



**ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
ornithological
society

Newsletter No. 102

Autumn 2016



The Late Frank Walker - Founder of RAFOS



The picture of a Resplendent Quetzal on the front cover of Newsletter No. 101 was wrongly attributed to Dick Yates. The picture was actually taken by Peter Grey.
Apologies to those concerned. Editor

Falklands Pictures by Mike Hayes



Deep in Tussock Grass

Long-tailed Meadowlark



Rock Cormorants

Striated Caracara



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Contents

Page No	Title	Author
5	Frank Walker, Founder of RAFOS	Mike Blair
7	Ramblings of a Vagrant	F J Walker
12	575237 Bowers RC to Wg Cdr Ron Bowers MBE	Dave Bodley
14	Gough Island	RSPB
15	Falklands - Third Time Lucky	Mike Hayes
22	A Return to the Magical Island of Lesvos	Pete Evans Jan Knight Ken Earnshaw
29	Robins' Nests	Martin Routledge
31	Tigers, Treepies and the Taj	Dick Yates
47	Spotted Flycatchers	John Wells
52	Norfolk Extravaganza Weekend	Scott Drinkel

John Stewart-Smith Receives UAE Natural History Award.

The following is an extract from the UAE Newspaper 'The National' dated 27 April 2016:

Maj John Stewart-Smith was awarded the the Bish Brown Award, named after one of the founders of the Emirates Natural History Group, for his conservation work with Sheikh Zayed in the 1970s and his contributions to knowledge of the UAE's natural history.

"The carrying out of studies into our history, heritage and culture is a fundamental part of the way in which the Emirates must prepare itself for the future," Sheikh Nahyan said.

Maj Stewart-Smith developed a love of nature as a child in Ireland but, under the misconception that the UAE would be barren of wildlife, feared he would not be able to continue it here.

"I quickly realised that the desert was absolutely teeming with wildlife. Out in the desert you'd just have to be patient and ... you'd begin to see all kinds of animals and plants," he said.

As a military man, he fulfilled his duty to Sheikh Zayed and shared the Founding Father's love of nature. That relationship helped to establish the first decree on wildlife protection.

Maj Stewart-Smith said Sheikh Zayed had "a real, deep appreciation for wildlife".

"John was a founder and first chairman of the Emirates Natural History Group, back in 1976, and made early and important recordings of the UAE's bird life and other aspects of natural history, which helped to lay the basis for our knowledge today," said Peter Hellyer, former chairman of the group.

Frank Walker, Founder of RAFOS

By Mike Blair

I had an intermittent correspondence with Frank Walker over a number of years, managing to combine three visits with work or travel plans, and so I heard a good few stories first-hand. In his RAF career, he rose to the most effective rank of all, Warrant Officer, about which the RAF in his time revolved, but he was still a Flight Sergeant when he twisted the arms of several officers of Air Rank who were keen birdwatchers to convene a meeting to set up an RAF Ornithological Society. The meeting was a great success and a formal outline agreement was reached on a constitution and a committee. A number of posts were filled by volunteers on the spot, when an Air Marshal realised that Frank hadn't been mentioned.

“Which post would you wish to fill on the Committee, Flight Sergeant Walker?”

“None, Sir – I've always been a believer in the highly paid earning their crust!”

That rather summarises Frank's character, one of clear and consistent aims, quite often resulting beautifully expressed disdain, amiable amongst those who had passed his litmus test as worthwhile company, but uncompromising to those didn't. I once asked him what he thought his greatest strength was, and I assumed it would be his formidable patience and application in tackling any serious task, whether professional or ornithological, but as so often with Frank, I was wrong-footed:

“Since I was a young man, I've always had a fully functioning bullshit detector!”

Frank had an interesting career about which he was reticent on security grounds, which circumstance may be why he knew so many high-ranking officers, but several of his stories are about a deniable RAF radar station in a certain country that then had a Shah. I would guess that its location was high on the northern slope of Mount Damavand, at 5671 metres Iran's highest mountain, because at 4000m altitude, that would give a long radar range (in excess of 500km by my calculation) over the Caspian Sea, which was only 60km away. He mentioned being snowed in for almost a month with food supplies running low and wolves prowling around the outside of the perimeter fence! His main complaint was that the winter was so severe that he saw almost no birds, which is why he didn't volunteer to repeat the experience.

Another story was about a time in Gibraltar in the late 1950s when Field Marshal the 1st Viscount Slim as Governor-General of Australia was visiting Gibraltar en route from UK. The military authorities had the task of keeping Bill Slim entertained for a few days (I think there was RAN warship which had conveyed him around the Mediterranean), and on contacting Slim's ADC had been informed that Bill Slim liked birdwatching. Sgt Walker's Squadron Leader boss, who had volubly complained of the amount of time Frank spent birdwatching, then sought brownie points by volunteering Frank to escort the Feld Marshal. This was thought a splendid idea until his boss informed Frank, who had already taken action to avoid the impending VVIP visit. Frank declined on the grounds that he was to be on leave during the week of the visit. His boss ordered Frank to carry out his escort duties in no uncertain terms, including stating in front of other SNCOs:

“At 1230 on the due date, you are to set off on a walk round the best areas for birds. Is that clear?”

“Yes Sir! I will set of at 1230 without fail!...and so he did. Unfortunately, Bill Slim's visit was running late and Frank set off on his own! The corollary to this story reflects how completely without pretension Bill Slim was, for one of Frank's friends let someone in Slim's retinue into the secret, and he roared with laughter still in the presence of Frank's boss...

I visited Frank twice in one of his many Mediterranean region boltholes, the Hotel Baleeira in Sagres. The first visit was after a conference in Lisbon in 1995 and the second during a holiday we took in the Lisbon area in the year of his 80th birthday. Wherever he went, he was treated wonderfully by the hotels, obtaining highly discounted rates (which the hotel insisted I receive, too!), and he usually had the use of a rental car free, because he would trial cars that the companies were thinking of obtaining, and recommend which he thought was the best.

Frank came from Shropshire, and would return there on leave, but as he documented the collapse of bird populations, he determined he would not stay in the country after he left the RAF. As a consequence, he determined to lead a frugal life while enjoying his work and volunteering to serve overseas where the birds were. He accumulated a small nest-egg and purchased Australian mining shares about six months before they suddenly shot up in value, and cashed them in

into a non-UK bank shortly before they collapsed. This enabled him to live simply in hotels whose managers became friends, and to be able to afford to travel to visit his sister in Vancouver.

