

# A history of *British Birds*

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and Richard Chandler

## Introduction

As the statement on the inside front cover – ‘Established 1907, incorporating *The Zoologist*, established 1843’ – confirms, *BB* will be celebrating its centenary this year, and this article is the first in a series to be published in Vol. 100 to celebrate that event. How did *BB* come into being, and how has it changed over the years? We hope that a review of where *BB* has come from, coupled with a statement of plans for the future, will, given that this is our centenary year, be both timely and of interest to our readers. The preparation of this history began some years ago. We turned initially to an editorial on ‘The First Fifty Years’ published in *BB* in June 1957 – at which time one of us (IJF-L) was already involved with the journal. That provided an excellent start and some of its contents are repeated here. In the past, we were also able to have extended conversations with E. M. (Max) Nicholson, who was for so long involved with the journal, and Anthony Witherby, who had taken over the publishing company on the death of his uncle, H. F. Witherby. As always, the editors invite comments and suggestions but, most particularly this year, they encourage readers to add to this history by providing their own memories of their time as subscribers to *BB*.

## Before 1907

It seems pertinent to look back a little before 1907 and examine the seeds from which *BB* germinated. H. F. (‘Harry’) Witherby was a partner, with his father and younger brother, in a London stationery manufacturing and printing firm, founded by his great-great-grandfather in 1740. The move by the firm into publishing came in the 1890s with the acquisition of the quarterly record of the Royal Navy, *The Royal Navy List*. In 1892, the firm acquired *Knowledge*, ‘an illustrated magazine of Science, Literature and Art’, which seems to have been a Victorian self-improvement publication fairly typical of its time. Almost immediately, and

even before he joined the firm as a partner in 1894 at the age of 21, Harry Witherby began contributing ornithological articles, including some which, after rewriting, would become chapters of his first book, *Forest Birds, their Haunts and Habits: short studies from nature*, based on his experiences in the New Forest where he grew up. *Forest Birds*, a small volume of 98 pages and with some 30 illustrations, was not produced by Witherby & Co., then yet to start book-publishing, but by Kegan Paul.

Harry Witherby was, from an early age, a keen naturalist – though it is unclear where this interest came from. He was certainly both a good observer and interested in communicating what he had seen. In October 1897, he introduced what was to become a regular section in *Knowledge*, entitled ‘British Ornithological

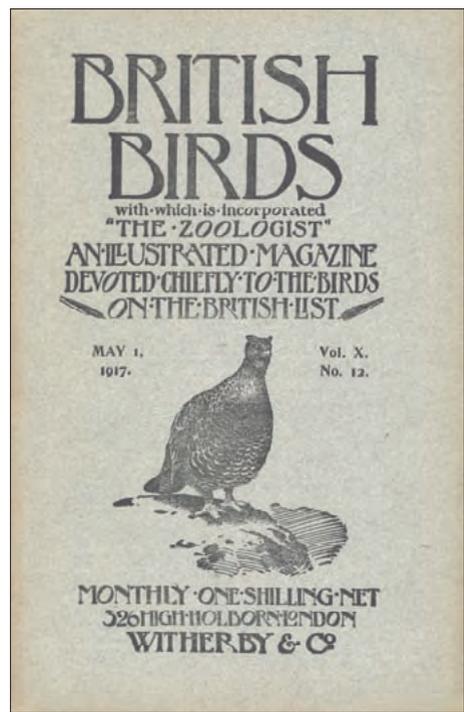
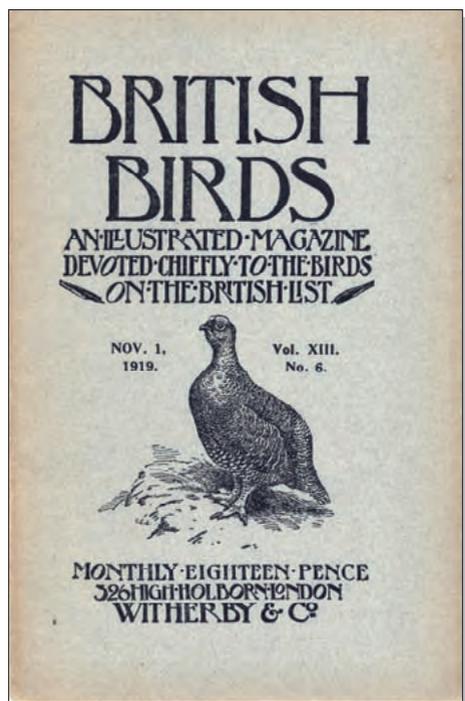


Fig. 1. May 1917. 1917 marked the first year of the incorporation of *The Zoologist* with *BB*.



**Fig. 2.** November 1919. By 1919, the original grouse drawing had been changed and the reference to *The Zoologist* dropped from the front cover, though retained on the contents list. The price had also risen, from one shilling to eighteen pence.

Notes'. The second of these, which appeared in February 1898, comprised two notes sent in by readers – on Wigeon *Anas penelope* nesting in Yorkshire, complete with a photograph of the nest, and on a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* shot in Sussex. Witherby both commented on these and added some information of his own on early nesting of birds in December 1897, as well as brief notices of the occurrence of several rare birds – all, naturally enough at that time, having been shot or, euphemistically, 'taken'. The similarities are sufficiently striking to show that this was obviously the progenitor of the 'Notes' section of *BB*. It seems highly probable that an increasing flood of letters and notes from the readers of *Knowledge* was one of the stimuli that caused Witherby to consider founding a journal devoted solely to birds.

Before *BB* first appeared, however, Witherby & Co. were moving into book-publishing, again led by Harry Witherby's interest in birds. His account of his journey along the White Nile in Sudan, *Bird Hunting on the White Nile*, appeared in 1902 with the publishing imprint of 'The Office of Knowledge', showing the con-

tinuing importance of that magazine in the company's affairs. Bird books continued to dominate the firm's book-publishing venture, and some 30 titles, nearly all on birds, had appeared by 1913. One of the earliest, J. E. Kelsall and P. W. Munn's *The Birds of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (1905), attracted a subscription list of 270 before publication and founded Witherby's long tradition of producing county avifaunas.

