

*This paper forms part of the proceedings from the BOU conference **Ecosystem services: do we need birds?**  
Other papers from these proceedings can be viewed at [www.BOUPROC.net](http://www.BOUPROC.net).*

## **Bird conservation in an ecosystem context**

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Whatever we might say about current commitment, there is a stronger vision for nature conservation in Government than for some decades. The *Natural Environment White Paper* in England, the refreshed biodiversity strategy *Biodiversity 2020* and, perhaps most importantly, the UK *National Ecosystem Assessment*, all published within the last year, inform our view of what Government want to see. In addition, they continue to openly support the findings of the Lawton Review, *Making Space for Nature*, as demonstrated by the recent announcement of Nature Improvement Areas. The concept of valuing nature in ways which establish its importance in all aspects of society is a critical feature. Embracing the ecosystem services concept will be an important element of how we evolve what we do and the way we do it. We will need to work through concerns about the challenge to the traditional species-led approach, and realize significant opportunities. Norris and Mace argue persuasively for this in *TREE*, 2011.

BTO research and survey is contributing in three ways, looking at:

1. What ecosystem services are provided by birds.
2. Where and how birds can act as indirect indicators of service provision.
3. What the consequences are for birds of managing for ecosystem services.

There is plenty of evidence, and an abundance of convincing stories that resonate with the public, about the cultural services provided by birds. We need to strengthen the understanding of how birds and broader biodiversity contribute to regulating and provisioning services, and this needs to be underpinned both by review and by original research. Cultural values of birds are complex – for example very different for nature conservationists and birdwatchers who tend to value rarity, and for the public who often value the common-place of daily life, or what they see on television. BTO experience of the contribution of volunteers is significant.

Are birds potential indicators of the provision of non-bird ecosystem services? This has yet to be fully studied. It is important to look at this issue at the right scale, where birds respond to landscapes at a large spatial scale such as river catchments, large land-holdings, for example in the uplands, and perhaps parishes. Relationships are best investigated around measures of bird abundance, and in addition BTO will investigate patterns within data from Bird Atlas 2007–11.

The consequences of managing for cultural value will cover only some, mainly rare, species. Management for provisioning and regulating ecosystem services in the wider countryside will tend to miss rarer species and will require an assessment of how to look after biodiversity that falls outside the benefits of this approach.

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This BTO perspective on bird conservation in an ecosystem context will look at how volunteer effort in biodiversity recording reflects strong cultural values, and demonstrates a significant resource contribution to society's environmental obligations. Research examples illustrate the BTO's contribution to addressing the three questions posed at the start of the paper, and points to where evidence is needed from further research and survey.

In conclusion, it is argued that now is the time for the conservation sector to get serious about supporting an ecosystem approach, and the potential for engaging other sectors through the appropriate valuation of biodiversity in terms of those services that it provides.