Now Frank's charm meant that many ladies wished at the very least to be in his company, and occasionally when I was RAFOS Secretary, I would receive an erudite love-lorn letter from a charming lady in one country or another asking wistfully if Frank might ever be in her vicinity in future! Frank never lost his touch, for when I achieved a lifetime ambition of travelling round the world in 2001, one of the stops was Vancouver, where we dropped in at his invitation to meet him at the Cheshire Cheese Restaurant and Irish Pub on Dunbar Street. Picture the scene: it's morning, a few booths have customers, all seemingly waiting for food, but at one booth against the right-hand wall, there's a bevy of extremely attractive waitresses, in short-skirted uniforms, either seated in the booth, or draped over the booth backs. As we got closer, we could hear conversation:

"Gee Frank, that's so interesting!"

"And daring!"

"Keep talkin', Frank, that accent is gorgeous!"

We couldn't help but notice that all the other customers in the various booths were looking wistfully envious – and hungry!

Check the BWP volumes – Frank's name is in there. He wrote on early radar ornithology. In 1996, he contributed a very valuable set of data to the journal *Seabird*, in which he recorded his years of recording Gannets on passage past Cape St Vincent 1986-1995.

A major penalty of anyone settling (not quite the right word for Frank's peripatetic life) abroad is that his RAF pension, minuscule at the time he left, did not qualify for any increments that those in UK automatically receive, and the same applied to his state pension when he became eligible, for it remained at the initial value. His savings began to run out, but the hospitality of the many friends he had made in the Mediterranean enabled him to spend his last days in Malta and be cared for. Frank Walker is very much one of the most amazing people I've had the privilege of knowing, but that's scarcely a surprise, because after all, he was a very fine Warrant Officer; as someone of 32 years' commissioned service, I can think of no finer compliment.

Reference

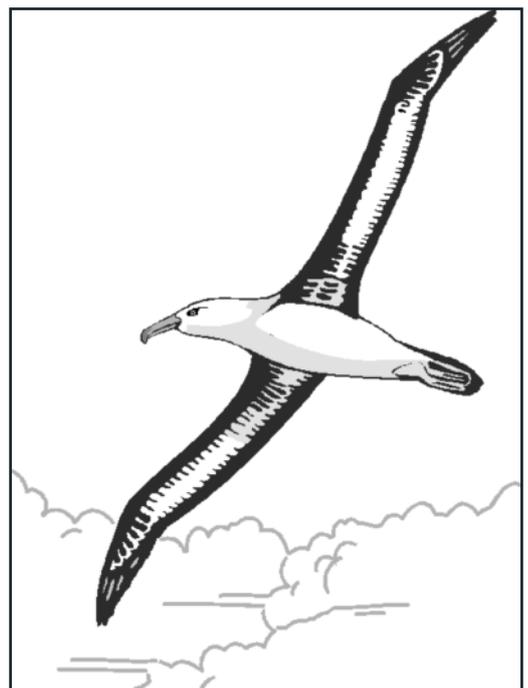
Walker, FJ. 1996. Observations of movements of North Atlantic Gannets *Morus bassanus* from Cape St Vincent, Portugal. *Seabird* **18**: 44-48.

On the next 5 pages is an article written by Frank Walker outlining his birding and Service career.

It was written for the RAFOS Special Millennium Publication and is reproduced here in full.

The picture opposite was used to head all Frank's articles entitled 'Ramblings of a Vagrant' in the RAFOS Newsletters.

Editor



RAMBLINGS OF A VAGRANT
Part Fifteen or More

by

F.J. Walker

I suppose my first memory of an exotic bird was a drake Wood Duck, paddling confidently along the water's edge off Dalton's Beach, Brighton, probably about 1935. The first tears shed for birds was when childish fumbling fingers inadvertently destroyed a nest full of the eggs of the Jenny Wrens at St Anne's Well, Hove. About the same time, the first real sadness on finding a Tawny and a Barn Owl a seething mass of maggots in Queens Park, Brighton, where the Queen Anne's Lace was above my head.

Blockley, in the North Cotswolds, was, in the mid-Thirties, an obscure, poor agricultural village, with the big house in the Park, a sawmill, a brickyard and an abundance of rural life. Here the dawn chorus of a thousand bursting throats heralded the rising sun, and at night the Tawny Owls hooted from the once prolific elms. I soon joined in with the local lads birdnesting and learnt such names as the Scribbling Schoolmaster, Hedge Betty, Bottle Tit and how to carefully turn a shoebox into a mausoleum for blown eggs. There were no field guides or bird books for us country boys, but Granny Butler had a delightful Victorian tome titled 'Country Games for Young Gentlemen', that described bird nesting and bird trapping, the latter to be incarcerated in tiny cages, until the cat or the first hard frost released them. But basically it was the field lore handed down from past generations of country folk, the famous Players cigarette cards on wildlife (of which I am still the proud owner of a set of birds contained in a small album). And we must not forget the elderly spinster lady, Miss Dee, who tried to civilize we barbarians on marvelous nature walks.

In 1940, my playground was St James' Park London, close to Pall Mall, where I was employed in divers tasks in the Senior United Services Club, and dwelt daily amongst the Royals, Admirals, Generals and Air Marshals of that disastrous period of World War II. I always felt that the birds of St James' Park were too tame after the Cotswolds, so I spent much time searching the flowerbeds for German incendiary bombs and British AA shell cases. After I had removed the base of the incendiary bomb, and made the weapon 'safe', I would take them back to Blockley and sell them for half a crown apiece.

From that point on, the War contained and directed my interests, and I found it was much more fun to go down to Gravesend to watch neat, elegant fighter aircraft scrambling, or to potter through the burnt out ruins of the once great churches and stately homes of London. I have vague but happy memories of dining in the zoo restaurant in Regents Park when St Johns Wood was No 1 ACRC. From there to ITW at RAF Bridgenorth for morse, drill, gunnery, and admin and org training.

RAF Madeley No 4 Radio School was a bucolic setting for my next year or so, bumbling round the Herefordshire skies in De Haviland Dominies and Proctors, and on weekends, walking through the daffodil covered woods, and listening to snipe drum and curlew whistle at dusk as we walked back from the pub. Not as though we heard much, we were busy singing 'aircrew songs'. But it was a period of learning and further postings,

No 1 Radio School at Cranwell, flying in Wellington bombers at Air Gunnery School at Walney Island, home to countless Terns, and where we buried hundreds of rounds of .303 ammunition when the weather was good. But off-duty, pubs and dance halls were the main attraction, even in places like RAF Carew Cherrington with Tenby close by. Then the war was over and we were singing 'We are redundant Aircrew, no bloody good we are...'. I drifted to RAF Broadwell Grove (DC3s), Lyneham (Yorks), ending up at RAF Manston in the great freeze of 1946/47, and then demob.