It should perhaps be recorded that, as well as being a fine field naturalist, Harry Witherby was a taxonomist of note, and his earlier ornithological activities were devoted primarily to the collection and study of skins; from these stemmed his interest in plumage changes and moult, on which he was to become a leading authority. His collection of skins eventually totalled over 9,000. He travelled extensively on collecting trips, destinations including the Kola Peninsula in Russia, Persia (now Iran) and Sudan, the results being published in *Ibis*, and he was one of the first British ornithologists to visit the now famous Coto Doñana in Spain, in spring 1898, the year of the Spanish–American War. His diary of that trip was at one time held in the *BB* editorial office and it was fascinating to read of his difficulties at that time in distinguishing *Sylvia* warblers in the field. Even his honeymoon, in Algeria, was combined with collecting, and his wife accompanied him on several subsequent trips to Spain. He thus developed a very considerable knowledge of birds in Britain, Europe and farther afield, and allied this to a desire to see information about British birds advanced by systematic investigation based on good science. The fact that his business involved the invaluable possession of a printing and publishing firm meant that he could hardly have been better qualified or placed to produce a new journal devoted to British birds.

### *The first fifty years*

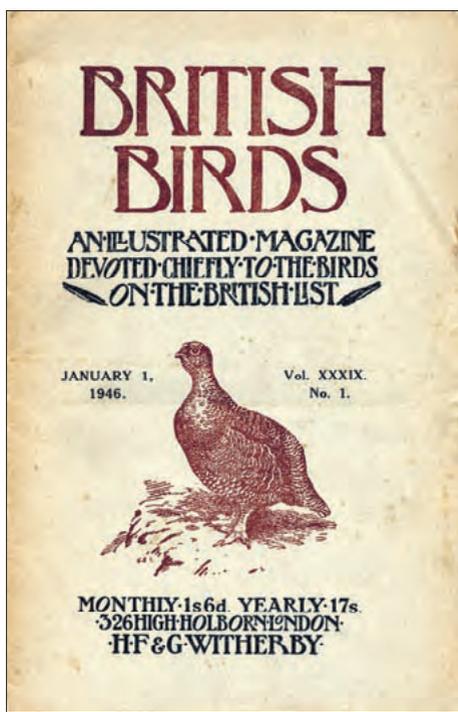
The June 1957 editorial in *BB* described how, early in 1907, H. F. Witherby approached friends and fellow ornithologists for support for his project to found a monthly journal devoted to the study of British birds. It also reprinted the original concepts expressed by Witherby about the scope and purpose of the new journal, demonstrating the remarkable grasp that Witherby had of the way forward for ornithology. His ideas embraced, for the first

time, the concept of amateur ornithological involvement in field studies and surveys.

Among the more significant events during those 50 years, the first of all was a note from Victor Wilson, published in only the second issue, in July 1907, which put forward an idea 'to trap birds and mark them, by a metal ring or otherwise'; this was accompanied by an editorial comment supportive of such a scheme. Thus, in those early days, *BB* clearly fulfilled roles that in future years were to be taken up by others, most notably the British Trust for Ornithology. With commendable alacrity the 'British Birds Marking Scheme', the first of its kind in the world, was launched in January 1909; it is now, of course, administered by the BTO. In a similar manner, the National Census of Heronries was launched in 1928 by Max Nicholson under the auspices of *BB*, which published the first report in 1929; this also is now administered by the BTO and continues to set new markers as the longest-running bird census in the world.

In January 1916 came the incorporation with *BB* of *The Zoologist*. That publication had been founded by Edward Newman (also a publisher) in 1832, originally as *The Entomological Magazine*, subsequently becoming *The Entomologist* and, in 1843, *The Zoologist*. From its emergence in 1843, and particularly from the 1850s, *The Zoologist* regularly published notes on birds, much as *BB* did from the beginning and, indeed, still does. It appears that the success of *BB* was the death knell for *The Zoologist*: as W. R. P. (Bill) Bourne succinctly put it, 'British Birds had got a progressive editor, Harry Witherby, and it [*The Zoologist*] had not' (*Brit. Birds* 88: 1–4).

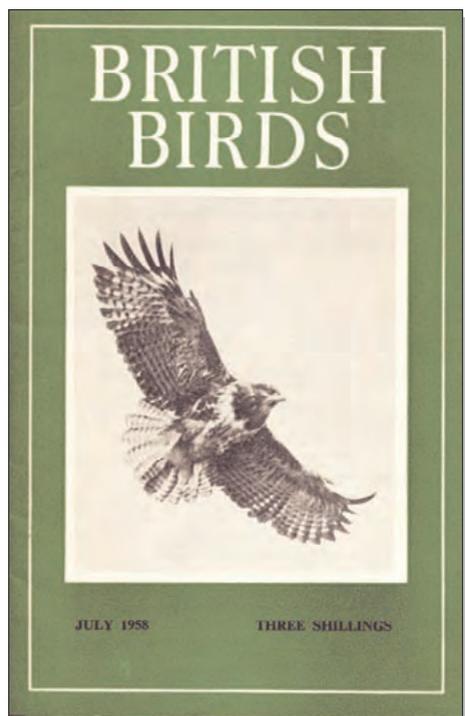
Harry Witherby was, as the editorial in 1957 put it, 'much more than the Editor of *British Birds*'. His death was a truly great loss, and it is difficult to imagine one man ever again playing such a leading role in British ornithology. Again to quote the 1957 editorial, 'his contribution was [because of the war] never fully assessed... it was not only immense but pervasive and incalculable.' Arguably, Witherby's greatest achievement was *The Handbook of British Birds* (1938–41). Though not directly associated with *BB*, *The Handbook* was written by H. F. Witherby, Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain, Norman F. Ticehurst and Bernard W. Tucker. Jourdain and Ticehurst had become assistant editors of *BB* in June 1909 and Tucker joined the board in June



**Fig. 3.** January 1946. Although 27 years (including the Second World War) had passed since 1919, the cover of *BB* was almost exactly the same, apart from the use of brown ink for the heading and the grouse emblem and the alteration in the name of the firm (and minor changes in the style of the date and price). The price itself, however, remained unchanged at 1s 6d per issue.

