attacks is surprisingly high at **199** This indicates that attacks are regular, and so frequent, that even those only occasionally present at liberations will be likely to witness them.

Because of problems with peregrines and sparrowhawks, **1189** lofts changed their training routes. (This figure constitutes over **81 per cent** of members using their own transport for training purposes).

THE SCARE FACTOR -



Most importantly are the injuries sustained during the panic which ensues when a batch of birds is targeted. Many pigeons are killed by flying into trees whilst trying to escape, some fly into the ground in panic, many become stranded in long grass or undergrowth and simply die. These losses are reflected in **Table 5 below**

Table 5 compiled from survey forms received, indicates that **33,043** pigeons were lost in training by **1,713** lofts at an estimated value of **£826,525**. Of the older pigeons lost, **3,422 (25 per cent)** had previously flown from race points 400 miles or more distant. ***These are experienced pigeons which would be flying on "automatic pilot" from a release point 20 to 30 miles distant.*** *Such birds do not hit wires or get lost from this distance. They are flying in familiar territory*

TABLE 5 BIRDS LOST DURING TRAINING

FEDERATIONS	LOFTS WHICH LOST BIRDS	LOST OLD BIRDS	LOST YOUNG BIRDS	BIRDS FLOWN OVER 100 MLS	BIRDS FLOWN OVER 300 MLS	BIRDS FLOWN OVER 400 MILES
AYRSHIRE	100	645	797	540	315	102
ABERDEEN	49	443	460	327	227	67
ANGUS	15	85	221	51	48	27
BALLOCHMYLE	68	582	878	446	218	100
CENTRAL	76	502	758	483	384	168
DUNDEE	26	121	200	72	67	37
EAST OF SCOT	65	395	483	217	165	190
FIFE	173	1,164	1,849	866	686	448
GLASGOW	56	463	798	363	178	73
HIGH & ISLES	23	275	339	152	40	22
KYLE & DIST	33	227	286	162	58	14
LANARKSHIRE	220	1,827	2,473	1,450	1,004	506
MIDLAND	106	1,220	1,589	1,016	716	329
MIDLOTHIAN	106	742	972	544	414	158
MORAY FIRTH	11	106	135	79	38	24
NTH OF SCOT	60	375	434	208	128	65
NORTH WEST	126	1,112	1,739	977	587	248
PENTLAND	41	455	552	465	241	94
RENFREWSHIRE	52	469	588	420	230	129
SCOT BORDER	48	260	610	277	214	133
SOLWAY	150	1469	2098	888	491	272
STH LANARKS.	53	434	655	411	217	135
WEST LOTHIAN	27	157	271	140	84	39
IND. CLUBS	25	169	161	148	116	42
IND. MEMBERS						
TOTALS	**1,713**	**13,697**	**19,346**	**10,702**	**6,866**	**3,422**

"Experienced birds are taking a lot longer, even until the next day, to return after having come into contact with a peregrine. Some birds are not returning at all. The sheer panic a peregrine has on pigeons literally makes them fly into a brick wall. Some will go to ground and hide for hours"
Messrs Murphy and Reid Loft No. 104765, Keith

"I had to change my training routes, without much success, because of hawk attacks."
Mr D Ree, Loft No. 100957, Broughty Castle

"No matter where we train, anywhere in Ayrshire, in any direction, down through the valley through Carsphain, New Galloway to Castle Douglas, the moorlands by Muirkirk, Douglas to the A74, the coastal route Ayr to Stranraer, every fancier is losing pigeons due to attacks. In training this year alone I have lost one 2 year old and two yearlings and had six birds return injured. On one occasion I watched two peregrines dive at my team south of Cumnock."
Mr J Brown, Loft No. 100675, Drongan

For further comments on Training, see supplement " comment booklet"

(C) Losses during racing

Within the averages shown in table 6, higher increases were recorded in some areas. For example, Solway's average loss per loft in 1996 is around the national average of **21.11** whereas in 1986 at **8.2** pigeons per loft, Solway was well below the national average of **10.41**

Table 6

FEDERATION	AVE. PIGEONS LOST PER LOFT 1986	AVE. PIGEONS LOST PER LOFT 1996
AYRSHIRE	9.9	23.2
BALLOCHMYLE	12.1	24.9
CENTRAL	5.5	18.3
EAST OF SCOTLAND	10.3	19
FIFE	10.2	18.5
GLASGOW	9.4	20.7
LANARKSHIRE	9.1	21.47
MIDLAND	12.8	21.7
MIDLOTHIAN	8.9	20.7
NORTH OF SCOTLAND	11.2	19.2
NORTH WEST	12.3	22
SOLWAY	8.2	21.3
SOUTH LANARKSHIRE	12.3	22

Racing falls into 2 categories - Old Bird and Young Bird. Any pigeon over a year old is termed an Old Bird. Old bird racing would normally commence in April and be completed by July, the race programme being made up of 12 races, increasing at each stage through to 500 miles. Young Bird racing starts in July and ends in September, again starting at 60 miles and usually consisting of 6 races increasing at each stage to 160 miles

Table 7 shows 973 lofts lost 10,131 birds racing in 1986, an average of 10.41 per loft. in 1996 1,643 lofts lost a total of 34,685 pigeons, an average of 21.11 per loft.

Table 7

LOFTS	AVE. BIRDS RACED 1986	TOT. BIRDS LOST 1986	LOFTS	AVE. BIRDS RACED 1996	TOT. BIRDS LOST 1996
973	16,654	10,131	1,643	27,531	34,685

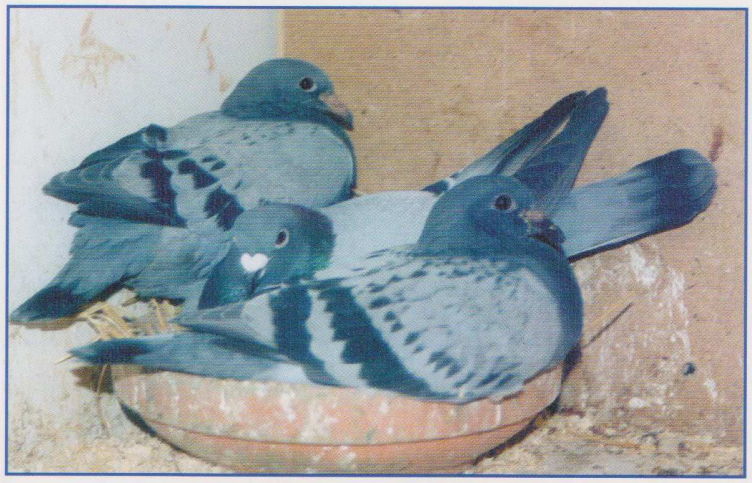


Pigeons are transported to races with every consideration given to the welfare of the pigeons, and in over **80%** of the races they are able to reach the race point overnight for liberation the next day. Transporters are equipped to ensure birds travel safely, and can be easily fed and watered.

The SHU organisations use "race controllers" who determine when conditions are right for liberation. Controllers ensure they have all the weather information available to them which, together with "line of flight" telephone calls to other controllers and fanciers, and monitoring the conditions at the race point itself via the "race convoyer" helps them to decide when to liberate the birds. In most cases, when conditions are not suitable for a liberation, the birds are brought home within two days.

Unlike previous sections of the survey, racing does not offer the same opportunity to witness attacks, though in March 1998 the SHU received approx. **500** rings mainly from game keepers from the North of England. Approx. **200** belonged to SHU members and when checked, most had been lost racing. (see comments supplement)

1,441 lofts reported 6,392 pigeons which had returned from racing showing signs of attacks by birds of prey.



Relatively few pigeons would be able to continue with the race programme after being involved in an attack by a bird of prey. While many are able to have their physical injuries treated, many more suffer greatly from stress which they show in their reluctance to leave the confines of the loft and in the nervous manner in which they behave even within the loft. Stress can affect how the pigeons breed and how they parent their offspring. It is common for stress affected birds to allow eggs to chill and to neglect young in the nest. Many youngsters can be killed because a nervous adult has crushed them in the nest bowl.

Numbers of racing pigeons bred in Scotland have remained stable for 25 years. Racing pigeons are fitted with an ID ring when they are around 7 days old which is registered in the owners name, and any transfers in ownership are recorded.

