GM crops and birds…

Recent research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) has demonstrated that the growing of genetically modified (GM) herbicide-resistant sugar beet on farmland currently carrying a healthy population of weeds and their associated seeds could have serious consequences for farmland bird species that are at present exhibiting significant declines. The research involved modelling a simple crop-weed-bird interaction. The chosen species were sugar beet, fat-hen Chenopodium album (a common weed of sugar beet and an important food source for birds) and Sky Lark Alauda arvensis. The modelling exercise undertaken suggests that using herbicides on GM crops could reduce the amount of food for birds by more than 90% compared with conventional crops. If the GM technology is taken up by farmers who already control their weeds effectively, the consequences for birds are likely to be small. Birds would be unlikely to feed on these fields anyway, since there is no food (weed seeds) for them. If, however, the technology is adopted by those farmers who currently suffer from high weed populations in their sugar beet fields (which provide valuable food resources for Sky Larks and other seed-eating birds in winter), the consequences for farmland birds could be very detrimental. The effects of herbicide use on these GM crops are currently being investigated in farm-scale evaluations. This large-scale Government-funded experiment is comparing the food resources available to birds in GM and conventional oilseed rape, maize and sugar beet crops. When these evaluations are complete, they should answer many of the questions raised by this modelling.

For further information, contact Dr Rob Robinson, c/o BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU.

…on RSPB reserves

At the same time as the UEA information reached us, we learnt that seed planted by the RSPB at its Vane Farm, Tayside, and Durkadale, Orkney, nature reserves was found to contain GM material supplied by Advanta, part of the same widely distributed batch that hit the national headlines in May this year. In Orkney, the same seed was supplied by the RSPB to other farmers in a scheme to boost struggling farmland bird numbers. By the time that the contamination came to light, it was too late to prevent sowing, and the crops all had to be ploughed in to ensure that no pollen or set seed escaped. The losers, of course, are the farmland birds, which will have lost the chance of an important food source next winter.

For further information, contact the RSPB, Scotland Headquarters, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP.

The G8

To most people ‘G8’ is a group of the World’s richest industrialised nations that makes news headlines every time that it meets. There is however, another G8 – ‘The Green Group of Eight’ – a coalition of the largest environmental non-government organisations in Europe. Figuring strongly in the group is BirdLife International, because birds ‘have no boundaries and are good indicators of the general state of the environment’. For further information, contact The Environment DG, 200 rue de la Loi, B 1049 Brussels, Belgium; http://europa.eu.int/

Budding bird-reserve wardens sought

Fancy yourself as a bird-reserve warden? This may be your opportunity. The RSPB reserves at Titchwell Marsh and Snettisham in North Norfolk are seeking three enthusiastic volunteers to join their warden team this winter. The volunteer wardens, who will be expected to commit themselves to a stay of at least six months, will be trained in all aspects of running these important nature reserves. Areas of work covered will include habitat management and estate work, bird surveys, and working with visitors. In return, the RSPB offers a structured training programme leading to a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level Two in ‘Landscapes and Ecosystems’ and the opportunity to go on specialised courses in such essential warden skills as the use of brushcutters. Although these posts carry no salary, accommodation is provided rent free with all bills paid. Previous trainees have supported themselves with part-time work in local pubs, hotels and shops. If you are interested in applying, send your CV with a covering letter to Dr Sarah Money, Titchwell Marsh RSPB reserve, Titchwell, Norfolk PE31 8BB; e-mail: titchwell@interramp.co.uk

Change of Recorder

Taking over from Tim Dean, who for the last three years has been handling the Recorder’s duties for both Cumbria and Orkney, the new County Recorder for Cumbria, as from October 2000, will be Colin Raven, 18 Seaforthwaite Road, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria LA14 4LX. (Tim is still the Recorder for Orkney.)
Musselling in for Eiders and Slavonian Grebes

Mussel farms in Shetland are currently burgeoning and, not surprisingly, are attracting the local Common Eiders *Somateria mollissima*. Shetland's eiders are thought to constitute a fairly isolated population and the most recent estimate of its numbers is 6,300 in 1997, down from 16,500 in the mid 1970s. Their attraction to this easy food source is inevitably leading to some conflict, to which there is no easy answer. Various methods of deterring the ducks have been considered, but all have various disadvantages. The most recent is to bring in specialist falconers in the hope that trained White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*, or similar raptors, might scare the feeding birds. Another welcome step forward was a meeting convened in July by the Shellfish Growers' Association, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Shetland Bird Club, with a further meeting planned for the autumn. Somehow, a way forward has to be found to suit all interested parties.

An application for a mussel farm in the vicinity of one of the best sites for wintering Slavonian Grebes *Podiceps auritus* in Shetland, at Tresta Voe on the west side of Mainland, has recently been refused. This followed opposition by the Shetland Bird Club, Scottish Natural Heritage and the RSPB. With 30-40 Slavonian Grebes regularly wintering there, this site holds about 6% of the UK wintering population. The developer has now, however, appealed against the decision, and, once again, the three bodies have submitted further evidence against this proposal. Fish-farming in its many forms may be one solution to the overfishing of the oceans, but is not without its conservation problems.

For further details, contact the Shetland Bird Club, Flat 4, Muckle Flugga Shore Station, Burrafirth, Unst, Shetland ZE2 9EQ.

Harriers – ‘Le Groupe Busards’

This group, perhaps confusingly named for the English-speaker (the French name for a buzzard *Buteo* is ‘buse’), exists to protect the three species of harrier *Circus* that breed in France, particularly those that choose to nest in agricultural cereal fields.

At a recent meeting, several members felt a bit depressed that maybe their efforts were rather in vain. Over a ten-year period from the mid 1980s, however, it is estimated that, of 15,000 pairs presumed nesting, 10,000 nests were located (80% of which were Montagu's Harriers *C. pygargus*), and 21,000 young were counted in these nests, of which 5,500 fledged successfully, thanks to the intervention of the watchers. In the case of the Montagu’s Harrier, as many as 40% of the young would have perished during cereal harvesting if the volunteers had not been on hand to save them. Far from being depressed, the people taking part in this work should feel very proud of what they have achieved. For further information, contact Alexandre Millon, at gorgonalex@aol.com

Believe it or not

Mathematically talented TV presenter Carol Vorderman was once a member of a pop group called ‘Dawn Chorus and the Blue Tits’.