1940. Thus, the four authors of *The Handbook* were the four editors of *BB*, and the publishers were H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd. This five-volume work had an enormous influence on bird-watchers until its place was finally taken by the publication of *Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1977–94). There are many, however, who still regard Witherby's own detailed plumage descriptions in *The Handbook* as unsurpassed. Moreover, it was Bernard Tucker's beautifully concise and yet comprehensive sections on 'Field-characters and General Habits' that began the great advances in field identification that were to snowball as the interest in watching grew after the Second World War. Another of Witherby's many achievements was, with such young lions as Max Nicholson, the part he played in the setting up of the BTO in the 1930s.

Witherby died in December 1943 and, in the February 1944 issue of *BB*, Bernard Tucker was named as the new editor. In April 1944, A. W.



**Fig. 4.** July 1958. By 1958, the cover had been completely altered and a monochrome photograph of a different bird was used each month.

(Arnold) Boyd joined Ticehurst on the editorial board – Jourdain had died in 1940 – and other ornithological figures of the day, including two of the Alexander brothers (H. G. and W. B.), the Misses Evelyn Baxter and Leonora Rintoul (the remarkable ‘good ladies’ of Scottish ornithology), David Lack and Max Nicholson, to name but a few, became involved in an advisory capacity.

Bernard Tucker continued the high standard of his predecessor. Harry Witherby’s two sons and his nephew, Anthony, while maintaining the commitment of the firm to ornithological publications, were not themselves birdwatchers and could not be expected to have the same personal sense of attachment to the journal. Nevertheless, Tucker persuaded them to make several changes during his relatively brief tenure as editor, including from 1946 to coincide the volumes with the calendar year, instead of June to May, and also to use many more monochrome photographs, especially for the excellent – and eventually long-running – series entitled ‘Studies of some species rarely photographed’, which began in that year. There were, indeed, few bird photographers of the post-war decades

whose work did not appear at some time in the pages of *BB*.

But Tucker’s longest battles with the publishers were over the journal’s size. Although the number of pages per volume had climbed from an all-time low of 248 pages in the 1943/44 volume, perhaps a consequence of paper rationing at that time, it was still only a total of 384 pages, or 32 per month, in 1947. In 1948, the addition of a 42-page supplement – by M. N. Rankin and E. A. G. Duffey on ‘A Study of the Bird Life of the North Atlantic’ – helped to raise this sharply, to 450 pages. Nevertheless, Tucker remained restricted in how many 40-page issues he was allowed per year, this being linked to the publishers’ reluctance to raise the annual subscription, though they finally increased it from one pound per annum to one guinea at the end of 1950 – just about the time when Tucker died, at the age of just 50.

Bernard Tucker had been editor for less than seven years, but his impact on British ornithology in that period and through his work for *The Handbook* was considerable. He always encouraged young birdwatchers whom he met in the field. One such was IJF-L, who in 1943 ran into him by chance at Northampton sewage-farm – a magnet for birdwatchers, as were most of the old-fashioned sewage-farms in those days – and thereafter by arrangement fairly regularly. After a period in the Department of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, Tucker was appointed Reader in Ornithology at Oxford, the first in any British university, and many graduates and undergraduates there during and after the war had reason to be grateful for Bernard Tucker’s help and advice. This is recognised by the annual Tucker Memorial Lectures in Oxford since 1951, some of the most recent of which have subsequently been published in *BB*. He will be remembered, too, for his remarkably neat handwriting, which complemented his art of writing pertinently and concisely. Another memorial to Tucker was the institution by the BTO in 1953 of the Bernard Tucker Medal, awarded annually for outstanding recent work by a member of the Trust through contributions to its scientific work or its surveys.

Among the problems which Tucker had faced during his editorship, one in particular became increasingly acute, stemming from the growing popularity of birdwatching, which at that time began a post-war expansion from a compara-

tively rare eccentricity into a national pastime. From a manageable and relatively steady flow of papers and notes, the material being sent to *BB* began to turn into a flood, which threatened to overwhelm the editor. This led to the appointment in 1949 as Tucker's part-time assistant of J. D. (Duncan) Wood, a master at Leighton Park School, Reading. He had been secretary of the Oxford Ornithological Society in the 1930s at the same time as Tucker was president. He was paid a (small) monthly fee by Witherbys to handle many of the chores of routine editorial work and correspondence. This developed, as Bernard Tucker became ill, into his carrying out a major part of the editorial work. (Duncan Wood died as recently as March 2006, at the grand old age of 95; see *Brit. Birds* 99: 387–388.) As already noted, Bernard Tucker had two associate editors, N. F. Ticehurst and A. W. Boyd, and a number of consultants, to advise him on the suitability of papers and choice of material, but they were not able to give him much help in actual preparation for publication. When Tucker died, however, Arnold Boyd stepped into the breach and became *de facto* acting editor, with Duncan Wood continuing as assistant. Between them, they managed to keep the journal appearing monthly, though often somewhat late.

