

**NOTES ON THE  
USEFULNESS OF  
BRITISH BIRDS**

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Notes on the usefulness of British birds by Isaac Illsey

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**ISAAC ILLSEY**

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BY ISAAC ILLSEY.

"LET FOWLS MULTIPLY IN THE EARTH."—Gen. i. 22.  
"BEHOLD THE FOWLS OF THE AIR."—Matt. vi. 26.

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## PREFACE.

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THIS small collection of notes is designed to convey some idea of the extent and utility of the labours of British Birds.

I have not entered into any account or description of the manner or different appearances by which birds are distinguished, but my object is to introduce some observations on their services; and the notes and remarks I now offer have been written with the hope of doing good, and encouraging a more kindly feeling of consideration for our native birds, by giving a brief sketch of the value and usefulness of their labours.



Fig. 1. The number of individuals in the population of the common vole (*C. glareolus*) in the area of the experimental site from 1980 to 1990.

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## NOTES ON BRITISH BIRDS.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### ROOKS AND DAWS.

FOR wide and extensive usefulness, the rook claims perhaps the first place among the native birds of Great Britain; and few of them, probably, have met with more prejudice and persecution than this industrious and persevering bird, whose days are almost wholly spent in the destruction of some of the worst enemies of the husbandman. I have met with much difference of opinion, however, among agriculturists as to their value. A farmer in this place will not even suffer them to alight on his land if he can possibly prevent it. Ancient records, too, show



that very unfavourable opinions formerly prevailed against them, and even now their usefulness is not so generally known or acknowledged as it deserves to be; and I often see them driven from (or too much persecuted to dare venture on) fields which sadly need their services. It has been well observed by a late writer that "it is scarcely necessary to mention the wireworm as one of the greatest scourges to which the farmers are exposed; and yet it is to the rooks chiefly, if not entirely, that they can look for a remedy. Cased in its hard shelly coat, it eats its way into the heart of the roots of corn, and is beyond the reach of weather, or the attacks of other insects or small birds, whose short and softer bills cannot penetrate the recesses of its secure retreat, buried some inches below the soil. The rook alone can do so. If watched, when seen feeding in a field of growing wheat, the heedless observer will abuse him, when he sees him jerking up root after root of the rising crop; but the careful observer will, if he examines minutely, detect in many of these roots the cell of a

wireworm, in its silent and underground progress inflicting death on stems of many future grains."

But the land I find in this neighbourhood to be more infested with the grubs of the cockchafer, although wireworms in some parts are far from being unknown. I have found these grubs by myriads in all the meadows from which rooks are excluded, or from various reasons deterred from entering. Each of these grubs lives from three to four years on the roots of grass or grain before coming to the winged state, when they are eagerly caught by the fern owl (*caprimulgus*), a bird much too seldom seen. The grass lands here this season are so full of these grubs, and those of the *tipulæ*, or longlegs, that the cows in grazing lift up whole pieces of turf, for the roots have all been eaten off long since; and fowls and small birds scratch up almost every tuft of grass in some places, leaving whole plots in the meadows quite bare. Many districts, in fact, suffer more or less (though the injury is not perhaps so apparent) from supporting hosts

of these grubs on the roots of their crops of grain and grasses. The plants do not always become discoloured, or show how much their growth is checked by the attacks of these grubs, as I have often pulled up pieces of turf in grass lands looking healthy enough above ground, whose roots have been filled with grubs grazing upon the tender fibres below. A crop of grass or corn is gathered in, in its season, from such land, but a good crop from a field suffering in this way can hardly be expected.

I have often watched with pleasure the rooks pulling up the grass and picking out these destroying insects; they follow up their useful labours, too, day after day for many months together. And where rooks assemble in thousands, and are allowed to follow their natural instincts, so wisely implanted by the great and benevolent Creator, the benefits derived from their services to man must be incalculable; for who could possibly counteract the silent and destructive progress of these enemies of cultivation so well as the industrious flocks of social birds, who "rise before or with the