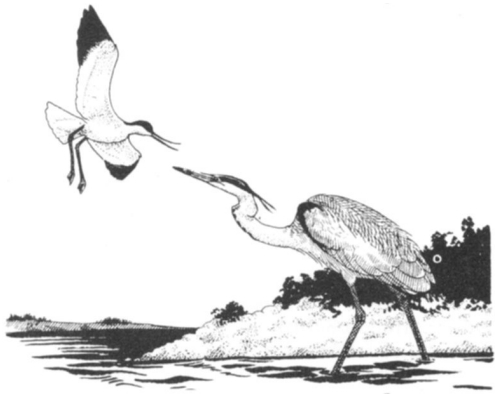


AVOCET diving at a predatory heron – drawing by Norman Arlott in *Minsmere*, reviewed below



The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland. Compiled by J. T. R. Sharrock for the British Trust for Ornithology. Poyser, Berkhamsted, £10.

Minsmere, by Herbert Axell. Hutchinson, £7.50.

Every now and again there appears an essential reference book on ornithology; and such is the Atlas of the BTO and the Irish Wildbird Conservancy. As the forerunner of other current mapping projects elsewhere it is equally essential as a text book and model of mapping techniques.

Each of 218 breeding species is assigned a page of text and a map, about 17×23 cm, showing by red dots the 10 km squares in which evidence of breeding was obtained in the period 1968–72. Large dots denote confirmed breeding, middle-sized dots probable and small dots possible breeding. Each map provides the best available indication of a bird's breeding distribution, but not of course of its density. Many factors in different degree affect the accuracy of the information; these are fully dealt with in Dr Sharrock's 15-page introduction so that the user can form his own conclusions. The BTO can separately supply 12 transparent overlays (for £1.50) showing temperature, rainfall, altitude, the distribution of lowland heath, moorland, sessile oak woods, etc. Used with the bird maps they suggest correlations between distribution and particular environmental requirements.

The coarseness of the 10 km grid necessarily obscures finer points. I compared the distribution map of one species in the Atlas with a map prepared for a single county based on 2×2 km quadrants. The larger scale brings out clearly the absence of the bird in a rather narrow belt of country (not obviously unsuitable) in a way that the smaller scale cannot. This does not invalidate the Atlas map but suggests a further reason for cautious use.

The text mentions such things as breeding preferences and draws on the BTO Common Birds Census to indicate population fluctuations; other relevant works are also listed. Each species is illustrated with an accurate and pleasing black and white drawing by one of a team of artists marshalled by Robert Gillmor. All praise then to the BTO, the IWC, their staffs and everyone else brought in to help. It is a fine achievement.

Minsmere is a well-produced and lavishly illustrated account of what is perhaps the best known RSPB reserve, and Bert Axell writes easily and affectionately of the place he wardened for 17 years, describing the variety of habitat and the bird life through the year. Four species – bittern, marsh harrier, avocet and bearded tit – are selected for fuller treatment, and there is a check list of Minsmere birds. His most original contribution at Minsmere was the conception of the 'scrape': 50 acres of dull, unproductive ground bulldozed to form a lagoon where the level and salinity of the water could be controlled; provided with islands for breeding birds and viewing hides for the public, it proved a highly successful exercise.

Eric Hosking's photographs are of the impeccable quality expected of him and the 24 black and white drawings by Norman Arlott add charm and variety.

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