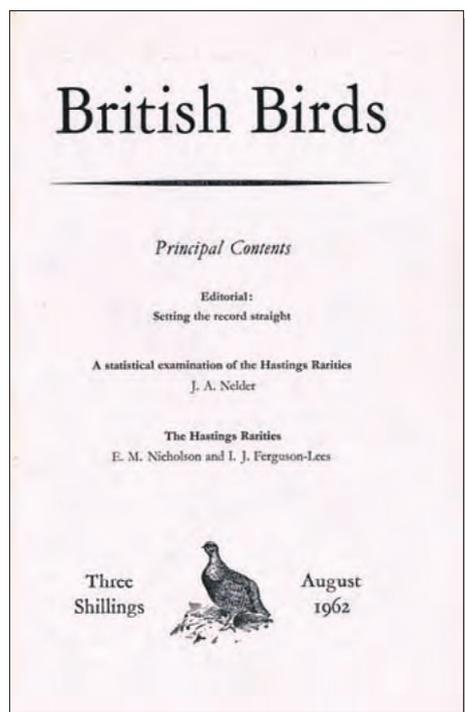
'The First Fifty Years' editorial pointed out how the rather few surviving ornithologists who had worked with both Harry Witherby and Bernard Tucker rallied round and ensured the continued survival of *BB*. What are not mentioned are some of the other possibilities discussed at the time. There was a real fear that publication might cease altogether and, with this in mind, it was proposed by a number of people that *BB* should become the official organ of the BTO. Although *BB* was publishing the results of many of the BTO surveys and reports, the idea did not find favour. Arnold Boyd expressed the contrary view that, while there was certainly a considerable overlap in the readership of *BB* and the membership of the BTO, the two institutions, though closely allied, did not have identical interests. He also doubted whether *BB* would be able to accommodate the increasing number of scientific papers emerging from BTO enquiries and still maintain its other services to ornithology. In the event, that organisation's own journal, *Bird Study*, was launched in 1954.

Another suggestion for the future of *BB*, put



**Fig. 5.** March 1959. In 1959, the cover had been redesigned by a professional artist (not a bird artist) enlisted by the publishers. The design was based on the Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* photograph used on the cover of the July 1958 issue (fig. 4), but the flight feathers on one wing overlap wrongly – so much so that, as was pointed out by several readers, the bird could not have flown!

forward by Duncan Wood, was that it should have a Board of Trustees, comprising representatives of the British Ornithologists' Union, the BTO, the Edward Grey Institute (EGI) at Oxford and the RSPB, as well as the publishers, Witherbys. He put this idea to Boyd and Ticehurst, and received a reply from the latter which, while approving strongly of the proposal, took issue with the inclusion of the RSPB among the organisations to be represented, with the words: 'regards a representative of the RSPB, I cannot see any utility or justification for including that Society which, as such, has never done any scientific bird work at all.' This somewhat unfair and nowadays wholly inappropriate comment perhaps reflected a much earlier outlook. Indeed, there would have been a time when the RSPB would probably have been reluctant to have anything to do with a journal edited by Harry Witherby, who had collected large numbers of birds and, in the shape of F. C. R. Jourdain, had an assistant editor who remained an egg-collector to the end of his



**Fig. 6.** August 1962. The buzzard drawing (fig. 5) had been removed after just one year and the style shown by this very simple cover, based on the main contents, was used for nine years with just the background colour changing annually. August 1962 has been selected here because that was a special 104-page issue dealing with the 'Hastings Rarities' (see text).

days. The RSPB thus tended to equate scientific ornithology with collecting, which was at least partly true, and so had periods of quite strong anti-science, while the scientists of the time regarded that body as no more than a lot of somewhat sentimental bird-lovers.

The new arrangements finally decided upon to fill the gap left by Bernard Tucker took just under two months to be brought into being, with an announcement of the new editorial board appearing in the March 1951 issue. Such a speedy outcome undoubtedly owed much to the fact that Max Nicholson had worked closely with Harry Witherby, and was therefore known in person and by reputation to the Witherby directors. Max Nicholson became chairman of the new board of editors (the 'senior editor'), where he was joined by the previous associate and assistant editors, Arnold Boyd, N. F. Ticehurst and Duncan Wood, and by two new members, Wilfrid B. Alexander (generally known as 'W. B.') and P. A. D. (Phil) Hollom.

The new board was able to produce a 440-page volume that year and also to begin publishing some of the backlog of accumulated papers, notes and book reviews which had built up substantially during Bernard Tucker's last year. An editorial in the May 1951 issue also flagged up what had become a major concern of Bernard Tucker's shortly before his death, namely the problems associated with the increasing numbers of field-identifications of rarities and the need for their more critical examination. Examples came to light of reports published in *BB* which had been rejected or at least put in square brackets by the county recorder in the relevant local report, and vice versa.

The idea of improved arrangements for dealing with rarities was in the minds of other ornithologists, too. In a letter dated 17th January 1951, David Lack had written to Arnold Boyd and suggested the formation of a committee 'for the consideration of records of rare birds before they are published. This committee should be closely linked with the BOU List Committee, and should keep in close touch with local Natural History Societies.' He went on to say how some records were submitted only to *BB* while others, equally interesting, went only to local journals, and that in the latter cases the vetting could be very variable. He advocated treating all records of rare birds equally. He concluded, 'I feel that if a committee was set up, its decision would give much more weight to the records published in *BB* than is at present the case.' The *BB* Rarities Committee was not, however, set up until 1959 (see below).

IJF-L's name first appeared on the title page of *BB* in June 1952, and remained there until 1979. Also a schoolmaster in the early 1950s, like Duncan Wood, he was invited to join as part-time assistant editor in 1952, when Duncan Wood obtained a post overseas. The workload was far too heavy, however, and in 1954 he gave up teaching to take up the appointment of executive editor, a post he was to hold for 19 years. A number of significant developments took place during his period as executive editor. First and foremost was the formation of the *BB* Rarities Committee, or BBRC: a committee of ten – who soon became teasingly known as the 'Ten Rare Men' – was devised and set up jointly by Phil Hollom, who became its first chairman, and IJF-L. (An article describing more fully the history of BBRC, its

publications and procedures, will be published in the March 2007 issue.)

This was followed by the setting-up of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP), which IJF-L devised with David Lea, then Deputy Director (Conservation) of the RSPB. The first RBBP report, for the year 1973, was written by J. T. R. (Tim) Sharrock, at that time the BTO's representative on the Panel, and published in 1975. Max Nicholson and IJF-L also saw the need, as a follow-up to the formation of the BBRC, for closer co-operation with editors of county bird reports. In the early 1960s they organised and were the introductory speakers at two one-day conferences; these led eventually to the formation, by Mike Rogers, of the Association of County Recorders and Editors (ACRE). Among other things, IJF-L introduced 'Recent reports and news' (as an offshoot of his monthly broadcasts in the *Countryside* programme) and was, with George Yeates and then Eric Hosking, responsible for developing what had started out as 'Studies of some species rarely photographed' into 'Studies of less familiar birds'. He thinks that perhaps his greatest memorial is the fact that the design of the annual *BB* Index – or 'Comprehensive Index' when it was launched in 1953 – still follows almost exactly the format that he developed with Diana Blamire (née Giffard) and which, much later, was carried on by MAO; they say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and even the layout of the binding instructions and booking form have hardly changed in more than 50 years.

