This paper summarises the information that is currently available on the recent range expansion of the Common Buzzard \textit{Buteo buteo} in Britain up to the end of 1997. The principal sources of data were the County and Regional Bird Recorders and the annual County Bird Reports.

\textit{The past}

During the nineteenth century, as a result of human persecution, the Common Buzzard was exterminated as a breeding species in much of the eastern and midland counties of England (More 1865). By 1900, the only remaining population in southern England was in the protected enclave of the New Forest (Clark & Eyre 1993). In Scotland and northern England, the species was restricted to the western counties, where the pressure of gamekeeping was less severe. During the twentieth century, as persecution diminished, there was a slow eastward spread from the species’ stronghold in western Britain.

The 1968-72 \textit{Breeding Atlas} (Sharrock 1976) confirmed that Common Buzzards were still absent from most of southeastern England. Exceptions were a small breeding population in West Sussex, a few records of confirmed breeding in the Chichlterns of Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire, and a solitary

\textbf{ABSTRACT} The failure of the Common Buzzard \textit{Buteo buteo} to re-establish itself as a breeding species in much of eastern Britain has been the subject of much speculation over the past 30 years. Recently, however, there is evidence that Common Buzzards are finally colonising areas of eastern England and Scotland from which they have been absent for over a century. They can now be observed within 30 km of the centre of London, and seem likely to colonise the remaining areas of suitable habitat within Britain in the near future.
record of probable breeding in the Brecks area of East Anglia. Common Buzzards were similarly absent from central England east of Shropshire and Staffordshire. The Lake District remained a stronghold in northern England, but Yorkshire, southern Lancashire and Co. Durham were devoid of the species. A few pairs persisted in the wilder parts of the Cheviots and Kielder Forest area of Northumberland. In southern Scotland, Common Buzzards were absent from much of the Borders and Lothian region. They were similarly absent from Fife and the eastern part of Aberdeenshire. A survey conducted by the British Trust for Ornithology in 1983 found little evidence of eastward expansion since 1968-72 (Taylor et al. 1988). Although that survey revealed an increase in the total British population, this increase was manifested only by infilling and consolidation of the Common Buzzard’s current range, with no evidence of any expansion of range.

The 1988-91 Atlas (Gibbons et al. 1993) showed an increase in records and slight eastward spread within Hampshire, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Compared with 1968-72, however, there had also been a retraction from the three areas on the eastern edge of the Common Buzzard’s range where pioneering individuals had been recorded. The West Sussex population appeared to have been reduced considerably, while the scatter of records in the Brecks had disappeared completely. There was one confirmed breeding record in the Chilterns area, but a reduction of total records within that area.

This apparent range contraction between the 1968-72 and 1988-91 surveys was surprising, coming during a period of re-establishment of many other raptor species, and a supposed reduction of threats from both pesticides and human persecution. Presumably, however, these isolated populations were vulnerable to a combination of human persecution and a lack of recruitment from the more westerly population.

In central England, there had been a slight eastward expansion of range within Worcestershire, Shropshire and Staffordshire. Farther

Fig. 1. Diagrammatic representation of spread of Common Buzzards Buteo buteo between 1991 and 1997 (based on Gibbons et al. 1993 and data presented here).

Fig. 2. Spread of Common Buzzards Buteo buteo into eastern Britain between 1991 and 1997. Filled dots show 1988-91 distribution (from Gibbons et al. 1993) and open dots represent 1997 records in previously unoccupied areas.
north, there was little sign of any major spread into Yorkshire or Northumberland. In southern Scotland, there was evidence of an extension into coastal farmland in the southwest, and some eastward spread within the Borders region. In northeast Scotland, there had been some spread into Angus and Aberdeenshire.

The present
Since 1991, there has been a major expansion of the Common Buzzard's range in eastern Britain. Tables 1-5 compare the recorded population of Common Buzzards at the end of the 1988-91 survey period with the records for 1997. The county entries detail the available information on current numbers and distribution.

South East England (table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1988-91</th>
<th>1997</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bedfordshire</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkshire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckinghamshire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater London</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hertfordshire</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sussex</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BEDFORDSHIRE Breeding was first recorded in 1995, at Southill Park, when a pair was also present in the south of the county. By 1997, two pairs were confirmed breeding, and presence was recorded in several other locations.

BERKSHIRE A minimum of two pairs was present in the west of the county during the 1988-91 survey period. The 1991 Bird Report stated that one pair was present. By 1997, there were ten to 12 pairs, widely scattered within the county.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE In 1991, the single pair of Common Buzzards recorded in the county represented the most easterly record during the 1988-91 survey period. By 1997, there was a minimum of eight pairs in the South Chilterns area and two pairs in the north of the county.

ESSEX Common Buzzards were first recorded breeding in 1994, when a pair was present in the northwest of the county. In 1997, at least three pairs were present in the county.