My return to the village of Blockley, to await a slot at teachers training course, was a sad affair. Everything had changed; the village had sold its soul and property to foreigners from London and Birmingham. I had a pair of battered Victorian field glasses and a copy of 'The Observer's Book of Birds', and found escape and an awakening interest in the local flora and fauna that lived in the North Cotswold escarpment. We did not seek rarities, were happy to see Stonechat, Wheatear, Ring Ouzel and the hoards of Redwing and Fieldfares that came every winter.

But like the birds, I had need to spread my horizons and returned to the post-war Royal Air Force, to live for the most part in 1936 wooden accommodation, eating 1940 style cooking. From Cardington to Yatesbury, empty tombs, thence to Ibbersley on the Avon, where a water bailiff befriended me, to show me the wintering geese and duck, the breeding Hobby, Wryneck and Dartford Warblers. Later to RAF Sopley, I could cycle to Mudeford Harbour at the mouth of the Avon, on empty roads, to feast on summer plumaged Bar-tail and Black-tailed Godwits, Knot and small waders, and nary a twitcher, lister or stringer to be seen.

From a brand-new 'Rotor' radar at Sopley, I was posted to the antediluvian radar AMES1 (or Chain Home 1). The accommodation was as primitive as the radar, but the birding was excellent. Here I met my first RAF birders, WO Bennet, and Sergeant Ted Lawrence, and we wandered at will across the Wallend Marshes as far as Rye. Not more than ten miles away was the then burgeoning Dungeness Bird Observatory, where Bert Axwell and Harry Cawkell trained me in the disciplines of bird-ringing and making useful records. Here I met a host of up and coming ornithologists from Oxford and London, who were not always as clever as they thought. Geoff Rivers and I left them to their lofty thoughts whilst we went roaming the Heligoland traps to find something else for them to talk about.

In 1955 I packed my kit bag and made my way in a nightmare journey to Hong Kong, via Rome, Maripur, Dum Dum and Changi. There we emplaned on an even more elderly piston job, that took us seven days via Labuam, Philipines Clark Field, to the paddy field girt Kai Tak airfield, where hoards of egrets bred in the trees on the north shore. To RAF Sek Kong, six to a Nissan hut, stinking 'thunderboxes', and an ancient radar beautifully located on the edge of the paddy fields and marshes of the Mong Tseng peninsular.

I had hardly settled in when a typhoon skirted Hong Kong, dumping tens of thousands of birds - terns, gulls, waders, herons over the New Territories and with only La Touche's two volumes of 'Birds of South-east Asia' and Herklots 'Hong Kong Birds' I was quickly saturated and even my brand new Ross 10x50 Stepmor binoculars did not help...too many birds.

Slowly with Lts Dickie Bird and Jerimia Sergeant, we began to separate the wheat(ear) from the chaff(chiff), and following in the footsteps of Lts Dove and Godhard,

started adding new species to the Hong Kong list. Over the next two years there was a gathering of birdwatchers who would make their way to the Sergeants Mess at RAF Sek Kong, Arthur St George Walton, Col Brown, Roland de la Monssaye, Maura Benham and many others to visit Mai Po and Mong Tseng. A month before I was tour-ex'd Arthur St George Walton and I formed the Hong Kong Birdwatching Society, that still flourishes forty-two years on.

I sailed from Hong Kong in September 1957 on the SS Oxfordshire and spent the next thirty odd days from dawn to dusk on deck watching seabirds and shipborne passage migrants. We called in at Singapore, Ceylon, Aden and Cyprus but the weather was too bad to stop in Gibraltar where in the great storm backlash hundreds of petrels and shearwaters streamed across our bows. Liverpool, cold dismal and grey, and Black Guillemot greeted us. As a post script, my carefully collected notes of this thirty day voyage together with notes taken on detachment to El Adem, Malta, Babul Sar, and Tabriz (Iran) were stolen at RAF Akrotiri Cyprus, and the idea of a Royal Air Force Society to contain personal bird notes from outlandish places was born.

After the exotica of the New Territories and the islands of Hong Kong I found RAF Wartling suburban in the extreme. The marshes were too well cared for, hedges neatly trimmed, flood waters carefully controlled, so I purchased a scooter and explored the beautiful Sussex/Kent border, with Rye Harbour, Dungeness Bird Observatory, the Midrips and Pett Level marvelous birding areas. But just a trifle cold on a scooter in January after sub-tropical Hong Kong. A year later and I was on the cold bleak marshes of Holderness, at RAF Patrington and a mere nine miles from Spurn Bird Observatory. There to the east the cold grey waters of the North Sea, to the west the vast mud banks of the South Riding. Birds aplenty and the beginning of twitching but not a place I'd want to go back to, the winds are too thin!

When Patrington closed for re-engineering I was sent to RAF Driffield, home at the time to Thor missiles, where I was often in trouble with security guards as I birded around the airfield. Here I tried gliding, two attempts - the first time the string broke half-way up, and the next time a rainstorm, so I left flying of that nature to the birds. The radar was at RAF Bampton where the gannets and alcidæ were colonizing, and Fulmars swept along the cliffs.

To Cape Gata, Cyprus, living in the bug-ridden rotten tents, relics of the Suez crisis with open plan toilets, and primitiveness worthy of Gordon of Khartoum fame. And just outside my tent a colony of Eleanora's Falcon bred on the rocky cliff ledges and to the north the glistening Akrotiri salt lake with its pink stain of flamingos. There I met up with the local RAF ringers, Graham Martin John Nicholson, Geoff Rivers and soon was putting up nets pre-dawn at Bishops Post or Happy Valley. Akrotiri was always a surprise. Netting at dusk to catch Red rumped Swallows we clobbered the islands first recorded River Warbler, and the next evening a Blyth's Warbler, latterly rejected by the UK base authorities. The Cyprus Ornithological Society, an active, positive organization, published our annual findings and recruited many new members from the Greek Cypriot community.

Whilst I was at Akrotiri I had three one month detachments to Tabriz, and Babul Sar (on the Caspian), two to El Adem (Libya) and one to Malta, and with the late Freddie Briggs visited Israel and Lebanon all with excellent ornithological results and all for free - well, almost.

RAF Neatishead radar site had its own Bitterns calling at dawn and dusk, RAF Coltishall where I was accommodated had its own jet fighters twenty-four hours a day. So I spent all my off duty time exploring the marvelous birding areas on the north coast of Norfolk, the east coast dunes, the central reed beds and lagoons, and made gentle forays to Minsmere, where Bert and Joan Axell, living in an ancient corrugated iron bungalow, extended a warm and generous hospitality that I have but rarely met with in England.

