

T & A D POYSER

Feasting, Fowling and Feathers



A History of the Exploitation
of Wild Birds

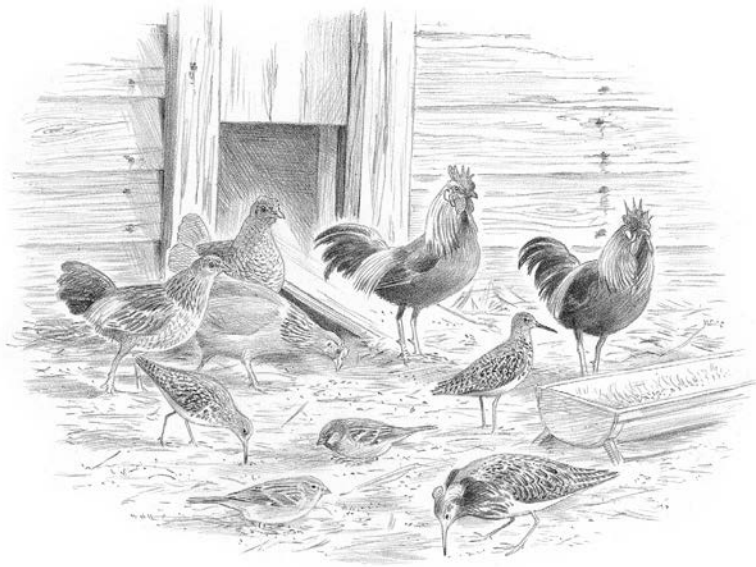
MICHAEL SHRUBB

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AND
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MICHAEL SHRUBB

T & AD POYSER
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Front cover: a hunter stealthily approaches a trip of migrant Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*;
spine: Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, once a common breeding bird in East Anglia;
back cover: captive male Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* in the farmyard. All cover art by Alan Harris.

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*For Veronica, who was determined that
I should finish this but never lived to see it*

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Introduction and acknowledgements

There is an extensive literature about the persecution of birds as vermin or competitors to human interests, most recently Roger Lovegrove's excellent account of the vermin records in the Churchwardens' accounts in English and Welsh parishes (Lovegrove 2007). This book deals with man's exploitation of birds for use as food, for feathers, as pets and as trophies, a field that covers both the birds themselves and their eggs.

Such exploitation has taken two forms, the domestication and breeding of species such as chickens, ducks, geese and other birds for which we use the generic term poultry, and the hunting of wild birds. A grey area lies between the two, with the large-scale rearing of gamebirds to release for shooting. In terms of food supply, much the most significant of these forms of exploitation has been domestication, but this book concerns itself with the exploitation of wild birds.

People have always hunted birds, mainly for food. Clark (1948) noted, however, that birds have rarely 'played a part in the food quest at all comparable with that of hunting (animals) or fishing'. Nevertheless, birds provided diversity in diet, which might have been particularly important in winter in mediaeval and early modern times, and often abundant seasonal food, whilst for many island communities seabirds formed an essential element of the food supply. The ingenuity expended in devising ways of catching birds and, later, the regulation of seasons and prices, argues that fowling (the taking of birds by various means) became an economically important activity.

Archaeological research in kitchen middens in prehistoric sites in Britain, Ireland, France, Germany, Denmark, Norway and Switzerland has found that important groups of species taken were wildfowl, grouse and other gamebirds, cranes and seabirds (e.g. Gurney 1921, Clark 1948, Fisher 1966, Greenway 1967, Yalden & Albarella 2009). The records came from coastal habitats in Britain and Ireland, France, Denmark and Norway, wetlands (lake villages and bog habitats) from Britain and Ireland, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland and cave sites in Britain, France and Germany, and the lists derived perhaps inevitably reflect the nature of these sites. They may also be biased by variations in the durability of the bones that form the basis of the identifications. Differing techniques of archaeological excavation also affect the range of bird species recorded. In particular most small birds will be overlooked if deposits are not extensively and thoroughly sieved (Parker 1988).

Nevertheless these groups of birds had obvious attractions for ancient fowlers. Individually, most would provide a meal. They are also gregarious, giving multiple chances to trap or to snare, and were perhaps especially vulnerable to simple fowling techniques in the breeding season or in moult. Geese and ducks, for example, could be run down when flightless, a technique used into the 20th century (see Chapter 5), and young seabirds could be taken just before leaving the nest colonies, as they still are. Yalden & Albarella (2009) noted that waders, which were favoured as food from Roman times, particularly plovers, Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* and Curlew *Numenius arquata*, are not well represented in the prehistoric archaeological record for Britain.