GREATER LONDON No records of breeding yet, although casual sightings include one over Trafalgar Square in March 1997. It will be interesting to see whether Common Buzzards can adapt to London's varied habitats, which include suburban gardens and extensive parkland. The Hobby *Falco subbuteo* has bred in surprising places within Greater London in recent years; Common Buzzards may, however, require more space and seclusion.

HERTFORDSHIRE Common Buzzards were first recorded as breeding in 1996, by which time they were present at four widely scattered locations within the county. In 1997, four pairs were present during the breeding season.

KENT Common Buzzards have been recorded in summer in recent years, but no definite evidence of breeding has been received by the County Recorder. If breeding is proven in the next few years, it is most likely to involve birds spreading from the Ashdown Forest area in East Sussex. In the longer term, Common Buzzards from the expanding Sussex population should find much suitable breeding habitat in Kent.

SURREY In 1997, a pair of Common Buzzards was reported from a central area of the county, but breeding was not proven. As in Kent, there appears to be much suitable habitat, awaiting the species' arrival.

SUSSEX The 1988-91 Atlas, which showed no confirmed breeding records, undoubtedly understated the position in the county. Apparently, there were about ten pairs present at that time. By 1997, the population had grown to over 25 pairs (M. E. Kalaher *in litt.*), with confirmed breeding records from several locations along the South Downs, as well as from the experimentally released population in Ashdown Forest.

Central England (table 2)
Precise data are not available for the more westerly counties of the region, but all show an increase in range and numbers.

DERBYSHIRE There were two proven records of Common Buzzards breeding in 1991. By 1997, there was a further increase in sightings from all parts of the county and at least 15 pairs were present.

LEICESTERSHIRE (WITH RUTLAND) The 1991
Bird Report suggested that the Common Buzzard was a scarce visitor, but that breeding was a possibility. By 1995, though there was still no confirmation of breeding, sightings of ten or more Common Buzzards were reported from the Belvoir/Knipton area. In 1997, breeding pairs were present in four or more areas, as far east as Rutland.

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE In 1991, there were two records of confirmed breeding. By 1997, at least six pairs were present in the breeding stronghold of the Dukeries. Pairs at other locations within the county may also have bred.

WARWICKSHIRE In 1991, one pair bred within the county. By 1995, at least ten pairs were present; the Bird Report noted over 100 records from 40 sites, compared with four records from three sites in 1985. In 1997, the species was still increasing rapidly, with records from 85 sites and at least 35 pairs thought to be breeding.

WEST MIDLANDS A shortage of observers has been blamed for obscuring the real picture in this county. A pair was present in 1995, and probably two or three pairs were present in 1997.

**Eastern England (table 3)**

In eastern England, the situation is confused by the presence of experimentally released Common Buzzards in Norfolk. Table 3 shows that Common Buzzards have spread and consolidated within the western part of this region.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE In 1991, the Common Buzzard remained a rare visitor. By 1997, there was a small population in woodland in the southeast of the county, with up to four birds present. As yet, breeding has not been proven.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE In 1997, Common Buzzards were present in two areas in the west of the county.

SUFFOLK As yet, there have been no recorded breeding attempts in the county, although display was noted at one site. With Common Buzzards present on the Cambridgeshire border, and an increasing population in Norfolk, the Brecks area within the county seems the most likely starting point for colonisation.

**Northern England (table 4)**

DURHAM The pair of Common Buzzards that bred in the south of the county in 1991 was the first confirmed since 1968. By 1995, the species’ range had expanded, with breeding proven at two sites in the south of the county and in Weardale, and breeding probable at a further site in the south and in Teesdale. Two other pairs were suspected to have bred. In 1997, 15-20 pairs were present.
Table 4. Number of pairs of Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* holding territory in suitable habitat in northern England. Yorkshire records refer to 1995, the latest year for which data are available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1988-91</th>
<th>1997</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northumberland</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire, East</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire, Northeast</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire, Northwest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire, South &amp; West</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire, West</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NORTHUMBERLAND In 1991, two pairs bred in the southwest, and two pairs were present elsewhere in the county. Since then, there has been a remarkable increase, with 14 pairs confirmed breeding in 1993 and 43 pairs confirmed breeding in 1997. The 1996 Bird Report noted that illegal persecution was responsible for the failure of five potential breeding pairs, and remained a limiting factor in the species’ spread.

YORKSHIRE In 1991, two pairs bred in the west of the county and one pair in the northwest. Common Buzzards have subsequently increased both in range and in breeding numbers within the county, slowly moving away from the higher ground towards the farmland in the east. Persecution appears to remain a limiting factor in Yorkshire, with numbers low for such a large county with much suitable habitat. The North York Moors, for example, remain devoid of the species. By 1995, the population had reached around 15 pairs.

Eastern Scotland (table 5)

Table 5 shows a continuing spread into the areas of eastern Scotland that remained unoccupied in 1991.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1988-91</th>
<th>1997</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Borders</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lothian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Scotland</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

there were seven pairs, with the population expanding to at least 27 pairs by 1997.