#### *Since 1957: the editorial board, Macmillan Journals and BB Ltd*

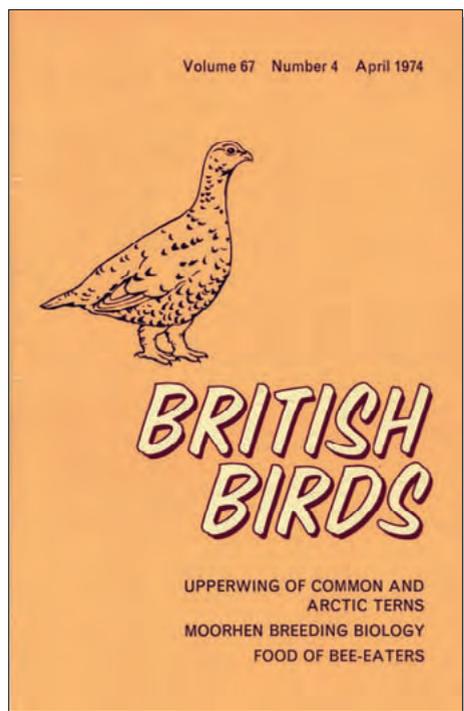
In the January 1960 issue of *BB*, it was announced that Max Nicholson, while remaining on the editorial board, was handing over the post of senior editor to Phil Hollom and that both N. F. Ticehurst and Arnold Boyd were being given a title of honorary editor, in effect signalling their retirement. To replace them, the editorial board invited Stanley Cramp, who had already established himself as an outstanding amateur ornithologist, to join them. Another change was also announced in the same editorial: George Yeates, who had been appointed the journal's first photographic editor in 1954, was handing over to Eric Hosking.

It is questionable whether formal editorial meetings had ever been held before this time,



**Fig. 7.** January 1969. This was the first issue using a design that was to last for five years, again with an annual change of paper colour. Like the previous design, it listed the main contents, but for the first time the emblem showed a grouse in flight.

though IJF-L had long had regular discussions with Max Nicholson in the latter's office at the Nature Conservancy, and they both met Phil Hollom at various ornithological talks and conferences, as well as at the monthly meetings in London of the 1937 Bird Club, of which Stanley Cramp was also a member. From 1960, however, probably at Cramp's instigation, monthly *BB* editorial meetings were held at a quiet restaurant in Soho and these continued for the next ten years. They would last about three hours and were part formal, part discussion of ornithological topics in general, and many developments not directly concerned with *BB* grew out of them. Probably the most important of these followed a discussion about *The Handbook* and the problem that, after a quarter of a century, it was becoming – in parts at least – increasingly out of date. IJF-L was asked to produce a paper on what should be the aims of a new 'Handbook', what it might involve in terms of research and some of the pitfalls to be avoided. At the next meeting, Max Nicholson proposed that, because British birdwatchers were by then frequently travelling in Europe



**Fig. 8.** April 1974. Five years later the grouse had landed again, in a new design that lasted only through 1975 (when it and the cover were blue).

and North Africa, the boundaries of the area covered by the new handbook should be extended from Britain & Ireland alone to take in the whole of the Western Palearctic. That was how *BWP* was born and the four *BB* editors became the first directors of West Palearctic Birds Ltd. Species lists were drawn up, the team enlarged, and the subject aired in open discussion at the IOC in Oxford in 1966 and in The Netherlands in 1970.

Those editorial meetings in the 1960s also led to other things. In and after that decade, Stanley Cramp and IJF-L were closely involved with the BTO, RSPB and BOU in various capacities, and Max Nicholson was not only director-general of the Nature Conservancy (until 1966), but also a founder member of the World Wildlife Fund, conservation-convenor for the International Biological Programme, vice-president of the Wildfowl Trust, and a former officer of all the other British ornithological bodies. The fourth editor in that decade, Phil Hollom – the ‘quiet man’ of post-war British ornithology – was one of the authors of the first (and, at that time, by far the most used) of the European field guides, *The Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* (Petersen *et al.* 1954); and also author of

*The Popular Handbook* (1952) and *The Popular Handbook of Rarer British Birds* (1960), both condensed updates of Witherby’s *Handbook*.

Thus, apart from *BWP*, other major subjects were explored during those *BB* editorial meetings in the 1960s. Following the publication of the *Atlas of the British Flora* (Perring & Walters 1962), one such subject was the feasibility of grid-mapping British bird distributions, which was being raised, with much opposition, in the committees of the BTO. The discussion at the *BB* editorial meeting helped to convince IJF-L to support the proposal strongly at the BTO Council, as a result of which he was appointed chairman of the Atlas Working Group that oversaw the organisation of the first *Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (Sharrock 1976). Another topic was that of reintroductions – now very much in vogue, but not in those days – which led to the presentation by Stanley Cramp and IJF-L of what was probably the first paper to the RSPB on this subject.

At the beginning of 1963, Stanley Cramp had taken over as senior editor from Phil Hollom, though the latter remained as a board member. Cramp was to hold this position right through until his death in 1987 (*Brit. Birds* 81: 10–13), making him the longest-serving senior editor after Harry Witherby (1907–43), though N. F. Ticehurst had been a member of the board from 1909 to 1957 and, more recently, David Christie was assistant editor from 1973 to 2002 (see below).

After this period of calm, the 1970s brought several changes and at least one major crisis. In 1970, when publication was often late, sometimes by a month or more, Pat Bonham joined the editorial board as assistant to IJF-L. Then, as announced in the January 1972 issue, Max Nicholson and Phil Hollom decided to step down and, in their places, Ian Wallace and MAO joined the board. Ian Wallace was, and is, a well-known and skilled amateur, who had at that time recently become chairman of BBRC, while MAO was then a research scientist at what is now the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge, thus becoming the first full-time professional ornithologist to be appointed to the editorial board.

