

## WHAT KILLED COCK ROBIN AND HIS PALS?



This thought-provoking question was the title of an excellent and very interesting talk by Vic Simpson, founder of the Cornwall Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre, after the 2006 AGM had finished.

In its comparatively short life, the CWVIC near Chacewater has become hugely respected for the vital work it is doing in finding out what is killing our wildlife. The centre is the only one of its kind in Britain and in little over four years has examined more than 1,000 wildlife casualties ranging from bats to buzzards, from stoats to squirrels. And already Vic has made new scientific discoveries affecting otters and red squirrels. In fact the team at Chacewater has examined more than 60 otters to date!

Cornwall, let alone Britain as a whole, is incredibly fortunate in having such a team dedicated to helping wildlife and we were doubly lucky to get this chance to hear all about it from the man himself.

The audience was rocked back in their seats by Vic's opening statement "*Tens of millions of birds die each year and we do not know why*".

**The causes include PREDATION , TRAUMA AND DISEASES.**

**PREDATORS.** Cats kill about 10% of garden birds. These are artificially concentrated into small areas by the continuous feed supplies. Even if they escape or are released after being bitten many eventually die from infections on the cat teeth. Collars, especially sonic collars, have been proved effective warning devices but cat-owners seem reluctant to fit these to their pets even though some 36 million birds could be saved! **Sparrowhawks** are common again after a decline in the DDT years and, of course, the concentration of garden birds helps them no end. **Magpies** have also increased over the last two decades. Autopsies of dead magpies show that they

were in excellent condition, even fat! Vic does not agree with the RSPB view that magpies are not a threat. In the case of some species, especially swallows, they take significant numbers of young and he considers that they should be culled where numbers are high.

Predator risk can be minimized by placing feeders **away from** cover (cats) and **close to** cover (Sparrowhawks). Clearly a balance has to be worked out!

**TRAUMA.** Collisions with windows, vehicles and cables. Principal amongst these is collision with windows, especially conservatories and greenhouses. The number of birds killed is at least equal to those killed by cats. The lesions due to impact include bruises/ hemorrhages, detached retina (especially raptors), ruptured organs and fractures.

The collisions in the garden, mostly with greenhouses or conservatories, are often due to sudden flight from a feeding station caused by the presence of a predator. The increasing popularity of conservatories has increased the number of collisions but the number of birds killed in this way can be significantly reduced by careful positioning of feeders and bird tables.

**DISEASES.** These may be Infectious, Parasitic, Metabolic, Toxic and Genetic or Congenital.. The toxic compounds include man-made chemicals such as insecticides used to kill aphids and ants and molluscicides used to kill slugs.. Herbicides (including paraquat which kills anything and which Vic thinks should be banned) are used for weed control. The amount of these chemicals used in gardens exceeds that used on intensive farms!

There are also natural toxins and these include aflatoxin which can be present in peanuts which have been stored in moist and warm conditions, and botulinium toxin. This may be present in maggots but poisoning occurs mostly in gulls and corvids feeding on decaying food in refuse tips.

Metabolic diseases are often due to malnutrition. Bone disease is found in Buzzard fledglings and may be due to them being fed insufficient roughage and too much meat. The incidence of bone disease in Collared Doves is common in some areas but the precise cause is not known.

Parasites include lice, mites, protozoa and worms. Of the disease caused by protozoa, or single celled parasites, the two most important ones are coccidiosis and trichomoniasis. The latter causes canker in pigeons and doves but the latest research shows it affecting finches and buntings.

**WANTED – UK WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT !!** It is a national disgrace that, unlike Scandinavian countries, Canada, and the USA, there is no Government Department or other organization responsible for wildlife health in the UK. This deficiency has been constantly ignored by all political parties in the UK. **Write to your MP and to Mr Jim Knight, Minister for Biodiversity, now!**

The Garden Bird Health *Initiative* (GBHi) was started in 2005 in order to study health problems in garden birds. It is a partnership supported by a number of organizations and post mortems are carried out at veterinary pathology labs in London, Cornwall, Liverpool and Ayrshire. Vic described some of the ongoing research by this group.

### **ACTIONS WE SHOULD TAKE.**

*FIT SONIC COLLARS TO OUR CATS*

1. Feed birds in moderation. Excessive food encourages rats and mice and infections. Salmonellosis is a serious problem from September to March (Finches and Sparrows)
2. If dead birds are found send them fresh and unfrozen to Vic for examination. Wear disposable gloves when handling the corpse(s).
3. **STOP FEEDING!** Wash all feeding equipment with a QAC-based disinfectant. Do it **OUTDOORS!** Wear gloves and use a scrubbing brush kept for this task.
4. Resume feeding after a minimum of two weeks.

#### **THE CONS OF FEEDING GARDEN BIRDS.**

Although supplementary feeding is undoubtedly beneficial to many birds, it may also create risks. Vic believes that

1. Although feeding, particularly with sunflower seeds, attracts large numbers of birds, excessive feeding results in increased mortality from trauma and predation and disease problems.
2. Feeding may cause early breeding, and chick fatalities to occur if no insects are available.
3. Supplementary feeding is not needed from May to end August.