It was at RAF Coltishall that I wrote a letter to the RAF News, the BTO and RSPB asking if any RAF personnel were interested in forming their own ornithological society. The response was good, particularly from ORs and I motored around England meeting up with many keen and enthusiastic birders.

With the cool polished intellect of Doctor WRP Bourne we drafted a constitution and aims of the Society, and I visited Squadron Leader Shaw at Bentley Priory who wished me luck and gave me the RAFOS logo of a golden eagle on a RAF roundel. I wrote to Lord Shackleton, Minister of Defence at that time, inviting him to become Patron of the Society. I was asked to pop down and see him at MOD Whitehall, where over a mug of Civil Service tea, he agreed to become Life Patron. Next to RAF Catterick where the late Wing Commander A Hudson RAF Regt agreed to become the Chairman, to Wing Commander F French at Felixstowe who volunteered to become Treasurer, and Flt Sergeant McDonald Secretary. En route to RAF Changi on a three-month detachment I learnt that Air Marshal Day was aboard the Hastings aircraft so somewhere between Istres and El Adem I found our first Vice President. And so on, to meet with birders at Gan, Seletar and a hair-raising trip to Hong Kong. On my return to the United Kingdom, the Chairman called an inaugural meeting and a Society was born, and the rest is, as they say, History.

A strange and deranged airman set fire to the radar hole at Neatishead so I found myself with all the single radar personnel hot footing it to RAF Bawdsey. That allowed me to extend my knowledge of East Anglia even further, and I often had my nets up behind the WRAF billets, didn't catch much! Called into the General Office I was presented with a General Application form and a posting notice to RAF Saxa Vord where I had been trying to get to for years. I didn't need a Gen Ap to get out of it, and so started a fascinating two-year stay on the most northerly RAF base in the UK. I will gloss over the weather, but the generosity and hospitality of the people of Unst, indeed Zetland will never be forgotten. The late Magnus Sinclair and Steve Saxby were a constant source of information on the flora and fauna of the island, and were always ready with a dram on a windy day.

My next series of postings were dull and uninteresting, birdwise. RAF Bentley Priory, STOC High Wycombe, RAF Fylingdales, RAF Wattisham back to close down RAF Patrington and the final straw back to HOSTC, so - PVR.

I found myself wearing the Sultan of Oman's Air Force uniform at Muastiar near Muscat, and shortly after to the vast desert airfield at Thumrait. Great heat, some problems with the Adu guerrillas, but virtually virgin birding. One felt that each sighting and record was important because no one had spent any time out in the field in the hot weather in Central Oman and I added several new species to the Arabian list. I spent four years wandering around the Jebel Aara and the Salalah plains. And then having covered the eastern side of Felix Arabia thought I'd try the western side, which was a sad mistake.

Sufficient to say, I spent a year at Tabum training Saudi Arabian airmen basic Air Defence, and then thinking I'd be safer elsewhere, I fled the country.

Being at a loose end and itinerant to boot, I decided to travel around the Mediterranean basin making initially for the south Iberian coast the islands of Mallorca, Cyprus, Crete and Malta. Tourism had arrived everywhere was changing. The sleepy entrepot of Limassol was a bustling city, the busy airfield at RAF Akrotiri a prison camp, and the roads full of Happy Campers. Malta was bursting at the seams with one of the highest population densities in the world, and twelve hundred shotgun licenses per square mile. For the rest, Tangier, Sousse, Heraklion, Gibraltar were all gearing up to the new tourists, and too busy making money to worry about conservation or ecology. But the countryside was pleasant enough, despite being mugged in Tangier, and attacked by a drug crazed East Midlander outside Sousse. Cyprus was pleasant enough, and John Veal and Mick Lobb looked after me very well, and together we were able to add a couple of birds to the Cyprus list.

Thinking to expand my ornithological experience I made three eleven month journeys round the world, exploring in depth Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and meeting up with old friends (Arthur Stagg in Brisbane, Mallorca, Tabuk, Cyprus, Eric Marshall in Ontario and Frank Kime in British Columbia, all founder members of the Society, come to mind).

And everywhere I went in our late Dominions I met with fantastic hospitality from the local birdwatchers, a generous sharing of local ornithological knowledge, and trips into the rain forests and deserts of Australia, the prairies and forests of Canada, the sheep country of Kiwiland. Among the highlights was an invitation to attend as an observer by the Australian Ornithological Society at an International Conference in Bangkok; joining a group in Sydney to go bush walking, and sleeping bushman style. Nothing seemed too much trouble in these local stalwarts of the British Empire and I compared it all very sadly with a distinct lack of hospitality in the English Counties or my travels around RAF stations.

As the aging process eroded my itinerant drives, I spent more time in one place, and I found Portugal's Algarve ideal for winter quarters, and Vancouver BC excellent as a base for exploring that vast continent. I finally decided to winter in Sagres, the most southwesterly point in Europe, for its excellent autumn migration and interesting sea watching. (Since 1992 I think I made about fourteen hundred dawn sea watches from Cape St Vincent).

My B&B hosts in Vancouver BC adopted me, the Natural History Society welcomed me. so I had an ideal base to travel afar, to Halifax Nova Scotia, to Wilmington North Carolina, to Meadow Vista in California, north to Alaska, east to Tappen, Calgary and Winnipeg. No wonder my hosts call me a vagrant.

Each time I left an area I birded in, I left a detailed list of sightings with the local Society and RAFOS finally agreed to hold my notes on the Algarve. Other notes were published in the RAFOS Newsletter, in local Societies magazines bird notes, my small contribution to ornithology.

And the future? I cross the Atlantic in six weeks time to Nova Scotia and thence to Vancouver BC for six months. After that west to the Antipodes and east to Europe, who knows, whilst health remains the world is my oyster.

God Speed.

February 2000

575237 Bowers R.C. to Wing Commander Ron Bowers MBE

By Dave Bodley

Ron Bowers was born in May, 1922 and went to school in Croydon until both his parents died suddenly in 1938, when he went to live with his aunt and uncle in Worthing. Faced with choosing a future career he really had no idea what he wanted to do. A friend of his uncle was an instructor at No.1 School of Technical Training at Halton Camp, and Ron was persuaded to 'have a go' at an RAF apprenticeship. On 10th January 1939 he started his course which would eventually result in a 38 year career as an aircraft engineer.

His apprenticeship was cut short by the outbreak of war, and after only 22 months training he was posted as an LAC to the Middle East to work with an aircraft repair unit. Surviving the war, he went on to serve as an NCO until 1950 when he was commissioned as an Engineering Officer. His varied postings throughout his service included work in Egypt and Libya, India, Germany, Canada, Northern Ireland, USA (Georgia) and finally Cyprus as OC 103 MU. His Service career is well recorded in his book 'Seeing Life from a New Angle' (ISBN 0 9512363 1 8), published in 1991.

