

Despite its distinguished history, critics claim the society is now more concerned with politics than birds, writes **William Langley**

ON A BLEAK, swampy stretch of the Norfolk coast sits a gleaming glass, steel and concrete construction – at first glance it could be a car dealership or the offices of a city IT company.

Approach closer though – that will be £5 at the car park – and the building's purpose slowly becomes clear. This is an architect-designed hide, built by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds four years ago at an estimated cost of £1million. To the society's critics, it is a perfect symbol of what is going wrong at Britain's largest wildlife charity.

To most traditional birders, a hide is a rickety wooden shed, the discomforts of which are borne cheerfully as a way of being closer to the birds.

The Titchwell showpiece, say the critics, reflects the new image of the RSPB – one of money, power, self-adoration and metropolitan preference.

Yet travel a few miles east to the small town of Holt, and a more reassuring – if still com-

'There's too much focus on the negative from the RSPB'

plicated – picture of the RSPB's activities emerges.

Two weeks ago a local gamekeeper was successfully prosecuted for poisoning 11 birds of prey. In giving Allen Lambert a 10-month suspended prison sentence, Judge Peter Veits praised the RSPB's painstaking investigation that brought the case to light.

With more than a million members and an annual income approaching £100million, the RSPB is a charity powerhouse, using its muscle to influence a wide range of issues from property developments to aircraft movements.

It has lobbied against shale gas exploration, embraced wind turbines and taken what many farmers and landowners see as an increasingly meddlesome and aggressive approach to private landholdings. Nowhere is this more evident than in the RSPB's attitude to field sports.

Earlier this month, a group led by Sir Ian Botham, the former cricketer and a shoot-

ing enthusiast, launched a counter-attack, accusing the RSPB of having a politicised agenda and turning itself into "a giant fundraising machine" that was dodging its obligations to conservation and had lost sight of its original remit.

"The RSPB simply has too much power, and worse than that, too much of a single mindset," Sir Ian told *The Sunday Telegraph* last week. "We are all bird lovers, but they really need a broader perspective. They don't want to listen to anyone else's view."

The group – You Forgot the Birds – has reported the RSPB to the Charity Commissioners, alleging that it spends far less than the "90p-in-the-pound" on conservation that it claims. Last week the RSPB amended the figures on its website after admitting that they "could be seen as misleading."

At the heart of the current conflict is what critics see as the RSPB's growing antagonism towards the shooting industry, which began under its Labour-supporting former conservation director, Mark Avery, who campaigned for a total ban on driven grouse shooting and last week dismissed Sir Ian as "bonkers".

There is no doubt that some rogue operators within the shooting fraternity who kill birds of prey, also known as raptors, to protect their valuable stocks of game birds. The extent of the illegal killing is hard to quantify, but even if it happens as often as the RSPB seems to think, the real conservation story is far more complicated.

Commercial shooting brings around £2billion-a-year into the British economy – about half of it from abroad – and much of this is reinvested in the preservation and management of moorlands. A report six years ago by Dr Stephen Tapper, one of Britain's leading experts on moorland bird life, found that land managed by gamekeepers did far more to sustain varied bird life than formal nature reserves. Why, then, does the RSPB appear fixated on the fate of a relatively small number of birds of prey?

"The RSPB does seem to have an obsession with raptors," said John Norris, a wildlife photographer and RSPB member from Rochdale, Lancs. "The suggestion you hear is that raptors bring in

One big grouse: has the RSPB lost its true aims?



Shooting enthusiasts are concerned about the RSPB's attitude towards protecting birds of prey, when land managed by gamekeepers can support a varied bird life



Game birds are big business

more money than other birds. More raptors equals more visitors. Get a family membership and you'll get a free, cuddly raptor. These people buy badgers, stickers, postcards, tea." He added: "There was a plan I heard about to release sea eagles on the North Norfolk coast. This is a huge predator. It would have caused havoc in the tern colonies. All I can imagine is that they thought it would bring in money." In its annual "Bird-crime" report, published at the end of last month, the RSPB adopted a sombre tone, lamenting the Government's failure to prevent the "persecution" of birds of prey.

According to Mark Harper, the RSPB's current conservation director: "Public desire for the return of our cherished birds of prey population is now at an all-time high. We look forward to uniting with

the shooting community." Yet a look at the RSPB's own figures show that populations of almost all British birds of prey are at their highest levels since records began.

Old hands in the birding world are bemused. Roger McPhail, a leading field sports artist and a lifelong bird enthusiast, said: "We should be celebrating, but all you ever hear from the RSPB is about what's endangered and what is threatened, and how everything's a disaster, and how much money they need to fix it. They have this fundamentalist idea that no harm should ever come to any bird, and that isn't how nature works."

Adrian Blackmore, of the Countryside Alliance, has also looked closely at the Bird-crime figures. According to his analysis: "There is no evidence to support the RSPB's allegation of mass persecution

of birds of prey by those involved in grouse shooting."

The RSPB was founded as the Plumage League in 1889 by Emily Williamson, who wanted to stop the use of great crested grebe feathers in ladies' fashions. Today it employs 2,000 people backed by more than 17,000 volunteers and its influence is felt in virtually every aspect of the debate on conservation and environmentalism.

Yet to some extent, its success and power may be working against it. Andrew Gilruth, membership director of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, believes the RSPB has lost touch with its core mission. "There's a disconnect between the issues that concern people on the ground, and what those sitting in big offices think is important," he said. "There's too much focus on the negative." The RSPB

undoubtedly does much good, and has a history to be proud of, but the response to the Botham allegations suggests a nerve has been touched. In a lengthy response, the RSPB dismissed its critics as "a self-appointed group backed by individuals with shooting interests ... with no legitimacy".

Mike Clarke, the chief executive, added: "We have a long track record in protecting birds and wildlife. Conservation involves not just protecting nature reserves, but developing science and field testing, working with farmers and landowners to share best practice, challenging those who break the law, and fighting to protect the laws that protect our birds, wildlife and special natural places."

Titchwell is a special place. But does it really need a million pound bird hide?

Why lying down can help you open up

ROGER DOBSON

FREUD'S COUCH may have been effective because lying down makes people less defensive.

Lying on one's back reduces defence mechanisms and may make people more open to learning from their mistakes, research suggests.

In two experiments, psychologists found that body position can affect behaviour.

Prof Eddie Harmon-Jones of the University of New South Wales in Australia, who led the study, said: "All of this makes us wonder if this was why Freud had his clients lying flat on their backs when they 'freely' shared their thoughts."

In the study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, participants were given a test in which they had to make a decision between two options they liked equally. After they made their choice, they changed their opinion to show a greater liking for what they picked. But only the people who were sitting upright justified their decision in this way.

The researchers said the results showed that reclining reduced desire and defensive behaviour, including rationalisation.

"When people rely too much on defence mechanisms to justify the things they're doing, it can prevent them from learning more healthy behaviours," said Prof Harmon-Jones.

Whelks on the wane

WHELK STOCKS are at risk of running out, say experts.

Over the past 10 years, the amount of the sea snails landed by British boats has more than doubled to nearly 19,000 tonnes, and experts say regulations may need to be changed to protect them.

Scientists from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science said: "There is a concern that whelk could be exploited, which could cause population crashes in commercial fisheries."