

Mammal and Red Kite bounties in Corbridge in the
17th and 18th centuries
Vasculum 83(1) 1-10 (1998)

Nick Rossiter

West Barn, Ordley, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 1SX

<http://www.nrossiter.supanet.com/hb/>

March 1998

THE VASCULUM

Vol. 83, No.1

March 1998

Mammal and Red Kite bounties in Corbridge in the 17th and 18th centuries

Nick Rossiter, West Barn, Ordley, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 1SX

The increasing interest in mammals has been reflected in the recent call for more information on their distribution in North-East England (Coult 1997). Mammals as a group appear to have always been under-recorded in the area, presumably because of the difficulties of observing many of them. The historical baseline was provided by Mennell and Perkins (1863-4) but many of the accounts lack the detail typically associated with, say, birds and flora simply because of the lack of data. An area that has been exploited for early records in other counties is that of bounty payments whereby the parish, through the churchwardens, paid a fixed amount per head for species that were considered to be vermin. In this paper an example of mammal and Red Kite *Milvus milvus* bounties from Corbridge is used to illustrate early persecution and provide early records for Northumberland.

The mechanism for the bounty payments was established by Parliament, which in 1566 authorized churchwardens to raise funds to pay so much a head to all those who brought in corpses of Foxes, Polecats, Weasels, Stoats, Otters, Hedgehogs, Rats, Mice, Moles, Hawks, Buzzards, Ospreys, Jays, Ravens, Kingfishers, etc. Many parishes continued to make payments under these and later acts until the 19th century, the persecution shifting from one species to another according to perceived priorities. For instance Kites were not an initial target for persecution because of their effectiveness as scavengers. However, after streets had become cleaner the campaign turned against them so that in later Stuart times (2nd half 17th century) we

find them proscribed as they were perceived as a menace to poultry and agriculture. Surviving parish records show that the destruction effected under these Acts of Parliament was colossal, particularly from the late 17th century, when guns were increasingly used to shoot birds on the wing (Thomas 1984).

Records of the heavy toll, as documented in Churchwardens' accounts, have been used in a number of counties for establishing the abundance of species which have become locally or nationally extinct. For example, Macpherson (1892) showed that in Cumberland at Crosthwaite bounties were paid on a number of Eagles and Ravens killed from 1713 to 1765. Lovegrove (1994) showed the prodigious numbers of Red Kites killed in some parishes: 380 in ten years at Tenterden (Kent), 411 in twelve years at Tarporley (Cheshire) and 201 in fourteen years at East Budleigh (Devon).

In Northumberland the books for Corbridge contain by far the most detailed accounts discovered so far of bounties paid for vermin heads before game preservation became more formally established in the late 18th century. This source was first mentioned by Forster (1881). He reported that in the Churchwardens' Accounts "The other items referred to are premiums paid out of the Church cess, for the heads of wild animals, and the heads of birds, called 'gledes'. The glade or common kite is a distinguished species of British hawk...". Forster further commented on the books as follows:

In addition to the usual yearly entries, there is a consecutive list of the names of all those who have presented heads at the vestry from 1676 until 1724, with the day of the month and the year in which they were presented, covering several pages closely written. In several places the writing is so defaced that it cannot be made out, and portions of several leaves are torn off, but the following numbers which certainly do not show the whole, are what we have been able to decipher during the period referred to:- Foxes' heads, 367; Fulmarts', 653; Brocks', 119; Wild Cats', 141; Otters', 27; Gledes' 153.
--Total 1460.

Forster's work was summarized by Nelson (1881) in the *Zoologist* and also reported in a later book on Corbridge by Dixon (1912). Unfortunately, the

records were discovered after Mennel & Perkins' work (*op. cit.*) and the Kite records were also later omitted by Bolam (1912). There is thus a danger that this valuable source of historical information will continue to be overlooked.

