

Destruction of Flowers and Buds by Birds

Title

Destruction of Flowers and Buds by Birds 1935-1938

Description and Summary of Results

The destruction of the buds of trees and shrubs by birds during late autumn, winter and spring, was a perennial source of complaint by fruit-growers and gardeners. However it had never been formally studied and so there was no real indication of the scale of the problem, which species were involved or the reasons why some birds did this. The species under most suspicion were common and widespread species, and in 1935 the BTO agreed to sponsor an inquiry. The lack of precise information available suggested that there might be particular difficulties, and it was therefore decided first to do a preliminary or "test" inquiry and confine it to a relatively small number of observers.

About 50 reports were received. Some referred to a single case in which bud destruction had been observed, and others to several, but the total number was too small to justify any attempt to draw final conclusions. The paucity was partly explained by the deliberate limitation to a few observers, but it also seemed to have been due to the real difficulty of making the observations. One suggestion for the reason for this was that extensive bud-eating (as opposed to the desultory picking of an occasional bud) occurred mainly at daybreak, not only inconvenient for most observers, but also a time when observations in the winter are often rendered difficult by poor light conditions.

The main species held responsible was the Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*, and buds of trees and shrubs certainly formed an important part of the diet of this species during winter and spring. Species of plants attacked included: apple, pear, plum, damson, cherry, gooseberry, almond (flowers), and there was no indication that the presence of insects was the main attraction. There were several records of House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* as well (especially to crocuses and other herbaceous flowers), and other species noted included Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (1 record), Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (2 cases of damage proved), Brambling *F. montifringilla* (1 record of a flock causing extensive damage to a plum orchard), and several Tits Paridae (although most were inconclusive in respect of actual damage).

The initial survey concluded that casual observations of the kind which such a survey could produce were not appropriate or useful in providing definitive and useful information on the scale of the problem and that some more systematic work was required. Hence the survey was not extended further.

Methods of Data Capture

A questionnaire was sent out which asked for details of casual observations of possible destruction. Special attention was drawn to the necessity of making absolutely sure that birds frequenting trees showing bud damage were, in fact, responsible for the damage, and the desirability of recording with precision the kinds of trees attacked and the circumstances in which such attacks took place. The need for the former in particular was

already clear from observations over a long period with several noting that attacks could occur on one tree leaving it denuded of buds whereas a neighbouring tree of the same species was left. A request was made for samples of twigs from attacked trees, and also of buds pecked off and allowed to fall on the ground, but no endeavour was made to secure post-mortem examinations of numerous dead birds.

Purpose of Data Capture

To try to determine the species involved in, and any reasons for, the destruction of buds and flowers on trees by birds. This was perceived to be becoming a problem for some commercial orchards.

Geographic Coverage

All of England.

Temporal Coverage

Records were accepted from 1935 to 1938.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by J C F Fryer with help from the BTO.

Organiser(s)

J C F Fryer

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The report of the survey is:

Fryer, J.C.F. 1939. The destruction of buds of trees and shrubs by birds. *British Birds* 33: 90-94.

The survey was noticed in the *BTO Annual Reports* numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4; and in *BTO Bulletin* numbers 3, 5 and 12.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 folder containing a copy of the report, the questionnaire and the instructions.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis