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They dined on crane: bird consumption, wild fowling and status in medieval England

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Abstract. In this paper the evidence for the use and consumption of wild birds in medieval England is reviewed. Wild bird bones are generally uncommon on medieval sites, however they are more frequently found on high status sites, such as castles, than in towns and villages, suggesting that they were regarded as luxury food. Both zooarchaeological and historical evidence point to an increase in their consumption in the later Middle Ages and the possible reasons behind this phenomenon are discussed. The distribution of wild birds in different areas of the country is also presented to show how geographic, environmental and cultural factors all contribute to their occurrence on archaeological sites.

Key words: wild birds, archaeology, medieval, England, fowling, status, consumption.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Better than any other bird, the Crane *Grus grus* symbolises the significance of wild fowl in medieval society. As YAPP (1981: 13) notes, aside from the symbolic dove and eagle, this species is "almost certainly the commonest of all birds in English manuscripts". It is also frequently mentioned in medieval documents and its bones, sometimes bearing butchery marks, are not infrequently found on archaeological sites of the period. The suggestion, however, that medieval people may have "dined on crane" may seem extremely unlikely if we consider that adult cranes are tough, gross, sinewy and engender a "melancholique bloud" (MUFFETT 1655: 91-2). Although young cranes would have been more tender and digestible, wild birds, in general, were "fussy and awkward to eat, needing a good deal of attention as well as in terms of preparation and setting out in the table" (WOOLGAR 2000). In addition, they would have retailed at a high price (WOOLGAR 2000).

The zooarchaeological evidence for the use of wild birds in medieval times will be reviewed in this paper and the reasons behind their, somewhat unlikely, consumption will be discussed. Since a full review of the evidence is beyond the space available, we will concentrate on a few key questions that can be summed up as follows:

· Who was consuming wild birds and why?

· What evidence do we have for any change in the consumption of wild birds during the course of the medieval period?

· Which wild species were the most important and did their significance vary geographically or temporally?

The area under consideration in this short synthesis is England, with a particular, but not exclusive, emphasis on the evidence from central England. The period discussed covers the Middle Ages, as normally defined in Britain (i.e. late 11th – early 16th century), although some references to the earlier (Anglo-Saxon) and the later (Early Modern) periods will also be made.

The title of this paper is inspired by the book on the history of acclimatisation societies "They dined on eland" (LEVER 1992). The survey of animal bone reports from central England, on which some of the evidence presented in this paper is based, was funded by English Heritage. We would like to thank Chris WOOLGAR, Keith DOBNEY, Dale SERJEANTSON, Jaco WEINSTOCK and Alison LOCKER for allowing us to refer to their unpublished work; Derek YALDEN for bibliographic help; John STEWART for helping us with the identification of the parrot bones mentioned in the text; Dale SERJEANTSON, Louise van WIJNGAARDEN-BAKKER and the journal's editor for comments on an earlier draft; and Zbigniew, Bożena and Mikołaj BOCHEŃSKI for their generous hospitality in Kraków and for organising an excellent and stimulating ICAZ Bird Working Group meeting in September 2001. This paper is dedicated to the memory of all wild birds that have been – and to some extent still are – slaughtered in the name of social inequality.

II. WILD BIRDS AS STATUS SYMBOLS

In general, the bones of wild birds are not abundant on archaeological sites of the medieval period in England. In most cases Domestic Fowl *Gallus gallus* and Goose *Anser anse*r represent more than 90% of the total number of bird bones. It is evident, therefore, that wild birds did not represent a staple element of the medieval diet or of the food economy. Yet, their relative rarity has the potential of highlighting differences in patterns of food consumption that may be difficult to pick up through the study of more common species. Wild birds can therefore be particularly interesting for the understanding of our medieval past and are worthy of careful investigation.

Though they never were a major resource of food, wild birds are unevenly represented on English sites. They are much more common on sites of high status (mainly castles) than in towns or rural sites of lower status (Fig. 1). These data are based on a survey of animal bone reports from central England carried out buy one of the authors (UA) (see below for more details).

Among these birds, the one that provides the clearest and most interesting distribution pattern is probably the Swan *Cygnus* sp. The swan is one of the largest European birds, whose bones are unlikely to be overlooked on archaeological sites, even where a sieving programme is not carried out.

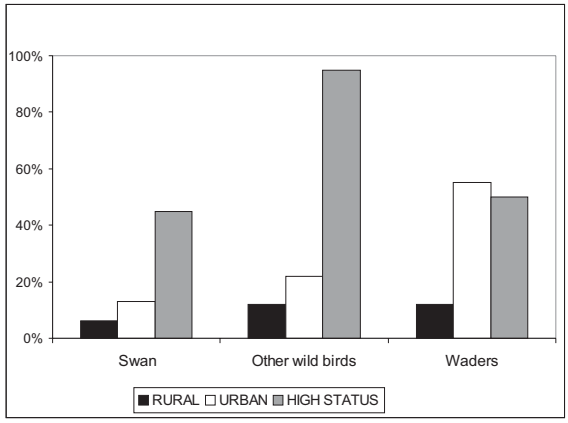


Fig. 1. Frequency of different categories of wild birds in medieval sites from central England (compared to domestic fowl = 100%).