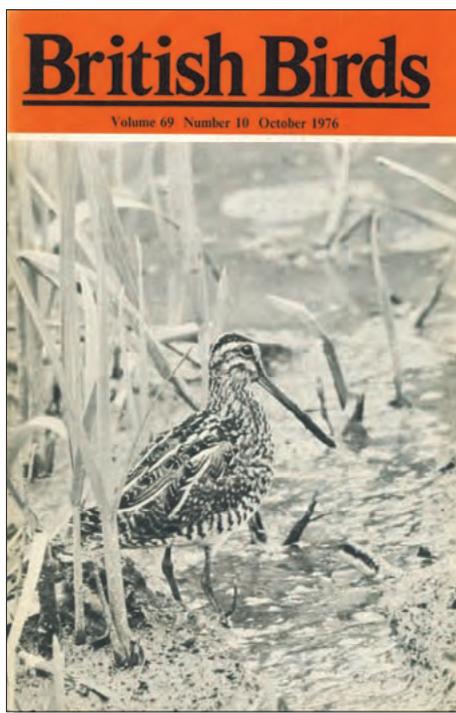
At the end of January 1973, IJF-L resigned as executive editor to join the staff of the RSPB and also to give him more time to work on *BWP*, but he agreed to remain on the editorial board and did so until 1979. His erstwhile assis-

tant, Pat Bonham, was appointed as executive editor in his place. At that point, David Christie joined as assistant editor – a position he was to hold until March 2002 (*Brit. Birds* 95: 214–215). A tower of strength throughout that time, Christie became acting editor on two occasions: first in 1975/76, following the resignation of Pat Bonham in July 1975, and again in 2000/01, during the interregnum between Tim Sharrock and Roger Riddington.

In 1973 this new team had barely had time to settle when Witherby & Co. dropped a bombshell in their laps with the announcement that the firm could no longer afford to support *BB*. Circulation was down and the journal was clearly losing money. This became one (of many) of Stanley Cramp's finest hours. Single-handedly, and with a minimum of consultation with his colleagues – in his latter years not an unusual method of working on his part – he negotiated the sale of *BB* to a new publisher, Macmillan. This firm had a substantial journals division and Cramp persuaded the directors that *BB* would sit comfortably alongside the likes of *Nature* and *Nursing Times*. He also clearly hoped that, as proved to be the case, Macmillan would be prepared to invest in promoting the journal and boosting its circulation to a more profitable state.

In July 1976, the editorial board, and Macmillan, appointed Tim Sharrock as managing editor, fresh from the recent success of organising, for the BTO, the first *Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1976). One of the first major changes to *BB* overseen by Sharrock was a complete redesign of the journal, with new typography throughout. It also now became possible for the whole journal to be printed on art paper, thus allowing photographic illustrations to appear in their appropriate places, instead of, as before, confined to inserted pages in the middle. Ian Wallace resigned from the editorial board at the end of 1978, because of pressure of other work, and his place was filled by Peter Grant, another keen and knowledgeable amateur, who in 1976 had also taken over from Wallace as chairman of BBRC.

The four editors, Stanley Cramp, MAO, Peter Grant and Tim Sharrock, were faced with a considerable new challenge in 1980, when Macmillan Journals decided that they wished to dispose of *BB*. A review of costs led Macmillan to conclude that the journal was not sufficiently



**Fig. 9.** October 1976. By 1976, monochrome photographs had returned to the cover, now bled off.

profitable. With remarkable foresight, Sharrock, when negotiating his contract with Macmillan, had managed to include a clause giving him first option to purchase the whole journal, and this, with the advice and encouragement of Cramp and the other editorial board members, was put into effect. A new company, British Birds Ltd, was formed for the purpose, with the four members of the editorial board equal shareholders and directors. The new company's aims and objectives were set out in an editorial in the August 1980 issue entitled '*BB* goes independent'. These aims were to manage *BB* for the benefit of British ornithology, with the company being run on a non-profit basis and any surplus devoted to providing a better journal.

Three more editorial changes took place in the period up to 1996. Peter Grant resigned in July 1987 and was replaced by RJC, who had been one of the journal's photographic consultants since 1980. With the death of Stanley Cramp in August 1987, the position of 'senior editor' was abolished, and the use of the senior editor's name on the spine of bound copies was discontinued. Robin Prytherch, who had had a long career as a producer of natural history pro-



**Fig. 10.** July 1978. In 1978, line-drawings replaced the photographs and the principal contents reappeared on the front cover.

grammes for the BBC, succeeded Cramp on the editorial board. Finally, the board size was increased to five in July 1992 with the appointment of Rob Hume, then (and still) editor of the RSPB's *Birds* magazine and, from 1993 to 1997, chairman of BBRC.

#### *Other important publishing developments*

Selecting from the wealth of topics covered in the last 50 years is no easy matter, so much is of interest. Perhaps the single most important event of the late 1950s was the appearance of the ecological sketches of the Coto Doñana and the Camargue, which helped to mark at least the beginning of the end of the insularity which had been apparent in much British ornithology (*Brit. Birds* 51: 1–23, 321–350). These seminal papers also broadened the scope of the journal, containing, as they did, much that was not strictly about birds, even though a proper understanding of the latter benefited greatly from the more ecological material included.

The 1950s and the 1960s were also noteworthy for the number of papers about bird migration, stemming particularly from Kenneth Williamson's theories of drift migration across the North Sea. It is now understood that some

of his hypotheses were based on inadequate data and revealed as such only by later radar studies. Nevertheless, his papers were eagerly anticipated and read, and stimulated much interest in migration studies, as well as giving a considerable boost to the establishment of bird observatories and coastal ringing sites, which have continued to reveal much of value and interest.