During his time in the RAF he became interested in several hobbies and pastimes, some Service-based and some more varied. A keen photographer, he soon progressed to cine-film with some success. Next he acquired an old Alvis saloon and started taking part in hill-climbs and local rallies in England. For relaxation he had a go at painting with oils. Whilst in the States he took up golf fairly seriously, and it was on a golf-course in Georgia that his interest in ornithology began when he found that his fellow (American) players could not put names to the many and varied multi-coloured birds seen during the games. Ron went out and bought a Field Guide to North American birds and set about identifying them.

It was not until his final overseas posting to Cyprus that his birding career really began when he met Wilf Corris, who persuaded him to join the big 1973 RAFOS expedition to the Panhandle (north-east Cyprus peninsular) as official photographer. (The report of this expedition, written by Arthur Staggs appears in Journal No 9)

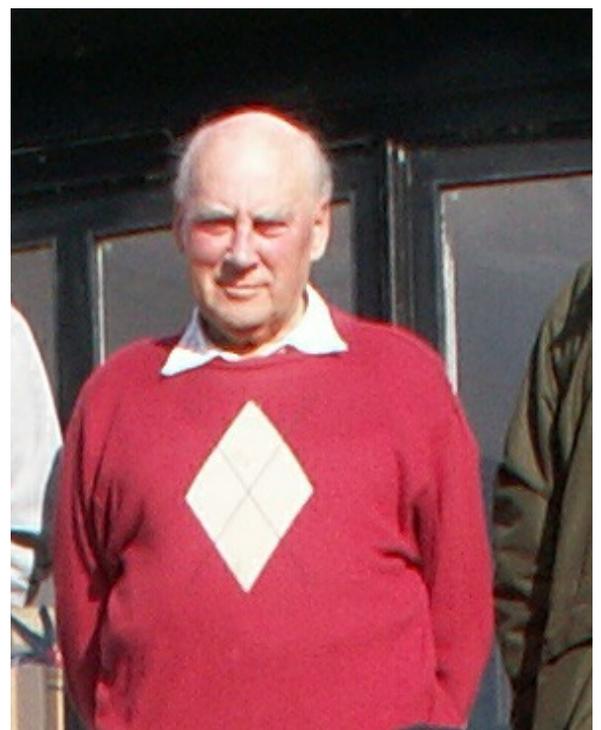
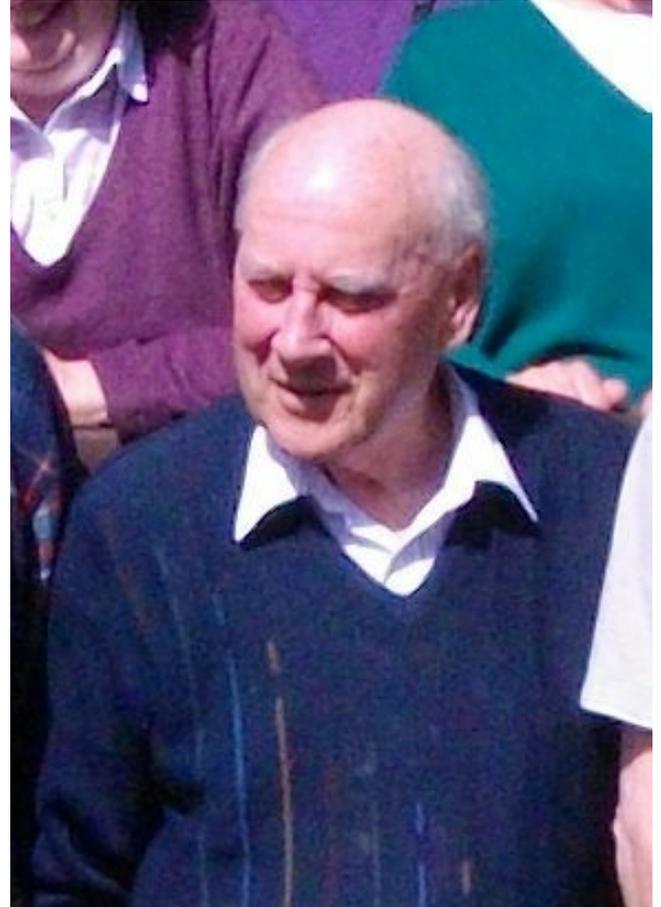
Returning from Cyprus after sadly closing down 103 MU (and placing Noddy in his coffin) Ron had nearly reached the end of his Service career. He bought a small cottage in Stockland, Devon and proceeded to tailor it to his taste. After retirement he joined the East Devon branch of DevonBirds and eventually became Chairman, also serving on the Council of the parent society. He regularly attended RAFOS field meetings at Portland Bill and Chew reservoir.

In 1973 he was suffering badly from chest pains and went to see a specialist in London. After examining him the consultant insisted that he went straight to hospital. Following a heart triple bypass operation he soon recovered his strength but suffered a lot of pain in his leg which had now lost a considerable length of vein! However, six months later he joined Reg and Val Kersley, Pete Bean, my wife and I and a group of Wiltshire birders on a whistle-stop tour of Kenya courtesy of Sunbird. We spent a lot of time in the minibus (getting out was forbidden as the wildlife was DANGEROUS): fortunately Sunbird guaranteed everyone a window seat, so Ron could stretch his leg across the vacant centre seat.

Although he was never Chairman of RAFOS, Ron organised a couple of 'ex-chairmens' weekends in Devon where he presented some notable species such as Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Dartford Warbler, Garden Warbler, Honey Buzzard, Ring Ouzel and Nightjar, and indeed he became a voluntary Warden for a patch of woodland which was home to several Nightjars. These weekends were also notorious for copious alcohol consumption before and during rather noisy dinners in hotels and pubs. There were several more of these events, visiting the Isle of Man, Anglesey, the Somerset Levels, the Isle of Wight, Minsmere, Thorney Island and Seaton, some of which Ron joined.

In return for his very fulfilling Service career, Ron devoted a lot of his time in retirement to working for SSAFA, becoming Secretary/Treasurer of his local branch.

As he approached the age of 90, Ron was beginning to flag, and eventually he had to give up driving. He soon moved into a care home and was immediately happy to settle back into communal living just as he had been used to in the Air Force. He died suddenly and peacefully on 29th December 2015.



Gough Island

The following is the text of a RSPB Press Release

Work needed to save seabird chicks from gruesome death 600,000 seabird chicks eaten alive on a UK World Heritage Site every year

UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting calls for ‘urgent action to eradicate mice from the island’ to ensure World Heritage Status isn’t lost. The animals and plants of Gough Island, one of only four natural World Heritage Sites administered by the United Kingdom are in a declining and perilous state according to a new report. The island in the South Atlantic is also one of the most important seabird colonies in the world, hosting more than 6 million birds of 23 species.

