

Paper tearing by birds

Title

Paper tearing by birds

Description and Summary of Results

The practice of entering houses and tearing paper, shown by various species of tits, had become widely known in Britain since the autumn of 1949, when the frequency of such attacks reached spectacular proportions. It was not a new habit though, for Gilbert White had recorded tits entering houses (though not tearing paper) in 1774, and it had been recorded from several European countries.

The completed questionnaires noted Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* as the most common species responsible followed by Great Tit *Parus major*. The vast majority of the responses to the broadcast also named Blue Tits as the main culprit, with Great Tit a poor second and several other, mainly tamed, individuals of other species also doing it.

The great majority of the records referred to the tearing of paper, normally such as wallpaper, or labels on bottles and boxes attached to a hard surface; or such as newspapers, magazines or dust-covers of books. However quite a variety of other articles were attacked (listed in the appendix to the published paper), varying from textiles both indoors (eg curtains, chair covers) and outdoors (eg washing on a line) to leather and soap.

Paper tearing was found to be much more common in the autumn than at any other time of year; and there was some indication that it occurred more commonly in dry weather. The reasons were not clear. Food was not thought to be the issue as in many places food was being provided anyway.

It did seem that in the autumn of 1949 the habit was far more widespread than before or since. It was a year when it seemed that tits were especially numerous but the later paper noted below suggested that it was simply an expression of the hunting or food-searching drive being needed even when food was apparently superabundant.

Methods of Data Capture

In the winter of 1948/49 a request for information was placed in *The Field* and the *BTO Bulletin*. In the autumn of 1949, 316 questionnaires were distributed to members of the BTO and others. On 4 December 1949 James Fisher mentioned paper-tearing in a talk broadcast by the BBC, and asked for records. Over 2000 replies were received as a result.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the scale and distribution of the habit of paper-tearing by birds.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain.

Temporal Coverage

Primarily the autumn and winter of 1949-1950 following the questionnaire and a BBC broadcast in the autumn of 1949.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry. Publicity and responses were greatly helped by a broadcast on BBC radio by James Fisher.

Organiser(s)

W M Logan-Home

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Logan-Home, W.M. 1953. Paper-tearing by birds. *British Birds* 46: 16-20.

This was followed up by:

Hinde, R.A. 1953. A possible explanation of paper-tearing behaviour in birds. *British Birds* 46: 21-23.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual report* numbers 16 and 17, and *BTO Bulletin* numbers 34, 35, 36, 38 and 39.

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 photocopy of the list of instances recorded. The Edward Grey Institute archives have the original and maps of the occurrence of the practice.

Notes on Access and Use**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**