More indirect evidence of the range of birds hunted by prehistoric fowlers comes from Palaeolithic and Neolithic cave paintings in Iberia, where cranes, storks, Great Bustards *Otis tarda*, wild ducks and geese, Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*, flamingos, Purple Gallinules *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, eagles and Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* are represented (Verner 1914). Whilst these depictions do not prove that the birds were hunted, this seems the most likely reason for depicting them. They are associated with pictures of other animals being hunted, and most of these bird species were hunted in historic times.

Ancient Egyptian art often shows scenes of wildfowling, and the birds are often clearly identifiable. Wildfowlers used S-shaped throwing sticks, weighted at one end, to break the necks of ducks in flight, and a painting from the tomb of Neb-Amon at Thebes shows him fowling, with his trained cat retrieving a passerine in its paws and a duck in its mouth (see Plate 1). Clap-nets were also used, particularly for wildfowl but also for species up to the size of cranes, and drag-nets were used for Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (Houlihan & Goodman 1986).

Many simple trapping devices have a very long history. Hobusch (1980) noted that excavations showed that many methods used in prehistoric times were still current in many parts of the world. Clark (1948) made a similar point noting that 'prehistoric man must in the main have relied upon the various types of snare and trap which occur over extensive tracts of Eurasia and North America and which still survive in parts of Europe'.

Macpherson (1897) described fowling methods from most European countries, Russia, the Middle East, Siberia, China, Japan, India, Burma, many of the Indonesian Islands, Borneo, New Guinea, Hawaii and other Pacific Islands, Australasia, both South and North America (particularly the Arctic regions), and parts of Africa. Snares, traps, nets and bird lime form the basis of the methods used everywhere. Only comparatively recently has the gun been efficient enough to supplant them, at least in more developed countries.

The historical record from the mediaeval period shows that a very wide range of bird species was taken. Macpherson (1897) provided details of fowling methods for 384 species from 67 families of birds worldwide, ranging in size from cranes and bustards to warblers and Goldcrests, taken for food, feathers, as pets or for falconry or related uses (owls, for example, were used as decoys to entice songbirds and raptors within range). Markets emerged in most major cities, and the Poulterers Company regulated prices in London from the 13th century dealing, as Bourne (2003) noted, with virtually all the more edible species from southern England except scavengers, which were regarded as unclean, and raptors, although Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* were eaten on Heligoland (Gatke 1895) and Scops Owls *Otus scops* on Malta (Wright 1864). Hope (1990) noted that almost no bird species found around London was deemed inedible and that birds, however small, were a valuable year-round source of fresh meat, a point also stressed by Thirsk (2007). A wide range of species we would not consider to be game today were still offered by game dealers in the late 19th century. Patterson (1905) listed 964 wild birds offered on one game dealer's stall in Yarmouth on December 16th 1889, which included 80 Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, 30 larks, 10 Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus*, 12 Water Rails *Rallus aquaticus* and 6 Dabchicks (Little Grebes) *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, and he remarked that hundreds of Blackbirds and Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos* could be seen on other stalls the same day. Even later, Gladstone (1943) noted that, in the war years of the early 1940s, birds such as gulls, Rooks *Corvus*

frugilegus and Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* were offered for sale by game dealers in London and other major cities after the availability of game ended with the shooting season. He also quoted a correspondent to the *Times* newspaper of April 14th 1942 that Red-necked Grebes *Podiceps grisegena*, Moorhens, Coots *Fulica atra* and Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* were offered for sale in one of the great London stores, the grebes described as female geese and the Starlings as Grey Lugs!

Corporations outside London also regulated prices, in York and Hull, for example (Nelson 1907). Prices were also laid down in the household regulations and accounts of aristocratic and gentry establishments. Overseas trade developed early, and by the 19th century was worldwide in scope, a point underlined by Stubbs (1913), in a note about the availability of Asian and North American birds in Leadenhall Market in London.

Four basic questions arise in considering the exploitation of wild birds by humans – what were they taken for, how were they taken, when were they taken and what impact did fowling have on bird populations, if any. The following three chapters consider these questions in general terms. They are followed by a series of chapters on groups of species, which examine these issues in particular detail.

I have concentrated in this book mainly on the history of exploitation of wild birds in Britain and Europe, for one cannot regard Britain in isolation. A high proportion of our birds are migrants or seasonal visitors; what happens elsewhere affects their status here. Similarly, Britain has long had a significant international trade in birds, centred upon London. This was particularly true of the plumage trade that developed in the later 19th century (see Chapter 11), where London and Paris were the major entrepôts but sources were worldwide, often being colonial possessions of Britain and France.

It must also be noted that compared to the scale of exploitation and destruction that is documented in, for example, North America with the arrival and spread of European settlers (see e.g. Nicholls 2009), the historical record for Britain and Europe is relatively modest. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, by the time that documentary records become available the land was already fully owned and controlled. Secondly, social regulation exercised some control over exploitation, either in the interests of conserving stocks, for seabirds or gamebirds for example, or by limiting those entitled to hunt. But fowling was a worldwide practice, and Macpherson's (1897) account of its history underlines three general points: the ubiquity of the pursuit of birds, the broad similarity of many of the methods used around the world, and the antiquity of many of those methods.

