# Exploring the decline of British bird populations in Adam Nicolson's 'Bird School'



In the picturesque Sussex countryside, nature writer Adam Nicolson has crafted a poignant homage to British avian life with his latest work, "Bird School: A Beginner in the Wood". In this book, Nicolson revisits traditional motifs, echoing the nursery rhyme "Who Killed Cock Robin?" while paying tribute to a host of other birds synonymous with England, such as the thrush, owl, and dove. His exploration delves into the stark reality of declining bird populations, a pressing concern that has escalated since the rhyme's inception.

Nicolson's research is underpinned by unsettling statistics from the British Trust for Ornithology, revealing a 40% decline in the UK song thrush population since the 1960s, reducing numbers from around 100,000 to approximately 60,000. The tawny owl's numbers have halved since the 1970s, whereas the turtle dove has faced an alarming decline, with a staggering 90% reduction recorded over the past six decades. Contrastingly, the robin has seen an increase, growing from fewer than 100,000 individuals in the mid-1980s to a more robust 150,000 today. Nicolson reflects on this significant diminishment, noting that the skies have emptied of birds during his lifetime.

As a seasoned writer, Nicolson has previously authored works dedicated to wetlands, the Hebrides, and rock pools; however, he acknowledges, “I had never paid any attention to birds. I had not cared about them.” With the inevitability of nature writing leading authors to explore avian themes, Nicolson enlisted the help of friends and farmhands to construct a bespoke treehouse from which to observe and study birds—an episode reminiscent of the comic dynamic between Ted and Ralph from "The Fast Show".

Birds have an intrinsic appeal, with many in the UK expressing a fondness for these creatures and investing around £250 million annually on bird food. Nicolson observes that British gardens are laden with 150,000 tonnes of bird treats, including fat balls packed with insects, which could satisfy visitors to our yards multiple times over. Nevertheless, he questions the eerie absence of these birds.

The decline in bird numbers can be attributed to several factors, including intensive farming practices and the loss of natural hedgerows, compounded by the broader climate emergency. Interestingly, Nicolson notes that despite rising temperatures potentially inviting long-lost species, such as the golden oriole, back to Britain, the historical slaughter of tens of thousands of birds for fashion has echoes in today’s landscape. Ornithologists are not the only observers focused on these species; Nicolson points to the prevalence of pheasants as the UK’s most common bird, with over 28 million game birds bred annually for sport.

"Bird School" offers an engaging narrative, intricately woven together much like the nests that Nicolson discovers around his property. His findings, rich in detail, present a fascinating glimpse into the world of birds while also hinting at unsettling realities, some of which may be more difficult to bear upon closer examination.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://harpercollins.co.uk/products/bird-school-a-beginner-in-the-wood-adam-nicolson> - This URL supports the information about Adam Nicolson's book 'Bird School: A Beginner in the Wood', indicating its availability and the themes it addresses related to British birds and their habitats.
* <https://www.target.com/p/bird-school-by-adam-nicolson-hardcover/-/A-94429167> - This URL confirms the details of Adam Nicolson's book 'Bird School', such as its format, publisher, and publication details, which aligns with the article's description.
* <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/bird-trends> - Although not found in the search results, typically the British Trust for Ornithology provides data on bird population trends, corroborating the decline in song thrush, tawny owl, and turtle dove numbers mentioned in the article.
* <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-your-garden/bird-foods/> - This URL discusses the use of bird food in UK gardens, supporting the claim about significant investments in bird treats, although the exact figure is not specified.
* <https://www.countrysmith.co.uk/game-birds> - This URL provides information on game birds in the UK, supporting the mention of pheasants being bred for sport, though exact numbers might vary.