* In 1975, **6,782** lofts bred **220,000** young birds, an average of **32** pigeons per loft
* In 1997, **4,100** lofts bred **210,000** young birds, an average of **51** pigeons per loft

This means that today's loft, on average, breeds an extra **19** pigeons, an increase of **59 per cent** from 1975. Although the rings sold have remained the same, the racing pigeons reaching a mature racing age of 2 to 7 years, have decreased due to the raptor problem, thus the present loft breeds an extra **19** birds to compensate. A good example of this is the Scottish National Flying Club's Rennes race in 1977 **7,476** pigeons were sent to compete for the King's Cup race at a distance of 540 miles into mid Scotland. In 1997, the number of pigeons entered had decreased to **3,269**, only **43 per cent** of the 1977 total. Only mature, experienced pigeons compete in the Rennes race.

RACING PIGEON POPULATION TABLE 8

FEDERATION	RINGS ISSUED 1996	RINGS ISSUED 1997	TOTAL	HIGHEST BIRDAGE RACED 1996	HIGHEST BIRDAGE RACED 1997	TOTAL	AVE %
ABERDEEN	7,900	7,900	15,800	2,400	1,856	4,256	27
ANGUS	4,100	4,000	8,100	1,501	1,336	2,837	35
AYRSHIRE	17,000	16,000	33,000	3,375	3,807	7,182	21
BALLOCHMYLE	6,000	6,000	12,000	1,858	1,724	3,582	29
CENTRAL	11,500	11,250	22,750	4,600	4,262	8,862	38
DUNDEE	6,100	5,500	11,600	1,506	1,761	3,267	28
EAST OF SCOT	6,100	6,100	12,200	3,110	2,895	6,005	49
FIFE	19,500	19,000	38,500	6,424	5,777	12,201	31
GLASGOW	7,000	7,000	14,000	1,616	1,599	3,215	23
HIGH & ISLES	N/A	N/A	N/A	485	479	964	N/A
KYLE & DIST	4,750	4,500	9,250	1,580	1,862	3,442	37
LANARKSHIRE	31,050	30,100	61,150	9,656	12,475	22,131	36
MIDLAND	12,500	11,000	23,500	4,091	4,315	8,406	35
MIDLOTHIAN	14,000	13,500	27,500	4,822	4,765	9,587	34
MORAY FIRTH	1,200	970	2,170	750	800	1,550	71
RENFREW	6,397	6,175	12,572	1,994	2,098	4,092	32
SOLWAY	13,000	13,500	26,500	3,267	3,209	6,476	24
SCOT BORDER	4,000	3,750	7,750	796	496	1,292	16
STH LANARKS.	6,000	6,000	12,000	1,781	2,061	3,842	32
NTH OF SCOT	8,750	9,000	17,750	1,692	1,683	3,375	19
PENTLAND	6,300	6,500	12,800	2,613	2,357	4,970	38
NTH WEST	13,200	13,200	26,400	5,392	3,727	9,119	69
W/LOTHIAN	4,300	4,400	8,700	1,602	1,592	3,194	36

#This table shows that on average, only 1/3 of Young Birds rung in any one year actually race

"At the beginning of this year (1996) we were losing a bird per day. Also the chap in the garage next door gave us some of our birds rings which he found on the flat roof of his garage. We are in total fear to let our birds out which is causing us to think of going out of the sport as we cannot build up a team because of the hawks"

J & R Murray Loft no 100612 Kilmarnock

For further comments on losses during racing, see supplement " comment booklet"

Deterrents Don't Work

Various methods have been tested to establish whether deterrents are effective against attacks by birds of prey. A total of 366 lofts had used some or all of those already on the market. A number of lofts considered that some of the methods could be a factor in deterring attacks in the short term, but none viewed them as effective in any significant way. Although sparrowhawks or peregrines were initially discouraged from attacking pigeons when a new deterrent was being tried, after the "surprise" element had worn off, attacks were resumed. For example, the erection of plastic replica eagle owls may prevent attacks for a few days, but even repositioning the model on a daily basis fails to stop attacks completely. The following table details the main deterrents used by members of the SHU, as indicated in responses to the survey.

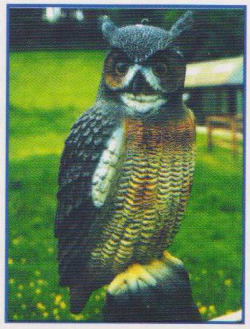
Table 9

LOFTS TESTING DETERRENTS	TRANSFERS	SEQUINS	BALI BELLS	OTHERS
366	144	87	77	50

Some or all of the above were used by 348 lofts. In addition, 50 lofts experimented with other types of deterrents drawn from the following list:-



Balloons
Whistles
Dazer Balloons
Eyes painted on lofts/on garden and house walls/or roofs and doors of lofts etc.
Replica Owls - Plastic and wooden
Hawk Eyes
Owl cut-outs
Scarecrow
Targets
Mirrors
Decoy geese



Of those lofts which had experimented with deterrents, only **39** thought they were useful in reducing attacks. Pigeon fanciers have been extremely inventive in their attempts to deter attacks on their pigeons. Transfer "eyes" in bright colours, when applied to the wings of pigeons, are intended to imitate the eyes of a larger bird, some species of butterfly show such patterns on their wings. Sequins are glued to the pigeons head and back in the hope that the reflections will startle a bird of prey as it attacks and allow the pigeon to escape. Balloons of all shapes and sizes, some marked with target eye patterns, have been tried at the loft and garden area to prevent attack. Deterrents were used by individual members for varying lengths of time from two weeks to two years. Some, fixed to pigeons, were found to be unsuccessful after two weeks and abandoned. Others, particularly those around the loft and garden areas, were in place for up to two years but had little impact on the numbers being attacked.

Overall there was no evidence available from the survey that deterrents worked in any consistent and sustained way to help protect pigeons. The fact that attacks continued when deterrents were in use argues strongly against their effectiveness. It is perhaps worth emphasising that **if deterrents were effective over the longer term, members of the SHU would be using them in large numbers since it would be very much in their interests to do so.** This would be very much easier for them than continuing to suffer the savage levels of losses and damage with which they have become only too familiar.

It has been suggested that, through aversive conditioning individual birds of prey may learn to avoid hunting pigeons by taking one or two treated with a chemical that induces vomiting in birds of prey but is harmless to pigeons. Some research was carried out into this possibility by Dr Andrew Musgrove, then of the University of Bristol, in 1994 (6).

The results were not conclusive. Captive birds of prey were fed on chemically treated meat and were found to dislike it. However it is not clear how it could be tested in the field. It would appear that each individual bird of prey would have to be conditioned. Birds of prey would have to be exposed to live pigeons which had been treated with the chemical. The practicalities of achieving this with over 4,500 peregrines are immense. There is, in addition, no available research to indicate that the offspring of birds of prey conditioned in this way would inherit their parents' aversion to the chemical.

Dr Musgrove has since advised the SHU that further development of chemicals would have to go ahead in order to ensure that, firstly, the chemical really did act as an effective deterrent in the "real world" and, secondly, that the chemical was completely safe to pigeons, peregrines and fanciers.
The name of the chemical has not been disclosed and Dr Musgrove would be concerned if fanciers used some and then damaged their health through unregulated use of it without proper trials having been undertaken. The SHU cannot therefore support the advocacy of this method contained in "Birds of Prey and Domestic Pigeons Back from the Brink" (5). The SHU records its concern that respected bodies in the field have lent their names to such a publication which gives a misleading and potentially dangerous impression.

Taking the available evidence all-in-all, it is difficult to avoid forming the impression that the advocacy of deterrents is based on flimsy grounds and does little more than obscure the real issue. There is no avoiding the issue that the numbers of the predators to which this report refers have now reached levels which require a fresh look to be taken at control of their numbers.

"Used all methods, mirrors and eyes painted round the loft, but have never had any success with any at all".
D Callanders, Dumfries

"I have tried the above (sequins, bali bells) and have found that they do not help to combat attacks. I have also tried anti-hawk strike, again this was useless. Most of my birds are killed exercising around home." **J McCormick, Kirkcudbright**

For further comments on Deterrents, see supplement " comment booklet"

WHAT OTHERS SAY

The earlier chapters in this report have focused on the outcome of the SHU survey and on the comments submitted by members along with their questionnaires. To use the survey as the sole source of information would, however, present a partial view of the position. This chapter sets out the views of others on some of the issues raised in this report so that readers of the report will be able to form their own views on the strength of the case made by the Scottish Homing Union

On population levels of sparrowhawks and peregrines

"Peregrines have also done well and are at their highest known levels in some areas. Even so, they are among the 12 bird of prey species with fewer than 1,350 pairs. Only the sparrowhawk, kestrel and buzzard are relatively common (more than 10,000 pairs) although the buzzard is still missing from much of its former range and the sparrowhawk and kestrel are now in decline in many areas"

Birds of Prey in the UK: Back from the Brink (1)

"The secretive sparrowhawk is one of the most widespread and abundant raptors in Britain, second in numbers only to the kestrel....indeed it may now be more abundant that at any time this century, as the widespread afforestation of upland districts has provided new nesting habitat where previously there was none"

The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain & Ireland: 1988-1991 (2)

"Numerically, the overall British population (of the peregrine) is now at its highest known level, but the species remains below pre 1940 numbers in Sussex and Kent, E Yorkshire, the N and W Highlands, the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland".