I am grateful to many people for help with this book. Once again I owe a considerable debt to Carole Showell, the Librarian at the British Trust for Ornithology, for her unstinting assistance in obtaining shoals of increasingly obscure references for me. She is rarely defeated and I could not operate on the outer rim of Wales without such help. The Librarians at the Public Library in Tywyn, Laura Micah and Lisa Markham, have given similar help with many books through the excellent inter-Library loan service. Their help has also been invaluable. I am also very grateful to Robert Gillmor for the extended loan of Gunnar Brusewitz's splendid history of hunting, which proved to be a most valuable reference, and to my nephew, Robert Sadler, for drawing my attention to a duck decoy at Angmering in Sussex, for obtaining a print-out of Payne-Gallwey's *Book of Decoys* for me and for prints from other old books.

A number of good friends, Roger Lovegrove, Graham Williams, Tony Marr and Martin Peers, have read through the different chapters and made many useful and valuable comments on their content and presentation, which have greatly improved the text. I also thank Alan Harris for his splendid illustrations, which so embellish the text, Jim Martin at Bloomsbury for much editorial help and advice, Elizabeth Andrews for help with German translations, and Sheila Kelly for photographing my print of partridge shooting in Plate 4.

One cannot produce a book like this without running into problems about recording currencies, values, units of area and measurement and weights, most of which have altered substantially over the centuries. For sums of money I have used the currency units used in the original sources, that is pounds (£), shillings (s.) and pennies (d.) (see Appendix 5), as I doubt if giving monetary amounts in the mediaeval period in modern pounds and pence means anything. Patently it does not if one considers the vastly different value of money today. For younger readers, note that combinations of shillings and pence are conventionally separated with a / e.g. two shillings and sixpence appears as 2/6d; a whole value for shillings may appear with a slash and a hyphen, so ten shillings is written as 10/-, while for pounds, shillings and pence the values are separated with hyphens e.g. £10-8s-6d.

From the mid-19th century I have translated sums of money into present-day values (see Appendix 5). A second problem with currencies is that Scots pounds in the mediaeval and early modern periods had a different, smaller value to their English counterparts, and documents do not always make clear which is meant. Fortunately units of area and measurement in Britain have remained constant for a long period of time, only changing with decimalisation. So giving modern values to mediaeval measurements seems to be straightforward.

Finally, I have, in general, retained the old English common names of birds, which maintains continuity with earlier sources. I have generally given the scientific name on the first appearance of each bird within each chapter. A full list of birds' names, their modern equivalents and scientific names is given in Appendix 6.



CHAPTER 1

Uses of wild birds

Food

The principal use for wild birds was and continues to be for food, and gamebirds and wildfowl remain popular items in due season today. Archaeological excavations at Roman sites in Britain summarised by Parker (1988) provided some indication of the use of birds as food in Britain in the early historic period. By far the most frequent bird remains found were domestic poultry and domesticated geese, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* and Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus*, indicating that rearing and eating of domestic poultry was already thoroughly established. But a wide range of wild birds was also recorded, summarised in Table 1.1. In the absence of detailed counts, the number of sites at which species were found gives some indication of how frequently they were caught.

Although the work to demonstrate unequivocally that these birds were eaten had not been done, Parker observed that one must assume that this was the chief reason for taking them, an assumption he noted as well supported by studies elsewhere, for example in Switzerland. Of the corvids, Rooks *Corvus frugilegus*, identified at 12 sites, may have been eaten, as they still are in Rook pie, but Ravens *Corvus corax* were certainly kept as pets (as they were in the Victorian era; Ratcliffe 1997), which must account for some records, and it seems very probable that this also applies to Magpies *Pica pica* and Jackdaws *Corvus monedula*. There was a strong Roman tradition of teaching these species, as pets, to talk (Toynbee 1973). Corvids probably also occurred in these records as a result of their scavenging habits.

