

Letters

Hastings Rarities in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

It is well established that, in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the prices paid by wealthy collectors for a single specimen of a British-taken rare bird could exceed the monthly earnings of the average tradesman. It has been suggested that this was a motivation for fraud, not least in the case of the 592 documented 'Hastings Rarities' specimens collected between 1892 and 1930 (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962). To George Bristow, the taxidermist who is

suspected of knowingly passing on several hundred fraudulent specimens during the Hastings period, this additional income presumably represented a significant sum, although James Harrison, in his defence of Bristow, pointed out that he showed no signs of conspicuous wealth (Harrison 1968).

Recently, when the exhibitions were closed as prelude to a planned refurbishment of the Royal Museum of Scotland (RMS), 14 mounted specimens that had been prepared

by Bristow were located in the British birds gallery. These and ten other specimens were acquired during 1913 and 1914, when the Museum was redeveloping and expanding its natural history displays under the direction of William Eagle Clarke. This mixture of rare birds and more common migrants is listed in table 1. There are three noteworthy issues. The first is that there was clearly no contemporary doubt regarding these specimens, otherwise the museum would not have bought them. Harry Witherby, then editor of *British Birds*, was to challenge Bristow about the provenance of the Hastings Rarities only in 1916. Second is that there are some rare birds that were not recorded elsewhere or tabulated in Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees (1962). Third is that the prices paid, though perhaps not excessive for each bird, were nevertheless cumulatively substantial. James Harrison (1968) also drew attention to the fact that not all of Bristow's birds had been documented, and the acquisitions by the RMS suggest that there may yet be rather a lot of unrecorded specimens (table 1). Some, such as the Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator* (plate 286) and Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* (plate 287), are possibly related to known Hastings Rarities but others, such as the Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg* (plate 288), are completely new. The

Martin Collinson © NMS



286. Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator*, reportedly obtained at Brighton, Sussex, on 22nd February 1914.

Martin Collinson © NMS



287. Female Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*, reportedly obtained at Rye, Sussex, on 10th May 1905.

Table 1. Specimens sold by George Bristow to the Royal Museum of Scotland. Those in blue are the 14 specimens that came to light during recent reorganisation of the British birds gallery.

Accession no. NMS.Z	Species	Age/sex	Reported date of collection	Reported location	Price	Notes
1913.198.1	Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	m	10.05.1912	Lydd, Kent		
1913.198.1	Kentish Plover	f	10.05.1912	Lydd		
1913.198.2	Little Gull <i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>	ad m	21.05.1913	Rye, Sussex		
1913.198.3	Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	ad f	10.04.1910	Crowhurst Marsh, St Leonards, Sussex		
1913.198.4	Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	m	30.11.1912	Rye		
1913.198.5	Little Crake <i>Porzana parva</i>	m	25.07.1913	Brickfields, St Leonards		Hastings Rarity 93
1913.198.5	Little Crake	f	19.07.1913	Brickfields, St Leonards		Hastings Rarity 92
1913.198.6	Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	m	03.05.1910	Romney Marsh, Kent		
1913.198.7	White-winged Black Tern <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	m	31.05.1911	Winchelsea, Sussex		Unrecorded previously, but may relate to 3 birds collected on 29.05.1911 (Hastings Rarities 250–252)
1913.198.7	White-winged Black Tern	f	31.05.1911	Winchelsea	1913.198, 10 skins bought as lot for £10.6/-	Unrecorded previously, but may relate to 3 birds collected on 29.05.1911 (Hastings Rarities 250–252)
1913.203	Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	ad m	02.05.1893	Rye Harbour	£2	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity
1913.204	Great Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	m	17.09.1912	St Leonards	£1.5/-	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity, the third Great Reed Warbler to be reported shot in St Leonards on a September date (see Hastings Rarities 390 & 392 in 1903 and 1906 respectively)
1913.205	Baillon's Crake <i>Porzana pusilla</i>	f	02.10.1902	Winchelsea	£1.10/-	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity
1913.206	Tawny Pipit <i>Anthus campestris</i>	f	10.05.1905	Rye	10/-	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity though Bristow reported finding pair and eggs on 23.05.1905 in SE Sussex
1913.207	Tawny Pipit	m	03.08.1907	Rye	10/-	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity
1913.208	Black-headed Wagtail <i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>	1	25.05.1912	Pevensey, Sussex	£1.5/-	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity
1913.209	Long-tailed Skua <i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	m	01.08.1911	Stromness, Orkney	£1.10/-	
1913.210	Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	m	29.04.1907	Pevensey	£1.10/-	
1914.22.1	Pine Grosbeak <i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	ad m	22.02.1914	Brightling, Sussex		Previously unrecorded but associated with 3 birds (Hastings Rarities 508–510) collected at Brightling in January 1914
1914.22.2	Nutcracker <i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	m	27.02.1914	Brede, Sussex		<i>macrorhynchus</i> : previously unrecorded but forms a pair with Hastings Rarity 334, female collected at Brede on 16.03.1914
1914.22.3	Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>	m	03.03.1914	Winchelsea	1914.22 – 3 specimens bought for £5	Previously unrecorded Hastings Rarity
1914.76	Sociable Lapwing <i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	m	09.05.1914	Winchelsea	£3	Hastings Rarity 111
1914.90	Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>	m	17.05.1914	Rye	£1.10/-	
1914.134	Rose-coloured Starling <i>Pastor roseus</i>	m	08.08.1914	Pevensey	£1.10/-	Hastings Rarity 493
					Total £31.16/-	