LOTHIAN In 1991, the population consisted of just two confirmed pairs. By 1997, numbers were described as too high to be monitored accurately, with over 60 occupied territories.

NORTHEAST SCOTLAND A survey in 1996 found at least 270 Common Buzzards either holding territory or breeding in areas where no buzzards were recorded during Atlas work in 1981-88 (Buckland *et al*. 1990). The population had expanded into the farmland areas of the Mearns and Buchan plain, with Common Buzzards present at over 100 localities by 1997.

The future

The current population of Common Buzzards in the counties of southeast England, comprising about 60 pairs, is scattered very thinly over a very large area. There are few locations where the density at present is in any way comparable to that in prime habitat in western England. To what extent Common Buzzards will consolidate in these newly colonised areas is uncertain. If persecution by gamekeeping interests re-emerges, this population is, of course, still very vulnerable.

Large areas of the southeast, where intensive arable agriculture predominates, may be able to support only a very low density of breeding buzzards. Currently occupied areas, however, such as the Chiltern Ridge, the South Downs and parts of rural Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, should be capable of supporting a population far above current levels. It is possible that the rapid eastward surge of the past few years will cease as the population consolidates and infills this new extension to its range. In the longer term, there are undoubtedly many parts of Surrey and Kent that appear to provide ideal habitat
for the species. It may be only a matter of time before the Common Buzzard has recolonised the whole of southeastern England.

In eastern England, the small but expanding populations in Norfolk and Lincolnshire should speed the further colonisation of this region. As in the Southeast, however, some areas of intensive agriculture seem unlikely to be able to support the species at any reasonable density. Conflict with game interests could slow the expansion into areas of coniferous forest in the Brecks and coastal Suffolk.

Farther to the north, much of Yorkshire remains unoccupied, with persecution appearing to be the main limiting factor. There, changing attitudes towards this species may allow further expansion of range.

**Discussion**

Two main reasons have been suggested in the past for the failure of Common Buzzards to recolonise eastern England and eastern Scotland. Persecution of isolated pairs on the eastern edge of their range was thought to be a factor (Gibbons et al. 1993). In addition, the overwhelming tendency of dispersing first-winter Common Buzzards to return to their area of origin in spring reduced the likelihood of the species rapidly extending its range into areas of past extinction (Walls & Kenward 1995).

There are several possible sources for the buzzards currently colonising eastern England. Common Buzzards from Continental Europe regularly overwinter in eastern England, especially Essex and Kent. There is, however, little evidence that these wintering visitors have ever stayed to breed. The absence of breeding records from Kent, the county most likely to attract migrant Continental Common Buzzards from the east, suggests that colonisation from the Continent is a minimal factor in the recent spread of the species into southeast England.

In recent years, the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology has released Common Buzzards at three sites in southern England: two in Sussex and one in Norfolk. In total, 52 individuals dispersed successfully from these sites over the period 1994-98 (R. E. Kenward *in litt.*). These experimental releases have obviously inflated the numbers of resident Common Buzzards in those counties, but cannot account for the increase in numbers over the region as a whole. Release sites tend to attract pioneering birds from elsewhere, so their presence has undoubtedly speeded up a natural process of recolonisation.

The major source of the Common Buzzards recolonising eastern England is the growing population to the West. The infilling and consolidation process in what were marginal areas 30 years ago has provided surplus birds for the recent expansion of range. A 75-km² study area near Bristol provides evidence of the increase in numbers (Prytherch 1997). An area that supported 12-14 pairs in the early 1980s had seen an increase to 56 pairs by 1996. Although productivity of fledged young had dropped from nearly two per nest to only one, indicating that occupancy of the area was nearing saturation level, the number of fledged young had continued to increase over the study period; any juveniles that dispersed from this area would have to move east to find suitable unoccupied breeding habitat. The former 'border' counties of Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire have seen major increases in their Common Buzzard populations over the past ten years. Farther east, the number of pioneering Common Buzzards seeking new territories has obviously reached some critical level where the number of incomers exceeds any losses from human persecution and natural causes.

There is some evidence that eastern England may now be a more welcoming prospect for these incoming buzzards. Although, nationally, there may be no constant trend of either increase or decrease in buzzard persecution (Elliott & Avery 1991), many gamekeepers have moved from poisoned bait, as an agent of crow control, to the Larsen trap, which is much less likely to affect buzzards. In Northumberland, the remarkable increase in numbers has been linked to the recent amendment to the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which made landowners responsible for the illegal actions of their employees (Day *et al.* 1995). In addition, there is evidence that the population of Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, an important food source, has increased markedly over recent years (Harris *et al.* 1995).

Prospects look good.
Acknowledgments
I am grateful for the assistance of the relevant County Recorders in providing the information that enabled me to produce the 1997 map of Common Buzzard distribution (fig. 1). Thanks are also due to Dr R. E. Kenward, for his assistance and advice, and to Lynn Giddings for help with references.

References

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