There were strong similarities with the prehistoric period, in the importance of wildfowl and gamebirds. Waders assumed much greater importance in Roman times, which also saw the introduction of domestic pigeons and doves to Britain (Yalden & Albarella 2009). Many songbirds were eaten, particularly thrushes, a long-standing Roman tradition (Gurney 1921).

| Species group | Number of species | Number of sites | Notes |
|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Hérons | 2 | 4 | |
| Storks | | 1 | |
| Swans | 3 | 3 | |
| Greylag/domestic goose | | 29 | |
| Other geese | 5 plus unidentified | 9 | |
| Shelduck | | 1 | |
| Mallard, Wigeon, Teal | | 53 | Mallard at 41 sites |
| Other dabbling ducks | 3 | 5 | Pintail not recorded |
| Diving ducks | 6 | 9 | |
| Gamebirds | 5 plus unidentified | 21 | |
| Rails | 4* | 10 | |
| Crane | | 12 | |
| Great Bustard | | 1 | |
| Plovers | 3 | 18 | Golden Plover at 13 sites |
| Snipe and Woodcock | | 29 | Woodcock at 27 sites |
| Other waders | 11 | 16 | |
| Pigeons and doves | 4 plus unidentified | 34 | Domestic/Rock at 11 sites |
| Seabirds | 5 | 6 | |
| Skylark | | 3 | |
| Thrushes | 5 plus unidentified | 20 | |
| Other small passerines | 16 including unidentified | 21 | Starling at 12 sites |
| Corvids | 6 | 57 | Raven at 39 sites |

Table 1.1. *Wild birds recovered at 86 Roman sites in Britain. Data from Parker 1988. * includes Coot and Moorhen.*

Parker (1988) commented that dietary customs in Britain were substantially Romanised, and that the lack of seabirds, commonly taken in north and west Britain, reflected the south-east geographic bias of the Roman province. Yalden & Albarella (2009) summarised records from more Roman sites, but these do not materially alter the pattern shown in Table 1.1.

Excavations from mediaeval sites show this pattern continuing, with a preponderance of domestic chickens and geese from the 7th to the mid-16th centuries (Serjeantson 2006), but the proportion of wild birds taken was very variable (see also p. 21). Table 1.2 summarises the archaeological records from mediaeval sites in southern England. Serjeantson noted that the species of wild birds most frequently found in Saxon sites were Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*, Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* and thrushes. Less frequent were wild duck, Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and godwits. From the mid-11th century the main species were Grey Partridge, plovers, Woodcock and Snipe. Many swans have also been found.

| Recorded in 1–5 sites | Recorded in 6–10 sites | Recorded in >10 sites |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| divers | Cormorant | Mute Swan |
| grebe | Grey Heron | Grey Partridge |
| shearwater | Coot | plovers |
| Gannet | Crane | Woodcock |
| Shag | Lapwing | Snipe |
| Bittern* | Ruff | thrushes |
| Stork* | godwit | |
| Spoonbill* | Curlew | |
| Quail | gulls | |
| Great Bustard* | | |
| Moorhen | | |
| Dotterel | | |
| Small waders | | |
| Whimbrel | | |
| tern | | |
| Common Guillemot | | |
| lark | | |
| sparrow | | |
| other small birds | | |

Table 1.2. *Wild birds recorded in archaeological records from mediaeval sites in southern England. Data from Serjeantson 2006. Note that there are also uncertain identifications for Water Rail, Oystercatcher, Razorbill and Puffin. * indicates one record only.*

Feasts and market lists

Other important sources of information on the birds consumed in mediaeval and early modern Britain are household accounts and lists of birds eaten at notable feasts or recorded in corporation market price lists, many recorded in the 19th and early 20th century ornithological literature. Table 1.3 summarises the frequency with which species occurred in 58 such lists, to give some idea of the range and variety of wild birds that were then eaten. Records of plovers, of small waders and of gulls are grouped together as it is not always clear which species were meant. The numbers of birds involved in these sources was not stated consistently. Nevertheless household accounts do show a similar pattern to the archaeological record, with Grey Partridges, plovers, Woodcock and Snipe as the most abundant species recorded in the accounts edited by Woolgar (2006), for example.

A similar source of information on the birds commonly eaten at that time is provided by price lists of the Poulterers Company of London, given by Jones (1965). Table 1.4 summarises 23 of these price lists, from the late 13th century to the end of the 16th century. Domestic poultry (including geese unless specifically stated as wild) has been excluded. Pigeons have

| Species | Number of lists | Species | Number of lists |
|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Bittern | 27 | Pheasant | 28 |
| Night Heron (Brewer) | 8 | Crane | 25 |
| Egret sp. | 13 | Great Bustard | 7 |
| Grey Heron | 33 | Oystercatcher | 4 |
| Stork | 4 | plovers | 43 ² |
| Spoonbill | 10 | Snipe | 26 |
| Swan (probably Mute) | 38 ¹ | Woodcock | 33 |
| Wild geese | 9 | Curlew | 32 |
| Shelduck | 2 | Redshank | 6 |
| Wigeon | 6 | Other waders | 22 |
| Teal | 28 | gulls | 15 ³ |
| Mallard | 26 | Puffin | 4 |
| Wildfowl | 6 | Pigeon (dovecote?) | 28 ⁴ |
| Grouse (three species) | 10 | Pigeon (wild) | 8 |
| Grey Partridge | 42 | Skylark | 31 |
| Quail | 19 | Other passerines | 28 |
| Peacock | 19 | | |