Martin Collinson © NMS



288. Male Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*, reportedly obtained at Pevensey, Sussex, on 25th May 1912.

plumage of the Pine Grosbeak is quite fresh and is probably consistent with a midwinter date. The plumage of the Black-headed

J. Martin Collinson, University of Aberdeen, Institute of Medical Sciences, Foresterhill, Aberdeen AB25 2ZD; e-mail m.collinson@abdn.ac.uk
 Robert Y. McGowan, National Museums Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF; e-mail b.mcgowan@nms.ac.uk

Wagtail is more worn than is typical for May birds.

The total sum paid to Bristow by the Museum for this series was more than £30 and the purchases spanned the period from November 1913 to August 1914. On the basis of the Retail Price Index this probably equates to around £2,300 today. However, it should be noted that this represented a reasonable contemporary market rate, comparable with prices charged by other taxidermists (Harrison 1968).

References

Harrison, J. M. 1968. *Bristow and the Hastings Rarities Affair*. Butler, St Leonards-on-Sea.
 Nicholson, E. M., & Ferguson-Lees, I. J. 1962. The Hastings Rarities. *Brit. Birds* 55: 299–384.

Status and movements of Eagle Owls in Europe

Since our earlier paper on the Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* was published (Melling *et al.* 2008), additional information has been received on the status and movements of this species and a summary is given here.

Size of the breeding population

With increased protection and a significant reintroduction programme in Germany in particular, the Eagle Owl has returned to those countries closest to Britain. Up-to-date population estimates are as follows.

- Denmark 33–34 pairs in 2007
- The Netherlands 8 territories in 2010
- Belgium 77–84 pairs in 2010
- Northern France (Roughly within about 250 km of the English coast: north of a line connecting Brest, Rennes, Paris and continuing east.) A survey in 2007–08 recorded six pairs, all at quarry sites near the Belgian border; the closest pair to England is 100 km from Calais. Individuals have been sighted near Boulogne, but there is currently no evidence of breeding (for more details, see Balluet & Chazal 2009, Balluet 2010).

Ringling recoveries

Information was requested from ringling schemes in 15 European countries and data were received from ten of these. We asked specifically for details of any ringling recoveries that confirmed or suggested that the birds had crossed large bodies of water. Despite a combined total of 5,488 recoveries, none of the ten countries had a single record that suggested such a movement, so there is no update to the small number listed in Melling *et al.* (2008).