In the present study, the original material from the Churchwardens' Accounts Books for Corbridge in the 17th and 18th centuries (NRO: EP 57/25 1676-1738; EP 57/26 from 1738) has been completely re-analyzed, both to check Forster's figures and to obtain more information on fluctuations in payments with respect to decades and seasons. The account book for 1676 to 1738 contains by far the most material with payments for vermin heads recorded throughout the book. Some of the vermin head payments are recorded in the front of the book along with other parish expenditure. These show the amounts paid for the heads and enable the unit value of each head to be determined: 1s for a Fox, 4d for a brock [Badger], fulmart [Polecat], Otter or Wild Cat, and 2d for a glead [Red Kite]. An extract from the front of the book for 1720-21 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Vermin Head Claims -- Front of Corbridge Churchwardens' Account Book.

claim	amount
to Tho: Forster for 4 Glead heads	£ 0. 0. 8
for washing the Church Linen	£ 0. 4. 6
pd for the book for ye fast day abt the Plague in France	£ 0. 3. 6
my Charges at Whitsunday Court at Morpeth 1721	£ 0. 2. 6
to Lyll Winship for one fulmart head	£ 0. 0. 4
to Matth: Thomson for 4 fulmart heads	£ 0. 1. 4
to Mr Errington's men for 1 fox head & a brock killd in Farnly	£ 0. 1. 4

The great majority of the vermin payments are contained at the back of the book. Here the date on which the head was received is recorded along with the name of the claimant and details of the heads received. Before 1752 the calendar year started on March 25th, so December 1679 for instance, would

be followed by January 1679 [a common practice was to record this as, e.g. January 1679/80]. The lines through the manuscript are contemporary with the original and presumably are part of an accounting mechanism. An extract from this part of the book for 1679-80 is shown in Table 2.

The full list of species recorded throughout the Corbridge Churchwardens' Account Book from 1676-1745, in the present study, is: Fox *Vulpes vulpes*, brock (Badger) *Meles meles*, fulmart (Polecat) *Mustela putorius*, glead (Red Kite), Otter *Lutra lutra*, Wild Cat *Felis silvestris* and Martin (Pine Marten) *Martes martes*. Forster did not identify Pine Marten in the returns. However, entries at the back of the book for 1679 confirm their presence at this time. For instance, a number of entries shown in Table 2 such as "John Hogget one fulmart head one martin hea... November ye 16th 1679" mention within single entries both fulmart and martin heads. The numbers of heads would have been added together under one name if only one species had been involved. Nowhere else in the book does a species appear under more than one name in a single entry.

From a complete examination of the Corbridge books from 1676 - 1745, the totals for each species annually were derived in separate totals for the front and back sections. Duplicates in the two sections were identified by examining the names of the claimants, dates and vermin details. Table 3 shows the net totals of heads calculated for each decade from 1676 - 1745 after adjusting for duplicates which reduced the total by about 2%. There are gaps in the entries with virtually no payments in 1683 - 86, 1718, 1725 - 27, 1730 - 37 and 1744 - 45. The number of missing years in each decade is shown in brackets in the first column. The last row of the table shows the total number of claims made for each species.

Considering the problems in transcription, the totals for the current study in general agree well with the original one. Forster produced totals from the reduced period of 1676 - 1725 with no allowance for duplicates in the two parts of the book. On this basis the totals from the present study are Fox 398 (367 in Forster), Badger 169 (119), Polecat 605 (653), Red Kite 168 (153), Otter 31 (27), Wild Cat 139 (141) and Pine Marten 6 (0). The only significant discrepancy, other than for Pine Marten, is for Badger. The entries for this species have been double-checked in the current study and no significant error found.

An interesting question is, why was Corbridge such an active area for this type of bounty system. Many entries in the 1676 - 1738 book during the period 1677 - 1717 involve claims by a John Hoggert (alias Hogget, Hoggart, etc) who Forster reveals (*op. cit.*) was the warrener or gamekeeper at Dilston. The warren covered all of Widehaugh and was farmed actively for Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* until the beginning of the 19th century. It is therefore likely that protecting the rabbit warren was one motivation for the bounty system. However, ownership also appears to have played a part. The owners of the Dilston estate until 1715 were the Radcliffes. In this year James Radcliffe was executed for his part in the Jacobite Rising and the estates transferred to the Crown. The rapid decline in numbers of heads presented after 1715 shown in Table 3 may therefore to some extent be due to the demise of the Radcliffes who may have been proponents of the church bounty scheme.

