

money for this student accommodation is now blocking the scheme, although the people involved are less downcast about the prospects than they might be.

As well as providing space for some scientific organization, this centre is intended to house several international voluntary organizations, including the Save the Children Fund. The organizations would buy their own leases, and gain the use of an assembly room, committee rooms and space for the libraries which some would bring with them. London International Centre would solve the accommodation problem for the societies which it housed, but the plight of many others must remain precarious as they try to hang on to expensive London homes, or continue to suffer inadequate or non-existent premises.

CONSERVATION

Protecting Predators

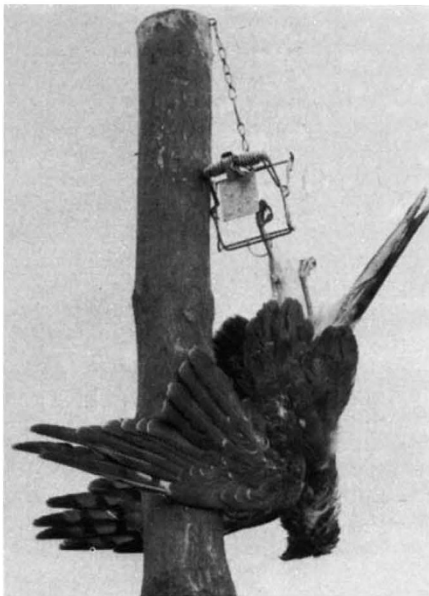
THE Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has launched a campaign to stop the killing of birds of prey. These birds "enjoy" full protection under the law as it stands, yet every year many cases of birds shot, pole-trapped or wantonly poisoned are brought to the notice of ornithologists throughout Britain. This year alone, thirty-one cases are already documented in the RSPB's files and in all but two cases the birds themselves were the intended victims of the so-called control measures.

Virtually all the blame must fall on British gamekeepers. Although fully aware that they are breaking the law, they still operate according to the old prejudice "if it's got a hooked beak, kill it"—a doctrine to which they slavishly adhere in spite of the paucity of evidence to show that game-bird breeding is adversely affected by avian predators. Indeed, most ecological studies indicate that birds of prey serve more to safeguard the breeding success of pheasants and partridges, for example, by destroying small rodents, whose egg-sucking habits are well known. In many cases, particularly among owls, there is no evidence whatsoever of conflicting interests with game birds.

The setting of spring traps in any position in which they are likely to catch birds (this clearly applies to pole traps and open-sided gin traps) has been illegal in Britain for several years; the use of poisoned bait is also against the law except under licence, and then only for certain types of poison applied in a restricted number of ways. Few, if any, such licences have been issued against birds in recent years. Why then is the use of such techniques so blatant and so widespread?

Many gamekeepers, it is certain, hide

behind the protective cloaks of their employers, the landowners (often titled) and wealthy shooting syndicates whose sporting interests they claim conscientiously yet illegally to protect. It is more than probable that many prosecutions have been blocked at source by chief constables anxious to preserve good relations with local dignitaries who may themselves be the magistrates presiding over the courts which hear the cases. Lack of evidence is the most frequent excuse for abandoning prosecutions, and under the law as it stands this is all too easily upheld, for only the person responsible for setting the trap, pulling the trigger or laying the poison can be brought to court. Under these restrictions, only a confession from the offender or the adequate witnessing of the moment that he commits the offence can uphold a prosecution. It is certain that if landowners were held responsible for the management practices conducted on their property, pole traps and poisoning would cease to be a problem.



Hen harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) illegally killed in a gamekeeper's pole trap.

There are other shortcomings of the law. A recent case in Kent outlines just how pressing is the need to give the extensive but surprisingly ineffective legislation some teeth, and also to require magistrates to treat cases with less flippancy. A Rochester gamekeeper admitted to using pole traps and was charged under the Pest Act. The defending solicitor submitted that a bird was not an animal and therefore the case did not fall within the terms of reference of the act. After consultation with the clerk, the magistrate conceded the point and the charge was quashed. On a second charge, brought under the Bird Protection Act, the gamekeeper admitted shooting owls. He claimed that the birds were killing

young pheasants and was asked whether he had any evidence of this (the act condones killing under such circumstances). His reply was no, but the trouble had stopped after the owls were shot. With this glib justification, too easy to give and too frequently used to dodge the law, the man was acquitted.

As well as providing more effective means of administering the law, educating gamekeepers to a better appreciation of the role of birds of prey in the ecological scheme of things might help. It is here that support from ornithological ethologists and ecologists is urgently needed. One of the problems faced by the compilers of a booklet to be published by the RSPB later this year has been the scarcity of studies to which they have been able to refer.

Called *Predatory Birds in Britain* and containing contributions from the Gamekeepers Association, the Game Conservancy and the British Field Sports Society, the booklet aims to offer constructive suggestions on how to handle the few authentically difficult situations which it admits do sometimes arise. Without killing the offenders, it maintains, it is possible to safeguard the interests of both the gamekeepers and the conservators.

It seems that more research, more publicity and modifications of the obviously inadequate protection laws would do much to combat this unnecessary threat to the conservation of a section of the country's wildlife which is already labouring under a heavy burden of habitat destruction, human interference and environmental pollution.

COMPUTER SOCIETY

Looking for Members

THE British Computer Society has launched a concerted effort to double its membership to about 30,000 in the next two or three years, and in this way to consolidate and strengthen its position as an effective central body in the computing profession. Much of the campaign is aimed at existing members of the society, who are being encouraged to introduce prospective members to the society.

The society was founded in 1957 and brought together many informal groups with wide interests in scientific and commercial computing. This mixture is still a characteristic of the society, which now has about forty specialist groups dealing with topics as diverse as the social implications of computing, computer-aided design and auditing by computer. Apart from incidental publications, the society regularly publishes two periodicals—the *Computer Journal*, which contains original contributions, and the *Com-*