Table 1.3. *The frequency with which species of birds occurred in household accounts, menus from feasts, and in Corporation market price lists in mediaeval and early modern Britain. Domestic poultry are excluded. Figures are the number of lists out of 58 in which the species occurred. Data from Pennant 1776, Harting 1879, Yarrell & Saunders 1884, Lennard 1905, Nelson 1907, Stubbs 1910a, Le Strange 1920, Gurney 1921, Ticehurst 1923, 1934, Mead 1931, Simon 1952, Darby 1974, Rackham 1986, Bourne 1981, 1999b, 2003, 2006, Woolgar 1999, 2006. Ticehurst 1923 is treated as one list; ¹ includes one record of Whooper Swan; ² probably mainly Golden Plover but here includes Dotterel, Lapwing and Ringed Plover; ³ mainly Black-headed Gull (or Puets); ⁴ includes 11 squabs.*

also been excluded as dovecote birds unless otherwise stated. Swans, although probably all Mute Swans *Cygnus olor*, are included. ‘Green’ and ‘Grey’ Plovers (which probably equate to Golden Plover) and Lapwing are treated as ‘plovers’ since it is not always clear which species is meant. Blackbirds are included as thrushes, and finches and sparrows are combined.

Several points must be made about these lists. First, those in Table 1.3 are drawn mainly from feasts or household books of aristocratic and gentry establishments. They are thus possibly biased towards what was consumed by the upper classes, and should not be taken as representative of the diets of ordinary people. Nevertheless Thirsk (2007) pointed out that cookery books from the 16th century at least show much interest in bird meat, and recipes were included for many of the species listed in the table. It seems clear that by then, if not before, such food was eaten by a wider sweep of society than just the upper classes. Secondly, in the aftermath of the Black Death, the number and range of birds, including passerines, eaten regularly rose considerably. Stone (2006) gave the example of

| Species | Number of lists | Species | Number of lists |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Bittern | 20 | Dotterel | 1 |
| Night Heron (Brewer) | 6 | plover | 22 |
| Egret sp. | 6 | Knot and Ruff | 1 and 1 |
| Grey Heron | 20 | Snipe | 22 |
| Stork | 4 | Woodcock | 23 |
| Spoonbill | 14 | godwit | 1 |
| Swan (Mute?) | 21 | Curlew | 14 |
| Wild goose | 1 | Redshank | 1 |
| Wigeon | 4 | gull | 2 |
| Teal | 22 | mew (probably a gull) | 1 |
| Mallard | 23 | Stock Dove | 2 |
| Grey Partridge | 19 | larks | 19 |
| Quail | 4 | thrushes | 9 |
| Pheasant | 19 | finches | 5 |
| Peacock | 2 | bunting | 1 |
| Crane | 15 | Great birds | 6 |
| Great Bustard | 9 | Little birds | 5 |

Table 1.4. Bird species listed in price lists of the Poulterers Company of the City of London over the course of three centuries. Figures are the number of lists out of 23 in which the species occurred. Data from Jones 1965.

London cook shops which were then offering birds such as roast heron, capon pasties, roast Woodcock, thrushes, larks and finches – what he termed high-class fast food. Swans and herons were eaten more frequently, and estates increasingly diversified into managing semi-wild birds, developing swanneries in the 14th and 15th centuries, for example. Stone also suggested that heronries were similarly managed (see p. 58). These patterns were part of a trend toward the diversification of agriculture and food supply after the Black Death, as cultivation became more difficult with a declining population, and cereals became less profitable (see also Thirsk 1997).

Thirdly, except for Common Cranes *Grus grus*, various herons and swans, the lists continue to be dominated by the familiar staples we still find in field sports today – gamebirds, ducks and geese, and waders. Although fewer wader species are taken today, those listed were common quarry well into the 20th century. Similarly, although songbirds are no longer taken for the table in Britain, many were taken into the early 20th century (see p. 14). Skylarks *Alauda arvensis*, for example, were still offered by poulterers in London in the early 1940s (Gladstone 1943), and cookery books of the same era also offered recipes for preparing them for the table. It was also the fate of many female songbirds caught by bird trappers engaged in the cagebird trade up to the end of the 19th century to be killed and sold off for food. Songbirds remain part of the diet in southern Europe.

Conspicuous consumption

Astonishing numbers of Bitterns *Botaurus stellaris*, herons, Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*, storks, swans and cranes were sometimes consumed at feasts. The great feast in September 1465 at the installation of George Neville as Archbishop of York is a case in point, which has been widely quoted. The list of provisions, as transcribed by Pennant (1776) from Leland's *Antiquarii Collectanea*, is shown in Table 1.5.