The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain & Ireland: 1988-1991 (2)

"Peregrine numbers have now recovered from he impact of organochlorine pesticides in the 1950's and 1960's, to densities that are probably greater than they were before the Second World War".

Birds of Prey and Red Grouse (3)

"The recovery of the peregrine represents no threat at all to other populations of wild birds. The same is true of the sparrowhawk"

RSPB article in "The Sunday Post" (4)

On the extent of the problem

"Peregrines do take racing pigeons and pigeon leg rings are occasionally found in their eyries"

RSPB article in "The Sunday Post" (4)

"Moorland peregrines mainly eat racing pigeons and red grouse, though a variety of other bird species is also taken....Racing pigeons are mainly available during race days, when they can be super-abundant in peregrine territories for short periods of time"

Birds of Prey and Red Grouse (3)

"Racing/feral pigeon were numerically the most important prey species of the peregrine. At Langholm, pigeons formed 56% of summer prey remains, whilst red grouse formed 10%. Game birds were the most important abundant prey type in pellets during the winter months"

Birds of Prey and Red Grouse (3)

"A wide variety of traditional preventative deterrent measures are used by game managers to minimise the likelihood and effects of raptor attacks, but the most widely used scaring measures are reported to have varying and generally low levels of success.....Substantial numbers of affected managers believe that provisions for population control or the killing of individual troublesome raptors are needed in addition to the measures being used"

Raptors and Gamebirds (7)

"Peregrines would also be expected to reach the highest breeding densities on southern moors as a result of the greater availability of racing pigeons there"

Birds of Prey and Red Grouse (3)

"Peregrines, sparrowhawks and goshawks do kill domestic pigeons. Wild feral and domestic pigeons are the main prey of peregrines in the UK. Feral and racing pigeons tend to form less than 5% of the diet of sparrowhawks"

Birds of Prey and Domestic Pigeons (5)

BIRDS OF PREY & DOMESTIC PIGEONS 1997

A SUPPLEMENT CONTAINED IN BACK FROM THE BRINK

The above named document was produced by a collaborative effort by 11 voluntary bodies. It addresses the concerns of some pigeon fanciers about losses of their pigeons to birds of prey. It suggests ways of minimising losses that do not involve the killing or removal of birds of prey. The following in blue print are statements from the above document, Save our Sport replies are in **black:-**

"Feral and racing pigeons tend to form less than 5% of the diet of sparrowhawks "

The Sparrowhawk, J Newton, 1986, is cited as the source for this information. There appears to be no evidence to substantiate this statement.

Refer to Sparrowhawk Population notes by Nevill Lewis (Pg no.19) for more detail.

"Pigeon fanciers who regard birds of prey as a significant cause of losses tend to overlook the many other possible causes. These include pigeons losing their way, joining a feral flock or dying en route due to fatigue, poor weather, or other factors. The relative importance of each of these factors has not yet been quantified "

There is no doubt that the increase of the peregrine and sparrowhawk populations to record levels has seen the increase in losses of racing pigeons. Racing losses have doubled in the last decade and at present more than half the pigeon losses are at the loft location or within 40 miles of the loft during training, our survey confirms this. With the exception of poor weather, any of the factors mentioned as possible causes of losses of racing pigeons could be attributed to an attack on a team of pigeons by a raptor and what happens as a result of the scare factor. Many pigeons have been reported hundreds of miles from where attacks have happened.

"There is no provision for the licensed control of birds of prey to prevent losses of domestic pigeons under any of the relevant legislation (the European Union birds Directive, The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 or the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985). Even if birds of prey were proved to be a serious problem, this does not mean that control by killing or removal would be an appropriate solution. Alternative solutions do exist but are often not considered by those advocating the control of birds of prey. To be effective such control would cause serious declines in the population of the target species because so may birds would have to be removed. "

How fair or just is legislation which allows falconers, under licence, to kill songbirds like the song thrush, a threatened species whose numbers have fallen by over 50% in the last 25 years, yet gives no protection to the domestic pigeon and would make a criminal of pigeon owners who injured or killed a sparrowhawk or peregine (with a £5,000 fine for the latter) whilst protecting their own livestock.

Only the peregrine falcon and the sparrowhawk are a serious problem to the sport of pigeon racing, and both are now at record population levels and are no longer "rare". The conservation status of the sparrowhawk is low concern "green list" and they can account for up to half of the summer mortality of their main prey species. Peregrine falcon conservation is medium concern "amber list" *Back from The Brink* 1997. To state that alternative solutions do exist but are often not considered by those advocating the control of birds of prey is not true, pigeon fanciers care about their pigeons and would try any practical solution to protect their birds and save our sport, our SHU survey confirms this and answers the actions recommended contained in *Birds of prey and Domestic Pigeons.*

BIRDS OF PREY AND DOMESTIC PIGEONS RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:-

ACTION 1 *Research is needed to*

a) Evaluate the significance of pigeon losses to birds of prey in comparison to losses from other causes.

The survey confirms losses due to attacks by peregrine and sparrowhawk are the main factor in pigeon losses. Attacks which are witnessed at the loft and during training confirm this. (See Loft and Training sections)

b) Assess the geographical variation in the extent of problems and the proportion of fanciers affected

The survey looks at the problem in geographic terms (see map pg 7)

c) Increase knowledge about the circumstances of pigeon losses to birds of prey to facilitate the development of methods to minimise losses without killing or removing birds of prey

The survey shows fanciers have tried all methods to minimise losses due to attacks by sparrowhawk and peregrine, but have found no solution to the problem.

ACTION 2 *There should be further developments and adoption of methods of managing pigeons to reduce the risk of predation such as:*

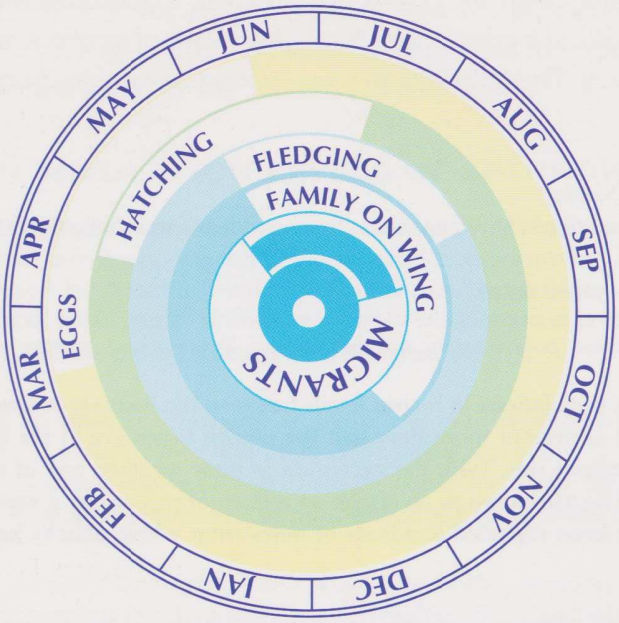
a) Developing better methods of excluding birds of prey in and around the lofts

Only 8 instances have been recorded where a bird of prey has actually entered a loft, we consider this shows the lofts of members in the Scottish Homing Union have a high level of security. All other methods of deterrents around the loft area fail to work.