In addition, this bird is typically associated with the English aristocracy and even nowadays is commonly kept in royal parks and in other areas surrounding castles and palaces. Fig. 2 shows a Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* at Leeds Castle (Kent, England), though the most common swan kept in royal parks was likely to have been the Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*.

Fig. 2. A tamed Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* at Leeds Castle, Kent, England. Photograph by Umberto ALBARELLA.

The selection of wild birds represented in the central part of the bar chart in Fig. 1 includes the following species: Gannet *Morus bassanus*, Stork *Ciconia* sp., Heron *Ardea* sp., Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*, Capercaille *Tetrao urogallus*, and Crane *Grus grus*. These species were chosen because they occur on some of the sites under consideration and their bones are generally reliably identifiable (though pheasants can be confused with domestic fowl). With the exception of the Sparrowhawk, these birds also have reasonably large bones, which should reduce the bias caused by possible differences in recovery efficiency between sites. As in the case of the Swan, these wild birds are more frequently found on high status sites.

Waders, illustrated on the right hand side of the chart in Fig. 1, are as common in towns as they are on high status sites. This may indicate that this group of birds is not as good an indicator of status as the other species mentioned above. However, the fact that they are uncommon on rural sites – generally peasant settlements – suggests that they can still help in discriminating between different levels of wealth, though probably not to the same extent as other species such as swan and crane.

In this paper all the species noted above were considered as potential food items. The Sparrowhawk is, however, an exception. This species was included not on the assumption that it would have been eaten, but because it is one of the raptors commonly used for falconry – an activity almost exclusively confined to the upper classes. Criteria for the identification of falconry have been discussed elsewhere (PRUMMEL 1997), and will not be repeated here. It is worth mentioning, however, that hawking can also help us in identifying various levels of status. Different hawks were used by people of different status, for instance Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* and Gyrfalcons *Falco rusticolus* would only be used by people of highest status, whereas Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus*

and Goshawks *Accipiter gentilis* could also be used by the lower nobility and by wealthy commoners (PRUMMEL 1997: 335). Raptor bones found in urban contexts – such as the partial skeleton of a Goshawk found in early medieval levels in Norwich (ALBARELLA et al. 1997) (Fig. 3) – are likely to reflect the social diversity of the town population therefore, but not necessarily the presence of the highest aristocracy. Unlike other raptors found in towns (see MULKEEN and O'CONNOR 1997), species of the *Accipiter* and *Falco* genera are unlikely to have acted as scavengers. For more details on falconry in England see CHERRYSON (2002).

Fig. 3. A Goshwak *Accipiter gentilis* skeleton found in 11th century levels from the site of Castle Mall, Norwich, England. Photograph by Graham NORRIE.

Castle sites provide the best opportunity at our disposal to obtain archaeological evidence pertaining to the diversity of wildfowl exploited in medieval England. For instance, at Okehampton Castle in Cornwall large numbers of Woodcock, Partridge and other wild bird bones (including Heron and Crane) were uncovered (MALTBY 1982). A similar range of species was found at the nearby castle of Launceston (ALBARELLA and DAVIS 1996), but in this case the more extended chronology of occupation provided a greater opportunity to investigate the close relationship existing between status and bird abundance. At Launceston Castle, a gradual decline in the status of the site occurred between the mid-medieval (13th century AD) and the post-medieval period due to the fact that the nobility were visiting the castle less frequently. This decline was paralleled by a steady decrease in the proportion of bird (and fish) bones, which become a negligible element of the diet by the late post-medieval period (ALBARELLA and DAVIS 1996: 10). It is clear that in the heyday of the castle the inhabitants could afford a diverse diet, however this gradually became more monotonous with the loss of status.