The report by the Institute for European Policy (IEEP), timed to coincide with the ongoing 40th World Heritage Committee meeting, presents overwhelming evidence that predation by introduced mice is leading to high rates of breeding failure in most, if not all seabirds, including three threatened species. Six hundred thousand chicks a year are being lost to mice. Without action, iconic British species will go extinct and Gough Island may lose its prized status as a World Heritage Site.

In a gruesome twist the chicks are eaten alive. The mice kill the chicks by gnawing into the chick’s body, create a gaping wound and the chick weakens then dies over several days. This predation is causing declines in several species of seabird, including the Critically Endangered Tristan albatross, which will lead to the extinction of the species. Researchers based on the islands have also noticed that many other species that were once regarded as abundant are now scarce.

Jonathan Hall, Head of the RSPB’s UK Overseas Territories Unit, said: “Gough Island is one of the most spectacular sites in the world for seabirds and has been recognised as such by UNESCO in its inclusion as a World Heritage Site. The World Heritage Committee meeting has been clear that the mice need to be eradicated to prevent the global extinction of at least three British bird species and ensure that the site retains its World Heritage status.”

Gough Island is also threatened by the invasive plant, the intriguingly named Procumbent Pearlwort. Although currently restricted to a small area of Gough, it has spread rapidly on other islands in the south Atlantic with similar temperatures and weather conditions to Gough. If left unchecked on Gough Island, it would have devastating impacts on the plants and invertebrates, some of which are unique to the island, by destroying nesting sites and out-competing native plants essential for many species.

Chris Carnegy, the UK Representative for the Government of Tristan da Cunha said: “Tristan da Cunha Island and the RSPB have developed a restoration programme for Gough Island that would eradicate the mice and prevent the spread of pearl-wort, safeguarding Gough and its spectacular natural heritage. “Given the severity of the threats to the species and habitats on Gough, and in particular three of the threatened birds, the restoration programme needs to start as soon as possible. However, this cannot proceed until the funding is found.”

The RSPB and Tristan da Cunha community are urgently working to raise the £7.6 million required for this World Heritage Site restoration project. Discussions with the UK Government and other private funders are under way, but even if this funding is secured, further financial support will need to be found if the project is to proceed and the annual death toll of 600,000 chicks stopped.

Gough Island is the most southerly of the Tristan da Cunha group. There are 23 bird species nesting on the island of which 21 are seabirds. The island hosts 99 per cent of the world’s Tristan Albatross and 100 per cent of the world’s Atlantic Petrel populations – the birds most often attacked by mice. Just 2,000 Tristan Albatross pairs remain.

FALKLANDS 2016 – THIRD TIME LUCKY

By Mike Hayes

I returned to the Falklands in February this year for my third visit, but this time was to be very different – I was going to enjoy it at my leisure and see a lot more of the islands. I also had a secret, I had never seen a Striated Caracara (*Phalacrocorax australis*) which is a bird of prey of the family Falconidae. In the Falkland Islands it is known as the Johnny rook. It breeds in several islands in Tierra del Fuego, but is more abundant in the Falklands. Though it was once considered common in the Falklands archipelago, it now only nests in the outlying islands where it breeds. The population in the Falklands is estimated at 500 breeding pairs. Over time, conflict with the sheep farmers has led to a great reduction in their numbers. This is now being corrected by the Falkland Islanders.

It all started when my wife (Eva) and I met our very good friends Rob and Ellen in London last summer. Rob had just completed a 2-year tour to Saudi Arabia and they had returned to the UK for a week before starting their next and first 2-year overseas tour to the Falklands – no contrast there then. Rob and Ellen are great outdoor activity fans and were looking forward to an exciting tour. Our conversation naturally included me reminiscing and them picking my brains about my previous two visits.

In the autumn of 1982 I was first sent to the Falklands (RAF Stanley) with only a couple of weeks' notice for a 6-month tour on the resident Phantom Detachment, later re-badged as 23 Sqn. At the time there was little if any time off, the area around the airfield was thought to be heavily mined and my bird watching enthusiasm was definitely still in the dormant phase that affects so many between the teenage years and full maturity (this can be difficult to pin point in men!). So no bird watching trips for me and no Striated Caracara ticked.

Having joined RAFOS in 1986, I was an early volunteer to take part in the December 1995 survey of Saunders Island led by Tony Marter. This expedition certainly wetted my appetite for the flora and fauna of the Falklands but was restricted to Saunders Island where the variety of species was limited but the numbers of birds very high. The majority of species were naturally lifers for me, but at the end I was feeling a little seduced by the Falklands and sadly, still missing was my Striated Caracara tick which was now rapidly climbing my bogie bird list. This missed opportunity to tick this rare species had become an irritant, which now began to itch every time the Falklands were mentioned. I had two bites of the cherry and dipped both times. Worse still, Iain McKenzie had even shown me a picture of what I had missed, following his visit there.

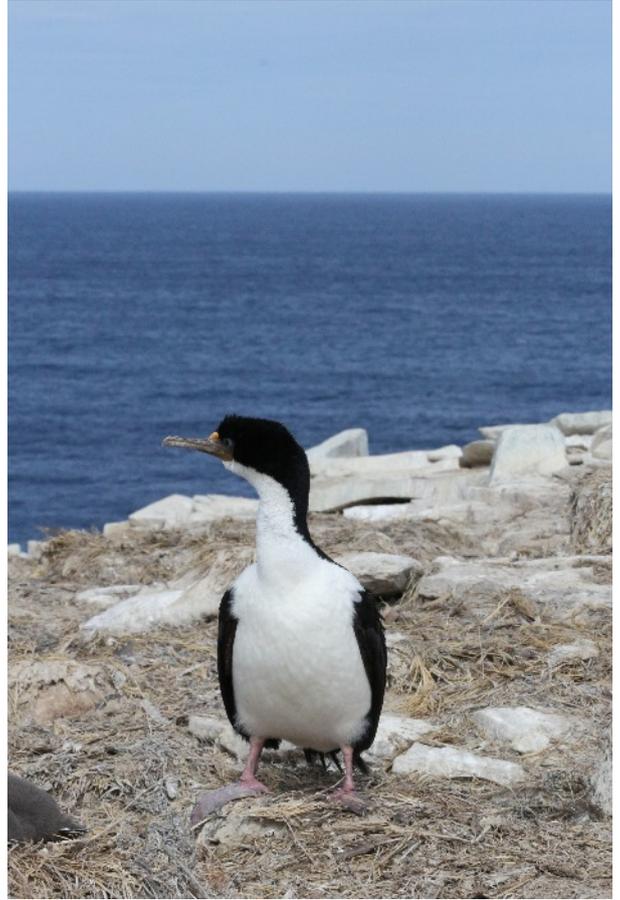
So 20 years later in a London pub with Rob and Ellen and a few friends, Rob uttered the fatal words 'you can always visit us if you fancy a trip down South'. To say such a thing in the company of Eva and I can be very dangerous as we do have a track record of taking statements like that as genuine and start planning. I started dreaming about the ticks that I had missed previously (Striated Caracara, Striated Caracara and Striated Caracara), and started scheming on how I could persuade Eva that spending some time in the south Atlantic would be a great way to use her annual leave. Problem was that the Falklands is not the Maldives, the diving is cold and opportunities for sun bathing in your swimsuit are somewhat limited in the 20 knot average summer winds from Antarctica. I omitted to tell her that the main difference between summer and winter in the Falklands is you can take your hat off on a good summer's day. Definitely not for the Eva I know and love. The argument that it was not that far did not work either. So I worked on the Penguin angle and made sure we watched Happy Feet (3 times) together with plenty of wildlife programmes featuring penguins, seals and whales. Added to this I emphasised that we will never have an opportunity like this again and if it was good enough for Sir David Attenborough it should be good enough for us. Eventually it was agreed we would go.