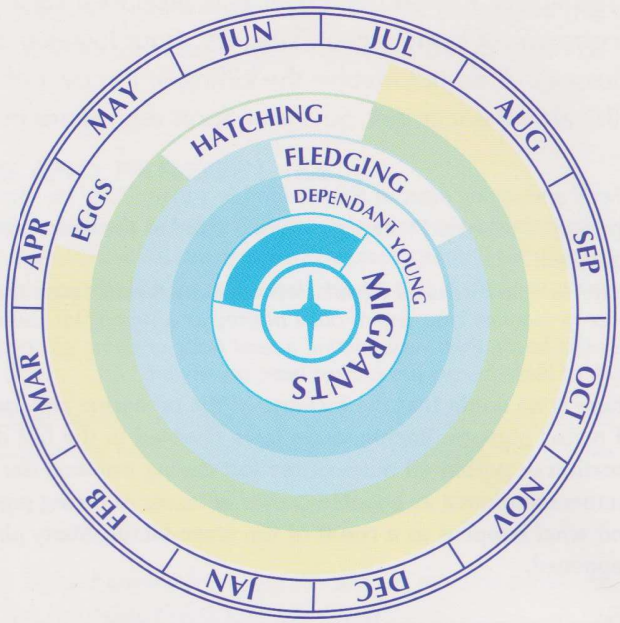
b) Avoiding release of birds from the loft at times or conditions when the predation risk is greatest

Members are vigilant at all times paying particular attention at times of the year when birds of prey are feeding young, and hunting activity is greater. Many have stated in the survey their pigeon are virtual prisoners at certain times of the year.

THE SPARROWHAWK YEAR



THE PEREGRINE YEAR



c) Varying the times and starting points of exercise flights to make the pigeons a less predictable food source.
d) Relocating certain race release points to avoid bird of prey territories.
1189 lofts stated they have altered training routes. (SHU hold over 220 race sites on file, organisations seldom use the same race point more than twice in any season)

e) Ensuring that birds are delivered in prime condition to the race points
Racing pigeons are the equivalent of a race horse, they are kept in peak racing condition by careful monitoring of diet and exercise

ACTION 3 *Greater support should be given by pigeon fanciers and others for the scientific development and implementation of deterrents against birds of prey such as:-*

a) "Bali Bells" In South East Asia racing pigeons have devices fitted to their tails, that make a high pitched noise when the birds fly and so deter birds of prey, these are now being marketed internationally and appear to be effective.
The survey shows these do not work

b) Butterfly or owl eye markings transfers are being marketed for application to a birds wing or nape. Claims of their effectiveness vary, birds of prey may become used to them a combination of butterfly markings and aversive conditioning could prove effective
We have no evidence which supports this claim. ***(see Deterrents Section)***

c) Aversive conditioning. Individual birds of prey may learn to avoid hunting pigeons by taking one or two treated by a chemical that induces vomiting by birds of prey but is harmless to the pigeons. This could be more effective than bird of prey control because the conditioned bird would deter other birds from its territory rather than being replaced by an unconditioned bird. More testing is required but the method seems promising.
This statement causes us some concern. See Text on this Pg 15)

d) Other deterrents: attaching sequins to pigeons, putting a model eagle owl near the loft, painting large eye marks on the roof or walls, and placing mirrors near the entrance are all methods that have been tried but there are no published results as to their effectiveness
Our survey shows these do not work, ***(see Deterrents Section)***

The 11 organisations contributing to the Back from the Brink document are:- British Trust for Ornithology; The Hawk and Owl Trust; The National Trust; The National Trust for Scotland; The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; Scottish Raptor Study Groups; The Welsh Raptor Study Group; The Wildlife Trust (UK) The Scottish Ornithologists Club; The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust; and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

To our knowledge no official Racing Pigeon bodies were contacted and asked to assist in the compilation *of Birds of Prey and Domestic Pigeons.*

Since our survey was mainly carried out in 1996, had the Scottish Homing Union been approached we could have advised that the actions now being recommended had already been tried and found to have had little or no effect.

Members of the Scottish Homing Union and fanciers all over the UK have voiced their concern that in 1996,The Hawk and Owl Trust, were awarded the Government contract to look at the extent of raptor predation on Racing pigeons, yet as one of 11 contributors to Birds of Prey and Domestic Pigeons, they have already endorsed the statement:-

"Demands for the killing or removal of birds of prey to protect pigeons are unjustified"

THE SPARROWHAWK- NO SOUND ARGUMENT AGAINST THEIR CONTROL

BY NEVILL LEWIS - CONSULTANT ORNITHOLOGIST

NOTES ON SPARROWHAWK POPULATION, IMPACT ON SONGBIRDS/PIGEONS, AND EXPLANATION ON WHY THERE ARE NO SOUND ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE CONTROL OF SPARROWHAWKS

Under the terms of the Wildlife and Countryside act 1981 a General Licence permits an authorised person (such as a land owner or occupier) to carry out what is otherwise an illegal act. Such licences give automatic cover to anyone qualifying and do not have to be applied for or actually held in one's possession. There is a General Licence to permit the killing or taking of certain birds, including the destruction of their nests or eggs, 'for the purpose of conserving wild birds.' Therefore if certain species are killing songbirds on your property you can legally take direct measures against them. However, there are only nine such species (Carrion/Hooded Crow; Herring, Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls; Jackdaw; Jay; Magpie; Rook; and Feral Pigeon.

Under the terms of the WCA you cannot take direct physical action against a Sparrowhawk for attacking or killing birds even in your own garden without being granted a Special Licence for that purpose by the Department of the Environment. But although the provisions for the issue of licences are in place, the DoE inform me that no such licences have ever been granted.

Any change in the law, to allow the 'removal' of problem Sparrowhawks, without having to apply for the Special Licence, (ie putting it on to General Licence) is strongly opposed by some Government advisors, most notably the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

According to the British Trust for Ornithology (The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988-1991, published 1993): the total breeding population of Sparrowhawks for Britain and Ireland is around 43,000 pairs - around 32,000 pairs in Britain and 11,000 pairs in Ireland. It should be noted that the British figure of around 32,000 pairs was first formulated in 1986 (Ian Newton, The Sparrowhawk). The BTO considers that non-breeding Sparrowhawks, may be of equal number. This would bring the British Sparrowhawk total up to 128,000 or so individual birds. To this there must be added the relatively large, but specifically not known, number of winter visitors (mainly from Norway, Sweden and Finland). The BTO Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland, published 1986, states that, in Britain, the total number of individual Sparrowhawks in winter, may be 170,000. But as I say, that was published back in 1986. Towards the end of the breeding season the total population of Sparrowhawks in Britain could easily (albeit temporarily) be in excess of 230,000 individual birds. As previously stated BTO Sparrowhawk population figures relate to 1991 or before; and Sparrowhawk populations have certainly increased since then. In an interview with the Daily Mail (16.10.1997) the BTO stated that, 'Sparrowhawks are at record levels.'

The amount of food required by a Sparrowhawk is dependent on a number of factors, including the sex and age of the individual, weather conditions, food availability and the energy consumption and metabolism of each bird. Calculating these variables as an average, an adult male Sparrowhawk will require about 50g of food a day, and an equivalent female about 70g. This and a non-breeding female around 25kg per year. So a non-breeding pair of Sparrowhawks (that makes the sums easier), consume about 43kg of food in a year. This could equate to:

4,300 Blue Tits,
2,150 Robins,
1,955 Chaffinches,
1,434 House Sparrows,
477 Blackbirds, or
133+ Pigeons.

Food requirement~by weight is not the same as food taken or killed. So in a female non-breeding Sparrowhawk, feeding solely on pigeon (and with ample food availability), wastage would be high, caching would be low, and kill rate would be near enough one~pigeon per day - up to 365 pigeons a year rather than 133.
The total prey taken by British Sparrowhawks is in excess of 4,300 tons of other birds each-year. This is equivalent to:

over 438 million Blue Tits,
48 million Blackbirds,
118 million Skylarks, or
13 million Pigeons.

It should be noted that in the document, Birds of Prey and Domestic pigeons (RSPB et al, 1997), it is stated that: 'Feral and racing pigeons tend to form less than 5% of the diet of sparrowhawks.' Ian Newton's The Sparrowhawk (1986) is cited as the source for this information.

The Sparrowhawk is based on a 14-year study of the species in two areas of Scotland (Dumfriesshire) - the study areas included the Forest of Ae, and the forests of Greskine, Craigieburn, and Auchenroddan. Basically the habitats under study were not regularly, in fact most were probably never, frequented or transversed by Racing Pigeons. The text in The Sparrowhawk actually states that: 'During September-March each year, we noted any places in the study areas were checked. In all, 36 species of birds and two of mammals were recorded in these months. Only six species formed more than 5% of the diet then, in order of numbers: Redwing, Blackbird, Fieldfare, Chaffinch, Woodpigeon, and Goldcrest; together these comprised 62% of all items recorded.I Amazingly, merely from this it appears, the RSPB et al draw their conclusion, and imply nationally, that, 'Feral and racing pigeons tend to form less than 5% of the diet of sparrowhawks.' There is, I believe, no evidence of this whatsoever.