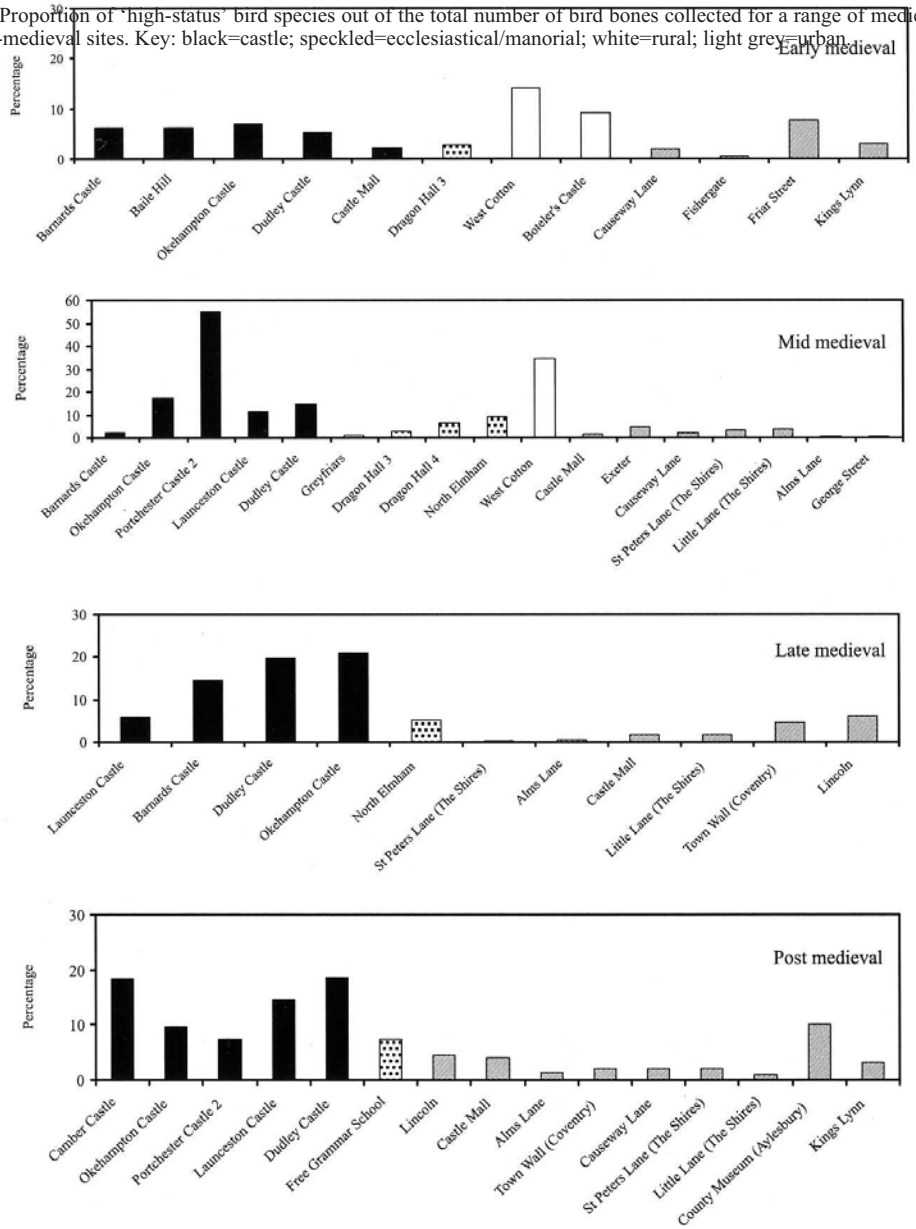
The evidence discussed above clearly indicates that the importance of wild birds in the medieval diet is not to be found in their contribution to subsistence and economy, but rather in the meaning that the consumption of wild birds implied. Some of the birds consumed were unlikely to have been particularly tasty, but, being expensive and difficult to obtain, they played an important role as a

symbol of status and wealth. In some respects wild birds fulfilled the same role as that played by deer and freshwater fish (see DYER 1989b). This assumption is confirmed by the historical evidence (WOOLGAR 2000) and is certainly not unique to England. For example, a similar scenario has been suggested for medieval Flanders, where wild birds were also uncommonly eaten and expensive to buy (ERVYNCK 1993: 118).

III. CHANGE OVER TIME

In Fig. 4 the frequency of wild birds on sites of different type and period is plotted. The higher occurrence of wild bird in castle sites is noticeable for most periods, but interestingly, not for the

Fig. 4. Proportion of 'high-status' bird species out of the total number of bird bones collected for a range of medieval and post-medieval sites. Key: black=castle; speckled=ecclesiastical/manorial; white=rural; light grey=urban.



early Middle Ages. An explanation for this situation can be found through an analysis of Fig. 5, which plots the average occurrence of wild bird species in sites of different periods. It is possible to note that wild birds are more commonly found in late and post-medieval sites than in the earlier period. These data confirm and explain the pattern evident in Fig. 4, namely that there is a trend towards an increase in wild bird consumption in the late medieval period. When the analysis of this trend is carried out on individual taxa (Fig. 6) further interesting evidence comes to light. It is possible to observe that, with one exception, all taxa under consideration increase in frequency in the later medieval period. The bird that probably signifies the highest status – namely the Swan – increases most, while the Grey Partridge is the only species to decrease in frequency. The analysis of historical documents supports the view that wild bird consumption increased towards the end of the Middle Ages (see WOOLGAR 2000).