After a 9 hour flight we landed at Ascension Island and Eva declared that it was not too bad and it was much warmer than she was expecting (hats off). When she asked how long it would take for the luggage to

More Falklands Birds



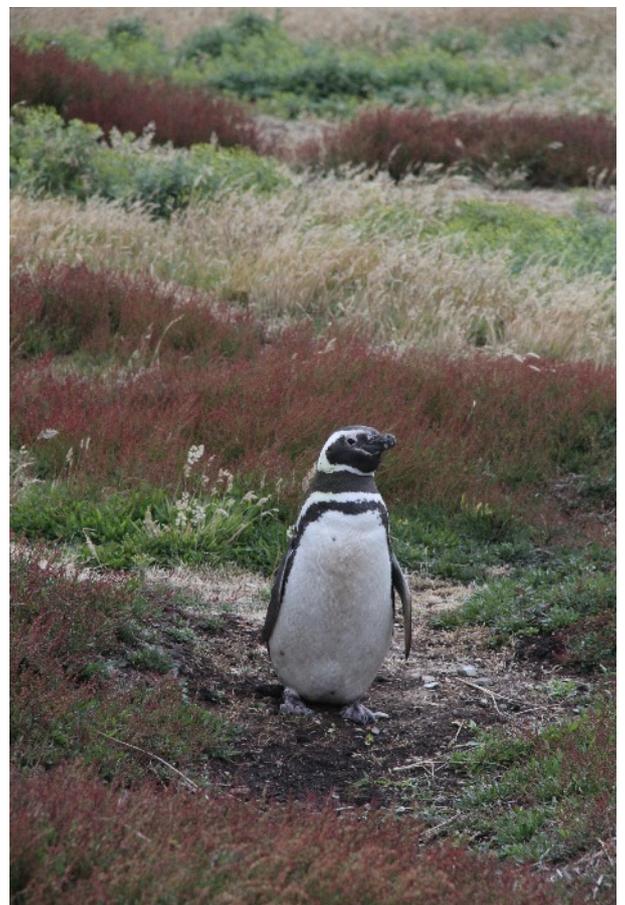
Black-crowned Night Heron



Imperial Cormorant



King Penguin & Chick



Magellanic Penguin

be off loaded I had to come clean and explain that after refuelling we still had another 9 hours to go. So after a quiet flight (someone was not talking to me) we arrived at a very windy Mount Pleasant Airfield (MPA), in fact so windy (hats on until they blew off) the aircraft baggage hold could not be opened for 24 hours – so expedition rules kicked in for underpants management! Not quite what Eva was expecting and my life was now in grave danger!

Having met our friends and settled in at MPA, the next day we hired a car and Eva and I set off for Bertha's Beach (BB) 6 miles from MPA, for our shakedown walk in beautiful sunshine but of course windy so hats stayed on. But not before ticking off House Sparrow, Turkey Vulture, Upland Goose and Long-tailed Meadow Lark at MPA. On arrival at BB we immediately saw a small flock of Rufus-chested Dotterel, Patagonian Crested Duck and Kelp Gull. On the beach we picked up Falklands Flightless Steamer Duck with young (the only endemic), Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper, Two-banded Plover and Falklands Skua. After a mile or so walk we saw our first Gentoo Penguin rookery with around 250 birds present. The young were very well advanced and just about ready for the sea but still being fed by parents. The noise (and smell) came flooding back to me and the hustle and bustle of the rookery was captivating to observe. We were able to approach quite closely and Eva clearly loved the experience, so big smiles all round. Well almost, as I was searching high and low but no signs of Caracara, maybe they are a myth and I would never be able to face Iain McKenzie at a RAFOS AGM again. After a great afternoon, time for supper and so we set off MPA picking up South American Tern on the way and spotting HMS Clyde (it's a ship not a bird) in Mares Harbour.

Next day (Wednesday) with hats on, we set off for Stanley to meet for lunch and do a bit or reminiscing on my behalf, the harbour was very quiet and so very different to when I was accommodated there on the infamous Rangatira. In 1982 both the inner and outer harbours were full of ships including several damaged warships. Today, visits from cruise ships are now a regular event and Stanley can become very busy as passengers visit the shops and restaurants. Stanley has increased in size but is still small with a population of around 2000 (about 2/3^{rds} of the total Falklands population). A walk along the shore doing the mandatory photo shoots, we soon added Kelp Goose, Dark-faced Ground Tyrant and Rock Cormorant. We then drove to Stanley Airfield, which looked very barren with just the Falkland Islands Government Air Service (FIGAS) and the Bristow Helicopters flying from the airfield. Very different to my last visit as all military equipment from 1982 had been removed but it was still very moving to be there some 33 years later. Next up was Gypsy Cove which is 4 miles from Stanley and having examined some of the Port William defence guns from WWII, we were soon looking at Magellanic Penguins on a beautiful beach. An uncleared area surrounded this so minefield signs were present and we stuck to walking behind a rather obese gentleman for safety reasons. A stunning Falklands Thrush singing away on top of a bush provided the music. We also added White-bridled Finch (often called Black-throated) and in the surf we saw our first Falklands Sea Lion. The list was moving along at a steady pace although it still had a gapping (Caracara) hole, but it is the beauty of the environment and sheer numbers of birds that really hooks you.