In 1962, the entire August issue – no fewer than 104 pages – was devoted to the 'Hastings Rarities' affair, with two long papers and appendices, preceded by an editorial entitled 'Setting the record straight'. The publication of these resulted from investigations over several years by Nicholson and IJF-L and, independently, a statistical exercise by J. A. Nelder. This issue of *BB* aroused a great deal of interest, not only among ornithologists, but also in the national press, which gave the subject front-page and even cartoon treatment, partly because of an assumed (but, in fact, non-existent) link with the Piltdown Man fraud. Although, as the authors said, they had waited until most of the main protagonists were dead, and were careful not to attach blame, there were still some people alive who had had at least some involvement, either directly or through relatives, and these made their contrary views known, both then and subsequently, through articles, letters and a book. Despite such counter-argument, the move to relieve British ornithology of the great cloud of suspicion and downright disbelief which had hung over so many records of rare birds for so long can be regarded as a complete success. It must go down as one of the great achievements of *BB* and its then editorial board. Max Nicholson liked to say that it was the exposure of the Hastings Rarities and the formation of the BBRC that put the final nail into the coffin of the old saying that 'What's hit's history, what's missed's mystery'. Since that time, of course, there have been other, smaller-scale exposures of frauds involving specimens, most recently the 'Tadcaster Rarities' (*Brit. Birds* 98: 230–237).

A further development also began in the late 1960s. Papers by J. L. F. Parslow at that time, specially commissioned by *BB*, reviewed status changes in the breeding birds of Britain and Ireland and were subsequently published as a book, *Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland* (Poyser, 1973). This pattern was later repeated for two other series of ground-breaking papers

that first appeared in *BB* and were republished as books: *Flight Identification of European Raptors* by Richard Porter, Ian Willis, Steen Christensen and Bent Pors Nielsen (Poyser, 1974); and *Gulls: a guide to identification* by Peter Grant (Poyser, 1982).

A number of other books have also been developed from the spawn of publications in *BB*: *Scarce Migrant Birds in Britain and Ireland* by Tim Sharrock (Poyser, 1974); *Frontiers of Bird Identification*, edited by Tim Sharrock (Macmillan Journals, 1980); *Birdwatching in the Seventies* by Ian Wallace (Macmillan, 1981); *A Notebook of Birds*, compiled by Jim Flegg from some of the myriad short notes published over the years (Macmillan, 1981); *Birds New to Britain and Ireland*, edited by Tim Sharrock and published by Poyser in 1982, which republished the first accounts of major rarities (updated in 2005 by Adrian Pitches and Tim Cleeves in their *Birds New to Britain 1908–2004* from the same stable); and a compilation of 34 stories by a cross-section of British ornithologists describing their *Best Days with British Birds* was put together and edited by MAO and Stuart Winter (*BB*, 1989). Now, to celebrate the centenary, it is hoped to reproduce the entire 100 years of *BB* editorial content in electronic format, which, being fully searchable, will be an invaluable resource for British and West Palearctic ornithology.

These publications represent just one way in which *BB* has expanded, and continues to expand, its horizons. While maintaining its traditional high standards, there has been a deliberate move towards a broader appeal, through a change to more modern and flexible layout, many new features and series, and the organisation of a number of competitions. The 'Bird Photograph of the Year' award has had many imitators, but still attracts top photographers who recognise its influence. The 'Bird Illustrator of the Year' award – which ran from 1979 to 2002 – markedly improved the standard of black-and-white line illustration among bird artists, several of the winners of this award going on to make careers in bird art.

In running these and other awards, *BB* has been supported by generous sponsorship from commercial firms. Appropriately, the first firm to offer both financial support and examples of its main product was Famous Grouse Ltd, which, over many years, was happy to help a much smaller concern that also had a Red



**Fig. 11.** August 1978. A one-off in August 1978 broke new ground as *BB*'s first colourful cover, using the design that won a Young Ornithologists' Club competition.

Grouse as its logo. Sponsorship has also been vital in maintaining the Rarities Committee. While the committee members perform their services entirely voluntarily, the secretary's honorarium and his and the members' postage and travel expenses amount to a considerable sum each year and the long-term sponsorship by Carl Zeiss Ltd has been of great importance. Other key sponsorship and support for awards has been received from book publishers – including Pica Press, Poyser (both of which are now in the A&C Black stable), and Harper-Collins – and others.

A major change in the British ornithological scene in the past two decades has been the advent of several completely new bird magazines. *Bird Watching*, published by EMAP, the leading magazine publisher in the country, appeared in 1986, to be followed in 1987 by *Twitching*, renamed *Birding World* in 1988, which is concerned primarily with the occurrence of rare birds. Another, *Birdwatch*, first appeared in 1992 as a bi-monthly, before changing over to monthly two years later. To some extent, these magazines have made life more difficult for *BB*, not least by eating into its

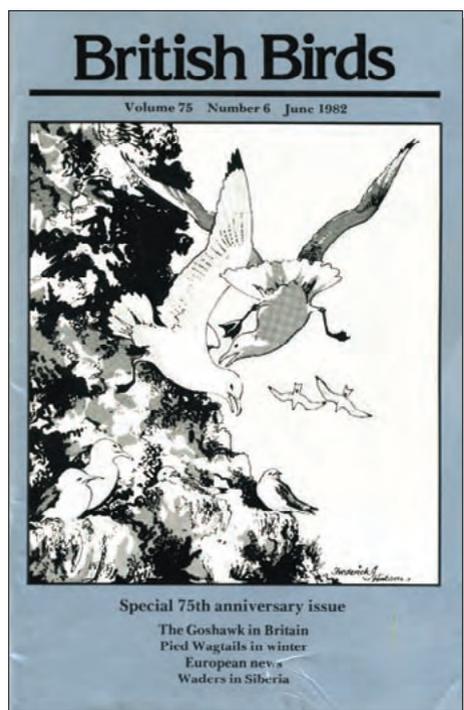


Fig. 12. June 1982. A silver cover to mark the 75th anniversary issue.

circulation and by direct competition through the use of ideas and features pioneered by *BB*; but competition has also been beneficial in forcing each of these magazines to play to its strengths, and establish its own particular niche.