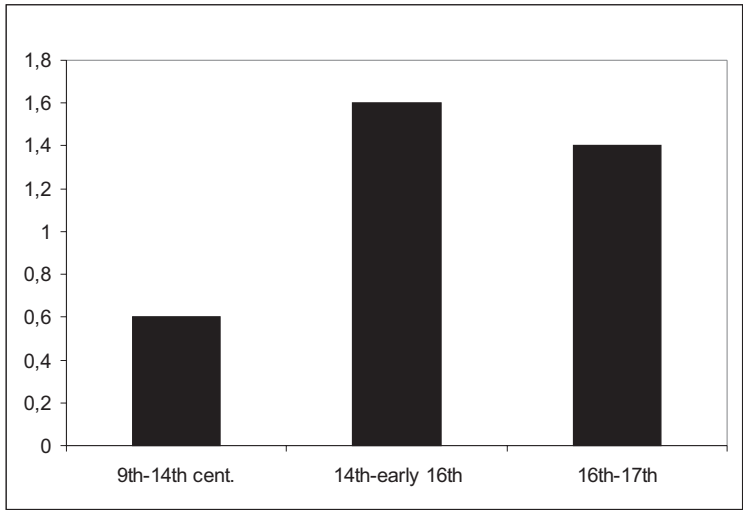


Fig. 5. Number of wild bird species per site in medieval and post-medieval central England.

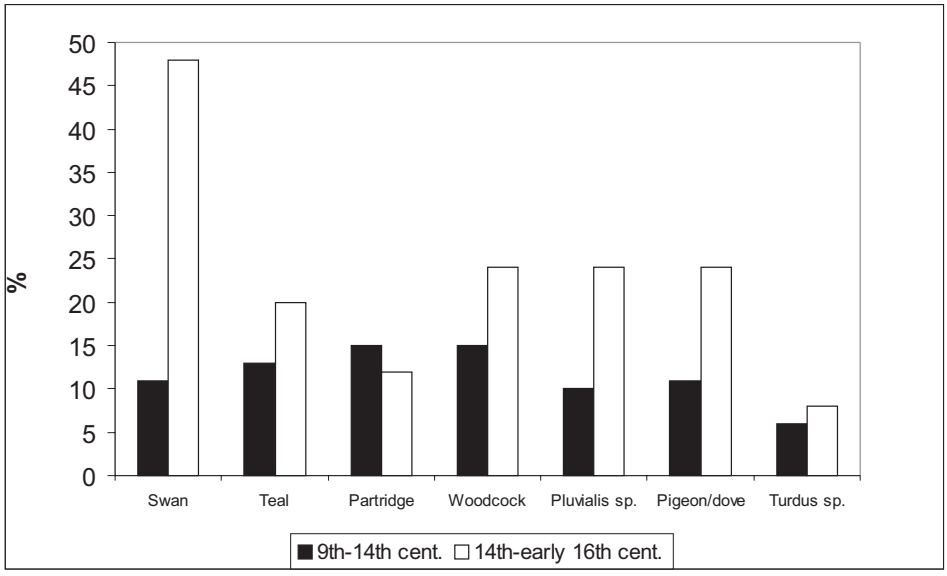


Fig. 6. Frequency of different wild birds in early and late medieval times in central England (compared to domestic fowl = 100%).

Considering the significance attached to the consumption of wild birds in medieval society, such a trend is intriguing. Why did the upper classes feel the need to express a higher statement of status? In order to answer this question it must be first remembered that eating any kind of meat – let alone 'fancy' meat, such as that of wild game – was, in medieval times, something of a luxury. The peasant diet was mainly based on cereals and meat would only be eaten on special occasions. The upper classes however, ate meat on a much more regular basis, and this would have presented a strong statement of status, differentiating themselves from ordinary peasants and town dwellers. The late 13th and early 14th centuries, in particular, were hard times for smallholders, but although exceptions occurred, there appears to have been a general improvement of peasant living conditions in the late 14th and 15th century (DYER 1988; DYER 1989a: 184). This led to a general increase in meat consumption (DYER 1989a: 159), which is also attested in the zooarchaeological record (ALBARELLA 1997; THOMAS in prep).

The increase in the occurrence of wild birds in archaeological assemblages can be explained in this context: in the late medieval period meat consumption in itself had become an insufficiently strong marker of status. The eating of more expensive meat, such as that of wildfowl, could therefore contribute to maintain the same level of difference in food consumption between the higher and the lower classes.

IV. MOST COMMON SPECIES

In this section the most abundant wild birds used in medieval banquets will be discussed. This is not as easy as it might seem, because the reading of the archaeological evidence is complicated by several potential pitfalls. Table I illustrates the occurrence of wild birds as derived from a survey of 153 sites of Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval date in Central England. Since many of these sites are divided into different periods of occupation and each different period is regarded as a different entry in the table, the total of 'period-sites' taken into consideration is 275. The table should not be read at face value because small birds, which are often overlooked on archaeological excavations, are underrepresented. The same is true for species that are difficult to differentiate and which are often lumped into wider taxa groups such as 'Goose', 'Duck' and 'Pigeon'.

