

REVIEW

Birds as monitors of environmental change. By R.W. Furness & J.J.D. Greenwood (Editors) 1994. Chapman & Hall, London. ISBN 0-412-40230-0 (hardback) 356 pp.

Because no organism is able to live under all conditions, but only under a set of well defined, often narrowly limited conditions, the presence of any organism indicates those conditions. This indication concept has often been used, and occasionally misused by enthusiastic people bent to generate more interest, funding or simply recognition of their work, or beloved group of organisms. Thus came that 'indicator organisms' and 'monitoring' have become buzzwords with sometimes confusing meaning. Neither birds nor ornithologists are exempt of suffering from, and occasionally contributing to this suboptimal state of affairs. Yet birds can signal changes in environmental conditions, and striking examples of this range from the canaries miners kept to alert them to danger under ground to raptors who became the unwilling signallers of the overuse of pesticides.

Birds can also serve as monitors of environmental change. This book surveys this role of birds in 7 chapters. Two introductory chapters discuss the potential of birds to serve for this purpose, and the nature of environmental changes. More specific areas reviewed include pollution (ch.3), radionuclide contamination (ch. 4), (fresh)water quality (ch. 5) and the role of seabirds as indicators of marine prey stock levels (ch. 6). The final chapter deals with 'integrated' population monitoring.

This is a book with mainly British authors, several of whom works, or worked, for the British Trust for Ornithology. Some chapters show a European bias stems probably from this fact. In general, the references are in the 70-ies and 80-ies, a bit dated for a book that was originally published in 1993. Unevenness in the detail and value of the individual chapters is nearly inevitable as authors of individual chapters are often opportunistically recruited. The chapter on radionuclides, for example, shows a baffling superficiality in dealing with the bird studies on the effects of the Chernobyl disaster that are extensive and very interesting. The integrated population monitoring chapter, in my view, fails to enlighten the reader about the concept. I was left with the impression that anything can be monitored, and that, occasionally, any of these is worth monitoring. This is a discouraging message and provides little guidance when planning monitoring studies.

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