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05/01/2025

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Mark Avery: we need to talk about the RSPB

I've been a member of the RSPB off and on, but mostly on, since before I saw my first Hoopoe (/species/redirect/30164), at Beesands Ley in Devon, and my second a day later at Buckfastleigh, in spring 1970. I sent my records to the Young Ornithologists' Club and had my observations briefly mentioned in its magazine, Bird Life. Since then, I volunteered for the RSPB as a teenager and spent 25 years on the staff, first as a biologist, then as Head of Research, and for the latter half of that period as Conservation Director. At RSPB AGMs, when I often had to answer questions from the members, I got an easy chuckle, and a few seconds thinking time, by saying that I too was a fully paid-up member (and I still am).

I am well and truly hefted to the RSPB and so it is with puzzlement as well as sorrow that I find myself wondering whether the RSPB is in serious decline. I wrote a few words to that effect in my August newsletter and received many messages agreeing with me and none telling me I was wrong (my subscribers do not shy away from voicing their views). I was surprised when a friend – another former staff member – said he was considering resigning his membership.

My concerns come from two sources; what I read and what I hear. I read most things that the RSPB sends to me, including the magazine, social media and press releases, and it seems to me that RSPB communications no longer are written, checked or approved by people with much bird or conservation expertise. There is a lot of management speak and emotive language but not much about conservation and far too many factual errors which suggest that the RSPB doesn't know its subject very well.



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PiBased on what he's read and heard, Mark Avery fears that the RSPB is in decline (Ian Livesy).

Concern for the organisation

Even more worrying is the feedback from RSPB staff, many of whom feel undervalued, kept in the dark and ignored, they tell me. And comparing notes, that's what other former staff and council members are hearing too. The RSPB does not seem to have made a good transition from the changes in working methods necessitated by coronavirus to a new efficient normality. Team spirit has somewhere been lost, morale is low and rumours, maybe unfounded ones, are rife.

The organisation is going through yet another review and there are strong signals that essential areas of RSPB work, including campaigning against wildlife crime, and reserves purchase and management, are no longer seen as core activities by some, and are coming under sustained attack.

Those who have read *Reflections* (voted *Birdwatch* readers' book of 2023) (<https://www.birdguides.com/store/bookshop/reflections-first-edition-issue-1/>) will know I recommend that we should all see our memberships, donations and legacies to conservation charities as investments – investments in nature conservation. We should invest wisely and carefully, according to where we believe our money produces the most wildlife. I hear that the National Trust is developing a new strategy which is much more nature-based, partly in response to unease about its wildlife track record, but also because of a perception of the RSPB losing its grip on these areas.

I'd recommend that all current RSPB members register to attend the 2024 online AGM, carefully read the recent RSPB magazines and look at the RSPB annual report and accounts as due diligence for their continuing conservation investment. Until

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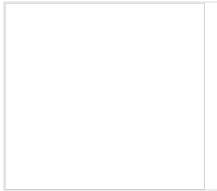
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now, I have always unhesitatingly recommended RSPB membership; now, I'm less convinced. It's up to the RSPB to convince us all that they are a blue-chip conservation stock that deserves our investment these days.

- This column first appeared in the October 2024 edition of *Birdwatch* (<https://www.birdguides.com/store/subscriptions/birdwatch/>). To be the first to read the magazine each month, take out a subscription to *Birdwatch* (<https://www.birdguides.com/store/subscriptions/birdwatch/>), or get the magazine alongside your bird news by subscribing to either Bird News Ultimate (<https://www.birdguides.com/store/birdguides-subscriptions/>) (paper magazine) or Bird News Ultimate Plus (<https://www.birdguides.com/store/birdguides-subscriptions/>) (digital access).



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