Table I

Number of sites in central England on which different species of domestic and wild birds occur

Taxa	Saxon	Saxon/early med.	Early med.	Late med.	Medieval	Early postmed.	Late postmed.	Postmed.
	6th-early 11th	9th-12th	late 11th-14th	14th-early 16th	late 11th-16th	16th-17th	17th-18th	16th-18th
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Podicipediformes								
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (PALLAS, 1764)				1				
Procellariiformes								
Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* (BRÜNNICH, 1764)			1					

Table I cont.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Pelecaniformes								
Gannet *Morus bassanus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)					1			
Ciconiiformes								
Stork *Ciconia* sp.			1					
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* LINNAEUS, 1758	1	1	1	2	1			1
Heron, *Ardea* sp.	1	1	1	1		1	1	1
Anseriformes								
Swan *Cygnus* sp.	1	1	4	7		5		
Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (GMELIN, 1789)	1	1	1	5				
Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)				1				
Goose Anserinae	17	15	37	23	9	20	9	3
Goose (domestic) *Anser anser* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	10		3	1	2	2		
Goose (wild) Anserinae	5	1	2	1				
Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus* BAILLON, 1833				1				
White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* (SCOPOLI, 1769)	1							
Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis* (BECHSTEIN, 1803)	1	1	1	1				
Brent Goose *Branta bernicla* (LINNAEUS, 1758)			1					
Duck Anatinae	18	12	19	17	6	14	6	8
Duck (domestic) *Anas platyrhynchos* LINNAEUS, 1758	2		1	1	1	1		
Duck (wild) Anatinae	2				1			
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* LINNAEUS, 1758	5		3	1	2			
Pintail *Anas acuta* LINNAEUS, 1758			1	1				1
Gadwall *Anas strepera* LINNAEUS, 1758				2				1
Shoveler *Anas clypeata* LINNAEUS, 1758	6							
Wigeon *Anas penelope* LINNAEUS, 1758	1				1			1
Teal *Anas crecca* LINNAEUS, 1758	3	2	4	3	2	2		1
Garganey/Teal *Anas crecca/querquedula*		1	4	2		1	1	1
Pochard *Aythya ferina* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	1			2		1		
Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula* (LINNAEUS, 1758)				1	1	1		
Pochard/Tufted duck *Aythya ferina/fuligula*				2				
Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		1						
Scoter *Melanitta* sp.				1				
Smew *Mergellus albellus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)					1	1		
Goosander *Mergus merganser* LINNAEUS, 1758	1					1		
Accipitriformes								
Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	2		1					1
Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		2	2	1		1		

Table I cont.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	2	1	2	3	1	3		
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		1						
Red Kite *Milvus milvus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	1	1	3	1	2	3		
Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus* LINNAEUS, 1758			1			1		
Galliformes								
Domestic Fowl *Gallus gallus* LINNAEUS, 1758	33	18	44	25	12	22	9	4
Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo* LINNAEUS, 1758				1		1	3	1
Peacock *Pavo cristatus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1			1	1	1	1	1
Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1			3	1	1		
Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		2	7	3	1	3	1	2
Grouse Tetraonidae				2				
Willow Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	1							
Gruiformes								
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		1		1			1	
Coot *Fulica atra* LINNAEUS, 1758		1		2		2		
Crane *Grus grus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	7	1	1		2	1		
Charadriiformes								
Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1							
Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	1		2	2		3		1
Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* (LINNAEUS, 1758)			2	2				
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	1			1				
Golden/Grey Plover *Pluvialis* sp.	2	1	3	3	1	1		1
Godwit *Limosa* sp.				2				
Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* (LINNAEUS, 1758)				1	1			
Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (LINNAEUS, 1758)					1			
Curlew *Numenius arquata* (LINNAEUS, 1758)		1	1	2				
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (LINNAEUS, 1758)			1	1				
Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* LINNAEUS, 1758	4	1	8	6	3	7	4	3
Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (LINNAEUS, 1758)	2			2				
Gull *Laridae*			3	1				
Common Gull *Larus canus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1				1	1		
Herring/Lesser Black-back Gull *Larus argentatus/fuscus*	1							
Columbiformes								
Pigeon/Dove Columbidae	4	3	4	6	2	5	3	1
Rock Dove *Columba livia* GMELIN, 1789	2	1	3	1	2	2		
Stock Dove *Columba oenas* LINNAEUS, 1758			1	1				

Table I cont.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1	2	2			1		
Strigiformes								
Barn Owl *Tyto alba* (SCOPOLI, 1769)					2	2		
Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* LINNAEUS, 1758				2				
Psittaciformes								
Parrot Psittacinae							1	
Piciformes								
Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* LINNAEUS, 1758			1					
Passeriformes								
Thrush *Turdus* sp.	1	2	4	2	2	2		1
Blackbird *Turdus merula* LINNAEUS, 1758					1			
Redwing *Turdus iliacus* LINNAEUS, 1758	1		1		1			
Songthrush *Turdus philomelos* BREHM, 1831	1			1				
Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* LINNAEUS, 1758				1				
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* LINNAEUS, 1758			1					
Raven *Corvus corax* LINNAEUS, 1758	5	1	2	2	5	1		
Crow *Corvus corone* LINNAEUS, 1758	1	2	2		1	1		
Rook *Corvus frugilegus* LINNAEUS, 1758					2			
Crow/Rook *Corvus corone/frugilegus*	3	2	5	5	1	6	2	
Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* LINNAEUS, 1758		2	5	5	1	4	1	1
Magpie *Pica pica* (LINNAEUS, 1758)				1		1		
Jackdaw/Magpie	1	1	2	2		2	1	1
Jay *Garrulus glandarius* (LINNAEUS, 1758)				1		1		