We also requested information on the distance travelled by the recovered ringed birds. The mean distance travelled was 52.6 km (n=1,658) and the farthest distance travelled remained the German record of 528 km documented in our 2008 paper. It should be noted that the record of an Eagle Owl moving 1,179 km from Germany to France (Kelly *et al.* 2010) is incorrect. The German ringling scheme advised that there had been a mix-up over ring numbers and the bird in question was, in fact, a Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* and not an Eagle Owl. The information received prompted us to list both the mean and the maximum distances

moved by various European owls as revealed by ringing recoveries (table 1).

We contacted Utsira Bird Observatory, situated 8 km off the coast of southwest Norway, as this seemed an obvious location to record any evidence of Eagle Owls from the large Norwegian population (1,000–2,000 pairs) attempting a sea crossing. Despite a history of observations dating back to the 1930s, there has never been a single record of an Eagle Owl on Utsira (Jan Kåre Ness pers. comm.).

The same story emerges from the record books of Helgoland, Germany. The information on owls published in Gätke (1895), which collates the results of over 50 years of observations on the island, is an interesting start. The totals recorded were: Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* 1, Little Owl *Athene noctua* 1, Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus* 30, Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* well-known, up to four in a day in autumn, Short-eared Owl *A. flammeus* a common migrant in spring, very common in autumn, Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* 1, Snowy Owl *B. scandiacus* 1, Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula* 1, Eagle Owl 0. Thus, in over 50 years on an island noted for its migratory birds and lying just 42 km off the

German coast, Gätke recorded a host of rare birds, but not a single Eagle Owl. Helgoland Bird Observatory has just celebrated its centenary (see *Brit. Birds* 104: 290–302), yet during that time there has still not been a single record of an Eagle Owl.

Up to the end of 2008, a total of 8,282 Eagle Owls had been ringed in Sweden, generating no fewer than 2,285 recoveries. Not one had made the sea crossing to Denmark, despite the distance being less than 20 km at several places (and at one point it is only 4 km). This of course does not prove (nor do we suggest) that no Swedish Eagle Owl has ever crossed to Denmark, but it does surely indicate that even a short sea crossing can be a barrier to the species. In our 2008 paper we mentioned rumours of Eagle Owls on North Sea oil platforms, but the North Sea Bird Club has no records and we believe that the claims refer to misidentified Long-eared or Short-eared Owls. Indeed, at the time of writing there is a video posted on the internet which claims to show an Eagle Owl on a North Sea oil platform but which clearly shows a Long-eared Owl (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDYeKt_VLiQ).

The figures on the mean and maximum

Table 1. The mean and longest recovery distance of European owls, based on data supplied by ten European ringing schemes (for Eagle Owl) and from BWP for other species. In each column the species are ranked approximately from most sedentary to most migratory.

Mean distance moved by ringed birds	Longest recorded movement
Tawny Owl <i>Strix aluco</i> – 15 km	Ural Owl – 200 km
Little Owl <i>Athene noctua</i> – 15 km	Pygmy Owl – 300 km
Ural Owl <i>Strix uralensis</i> – 30 km	Great Grey Owl – 490 km
Eagle Owl <i>Bubo bubo</i> – 52 km	Eagle Owl – 528 km
Great Grey Owl <i>Strix nebulosa</i> – 100 km	Little Owl – 600 km
Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i> – 110 km	Tawny Owl – 745 km
Pygmy Owl <i>Glaucidium passerinum</i> – 150 km	Tengmalm's Owl – 1,350 km
Tengmalm's Owl <i>Aegolius funereus</i> – irruptive movements of over 1,000 km noted	Snowy Owl – 1,380 km
Snowy Owl <i>Bubo scandiacus</i> – 830 km	Barn Owl – 1,650 km
Hawk Owl <i>Surnia ulula</i> – few data, but recoveries are long-distance (e.g. Sweden to Russia)	Hawk Owl – 1,860 km
Long-eared Owl <i>Asio otus</i> – migratory in parts of its range	Long-eared Owl – 2,300 km
Short-eared Owl <i>Asio flammeus</i> – migratory and nomadic	Short-eared Owl – 3,345 km
Eurasian Scops Owl <i>Otus scops</i> – few data, but wholly or partially migratory and eastern birds travel 7,000–8,000 km to their wintering areas	Eurasian Scops Owl – 7,000 km