Further particulars of the actual courses also listed Redshanks *Tringa totanus*, stints, larks and 'Martynettes roast'. Pennant believed the last to be Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, which Macpherson (1897) noted were taken in large numbers in northern Italy, being much in demand by the poulterers of Padua, for example. Both Pennant (1776) and Woolgar (1999) indicated that the oxen, sheep, pigs and what Pennant termed 'other more substantial foods' were served to the retinues of the noblemen present, amounting to more than 400 persons.

| Item | Number | Item | Number |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| In wheat | 300 quarters | Pigeons | 4000 |
| In ale | 300 tuns | Rabbits | 4000 |
| Wine | 100 tuns | In Bitterns | 204 |
| Of hippocras | 1 pipe | herons | 400 |
| In oxen | 104 | Pheasants | 200 |
| Wild bulls | 6 | Grey Partridges | 500 |
| Muttons | 1000 | Woodcock | 400 |
| Veales (calves) | 304 | Curlew | 100 |
| Porkes | 304 | Eggrites | 1000 |
| Swans | 400 | Stags, buck and roe | 500 and mo.[re?] |
| Geese | 2000 | Cold venison pasties | 4000 |
| Capons | 1000 | Parted dishes of jellies | 1000 |
| Pygges | 2000 | Plain dishes of jellies | 3000 |
| Plovers | 400 | Cold baked tarts | 4000 |
| Quail | 100 dozen | Cold baked custards | 3000 |
| The fowls called Rees | 200 dozen | Hot venison pasties | 1500 |
| In peacocks | 104 | Hot custards | 2000 |
| Mallard & Teal | 4000 | Pike and bream | 608 |
| In Common Cranes | 204 | Porpoises and seals | 12 |
| In kids | 204 | Spices and sweetmeats | plenty |
| In chickens | 2000 | | |

Table 1.5. Provisions for the feast celebrating the installation of George Neville as Archbishop of York in September 1465, from Pennant 1776. For 'a quarter of wheat' see Appendix 5. Hippocras was an aromatic medicated wine much used as a cordial. No explanation is given for the appearance of both porkes and pygges; perhaps pork and bacon? No explanation is given for the term 'In cranes', 'In chickens', etc. 'Rees' are usually interpreted as Ruffs but see p. 113.

However, both Gurney (1921) and Bourne (1999) were sceptical that all these provisions were actually consumed. But it was not expected that those present at such functions would eat everything. A substantial amount of broken meats, or left-overs, was expected to be given as alms to the poor, and aristocratic establishments at this time employed almoners, whose duties included responsibility for overseeing the gathering and distributing of such post-feast gifts (Woolgar 1999).

Nor was such scale at a major feast unique. Hobusch (1980) listed, from State Papers, the game consumed at the wedding feast of the Polish Duke Johann Sigismund in 1594, which comprised 13 Bison, 20 Elks, 10 Red Deer, 22 does, 36 Wild Boar, 29 sounders (young pigs), 2 bears, 48 Roedeer, 272 hares, 5 wild swans, 123 Woodcock, 279 heath cocks (Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*), 433 Hazel Grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*), 47 partridges and 413 wild ducks. The provisions requisitioned by Henry III for his Christmas feast in 1251 involved 430 Red Deer, 200 Fallow Deer, 200 Roedeer, 200 wild swine, 1,300 hares, 450 Rabbits, 2,100 partridges, 290 Pheasants, 395 swans, 115 Common Cranes, 400 tame pigs, 70 pork brawns, 7,000 hens, 120 peafowl, 80 salmon and lampreys without number (Rackham 1986), and for a feast for King Richard II in 1387 50 swans, 200 geese, 120 Curlews, 144 Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* and 12 Common Cranes were among the viands provided (Stubbs 1910a). Bourne (1981, 1999b) also listed birds consumed at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, and at the meeting between Henry VIII and the King of France at Calais in 1532, which included totals of 86 Bitterns, 801 Brewes (Night Herons), 440+ Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*, 304 Common Cranes and storks, 65 Spoonbills, 48 Great Bustards *Otis tarda*, 361 swans, 1,800 partridges, 5,947 Quail *Coturnix coturnix* and 3,120 Snipe; the list for 1520 included a separate item of 912 Bitterns, Curlews, shovellers (Spoonbills) and gulls.

There is clearly a strong element of conspicuous consumption involved in these lists. Eating species such as herons, cranes and swans was an important mark of status. The birds listed for the Neville feast would, on the basis of prices given for around the same period by Jones (1965), have involved an expense of c.£260, a very large sum of money in the mid-15th century, when a labourer's daily wage was around 2–3d. The cost of the birds consumed in 1520 and 1532 was even greater and Bourne (1981) estimated it at £545 and eight shillings. These lists are also markedly at variance with the patterns shown by household accounts, which more usually record the acquisition and consumption of such birds in ones and twos, occasionally tens and twenties, when they would have been penned and kept for future consumption.