Birds are morphologically much more homogenous than mammals, and include a larger number of species. Consequently, the identification of bird remains from archaeological sites can be difficult and always requires extensive reference collections. Identification criteria highlighted for particular taxonomic groups such as Columbidae (FICK 1974), Ardeidae (KELLNER 1986) and Podicipediformes (BOCHEŃSKI 1994) are particularly valuable, but uncertainties are bound to remain. A promising avenue of investigation for the future is represented by biomolecular work, which has proven to be successful in discriminating between some of the goose species (BARNES et al. 1998 and 2000). Meanwhile we have to be content with the level of identification accuracy presently available, which means that lists of bird species from archaeological sites must be critically evaluated.

In Table II the six most common wild birds recorded on medieval archaeological sites in England are listed. Due to the problems discussed above, these lists may not represent a true reflection of the birds that were most commonly eaten. Wild geese and wild ducks (with the exception of the Teal) are not included due to the problem of separating them from their domestic counterparts. Passerines of medium size, such as Thrushes and Blackbirds, *Turdus* sp., are likely to have been among the most commonly consumed wild birds, however their absence from the list probably reflects recovery biases. Conversely, large birds like the Swan are likely to be over-represented. Having said this, such biases should apply to all periods and geographic areas equally, therefore the data in Table II can be used on a comparative basis.

As expected, Woodcock and Grey Partridge feature strongly in the list for central England, particularly in the early medieval period. These species are also relatively small and therefore their abundance does not reflect a recovery bias. Following a comparison of the early and late medieval

Table II

Most common wild bird species found in different regions of England (in ranking order from top to bottom). Species whose identification is problematic, such as ducks and geese, have not been considered. Data for the south are provided by SERJEANTSON (2000) and for the north by DOBNEY (unpublished). The data from the south are not entirely comparable since only food species also encountered in the historical record are mentioned (hence the absence of corvids)

Central		South	North
early medieval	late medieval	medieval	medieval
Woodcock	Swan	Woodcock	Raven
Grey Partridge	Woodcock	Teal	Woodcock
Teal	Grey/Golden Plover	Swan	Grey/Golden Plover
Swan	Teal	Grey Partridge	Guillemot
Crow/Rook	Crow/Rook	Snipe	Blackgrouse
Jackdaw	Jackdaw	Grey/Golden Plover	Jackdaw

periods two phenomena are noticeable. The first is the increased frequency of Swan remains and the other is the disappearance of the Grey Partridge among the most commonly recorded birds. If the increase in Swan remains can be interpreted in light of the greater concern in the consumption of 'fancy' food items that typifies the late medieval period, the decrease in Partridge numbers is more puzzling. In Britain this species has been subject to a marked decrease (SNOW and PERRINS 1998: 464-5), but this is a phenomenon probably no older than a century. In the 18th and 19th century Partridges seem to have been on the increase, perhaps as a consequence of changes in agricultural practice (CRAMP and SIMMONS 1978). Further fluctuations may have occurred in the more distant past and it is therefore not impossible that in the 14th and 15th century the Partridge population had shrunk. An alternative explanation is that Partridges were not as highly prized as other wild fowl and had therefore become less popular with the increased sophistication of aristocratic banquets.

The list of the most common wild birds in southern England is broadly similar to that which was found in the central part of the country (Table II). The absence of corvids can be explained by the fact that the southern list only includes food species also mentioned in the historical record (SERJEANTSON 2000). Jackdaws *Corvus monedula*, Crows *Corvus corone* and Rooks *Corvus frugilegus* are likely to represent the accidental introduction of scavenging species in an anthropogenic assemblages and they are therefore unlikely to feature in these documents.

In the north of England (DOBNEY unpublished data), the range of most common birds appears to be rather different. Woodcock, Plovers *Pluvialis* sp. and Jackdaw are well represented, but other species, like Raven *Corvus corax*, Guillemot *Uria aalge* and Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*, which were not so common in the rest of the country, feature strongly. Although none of these three species are exclusively distributed in the north, they probably have their strongholds in that region. Black Grouse typically live in habitats transitional between forest and open heath (SNOW and PERRINS 1998: 438), which are more common in the north. Their area of distribution partly covers central England, but the species is absent in the south. Guillemots are mainly distributed in the north and south-west of the country, where there are plenty of sea cliffs, upon which these birds gather in spring for nesting. During the rest of the year the species is predominately pelagic and can occasionally be seen anywhere in the country, however the birds are unlikely to be caught in this period. Ravens have a similar distribution and also tend to nest on cliffs, although they can also use tall trees (SNOW and PERRINS 1998: 1483). Overall therefore, it appears that the distribution of birds in medieval England was strongly affected by geographic and environmental factors. Although this is not surprising, it is still worthy of note that in a period in which trade must have played a significant role in the distribution of foodstuffs, regional differences can still be identified. These are likely to have been determined by a combination of environmental and cultural factors.