recovery distances in table 1 confirm that the Eagle Owl is one of the more sedentary European owls. This is relevant when considering Norman Elkins' suggestion that the bird in the West Midlands in 1990 may have come from Norway (*Brit. Birds* 103: 240–241). Apart from the meteorological data presented by Elkins, there is no evidence suggestive of a wild origin for the West Midlands bird. The distance of the speculative movement is a minimum of 827 km, which would be unprecedented for an Eagle Owl (over 50% farther than the known longest overland movement of 528 km; table 1) and would involve a sea crossing of at least 609 km (minimum distance between the coasts of Norway and England). Eagle Owls are not migratory, irruptive or nomadic and, as the information detailed above shows, they are relatively sedentary.

We wish to stress that, in over 5,000 ringing recoveries examined, the only significant sea crossing was by a bird recovered on the Swedish island of Gotland, which involves a crossing of at least 48 km (very different from the 600+ km separating Norway from the east coast of England). Moreover, the fact that movements overland are not a valid guide to how far birds will move over water is clearly illustrated by the figures for Tawny Owl. In Sweden, there is a recorded overland Tawny Owl movement of 745 km, yet Tawny Owls have never occurred in Ireland and there is general agreement that the relatively modest crossing of the Irish Sea (20 km at its narrowest) is a barrier for them.

Of course, we do not dispute the weather conditions at the time of the West Midlands record but, since captive Eagle Owls in

Britain escape at the rate of about 65 per year (Melling *et al.* 2008), then (irrespective of weather conditions) at any date in the year there are likely to be one or more escaped Eagle Owls at large somewhere in the UK. On the balance of probability, it seems far more likely that the West Midlands bird was an escape or illegal release, rather than a storm-driven bird arriving as a result of an unprecedented sea crossing.

In conclusion, we remain firmly of the opinion that current British records relate to escapes, illegal releases and their offspring and that input of wild birds from the continent is either zero or so low that it is effectively zero.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the ringing schemes in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland for supplying data. Thanks are also due to Jan Kåre Ness, who provided information on the status of the Eagle Owl on Utsira, and Pascal Demarques, who clarified the current status in northern France.

References

- Balluet, P. 2010. *Le Grand-duc*, No. 6. Available at: http://rapaces.lpo.fr/sites/default/files/mission-rapaces/36/GrandDuc_6_sept10.pdf (Access date: 11th July 2011).
- & Chazal, R. 2009. *Le Grand-duc*, No. 4/5. Available at <http://lpo.nozav.org/sites/default/files/mission-rapaces/36/LeGrandDuc4-5.Sept09.pdf> (Access date: 11th July 2011).
- Gätke, H. 1895. *Heligoland as an Ornithological Observatory*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Kelly, A., Leighton, K., Newton, J. 2010. Using stable isotopes to investigate the provenance of an Eagle Owl found in Norfolk. *Brit. Birds* 103: 213–222.
- Melling, T., Dudley, S., & Doherty, P. 2008. The Eagle Owl in Britain. *Brit. Birds* 101: 478–490.

Tim Melling, c/o RSPB, Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Denby Dale, West Yorkshire HD8 8QD
Steve Dudley, British Ornithologists' Union, PO Box 417, Peterborough PE7 3FX
Paul Doherty, 28 Carousel Walk, Sherburn in Elmet, North Yorkshire LS25 6LP