I have contacted, in writing, the '11 voluntary bodies' which collaborated with the document, asking them for an explanation - I have yet to receive a response from any of them.

With the apparent, ever increasing, drain on songbird populations why won't the RSPB support, at least, the 'removal' of the most troublesome birds or even a general 'thinning out' in some areas? Surely that's got to be beneficial for all, including (in the long-term) even the Sparrowhawks themselves. Although the RSPB actively cull crows and gulls on their reserves, they will not contemplate the actual killing of Sparrowhawks. The RSPB have a number of 'hawk-deterrent' devices in use (or on test) where they are concerned about increasing Sparrowhawk depredations on some songbirds, but most particularly in areas where hunting Peregrines are endangering tern colonies. A deterrent may in the short-term work locally, but even if it was to work long-term, at the end of the day it merely moves the problem on to somewhere else.

The RSPB are afraid that to allow Sparrowhawks to be culled will set a precedent, and from here the situation would escalate and Sparrowhawk populations would be decimated as they were prior to their legal protection.

The RSPB point out that the persecution of the Sparrowhawk began with a vengeance in the mid-1800s, and then, apart from a reprieve during the two World Wars the 'extensive slaughter' continued to the mid-1900s. Hardly culling was taking place? And indeed, could it even be the case that since Sparrowhawks had (and still have) such limited natural predators and these only on a very local or part-time basis, it is the moral duty of man to help offset the imbalance he has himself created, and act in part as a Sparrowhawk predator?

To evaluate, we need to look at the situation of the day. So prior to the problems with agrochemicals in the 1950s/1960s what was the status of British Sparrowhawks? After all, the Sparrowhawk was given full legal protection in Britain in 1961 because of its population collapse due to chemicals, not because it was being shot out of existence. And if formerly, the Sparrowhawk was not endangered when problem individuals were removed from the system, why should the situation be any different today? So there are two general questions we need information on:

1) Is there any evidence to suggest that the Sparrowhawk was endangered by shooting?

2) Was man actually needed as an active predator of Sparrowhawks to maintain the balance and protect other bird life?

These questions are so entwined that they can be looked at together. So what was the actual evidence at the time Sparrowhawks were being culled.

a) 'This bird would, I should imagine, soon become a very numerous species indeed, were it not universally killed down,' (Edward Booth:Descriptive Catalogue of Birds, 1876).

b) This is a very bold and destructive species. It is pretty generally distributed over the British Islands. No doubt its numbers are immenseLy reduced to what they might be, simply from the attention the bird receives from most gamekeepers,' (Lieut-Colonel Echalaz: The Echalaz Collection, 1907).

c) 'Despite the most persistent persecution of the species, the Sparrowhawk still manages to maintain itself in considerable numbers,' (George Girdwood: Some Notes on the Birds, 1905).

d) 'The Sparrowhawk is a plentiful bird in the British Isles in spite of the numbers killed by gamekeepers and others,' (British Museum of Natural History: Guide to the Gallery of Birds, 1905).

e) 'This fierce and dashing little hawk manages to maintain itself in fair numbers in most parts of the country, although farmers and keepers do their best to extirpate it,' (Anthony Collett, A Handbook of British Inland Birds, 1906).

f) 'Given the presence of trees, the Sparrowhawk is found almost everywhere with us, in spite of the persecution to which it is, not unreasonably, subjected,' (Frank Finn, Birds of the Countryside, 1907).

So indications are that the Sparrowhawk was in no danger whatsoever of being shot out of existence when it was perfectly legal to remove problem birds from the system. And indeed, it does seem that it was necessary for man to intervene to prevent Sparrowhawks (at least locally) from reaching 'plague proportions' or at least causing severe damage. The RSBP would of course disagree. Or would they? Some of their most noted employees have had the following to say:

g) 'In spite of massive and needless persecution by gamekeepers and farmers the Sparrowhawk was common throughout Britain until the late 1950s and early 1960s when it suffered a great decline through its prey being contaminated by persistent toxic pesticides,' (Michael Everett, The Guiness Book of Woodland Birds, 1980).

h) 'An extremely wide variety of birds is taken as prey, ranging from Blue Tit, Robins and finches to thrushes, Jays and pigeons. they are found throughout the British Isles with the exception of the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland and, despite a long history of persecution, remained as one of our commonest raptors until affected by agricultural pesticides in the late 1950s,' (the late Ian Prestt, a Director of RSPB, British Birds - Lifestyles and Habitats, 1982).

i) 'The resident Sparrowhawk population in Britain has undergone some dramatic changes in recent years. Sparrowhawks were once widespread and common, but the population was kept in check by intensive keepering until the early 1940s when wartime activities allowed it to increase. The mid-1950s saw a major decline in the numbers of Sparrowhawks as a result of pesticides, and there was no recovery until restrictions on the use of certain chemicals allowed the population to regain its former abundance,' (Bob Scott, The Birdwatcher's Calendar, 1988. Bob Scott is [1982] 'employed at the RSPB's headquarters at Sandy in Bedfordshire as the Manager for all the Society's reserves').

Well it does seem that the RSPB actually agree that the removal of problem birds (and as they put it 'keeping the population in check') did not put the Sparrowhawk species at risk.

Of course there is another major point to the issue. Can you really have too many Sparrowhawks? Can Sparrowhawks actually be injurious to the natural welfare of the countryside? Does increasing numbers of Sparrowhawks mean (at least initially, and locally) decreasing numbers of songbirds? After all, if the hawks are merely taking surplus songbirds (ie the prey can replace its numbers at least as efficiently as the Sparrowhawks can reduce them), there is presumably no reason to reduce Sparrowhawk numbers anyway

So we need to ask another question. Before Sparrowhawks were protected by law, is there any evidence that they could cause a threat to songbird populations? Some points in answer to this have already be raised, but let's look at a few more.

j) 'After very carefully considering the facts we are of the opinion that the injuries the Sparrowhawk inflicts are considerably in excess of the benefits it confers, in consequence of which we cannot advocate any protection for it,' (Walter Collinge, DSc, MSc, FSA, FLS, Member of the British Ornithologists Union, Fellow of the American Ornithologists Union, Member of the Wild Birds Advisory Committee, The Food of Some British Wild Birds - A Study in Economic Ornithology, 1927).

k) In his book Bird Gardening -_How to Attract Birds (1954) Maxwell Knight OBE, FLS, cited the example of a male Sparrowhawk which regularly swooped down into a Surrey bird garden to take small birds, and 'ruthless measures had to be taken as it was a question of the survival of the bird garden as such, or the survival of the Sparrowhawk.'

l) 'Gamekeepers now concentrate their energies particularly on the Sparrowhawk, and few even of the most ardent protectionists object to this,' (James Fisher, former secretary of the BTO and Chairman of the General Purposes Committee of the RSPB: A History of Birds 1954).

m) 'The Sparrowhawk is destructive and doubtfully of any utility,' (Robert Newstead, The Food of Some British Birds, published as a supplement to The Journal of the Board of Agriculture, 1908).

n) 'Most of its food consists of small birds of various kinds, but it is probable that for every sparrow it takes at least half a dozen birds of other (and more useful species),' (Wild Birds and the Land, Bulletin No 140 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1948).

o) 'The Sparrowhawks had been observed to make sad havoc for some days among the new-flown swallows and martins,' (Gilbert White: The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne, 1789).

p) 'The depredations of this tyrant of our woods and groves certainly surpass those of any other British bird of prey,' (A E Knox: Ornithological Rambles in Sussex, 1850).

q) 'The food of the Sparrowhawk is mainly confined to the smaller birds up to the size of a thrush, although he is capable of destroying much larger birds: witness his depredations amongst the partridges and pigeons ... I do not think the Sparrowhawk takes more than two or three small birds in a day, save in the breeding season,' (Charles Dixon: Rural Bird Life, 1882).

r) 'The Sparrowhawk is a most dangerous foe, and the legs of its many victims, in and around a nest which has contained its young, tell only too plainly of the havoc which it has committed,' (C F Archibold: Wild Birds Useful and Harmful, 1909).

s) 'This Hawk is the terror of the countryside, the dread of all the smaller birds, and the captor of many species much larger and heavier than itself,' (Charles Dixon: The Bird-Life of London, 1909).