V. MORE COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL SPECIES

Bird remains from English medieval sites may not be common, but they certainly indicate that a large variety of species was exploited. This is consistent with the evidence from historical sources. COSMAN (1976: 40-1) mentions, among other species, Bittern, Bustard, Crane, Heron, Partridge, Plover, Swan, Teal, Woodcock, as birds hunted for the aristocratic table. A similar list of birds is provided by WOOLGAR (1999: 114) in his account of the food served at the great household table. This includes Partridge, Lark, Bittern, Crane, Heron, Swan etc. In the context of monastic diet – which would also have been of a high status – HARVEY (1993: 52) refers to game such as Teal, Snipe and Swan. At a series of feasts for the enthronement of the Archbishop of York in the late 15th century a formidable amount of wild birds were provisioned. These include: Swans (400!), Quails, Mallards, Teals, Cranes, Bitterns, Pigeons, Pheasants, Partridges, Woodcocks, Curlews, Egrets and other species whose names are more difficult to identify (WOOLGAR 2001).

The frequent mention of the Swan in historical documents suggests that its common occurrence in the archaeological record is not just an artefact of a recovery bias. It is likely that this was genuinely one of the most common wild birds eaten by the medieval upper classes. Indeed from the tariffs of the London Company of Poulterers between 1274 and 1634, it is apparent that Swan was always the most expensive bird (WILSON 1973: 118). This bird did not enjoy a fully wild status however, and should probably be regarded more as tamed. Together with Herons, Pheasants, Bitterns and Peacocks, Swans were kept in parks in, what seem to be, controlled and closely managed conditions (MacGREGOR 1996; WOOLGAR 1999: 14).

Of the species mentioned in historical sources, the Bustard *Otis tarda* and the Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* have proven to be rather elusive in the archaeological record. The bustard is particularly interesting. This species became extinct in Britain in the 1830s (SNOW and PERRINS 1998: 529) and is now confined to restricted areas in southern and central Europe. EASTHAM (1971: 390) mentions that the last breeding pair was recorded in Suffolk in 1832. It is a large, largely terrestrial bird, which would have certainly made an impression at the aristocratic table. We are only aware of a single medieval finding of this species in England. This derives from early 16th century levels at Baynard's Castle, London (BRAMWELL 1975). The only other post-glacial record of Bustard bones known to the authors is represented by seven specimens of this species recovered from Fishbourne Roman Palace (EASTHAM 1971). Bustard bones are large and distinctive and their uncommon occurrence on archaeological sites probably indicates that the species was always rather rare in England.

The only published medieval record of the Bittern, that we are aware of, is from the site of Flaxengate, Lincoln, and was identified by Don BRAMWELL (O'CONNOR 1982: 44). There are, however, unpublished records of this species in kitchen deposits dating from the 12th-13th and 13th-15th centuries at Scarborough Castle (WEINSTOCK pers. comm) and in post-medieval levels (1538-1682) from Nonsuch Palace, Surrey (LOCKER pers comm). It is interesting to note that at least two of these sites are of a high status (this is more difficult to establish for the urban site of Lincoln). WOOLGAR (1999: 114) does indeed mention that Bitterns and Cranes were used for great feasts. Bittern bones are unlikely to be confused with those of other herons, and although the species is frequently mentioned in historical documents, its rare occurrence in archaeological sites indicates that this bird may have been as uncommon and localised in the past as it is today.

The Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* has already been mentioned above particularly in relation to its intriguing decline in the later Middle Ages. The species is regarded as "delicate and exquisite" in a 20th century gastronomy book (SIMON 1944) and, along with the Woodcock, would have probably been a staple element of wild bird dishes. It is the only wild bird – together with miscellaneous "small birds" – to be mentioned by COSMAN (1976) in a series of medieval recipes. Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of this bird in the earlier medieval period was that it could be kept in cages, alongside poultry and piglets (WOOLGAR 1999: 114). Grey Partridge bones (but not Woodcock) are also found in some abundance at the castles of Manzano (Italy, 11th-13th century AD) (BEDINI 1995: 346) and Moncalieri (Italy, 13th-17th century AD) (PAVIA 2000: 350). Their association with high status diet is therefore not confined to England.

Falconry (or hawking) has already been briefly mentioned as a practice restricted to the upper echelons of medieval society. The presence of the bones of certain raptors, as well as those of their prey, can be used as a way to identify falconry and consequently the high status of a particular site. Indeed some of the wild birds already mentioned would have been hunted by trained birds of prey. Herons and Cranes could be caught by Gyrfalcons and Teals by Sparrowhawks (WOOLGAR 1999: 115). Since the larger falcons – Gyrfalcon and Peregrine – were exclusively used by the highest aristocracy, some of the very large birds that they caught would find their way to the table of people of similarly high status. The same cannot be said for smaller game, such as ducks however, which would normally be caught by birds of the genus *Accipiter*, which, as has already been mentioned, could be owned by rich merchants and representatives of the gentry.