In terms of its physical appearance, *BB* has evolved much more dramatically during the past 20 years than for the first 80, most notably in 1999, when the present, larger format was introduced, and printed in colour throughout, allowing far greater flexibility in the use of illustration. The main concern of the present directors and editorial board, however, has been to maintain *BB*'s role as an indispensable bird journal for birdwatchers. The key aims of *BB* are summarised inside the front cover each month, and a number of elements – such as its status as the respected journal of record, and its coverage of a breadth of topics from behaviour and ecology through distribution and movements to identification, taxonomy and conservation – provide both a link with our past and a signpost for the future.

As has been seen, *BB* long ago extended its coverage beyond the shores of Britain and Ireland, and now recognises the boundaries of the West Palearctic as its natural limits, though

with extensions from time to time to cover the Palearctic species occurring in, for example, Thailand, China and Australia. More recently, the title 'Important Bird Areas' was instigated (*Brit. Birds* 99: 280–281) as an occasional series, of which the first two papers have now been published, on Southwest Greenland (June 2006) and the United Arab Emirates (November 2006). We believe these to be both a valuable resource for our readers, and a clear record of the ornithological importance and conservation needs of these areas.

### Recent developments

The late 1990s was a period when new competition from other journals was having a detrimental effect and, in October 1997, three of the four remaining directors (RJC, MAO and Robin Prytherch) resigned and passed their shares in *British Birds* Ltd to Tim Sharrock. Shortly thereafter, ownership of the company was assumed by Christopher and Amanda Helm, who transferred the administration to their home near Robertsbridge, in East Sussex. In the meantime, the editorial board, aware of the need to introduce new (and younger) blood, appointed Ian Carter, Martin Collinson and Nigel Redman as additional members in June 1998, while MAO resigned at the end of 1997, at the end of a 26-year stint.

Early in 2000, *British Birds* faced another significant challenge, for the new arrangements had not proved successful and Christopher Helm informed the editorial board that he would be unable to continue the business beyond May or June of that year. An ad hoc committee was formed consisting of RJC, Jeremy Greenwood, Peter Oliver, Robin Prytherch and Bob Scott, and this, having examined the basics of the business, concluded that it could be made viable. There followed a hectic six weeks of fund-raising, and the resulting help and support of many individuals and organisations, including the RSPB, enabled a new company, *BB 2000* Ltd, to assume ownership of the business. The members of the working group became the first directors of the company, Tim Sharrock retired as editor at the end of 2000 and, with David Christie holding the fort during the intervening period and providing crucial experience and continuity for the new blood, Roger Riddington took over in February 2001. At the same time, ownership of *BB 2000* Ltd was transferred to the *British Birds*

Charitable Trust, thus ensuring that any profits made by the company would be available to support British ornithology and, consequently, fully in accord with the sentiments of Harry Witherby.

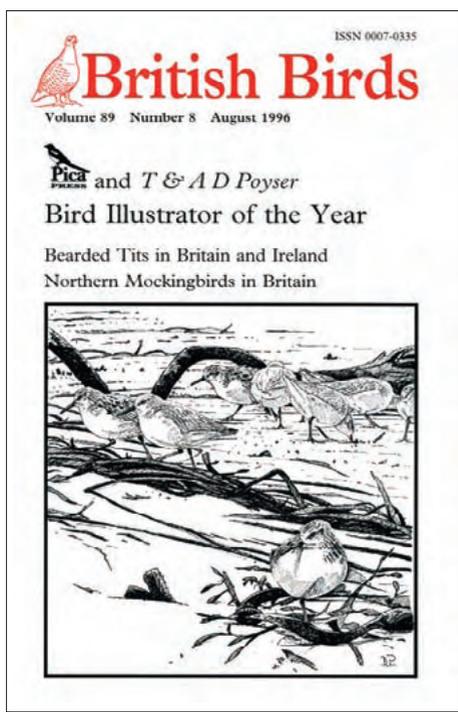
Since then, membership of the editorial board has expanded: Dawn Balmer joined in February 2003; Chris Kehoe (whose responsibility for dealing with rare subspecies on behalf of BBRC replaced a direct link with the committee that had been broken when Rob Hume retired simultaneously in 1997 as chairman of BBRC and as a member of the editorial board) in October 2005; and Steve Votier in January 2006. The combined breadth of ornithological interests of its members is now considerable. There have also been changes in the membership of the board of directors. Peter Oliver and Robin Prytherch retired, though the former remains as a trustee and the latter as a member of the editorial board. John Eyre and Ian Packer were recruited to the board, followed by Richard Porter, Terry Smeeton and, more recently, Adrian Pitches. At the end of 2005, RJC stood down as chairman and as a director, though remaining on the editorial board and as a trustee, and John Eyre took over as chairman.

As for the future, we are immensely encouraged by the volume of material now being submitted to *BB*. This is testament to the hard work put in by our substantial team of enthusiastic workers and supporters. Most importantly, our subscribers, many of whom have witnessed some of the changes to the fortunes of the journal over the years, have continued to support us loyally. Subscribers are the life-blood of *BB* and we hope for, and indeed rely upon, their continued support, while recognising that we have constantly to earn it. With this support, as we move on to the next hundred years we shall know that, at the very least, Harry Witherby's vision for the journal remains intact.

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*James Ferguson-Lees, 4 Walnut Close, Rode, Frome, Somerset BA11 6QA*

*Richard Chandler, 4 Kings Road, Oundle, Peterborough PE8 4AX*



**Fig. 13.** August 1996. Black-and-white illustrations remained the familiar *BB* cover format for over 20 years, until January 1999 when the journal switched to its present size and adopted colour photographs on the cover.

#### Acknowledgments

In the writing of parts of this account, the correspondence files of the late Duncan Wood have been used. References are also made to editorials in *BB*, especially that in the June 1957 issue, entitled 'The First Fifty Years', which comprised a comprehensive account of the founding, development and achievements of *BB* up to that time. MAO wrote a brief history of *BB* which was published in the 1983 edition of *The Birdwatchers' Yearbook*, and some short quotations have been taken from that. David Christie, Peter Oliver and Robin Prytherch made extensive and helpful comments on a draft, and it was David Christie's idea to reproduce a selection of front covers to illustrate their evolution over the past century.