t) 'In one instance of what we knew, a Sparrowhawk, not content with killing two parent Blackbirds, returned and took the unfledged young ... The Sparrowhawk deserves no mercy,' (John H Salter DSc: Bird Life Throughout the Year, 1917).

u) 'Sparrowhawks are of less significance, as far as sparrows are concerned, in this country than they are on the Continent since they are so much less numerous. In a study in Holland, for example, (L Tinberg n), 921 carcasses were found at one Sparrowhawk nest - and this represented about 80% of the House Sparrows dying in that month', (J D Summers-Smith: The House Sparrow, 1963).

v) 'The Sparrowhawk nests late so its offspring are in the nest when there are plenty of young tits and Robins about ... Its strong hooked bill is used to tear flesh and strip bones bare,' (The RSPB Birdfeeder Handbook, 1990) .

w) 'Evidence that raptors could reduce prey numbers, came initially from studies of prey near raptor nests. Thus Sparrowhawks in Britain substantially reduce the numbers of Great Tits and Blue Tits within 200 metres of the hawk nest,' (R E Kenwood: "Feeding Habits", in Birds of Prey, 1990).

x) 'The Sparrowhawk is one of the most efficient predators of Great Tits. This is especially so in summer when the hawks are raising their broods largely on a diet of young tits ... 20 to 30 per cent of young tits fall prey to Sparrowhawks,' (Andrew Gosler: The Great Tit, 1993) .

y) 'The Sparrowhawk keeps down the number of small birds,' (The RSPB, ABC of Common Birds, 1919; reprinted 1920~ 1923~ 1928~ 1932).

z) 'Magpies kill far fewer birds than cats, cars, sparrowhawks or peregrines!', (The Complete Book of British Birds, 'written by RSPB experts', 1996).

Well there certainly seems to be strong evidence that some form of legal control is at the very least necessary against certain Sparrowhawks in some localities. Of course, that doesn't mean that Sparrowhawks should lose all legal protection, merely that the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 be amended to allow the control (under General Licence) of individual birds seriously endangering other wild (and domestic) birdlife. Of course even this may not be necessary if the Department of the Environment were to honour the provisions already in the WCA and grant Special Licences for the removal of specified, problem birds.

NOTES ON PEREGRINES

(WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO PEREGRINE/PIGEON INTERACTIONS)

BY NEVILL LEWIS - CONSULTANT ORNITHOLOGIST

According to the International Council for Bird Preservation's Technical Publication No 8, there are six species of falcon "threatened" with extinction. The Peregrine is not one of the six, and indeed to quote Roy Dennis (RSPB's Senior Officer for the Scottish Highlands, Peregrine Falcons, 1991), *'The Peregrine Falcon occurs throughout the world and in fact is probably one of the most successful and widespread of birds.'*

An average male Peregrine is about the size of a jackdaw, and a female the size of a Rook or Carrion Crow. For identification and distinguishing behavioural features between selected raptors, see the Racing Pigeon Pictorial Nos 295 & 296.

In Britain, Peregrines may be particularly encountered along rocky coastlines, and in the upland areas of Wales, Scotland and (northern) England. Outside the breeding season they tend to wander (peregrinate) and may then occur virtually anywhere, many favouring river estuaries and other low-lying wetlands.

Peregrines usually nest high-up on a cliff face. They do not make a nest as such, being content with a scrape or hollow on a ledge. Some pairs will use the old nests of Golden Eagle, Buzzard, Raven, or Carrion Crow (on a ledge or occasionally in a tree). They sometimes nest on the ground (particularly amongst heather), and are increasingly nesting on urban buildings.

In Britain, occupied nests may typically be between 22 and 6 miles apart. The actual distance is dependent on the location of suitable sites relative to population change, (basically, higher the population the closer the nests), and food availability (again the greater the food supply, the closer the nests). In the Queen Charlotte Islands (off British Columbia, Canada), Peregrines stake out territories just half a mile or so apart. While the Peregrine-like (same genus, and sort-of similar looking), Eleonora's Falcon breeds on a number of offshore islands, where it takes advantage of the (so-far) large numbers of migrating birds crossing the Mediterranean, and on the Isles of Mogador these falcons have their nests at an average distance of 30 feet apart, and some are only 3 feet from their neighbours (Tennesen 1992).

Peregrines usually lay 3 or 4 (occasionally 2, rarely 5, and 6 recorded) bullfinch eggs, heavily (and variably) patterned with brown. The eggs measure about 52mm x 41mm, and a newly layed egg weighs about 45g. They are layed in late March or April, at (about) 2-day intervals. Incubation usually starts from the laying of the next-to-last egg and is undertaken by the female for 28 to 33 days. On occasions the male guards and/or covers the eggs but does not actually incubate. He provides all the food for his mate during incubation, and for the whole family for at least the first couple of weeks after hatching. The male may regularly travel in excess of 3 miles (but rarely over 10) from the nest to a favoured hunting ground. Hunting does not necessarily take place in the Peregrines' territory. The territory is the area that is actively defended, the rest is the bird's home range. It is therefore quite probable that good hunting areas will be regularly visited by Peregrines from several different families. Their is a general tendency for Peregrines to hunt in the early morning and late afternoon, (they do not like excessive heat, and usually lay-up during the hottest parts of a summer's day). The young are cared for by both parents for 35 to 46 days in the nest, and then for about another 60 days after they have fledged. As occurs with Sparrowhawks, male Peregrines tend to leave the nest a few days before females, and so it may be a week or more, from the first's departure, to the whole family being on the wing together. Juveniles moult into adult plumage at about 16 months, and may usually breed at 2 (rarely 1, and sometimes 3) years of age.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (Bulletin No 140, September 1948): *'It is probable that nobody, not even its enemies, would wish to see Peregrine numbers reduced to the verge of extinction but it cannot honestly be given an entirely good character. Possibly its greatest enemies are racing pigeon enthusiasts, for many a homer has fallen victim to a Peregrine. It is unfortunate that the Peregrine does not confine its killing of pigeons to the wild species. Few naturalists can resist feelings of admiration for the Peregrine, but great as their regard for it, and little as any of them would like it to become rarer in this country than it already is, nobody could paint an honest picture of it without including a few unpleasant undertones. All bird lovers will venture to express the hopes that it will always be present in our muster of fine native species, while hoping that its depredations may not prove to be such as to increase the enmity against it - the peregrine must be viewed as a bird (who increases) may need watching'*

Research on Peregrine prey during the period 1984-1990 showed that nothing much had changed, well, apart from the increase in Peregrines. Wherever and whenever pigeons and Peregrines were occurring together, pigeons were the principal (first choice) prey of the Peregrines. There was a peak in the percentage taken in the middle of summer (from a low this started to build up in March, and then faded to a low again around September/October). As a national average and covering both sexes, pigeons were constituting (as 1990) about 76% of a typical Peregrine's diet.

Roy Dennis studied a number of Scottish Peregrines while employed by the RSPB, and stated (in his already mentioned book), *'The most regular prey are domestic pigeons,' and he observed that when young Peregrines were learning to hunt with their parents, 'dopey young pigeons soon come to grief.' The reference to pigeons being 'dopey', prompts me to remember the writings (and pet Robin) of Jules Michelet: 'These birds of prey, with their small brains and cruel hearts, offer a striking contrast to the numerous amiable and plainly intelligent species we find among our smaller birds. The head of the former is only a beak; that of the latter has a face. What comparison can be made between these brute giants and the intelligent, all-human bird, the robin redbreast, which at this very moment hovers about me, perches on my shoulder or my paper, examines my writing, warms himself at the fire, or curiously peers through the window to see if the spring-time will not soon return,'* (The Bird,1895).

Andrew Village (who is now a Minister in the Church of England) studied various species of falcon for 15-years, and (independently) came to the same conclusion, namely that, *'British Peregrines are primarily pigeon-eaters, most of the kills are racing pigeons, and pigeons account for 50-80% of prey items at inland eyries in Wales, northern England and southern Scotland. Pigeons are less frequent in areas away from [racing pigeon] flight-lines, where other prey become important. These include grouse in the eastern Highlands and seabirds at some coastal sites,'* (Falcons 1992).

Among these seabirds are Roseate Terns (a Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Schedule 1, 'specially protected species'). In the words of the RSPB, the Roseate Tern, *'is rare and considered to be in danger of extinction as a British breeding species. Predation by Peregrines has occurred every year since 1979. Various attempts to solve the Peregrine problem have been ruled out or have failed. Artificial feeding has been attempted with little success; no suitable form of scaring has been suggested; the prevention of nesting by Peregrines, by modifying the local nest site, is impracticable since many suitable alternatives exist (and because not only local birds are involved). Trapping (and removal), or destruction of the Peregrines have been ruled out as options',* (Red Data Birds in Britain, RSPB 1990).

