

PRIVATE EYE - ARTICLE ON THE RSPB's RESERVE AT BERNEY MARSHES
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Down on the Farm

The recent report from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Birds made particularly interesting reading for Robin Page, the vociferous farmer and passionate naturalist who runs the Countryside Restoration Trust.

When the trust was launched, it's aim was to buy farmland in East Anglia which had been denuded of wildlife by modern farming methods, and see it managed in such a way that the trees, flowers, birds, butterflies and animals returned. Page was therefore struck by the fact that although the RSPB was mourning drastic declines in bird populations around the Norfolk Broads, there seemed to be one exception: the RSPB's reserve at Berney Marshes.

While the number of snipe has fallen elsewhere by 94 per cent, redshank by 32 percent and lapwings by 35 percent, Berney Marshes has reported a striking recovery; redshank up by 500 percent; lapwings from 12 pairs to 47.

Curiously the RSPB offered no explanation. As a particular fan of lapwing, Page investigated.

Mark Smart, the RSPB warden at Berney marshes was only too happy to reveal his secret. Not only has he been careful to recreate the right habitat for his birds but he has also rigorously been controlling predators that previously been decimating their numbers.

In the first year he shot 40 foxes. He has shot any crows he sees on the land. And he has cut down any trees which used to provide cover for other predatory intruders, such as magpies and sparrow hawks. The results as the figures show have been dramatic. But why is the RSPB so coy about publishing the secret of Mr. Smart's success in reversing the rush towards extinction which it is constantly bewailing elsewhere?

It seems the RSPB is reluctant to admit that, to save some species of birds it may sometimes be necessary to reduce the numbers of others (let alone those cuddly little foxes so loved by the RSPBs largely urban membership).

The truth is that Britain's countryside is only the way it is thanks to the activities of man, and to keep any balance in wildlife populations, it is often necessary for man to intervene. One of the most destructive of all predators on birds is the badger, and one of the consequences of the runaway explosion in the badger population since culling was banned in the 1980s (apart from the bovine TB epidemic devastating the dairy industry) has been a further massive decline in the numbers of ground-nesting

birds.

Another, as Defra is privately aware, has been a similar collapse in our hedgehog population. Hedgehogs and badgers are competitors and, since badgers are bigger and stronger, there is nothing they like more than a few baby hedgehogs for dinner.

One problem giving the RSPB a particular headache at the moment has been the severe decline on Salisbury Plain of the number of ground-nesting stone curlews, now one of our rarest species. The RSPB is keenly aware that the cause of this disaster has been the explosion in the local badger population. But given the members affection for Mr. Brock, the last thing the RSPB is prepared to do is publicly admit it."

'Muckspreader'