However, the decline in bounty numbers after 1715 should not be read as implying that persecution had ceased. A bounty system may have been run more directly by private estates. Indeed the probable demise of the Red Kite during the 18th century, the sighting of the last Wild Cat at Aydon in 1822 and the extreme scarcity of Badgers in the Corbridge area in the 19th century (Forster, *ibid*) all suggest that persecution continued unabated but was recorded in a different manner, if at all. The impression is given in many natural history books that it was the coming of systematic game preservation, commencing in the late 18th century, that led to the demise of many of our predatory animals. However, it is clear from the data that a considerable reduction in numbers was taking place before this time.

Table 2. Vermin Head Claims – Back of Corbridge Churchwardens' Account Book.

May the 31 day 1679

John Lowson one brocke head May the 31 day 1679

John Hearon in Dilston one fox head June the 25th day 1679

Nicolas Grenewell one glead head Septem ye 24 day 1679

John Hudspeth do hold one wilde cat head Octo: ye 3 day 167...

Claudius Carr in Corbridge one fox head two brocke heads December ye 18th day 1679

Claudius Car one wilde cat head dec ye 24th John Hogg in Dilston two wilde cats heads two fulm... heads one martin head Oct 12th

John Hogget two fulmarts heads Octo: ye 16th 7...

John Hogget one fox head thre fulmarts Novem ye first 1679

John Hogget one fulmart head one martin hea... November ye 16th 1579

John Hogget thre fulmarts heads one martin head December the 14th 1679

Nicolas Addison one fox head Decem ye 24th 1679

John Hogget one fulmart head two martins hea... one wilde cat head de 21 . 79

John Hogget thre wilde cat heads one marti... head Janu: 23 day 1679

John Hogget two wilde cats heads Jan 26 . 79

John Hogget two fox heads two wilde cat head... one glead head two fulmarts heads feb. 10 day 79

Claudius Car in Corbridge two fox heads one brocke head one wilde cat head feb. the 12 day 1679

John Newton in Corbridge one fox head feb. 27th 7... one fulmart head one glead head

Will Dodd one fox head february the 27th day 167...

Claudius Car one fox head one brocke head March the ...

John Newton one fox head May ye 30th day 1680

(a facsimile of this page in the Churchwardens' Account Book is presented as figure 2).

**Table 3. Total Numbers of Heads per ten-year period at
Corbridge: 1676-1745**

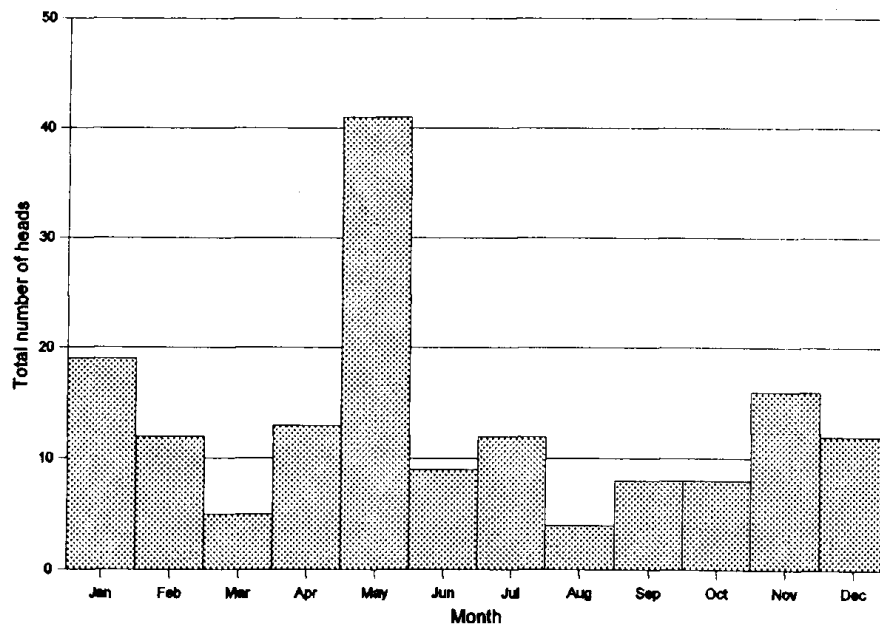
decade (number missing years)	Fox	Brock	Fulmart	Glead	Otter	WildCat	Martin	total
1676- 1685 (3)	87	28	100	32	11	54	6	318
1686- 1695 (1)	98	46	154	22	9	29	-	358
1696- 1705 (0)	85	27	127	47	3	15	-	304
1706- 1715 (0)	61	35	156	36	3	28	-	319
1716- 1725 (2)	56	26	63	26	4	11	-	186
1726- 1735 (8)	-	-	21	-	-	3	-	24
1736- 1745 (4)	12	-	70	-	1	1	-	84
Total Heads	399	162	691	163	31	141	6	1593
Total Claims	280	139	249	91	28	92	5	884

In the current study, the time of the year in which Glead heads were presented was assessed for the 155 entries for which the full date was available. The numbers of Glead heads were then summed by calendar

month. The result is shown in Figure 1 as a graph of the total numbers of Glead heads presented by calendar month.