So why is it that pigeons (and especially Racing Pigeons) figure so highly in the diet of Peregrines?
unfortunately for the pigeons, they have characteristics which make them highly suitable and vulnerable to attack:

a) Pigeons are generally readily available on a regular basis. Peregrines (or any other predator) can only increase their own population if they have a common food source - that is, common relative to their own population.

b) The audible wingbeats of a pigeon may attract the attention of a Peregrine when the pigeon itself may not be in direct sight or when the Peregrine is not in full visual concentration.

c) The tendency to flocking makes pigeons more visible from a distance than an individual might be. It also increases (enhances) the sound from the wingbeats. Pigeons flying in a flock give the Peregrine a higher target choice and probability of success. Out of a flock of pigeons at least one is (almost) certain at some stage to be in an ideal target position.

d) When attacked or buzzed by a Peregrine, pigeons tend to panic, and separate. This typical failure to bunch together when threatened makes individual birds especially vulnerable as they break away. A Peregrine is more reluctant to strike a close-knit flock. The flock may be buzzed repeatedly, but, if the flock unites and moves as one, drops and flies at low level close to the ground (or water) or hugs close to cliff-faces or tree-tops, the Peregrine often gives up the chase and looks for easier prey.

e) Flying with a definite motive and goal, racing pigeons may be unaware of the presence of a hunting Peregrine.

f) The pigeon's general use of a fast, straight, inflexible flight over open areas makes make the Peregrine's timing and strike easier.

g) Pigeons tend to fly (or are flown) in regular areas using regular routes, from a regular direction and at regular times, making an 'ambush' easy.

h) Pigeons have 'loose plumage' compared to most other bird species, and this makes feather plucking easier and faster.

i) Peregrines unquestionably like the taste of pigeon flesh, which in the case of the racing pigeon is exceptionally healthy and nutritious.

There is quite rightly, many an ongoing debate about what could (or should) be done about troublesome birds of prey, but for now I'll leave the summing up to an extraction from How to Attract and Protect Wild Birds: *'I should not wish a reward to be offered for any animal which might possibly be exterminated by energetic persecution; but I would always maintain the right of the individual to self-help; that is, if an animal is troublesome to anyone, he must be able to obtain permission to get rid of it. In this way the lives of our birds, especially the rarer kinds, are respected, as well as the reasonable wishes of individuals"* (Baron von Berlepsch, 1908).

NOTES ON PEREGRINE AND SPARROWHAWK THROUGH THE YEAR

JANUARY

PEREGRINE

Some winter visitors (now principally adult birds) may still be arriving, earlier visitors are firmly established in winter quarters or are merely wandering around. (Winter visitors from Europe arrive in Britain every year. Most of these - around 65°o - will be first year birds; and there is a tendency for young females to arrive first). Some birds may be passing through on passage (ie to somewhere else). Successful (resident) breeding pairs have probably remained near their nest site, or at least in (or near) their summer territory. Others may visit wintering areas (individually or as a loose pair), or are nomadic. Non-breeding and failed breeding adults from last season (and first year birds) are probably well dispersed throughout the country, either settled in winter quarters or are nomadic. Established pairs may start to roost together (or in relative proximity) towards the end of the month. Cooperative hunting between established pairs may be evident from the end of the month.

SPARROWHAWK

A number of visitors from Scandinavia are firmly established in winter territories. While others (particularly along the south and east coasts of England) are just wandering around taking advantage of migrant songbirds. British bred birds do not migrate abroad, and successful breeding pairs from last season will probably have separated, but both are likely to have remained somewhere in the vicinity. Some pairs will have stayed together in their breeding territory. Female Sparrowhawks may tend to haunt woodland edges and relatively open country, while the males may be more restricted to hunting in actual wooded areas. Pairing takes place early, often three or four months before the commencement of egg laying, and some pairs may form and start to roost (and even hunt) together. Limited nest building may be underway.

FEBRUARY

PEREGRINE

Winter visitors should have stopped arriving by now, and are well established in their winter quarters, or are remaining nomadic. Some earlier arrivals may start to return, but most of out over-wintering visitors leave around March or early April. An influx of passage birds may occur. Non-breeding resident adults from last season (and first year birds) are still probably well dispersed throughout the country, but may now be looking for breeding areas. Successful breeding pairs from last year, may return (if they left) to their breeding areas. Many (or even most) pairs are now roosting together. Cooperative hunting among adult pairs may start (or continue) until at least the end of the month. There is evidence of courtship/territorial behaviour. Male to female food transfer can be observed from the middle of the month. Other display flights are evident.

SPARROWHAWK

Winter visitors will have stopped arriving by now, and any winter territories they are holding will break down as the month progresses. Pairs continue to show interest in nesting activity, and are increasingly roosting together. Display flights (soaring, spiralling, high-speed chases, and exaggeratedly slow flights), above their nesting territory may become more evident. These display flights usually have peaks at the time of nest building and egg laying. The territory is usually 'staked out' (and initially defended) by the female. Territories are normally at least 400 yards apart, but on occasions (and increasingly so) may be less than 200 yards. To further complicate matters, territories sometimes overlap. Polygamy is quite frequently recorded, with one male pairing with two females. Some birds will still be in juvenile plumage when first breeding, and may retain scapular feathers (and tertials) until May/June/July of their third year.

MARCH

PEREGRINE

Winter visitors leaving. Spring passage birds are passing through. Late birds may still be returning to their breeding areas. Male to female food transfer, display flights, and pairs roosting together continue. Early egg laying occurs from the middle of the month. Some birds are still dispersed throughout the country (mainly first year birds), national and local movements are still apparent.

SPARROWHAWK

Movements of visiting birds are still much in evidence. Most resident pairs are now established in breeding territories, and nest building will have peaked by the end of the month. Sparrowhawks usually build a new nest each season. An old nest of another species may be used or adapted. Successive nests are normally sited in close proximity, often in the same tree. A typical nest can be located on a side branch (usually close to the trunk), at a height of 20 to 50 (sometimes up to 80) feet. On occasions nests are found on/in low bushes, and more exceptionally actually on the ground. In a dense wood the nest is likely to be situated near a track, path or stream, so as to ensure easy flight access (and visibility) to and from the nest. The nest is made of twigs (some picked up off the ground, but most broken from nearby trees or hedges). The nest lining is of thinner twigs and pieces of bark. Some green leaves may be added. The nest is usually built by the female, with some assistance from the male (bringing materials but not actually building). On occasions a pair may work together, both collecting and constructing. Numerous factors are involved regarding the time taken to build a nest, but on average (starting from scratch), a complete nest takes three or four weeks, and when complete is about two feet in diameter.

APRIL

PEREGRINE

By the end of the month most winter visitors should have left, although some young birds may summer-over; and could even become resident either short or long-term. Spring passage of birds reduced towards the end of the month. Egg laying peaks during the month (first half). Early hatching from the middle of the month. Some non-breeding birds (individuals and pairs) are holding territories.

SPARROWHAWK

All movements of visiting birds will have ceased by the end of the month. Late starters may be nest building. Nests can be built in a variety of trees, but if available/suitable there is a preference for conifers (especially Spruce). Of deciduous trees, Oak and Birch are often favoured. Pairs in the south of England typically nest (slightly) earlier than pairs further north. Pairs nesting in conifers tend to breed (slightly) earlier than those in deciduous trees. Earlier nestings tend (on average) to fledge more young per number of eggs laid. Early egg laying occurs from the middle of the month. The eggs are laid at two or three day intervals. Peak of nest building is over by the middle of the month (but nests may be continually added to throughout the breeding season). Some adult females start their moult at the end of the month.

MAY

PEREGRINE

Spring passage movements are over by the middle of the month. Late egg laying (of an initial brood) may occur at the beginning of the month. Repeat egg laying following losses can occur through to the middle of June. Some non-breeding birds well-established with territories. Hatching of eggs peaks towards middle of the month. (Very) early fledging may occur at the end of the month. Food transfer from male to female can still be observed.

SPARROWHAWK

Initial nest building is over by the middle of the month, although replacements for destroyed/damaged nests may be under way. Egg laying peaks this month. Early hatching occurs from the middle of the month. An increasing number of adult females start to moult. Some adult males begin their moult.

