

Andrew Harrop, Chairman of BOURC, commented: ‘The identification of this Red-footed Booby in Sussex was straightforward, and there was no reason to doubt that it had arrived naturally, so the record was unanimously accepted by BOURC after a single circulation. Unlike some historical records of rare seabirds found in unusual circumstances, there is a detailed account of its discovery by a known finder that is fully corroborated.

‘Some of the decisions taken about the treatment and rehabilitation of the bird were well intentioned but perhaps misguided. Long-distance vagrancy by birds is a natural phenomenon, and trying to “correct” it by returning them to their “normal” range is fraught with difficulties. In this case, it was uncertain which population the bird had come from (during the BOURC circulation it was noted that the Brazilian islands of the South Atlantic might be a possible source of vagrants), and possible that it was actually an individual in the vanguard of a natural colonisation event. In these circumstances, once it had fully recovered, there was a strong case for releasing it close to where it was discovered.’

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## Letters

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### The real conservation priorities?

While welcoming debate on how the conservation movement uses its precious resources, we disagree with some of the points made by Ian Carter in his recent *BB* eye (*Brit. Birds* 110: 638–639), as he seems to misunderstand the purpose of our IUCN Red List paper (*Brit. Birds* 110: 502–517). Ian also makes some more general points that we feel are misleading. We therefore welcome this opportunity to clarify any points of confusion and explain the conservation relevance of the work.

First and foremost, our IUCN Red list is not a new list of priorities for British birds and it is not an alternative to any existing priority list. It is simply a list of birds that are threatened with extinction in Great Britain, generated using an internationally recognised process. Perhaps surprisingly, this is the first time this has been done at a GB level, and will provide a level playing field for necessary comparisons of threat with other taxa in GB and for birds and other taxa across the globe. For many countries, Red lists are the only assessments of conservation status that are possible and numerous conservation mechanisms respond to them. For British birds, the conservation community is in the fortunate position of also being able to produce more sophisticated assessments.

To be clear, the two most important

priority lists that inform conservation action for birds are, firstly, the well-established Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC; *Brit. Birds* 108: 708–746), which is updated every six years to reflect the shifting status of many of our bird species; and, secondly, the devolved government statements on the species and habitats of principal importance for conserving biodiversity (e.g. the Section 41 list in the NERC Act (2006) in England). All of the government lists are of long standing and the Section 41 list, for example, has not been revised for over ten years. The new IUCN list will help to inform the revisions of such government lists and BoCC, if and when they occur. The implication that species priorities are forever changing is incorrect but, equally, it is important to use the information available on their status to keep priority listings up to date.

Ian goes on to make a point contrasting how the UK is well served by conservation reporting and strategies, but has an increasingly impoverished wildlife – almost as if one was responsible for the other. We can assure *BB* readers that the resources spent on setting priorities and strategies across conservation organisations are both well considered and an appropriately small fraction of the resources at our disposal. Clarity on our priorities simply enables us to ensure that

those resources are expended in the most efficient manner on the species, habitats and issues that most urgently require attention. It is important to remember that priorities change and hence we make no apology for reviewing priorities from time to time to ensure that we are doing the best job we can with limited resources.

Ian's comments on the highly influential and high-profile *Making Space for Nature* (2010) and the *State of Nature* (2016) reports are hard to fathom given the pivotal role of these reports in crystallising and communicating the needs for nature and uniting the conservation and research community behind that cause.

The depressing reality is that the pressures upon our wildlife are increasing, while the resources available to combat them are insuf-

ficient and, in most cases, declining. Although there are many brilliant examples of conservation success that demonstrate what can be achieved, the wildlife in our countryside remains under pressure from intensive management, built development, invasive species and pollution, while the impacts of climate change increase year on year. At the same time, the public sector spend on biodiversity conservation is currently just 0.024% of GDP, a tiny proportion and one that has fallen by one-third in recent years (Defra 2017; <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-4251>). Linked to this, non-governmental organisations struggle for funds to continue their vital conservation programmes. Perhaps this is what society should be focusing attention on?

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I hate to take issue with a fellow conservationist, but Ian Carter's comments on the report that bears my name (the 'Lawton Report', or more correctly *Making Space for Nature*) in *BB eye* (November 2017) need a response. I do not wish to comment on the rest of his article.

He says that *Making Space for Nature* was produced 'after several years of deliberation'. It wasn't. Defra commissioned (it didn't 'lead') the review in late 2009, and I met with the then Secretary of State for the Environment (Hilary Benn) on 20th January 2010 to discuss my role as Chairman of the panel. We started work in February and submitted our report to Defra on 16th September 2010 (some seven months later).

Ian Carter says that 'everyone involved in conservation was already aware of its main conclusions', characterised by the 'summarising manta' ('more, bigger, better and joined'). I agree with him. He describes the report as 'well argued', for which I am grateful, but I have said on the record on numerous occasions that virtually all the science underpinning *Making Space* could

have been written 10 or even 20 years earlier. It wasn't written for experts like him. It was targeted deliberately at policy- and other decision-makers, using simple, positive language that they would hopefully understand and act upon.

And there's the rub. He goes on to imply that money spent on producing reports like *Making Space* would be better spent on actual conservation actions (wellies in the mud stuff). Actually, I don't know how much *Making Space* cost to produce, but the panel members were not paid and received only travelling expenses, and we had one paid member of Natural England staff to support us; so I guess a few thousand pounds at most. You don't get many hectares of land bought, or ponds dug for that.

But what *Making Space* did do, and continues to do, is persuade policy- and other decision-makers in organisations with money, and who care about wildlife conservation, that 'more, bigger, better and joined' is the way forward and to put their money where their hearts are.

*Making Space* is, or has been, directly