There were elaborate rules for dressing and carving birds such as herons and cranes. An early 16th century 'Boke on Kervynge', quoted by Stubbs (1910a), noted that one displayed a Crane, dismembered a Heron, unjointed a Bittern, broke an Egret, and minced a Plover (modern spellings). Whilst one may now not understand what these terms meant, they indicate that prescribed ceremonial methods of carving such birds were followed. Hope (1990) also noted that swans and peacocks were commonly skinned, rather than plucked, and roasted and then reassembled to be served in all their feathered beauty, with bills and some feathers further decorated by gilding. Gurney (1921) gave a recipe for Peacock *Pavo cristatus* in which the bird was 'flayed, parboiled, larded and stuck thick with cloves; then roasted, with his feet wrapped up to keep them from scorching; then covered again with his own skin as soon as he is cold, and so underpropped that, as alive, he seems to stand on his legs'. Such consumption and ceremony contributed to the projection of the power, wealth and prestige of the giver of the feast.



Figure 1.1. A 17th-century street market. The stall on the left offers a peacock and, to its right, what is probably a swan, a crane (which the stall-holder is lifting down), a large wader (perhaps a Curlew) and a goose. From Burke (1940).

Although egrets, Night Herons, Spoonbills, storks and Common Cranes were apparently no longer offered for sale in England much beyond the end of the 16th century (see Figure 1.1), Bitterns, Grey Herons and Great Bustards continued to appear in the markets into the early 19th century (Gladstone 1943). Spoonbills and Common Cranes ceased breeding in Britain in the early 17th century, although Common Cranes remained winter visitors, and imported species, such as Night Herons, may have become more difficult to obtain, becoming increasingly scarce due to over-exploitation (see Bourne 1999b).

There was a considerable import trade in live birds through Calais by the early 16th century, which has been well summarised by Bourne (1999b), reviewing information in the Lisle letters from Calais relating to the English bird trade. This trade mainly concerned birds intended for food or for falconry. The main species imported for food from mainland Europe at this time were herons – Grey Herons, Night Herons and egrets – and Quail, with lesser numbers of larger gamebirds, Mute Swans, Common Cranes, storks, and occasionally songbirds (to be kept as pets). Lapwing, Snipe and Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus* were also sent, although many of the latter were by then being obtained from Lincolnshire. Anne Boleyn was fond of Dotterels, and kept them in her garden until it was time to eat them. Lisle specialised in Quail, which he bought in vast quantities as presents (see Chapter 6). Such trade was international. Thirsk (2007), for example, recorded fattened birds being exported from Poland to the Netherlands in the 17th century, sent live in baskets in the corn boats from Danzig.

Smaller numbers of gulls and preserved Puffins *Fratercula arctica* (counted as fish by the Church and therefore permissible on Fridays and in Lent) were sent from England to France. Peregrines were also sent from England, whilst Goshawks, particularly, came from France. The trade continued after Calais reverted to France in the mid-16th century, and William Harrison, writing in 1577, noted the continued import into England of ‘egrets, pawpers (Spoonbills) and such like ... daily brought unto us from beyond the sea’. These birds were shipped live, the herons and gulls mainly taken as young from the nest and sent to be reared in pens or houses, known as stews or mews, to be eaten when required. Methods of preparation described by Stubbs (1910a) show quite clearly that these birds were killed and dressed as required for the table. The costs of making pens to hold them, of food for the birds and of keepers to look after them appear not infrequently in household accounts of the period. Quails were sent in baskets provided with hempseed and water for the journey (Hope 1990).

Stews or mews

The art of capturing birds alive and fattening them in stews or mews was practiced with species besides herons and gulls. It was commonly done with waders (see Chapter 7), with gamebirds and Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur*, and with thrushes and Ortolan Buntings *Emberiza hortulana* (see Chapter 9). This is an ancient practice and it was frequently illustrated in ancient Egyptian art, particularly featuring cranes, herons and geese. Cranes are shown being herded by keepers, who guided them with long sticks. Both cranes and geese were crammed *i.e.* force-fed. Foods such as hempseed, milk curds, wheat, barley and liver were widely used, and wildfowl were coaxed to feed on wine and ale, which made them drunk. Birds were often placed with others already tamed for reassurance (Thirsk 2007). Young Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus*, known as puets, and herons were fed on ox liver and household scraps and sometimes curds to fatten them and to sweeten the flesh. Herons at Althorp were also fed on oatmeal (Lilford 1895). Even Spoonbills were recorded as readily taking such foods. Thirsk also noted a fashion in the early 17th century in parts of eastern England for breeding species such as Quail and plovers for meat and eggs.