JUNE

PEREGRINE

Re-nesting of some pairs after failure of initial laying starts or continues. Late hatching of successful laying finished by the middle of the month. Fledging continues to increase (peak middle of the month), with more young on the wing with their parents. Some non-breeding birds are still holding territories.

SPARROWHAWK

Most eggs from initial (successful) laying have hatched by the middle of the month. The young can tear up food for themselves at 17 to 22 days. Females may also hunt for food during the last few (6 to 12) days before fledging. Early fledging of young will have occurred by the middle of the month. Fledging time falls between 20 and 43 days (usually 24 to 32). Although female young gain weight faster than males, their plumage development is somewhat slower, and consequently (on average) males tend to leave the nest before females. The peak of adult females starting to moult occurs at the beginning of the month. Most adult males have started to moult by the end of the month.

JULY

PEREGRINE

Fledging from (initial) successful laying continues to the end of the month, most young are already on the wing with their parents. Fledging from re-nested birds continues to the end of August. Some non-breeding birds are still holding their territories. Male to female food transfer may be observed. Some birds start to disperse from the end of the month.

SPARROWHAWK

Late hatching (and most hatching from replacement clutches) is complete by the middle of the month. If repeatedly 'lost', an initial clutch may be replaced up to three times in one season. The fledging of young continues. Peak feeding of fledged young from the middle of the month through August. On the approach of fledging (and during the period prior to independence) some adults (especially males) will have one or more suspensions in their moult. Some early dispersal of young may occur from the middle of the month. Most young birds will (probably) remain within 12 miles of their breeding site. The adult moult continues.

AUGUST

PEREGRINE

Re-nesting may continue through to the end of the month. Very late hatching from initial laying can occur. Some young still on the wing with their parents, others have separated and dispersed. Early winter visitors (probably young females) may arrive from the middle of the month. The first (young female) migrants can occur anytime from now to mid-October, but is most usual from mid-September onwards. Young males start to arrive slightly later - averaging October/November. Adult Peregrines can arrive at any time, but quite frequently not until December or January. Some of our successful resident breeding pairs may start to disperse. However, many (most) successful adult pairs will remain in (or near) their summer territory.

SPARROWHAWK

Fledging of young complete by the end of the month. Dispersion of young (and some adults) continues, and peaks towards the end of the month. Adults still in moult. Migrants may start to arrive towards the end of the month.

SEPTEMBER

PEREGRINE

All breeding activity should have now ceased. Some young are still on the wing with their parents, and there is continued separation and dispersal. Autumn passage of foreign birds is under way, and winter visitors are arriving (initially, mainly young females; young males from towards the end of the month, but mainly October to November). Young Peregrines may arrive (on the east coast) either singly, in pairs, or in groups of up to six or seven. Older birds tend to arrive singly or in pairs. A number of young birds may arrive (perhaps as a one-off) every year, merely due to their wandering nature. The numbers of passage birds tends to peak this month. Return passage can be February to May. Most passage birds are adults and may be regular (annual/seasonal) passers-through. Our resident birds may well be dispersed, although many (most) successful adult pairs will remain in or near their summer territory.

SPARROWHAWK

Independence is achieved by most young 3 or 4 (sometimes 5) weeks after leaving the nest. Most young are independent (or at least not dependent on their parents, although they may still be with them), by the end of the month. Incoming migrants are increasing. Breeders may disperse, (generally in the locality), and may separate within the breeding territory. Most adult females have completed their moult, although some continue through to the end of October. Most adult males have also completed their moult by the end of the month, although some may continue through to (at least) the beginning of November.

OCTOBER

PEREGRINE

Some young still separating from their parents. Resident birds may well be dispersed, many (most) successful adult pairs remain in or near their summer territory. Autumn passage of foreign birds continues, winter visitors (all ages/sexes) may arrive. (British-bred Peregrines may visit continental Europe, but ringing recoveries on the east coast of Britain, and in Europe, show that this is unlikely to occur every year, and when it does occur, it only involves single birds).

SPARROWHAWK

The number of migrants is increasing. Adult females will have completed their moult by the end of the month. Some adult males will continue to moult through to at least the beginning of November. Most birds remain in the same haunts.

NOVEMBER

PEREGRINE

Visitors continue to arrive, many becoming established in winter quarters from the middle of the month, others remain nomadic. Increases to the 'norm' of winter visitors may occur due to: a) The climate in Europe - the harsher the climate, the greater the likelihood of increased visitors to Britain. b) Breeding success in Europe - the greater the breeding success, so the greater the likelihood of increased visitors to Britain. c) Food supply - less availability of food abroad may increase the number of visitors to Britain. This may be a factor on its own, or may be allied to points a) ~ b). Peregrines may (and Sparrowhawks do) follow flocks of migrating birds to Britain. Most autumn passage movements of foreign birds will be complete by the end of the month. A few young may still be separating and dispersing from their parents, this will be complete by around the middle of the month. Much local movement is in evidence.

SPARROWHAWK

Migrants still occurring, by the middle of the month some established in winter quarters. Others remain relatively nomadic (particularly) on the east and south coasts of England. British birds (basically) remain within their established areas. Adult males will have completed their moult by the middle of the month.

DECEMBER

PEREGRINE

Winter visitors may still be arriving. Non-breeding resident adults (and first year birds) are (probably) well dispersed throughout the country, and may set up winter quarters. Successful (resident) breeding pairs will probably remain near their nest site, or at least in (or near) their breeding territory. It is difficult to estimate the number of Peregrines added to our own population from Europe each year (either on a temporary or a more permanent basis), due to their nomadic nature on arrival and the movement within this country of our own birds. Numerous observations at east coast sites of birds coming in from the sea would give a figure of (at least) around 50 birds each year, and possibilities (probabilities) in peak influx years of 300 to 400+ birds.

SPARROWHAWK

Most British birds have remained in their summer haunts. Migrant birds still establishing winter quarters, some remaining nomadic.

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Scottish Homing Union
Member's Raptor Survey

Name ..... Loft No. ..... Club ..... Fed .....

If you are a partnership, state how many in partnership _____

Do you have a problem with Hawks / Falcons? YES ☐ NO ☐

If you have ticked NO box please sign the form and return to your Club Secretary.

SECTION 1 Loft Location

Where is your loft located (state town or village) _____

Are there Peregrines near your loft location YES ☐ NO ☐

Are there Sparrowhawks near your loft location YES ☐ NO ☐

Have you witnessed pigeons being attacked by Hawks/Falcons near your loft? YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES was the attack by Peregrine? YES ☐ NO ☐

or Sparrowhawk? YES ☐ NO ☐

SECTION 2 Training 1996

Do you train your pigeons using your own transport? YES ☐ NO ☐

Do you train with other members? YES ☐ NO ☐

Have you changed training routes because of Hawk/Falcon problems? YES ☐ NO ☐

Have you witnessed pigeons being attacked by Hawk/Falcon during training? YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES - Please state area where attack took place _____

Have you had pigeons return from training injured due to Hawk/Falcon attack? YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES - Please state numbers injured _____

Have you lost pigeons from training flights YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES - Please state numbers lost in 1996 O/B _____

Y/B _____

From the old birds lost in training state number that had previously flown over 100mls _____

300mls _____

400mls _____

What would be your estimated value of old birds lost in training? £ _____

If you have raced pigeons for over ten years state from your records the approx. number of old birds lost in training in 1986 _____

SECTION 3 Racing

What was the average number of pigeons you sent to a race in 1996? _____

How many pigeons did you lose racing in 1996? _____

Have you had pigeons returned from racing injured due to Hawk/Falcon attack? YES ☐ NO ☐

If YES - Please state numbers injured _____

(Please answer the following if possible)

What was the average number of pigeons you sent to a race in **1986**? _____

How many pigeons did you lose racing in **1986**? _____

SECTION 4 Deterrents

Have you used wing transfers, sequins, bali bells or other legal means to deter attacks on the pigeons either at the loft, training or racing? YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES** state which method you used and if it was successful

Type used _____

How long in use _____

How successful _____

Use this space if you have tried several different deterrents

. . . . . .

Additional comments - Please use this space for any comments or information you may wish to pass on and add to the survey. The more data we can collect on the Hawk/Falcon problem the stronger our case becomes eg. you may wish to list approx. dates & details of any attacks etc.

This is your space, use it!

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please sign and return the completed form to your **CLUB SECRETARY** who will forward it to our office in the envelope provided.

Please sign

All information is correct to the best of my knowledge _____ Date _____

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