Seabirds like Guillemots and Razorbill *Alca torda* are relatively common in the north of England, but overall the zooarchaeological evidence does not suggest an intensive exploitation of marine resources in medieval England. Sea ducks are occasionally found, such as the bones of the Scoter *Melanitta* sp. from King's Lynn (BRAMWELL 1977), but in general they are rare. Gannet is recorded, among a few other sites, at Hereford (BRAMWELL 1985), Exeter (MALTBY 1979), Okehampton Castle (MALTBY 1982) and Launceston Castle (ALBARELLA and DAVIS 1996), but, surprisingly, at no locality in the north of the country (according to DOBNEY's unpublished data). Interestingly, all these sites are located inland, and Hereford especially, is a considerable distance from the nearest coast. The other three sites are located in the south-west of the country. The meat of the Gannet was highly prized and until the end of the 19th century was sent to London and many Midlands towns (such as Hereford) (SIMON 1944). For the medieval period, this species is almost certainly an indicator of high status, at least when found in inland localities.

The most interesting seabird present on English medieval sites is arguably the Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*. This is a strictly marine species that nests exclusively on islands. To date this species has only been recorded at castle sites, such as Baynard's Castle (BRAMWELL 1975), Bristol Castle (BRAMWELL 1975), Launceston Castle (12 bones all from hind limbs, ALBARELLA and DAVIS 1996) and Dudley Castle (THOMAS in prep.). Once again there are no records of this species from the north of England (DOBNEY unpublished data). The Launceston remains are all from the 13th century (with one exception from the 15th century), whereas single specimens from Dudley and Baynard's Castle date from the 14th and early 16th century respectively. No date is provided for the finding from Bristol Castle. The presence of the Manx Shearwater on inland sites would suggest that some trade in this species occurred in the medieval period, and the bird may well have represented a symbol of high status. Fourteenth century accounts from the Scilly Isles, which were a major source of young Shearwaters, discuss their exploitation. According to these documents, the birds were hauled from their burrows in August when fat and heavy, they were then salted, barrelled and later boiled to be eaten (ALBARELLA and DAVIS 1996: 27). The fact that at both Launceston and Dudley Castle only the bones of the hind limb were recorded might provide independent evidence for this practice.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that the upper classes would not regard wild birds exclusively as food items. Trained falcons were valuable pets and exotic birds, kept in cages, would also provide a great symbol of status (WOOLGAR 1999: 195). In the early 17th century cormorants were also trained for river fishing and were held in high esteem by James I (MacGREGOR 1989: 313). A green parrot is illustrated in a medieval manuscript of the early 14th century together with a large array of other birds including Wren, Magpie, Bullfinch, Jay, Great Egret, Woodcock and the inevitable Crane (YAPP 1981: 108). Although no medieval archaeological findings of exotic birds in England exist, two Parrot bones were uncovered in a pit dated to the mid-late 17th century from the site of Castle Mall, Norwich (ALBARELLA et al. 1997) (Fig. 7). The bones belong to a mid-large sized parrot, of about the same dimensions as an African Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus*, but it was unfortunately not possible to identify them at a level any more specific than that of the sub-family Psittacinae. Since this is the largest and most widespread of the parrot subfamilies, the bird could have virtually come from any region of the Southern Hemisphere. It probably belonged to a rich merchant or a sailor.

Fig. 7. Parrot (Psittacinae) carpometacarpus and coracoid found in mid-late 17th century levels from the site of Castle Mall, Norwich, England. Photograph by Graham NORRIE.

VI. SUMMING UP AND CONCLUSIONS

Wild birds were only occasionally eaten in medieval times in England, but, as the zooarchaeological evidence indicates, they played a significant role in the definition of economic and social status. Although many of the species may not have been particularly tasty, they would often make an impression on an aristocratic table or in the course of an important feast.

Historical and archaeological sources are consistent in suggesting that the upper classes increased the consumption of wild birds in the later medieval period. It is possible that such increase is related to the greater availability of meat in this period, which prompted the need to find new ways to differentiate between high and low status diets.

The most commonly used wildfowl were probably Partridge, Woodcock and various species of ducks. Large birds like Swan, Crane and Heron, however, were likely to have greater status significance. Waders were probably not equally prized, as they are found as commonly in towns as they are on high status sites. The distribution of wild bird species seems to be affected by geographic and environmental factors as well as by cultural preferences. Sea birds have been found in sites located inland, but species that were likely to have their strongholds in northern England are still much more common in that region than in the rest of the country.

This analysis shows how limiting it is to regard zooarchaeology merely as an analysis of food subsistence. Although wild birds did not represent staple food, their investigation provides us with an important insight into aspects of the medieval world that combine economic, social and symbolic elements. Medieval people did not live on Cranes but a few of them certainly dined on these graceful birds. Although economically irrelevant such meals would have been of great importance in reaffirming the social and wealth inequality of medieval society.

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