Being outside the restrictions of the Game Laws in England (see Chapter 5), a large trade developed in wildfowl and waders, with wildfowl particularly important following the introduction and spread of Dutch-type duck decoys from the early 17th century. Virtually all waders were taken for the table, but the records show a preponderance of plovers, Snipe, Woodcock and Curlew (see Chapter 7).

Passerines were eaten by all classes of society, a tradition that went back to classical times at least. Although the point should not be exaggerated, Macpherson (1897) remarked that the English have never indulged in the destruction of small birds for the table to the same extent as the French, the Germans or the Italians. It is probable that the restrictions placed by the scale of enclosure and game preservation from the late 18th century on the activities of bird-catchers in England partly underlie this observation (see Chapter 9). Enclosure in France, Germany and Italy was a far more piecemeal and fragmented process (Blanning 2007).

In his account of the history of fowling Macpherson (1897) makes it clear that all groups of seabirds were exploited, mainly for food, worldwide (see Chapter 8). Seabird colonies are an obvious target for such exploitation combining, as they do, concentrations of birds (and eggs) of good size and abundance in one place. Thus Gannets *Morus bassana* and auks, and, latterly, Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis*, for example, were widely taken for food by local communities at stations all round the North Atlantic from prehistoric times.

Changes in attitudes

With the development of efficient sporting firearms and increasingly efficient and abundant food production from the mid-18th century, attitudes to taking birds in Britain changed. Wild birds were no longer regarded as part of the produce of an estate to be harvested to help feed the household. Instead, gamebirds and wildfowl came to be valued for field sports and the management of estates at least partly devoted to this purpose. 'Vermin' was rigorously controlled, methods of rearing and feeding game were developed or expanded and coverts laid out to improve the sporting nature of the shooting. It is probably no accident that the age of the big shots (see Ruffer 1977) coincided with a period of marked agricultural depression in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Estates had often developed

or acquired other sources of income and, as agricultural prosperity declined, landowners increasingly regarded the sporting aspects of their estates more highly. Tenants were, for example, prevented from reorganising the field patterns of their holdings to preserve hedges for game and shooting, a significant check on agricultural improvement and profitability (Shrubb 2003). Markets also dealt with a narrower range of species, mainly gamebirds, wildfowl and some waders (e.g. Gladstone 1943), although passerines, particularly larks, were still traded into the 20th century.

Feathers and down

Feathers are an inevitable by-product of eating birds, and have had many uses, for example as quill pens, for firescreens, for stuffing pillows, cushions, quilts and mattresses, for fashionable decoration of hats and clothes and as fletching for arrows. Wildfowl were perhaps the most important group for many of these uses (see Chapter 5), although there was also an extensive trade in the feathers of seabirds (Chapter 8). Minor uses included making fishing flies (trapped Wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes* were released without their tail feathers, plucked for this purpose; Swaine 1982) and as paint brushes. Payne-Gallwey (1882) noted that the Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer* was ‘well worth a little trouble, for if not in sufficiently good plumage to please a collector, the large white breast makes the perfection of a fowling cap, and three such skins an excellent waistcoat. Impenetrable to wet, tough as leather and warm, the plumage is of a most suitable kind and colour for a fowler’. Smith (1887) noted that the skins of divers were much favoured for this purpose in Scandinavia.

Geese

Domestic geese were particularly important for quill pens and soft furnishings and, in the mediaeval period, for fletching arrows. In mediaeval Britain, geese were kept in small units by peasants, but by the end of the period they were also being raised in large flocks (Gurney 1921, Serjeantson 2006). Such flocks were kept on commons, particularly the commons of the Fens and Somerset, for both meat and feathers. For meat the London markets, for example, were supplied by geese driven from the eastern counties (Figure 1.2), particularly from Norfolk and Suffolk. Defoe (in Furbank *et al.* 1991) described the goose drives from these counties, saying ‘a prodigious number are brought up to London in droves from the farthest parts of Norfolk; even from the fenn-country, about Lynn, Downham, Wisbich and the Washes; as also from all the east-side of Norfolk and Suffolk, of whom tis very frequent now to meet droves, with a thousand, sometimes two thousand in a drove: they begin to drive them generally in August, by which time harvest is almost over, and the geese may feed on the stubbles as they go’. Driving ceased in October, when the roads became too muddy for the geese to negotiate.

There were important feather industries in Lincolnshire and Somerset in the 18th century, supplying feathers and down for stuffing mattresses. Pennant (1776) recorded that the geese in Lincolnshire in his day were plucked five times a year, from Lady-Day (March 25th), when feathers and quills were taken, and four times subsequently for feathers, until Michaelmas (September 29th). They were plucked alive and Lord Orford, in his *Voyage through the Fens*, recorded having found many dead and dying geese as a result of this