The result is a strong indication that persecution was highest in May, presumably of breeding birds which may have made tempting shooting targets. Such persecution is likely to have been far more serious in its effect on the Red Kite population than if persecution had been mainly of young birds in the autumn. Indeed the low numbers of Red Kite heads presented in August could be taken to indicate an almost total lack of breeding success, since recently fledged juveniles would have been relatively easy to kill.

Figure 1. Numbers of Glead Heads presented by Calendar Month at Corbridge 1676 - 1723.



Another interesting question is, whether predators were persecuted to the same degree in other parts of Northumberland as at Corbridge. Other Churchwardens' Accounts Books do indicate the existence of a bounty system, but quite often mainly for foxes and at a much lower rate than that shown in Corbridge. Such books are still being actively studied. However, empirically the whole of the county eventually lost most predatory animals so it would seem reasonable to speculate that persecution was rife everywhere but was simply better documented in Corbridge than elsewhere.

References

- Bolam, G., 1912. *Birds of Northumberland and the Eastern Borders*. Alnwick: Henry Hunter Blair.
- Coult, T., 1997. Putting Northumbria's Mammals on the Map. *The Vasculum* **82(1)**: 3-5.
- Dixon, S.F., 1912. *History of the Saxon Royal Town of Corbridge-on-Tyne*. Newcastle: R.Ward.
- Forster, R., 1881. *History of Corbridge and its Antiquities with a Concise History of Dilston Hall*. Newcastle: J.Beall.
- Lovegrove, R., 1994. Fight for Survival: Birds of Prey. *RSPB/Evening Mail*, April issue: 26-28.
- Macpherson, H.A., 1892. *A Vertebrate Fauna of Lakeland*. Edinburgh: David Douglas.
- Mennell, H.T., & Perkins, V.R, 1863-4, A Catalogue of the Mammalia of Northumberland and Durham. *Transactions of the Tyneside Naturalists' Field Club* **VI**: 111-177.
- Nelson, T.H., 1881. Some Ancient Records Relating to the Wild Animals of Northumberland. *Zoologist* **3rd series**, **5**: 172-175.
- Thomas, K., 1984. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. Penguin.

Figure 2. Vermin Head Claims -- Back of Corbridge Churchwardens' Account Book.

May the 31st 1679
 John Dawson one brooke head May the 31st Day 1679
 John Hogg in Dilton one fox head June the 25th Day 1679
 Nicolas Gerson one and a half brooke heads September 24th Day 1679
 John Hogg one do. one wild cat head Oct 7th 1679
 Claudius Dore in Boobing one fox head two
 brooke heads December 18th Day 1679
 Claudius Dore one wild cat head Dec 24th
 John Hogg in Dilton two wild cats heads two fulm
 one fox head Oct 13th
 John Hogg two fulm heads Oct 17th 1679
 John Hogg one fox head two fulm heads Novem
 8th first 1679
 John Hogg one fulm head one Martin
 November 17th 1679
 John Hogg three fulm heads one Martin
 head December 14th 1679
 Nicolas Dore one fox head Dec 24th 1679
 John Hogg one fulm head two Martin
 one wild cat heads Dec 21st 7
 John Hogg three wild cat heads one Martin
 head Jan 2nd Day 1679
 John Hogg two wild cats heads Jan 26th 7
 John Hogg two fox heads two wild cat
 two fulm heads Feb 10th Day 79
 Claudius Dore in Boobing one fox head one brooke head
 one wild cat head Feb 16th 1679
 John Hogg one fulm head one fox head
 Will Dore one fox head Feb 24th Day
 Claudius Dore one fox head one brooke head March 14th
 John Hogg one fox head March 14th