The following day it was a trip to Volunteer Point (VP), which was a little bit of an adventure. We drove ourselves to Johnson's Harbour some 90 minutes from MPA. Here we met with Derek Pettersson who rents and runs VP Guest House with his wife Trudi. Derek owned an enormous 4x4 that he had imported from Chelsea (ex-tractor!) and had enormous wheels with very soft tyres fitted. So we set off for VP in miserable weather, which was an hour away across very challenging terrain no roads or tracks – my thoughts went back to 1982 and the stories of unsupported 50 mile yomps by our troops with all their kit and weapons in weather like this; my respect for their achievements could not be higher. Fortunately, there were no cruise ships that day so we only shared VP with a team of German scientists. This meant that we were allowed to visit more areas and approach a little closer. When cruise ships are in, large numbers of their guests (cruisers?) visit VP. Tales of Johnny Foreigner (not Johnny Rooks) abound, such as a Japanese tourist who took a penguin back to a cruise ship where it was found in her shower, or others who want to pick a penguin up for a photo shoot.

At VP there is a somewhat dilapidated visitor hut with a kettle and outside toilet facilities – so some respite available from the weather. Eva was impressed with such luxury – we even had some ginger nuts, I certainly know how to treat a lass! So to the rookeries which are home to over 2000 King, 1000+ Gentoo and

Falklands Pictures



Dolphin Gull



Grass Wren



Falklands Thrush



Gentoo Penguin



Flightless Steamer Ducks



Kelp Geese



King Penguins



Magellanic Penguins

similar numbers of Magellanic penguins, 12+ Skuas sitting on the high tide line, 10 Turkey Vultures around the rookeries, circa 100 Two-banded Plovers and 0 Striated Caracaras. Falkland Sea Lions patrolled the surf. Even in the rain and wind a truly memorable day. We returned to the Guest House and enjoyed our first Smoko with Derek and Trudi. Smoko is the Falklands traditional afternoon tea consisting of cakes, biscuits and sandwiches washed down with as much tea or coffee as you can drink. A Falkland twist is that Smoko can be taken at any time of the day. During our stay we were to consume our fair share of Smoko. We then departed for our trip back to Johnson's Harbour. On the way the Derek told us he had been part of the Falkland Islands Defence Force in 1982, however, after some disruptive action, they were all rounded up and put under house arrest at Fox Bay settlement for the duration. 1982 is never far away in the Falklands. Naturally the weather improved on the way home, we even stopped at a stream when we saw a small flock of Yellow-billed Teal. We also drove via Mount Kent, one of the battlefield sites.

Next day was better (hats off) and we stayed on the war theme and visited Goose Green where we walked around and saw the village hall where 120+ islanders spent over a month imprisoned. Chatting to the locals who kindly pointed us in the direction of a nesting Red Jungle Fowl in a small garage. Then it was off to Darwin House for Smoko (excellent) and a beach walk. At Darwin House a walk to the jetty produced Black-crowned Night Heron and juvenile, Magellanic and Pied Oystercatcher, large flocks of Flightless Steamer Ducks and King Cormorant. In the Gorse bush were Black-chinned Siskins and in the fields both Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese. We also visited the memorial where Colonel H fell. On the way back to Mount Pleasant we stopped and paid our respects at the Argentinian Cemetery which was very moving in a somewhat desolate setting and so very sad to see so many young men laid to rest there.

Back on the MPA road and heading home for supper I had to carry out an emergency stop, Eva was not impressed as there were not any other vehicles in any direction for miles, – Striated Caracara I hear you ask? Nope, not unless they can swim which was definitely not in the description in the Field Guide. It was swans that I thought I had seen in my periphery vision on a distant pond. A quick scan with the Scope confirmed a flock of 6 Black-necked Swans. These were the only swans we were to record, so worth the daggers from Eva over the nature of the stop.

Saturday arrived quickly and time to start part two of our trip as we were now going to pick up our islands tour with Rob and Ellen. A week had passed by and we had enjoyed every minute except of course there was a massive dip looming, like a dark black cloud over my head; I had yet to tick a Striated Caracara. First journey was an early morning helicopter flight to Fox Bay to stop briefly and pick up fuel. Next stop was Byron Heights to drop off some personnel and material, no hats as they blew off!! I really would not like to do a 6-month tour perched up there. Then off again to our first overnight stop at Carcass Island at the North West of the Archipelago. We egressed and protected our kit as the helicopter departed at around 10.00. We were then picked up by Rob McGill who owns the island with his wife Lorraine, in his Lander, and taken to the hostel and mini settlement. Carcass is an unspoilt island around 6 miles long and was in my view one of the best and most photogenic locations we visited. Definitely my favourite island of the trip. On the way to the Hotel we entered some tallish conifers that act as a screen against the prevailing winds. We were chatting away when Rob, clearly annoyed, said in a raised voice 'get out the way - bloody rooks'. I glanced up and saw a large dark bird, which I did not recognise hopping on the ground corvid style. This was immediately followed by several others squawking away. I have to admit for about 30 seconds I was baffled, as I knew there were no corvids on the Falklands. Then the penny dropped with a loud bang! Striated Caracaras. I was later to find out there were at least 20 juveniles (no striations and lots of tan brown in the wings and tails) present around the hostel. I couldn't believe it after all this time to find they were as common as muck at Carcass. What a relief - ticked at last. In fact, I needn't have worried, as we were to see many more in the next few days. To top it all we were taken straight into the hostel for some great Smoko made by their fantastic Chilean chef. I did like it there.

Over Smoko we met Michael and Jeanette Clark who were to be our hosts for the day or rather Captain and crew, as we were going on a sea voyage to West Point Island. On the way to the boat we saw on the hill our second Caracara species, this time, two Crested Caracaras perched on a rock, I suspected they might be a nesting pair (later confirmed). We set off on our voyage and although we went through some squally showers (hats on) the weather was generally ok and the sea not too rough. This meant that we are able to

sail to and around West Point Island before we would be able to land and go ashore. The trip was excellent with Falklands Diving Petrel and thin-billed Prions (both lifers). We also had good sightings of Peal's Dolphins enjoying themselves in the surf at the bow. We saw large colonies of nesting cormorants, Kelp Gulls and Dolphin Gulls on the Cliffs. At the base of the cliffs were hunting Sea Lions hoping for an unlucky chick or two falling off. Gliding around the boat were Black-browed Albatross and Southern Giant Petrels and the occasional penguin was spotted in the sea, absolutely brilliant experience.

The sun broke out as we landed on West Point Island and the first thing we did was to take our hats off and open our packed lunch – Smoko of course. Tussock Birds were soon surrounding us trying to steal what they could. Then it was a mini-yomp over the hill at the centre of the island. On the other side we encountered fully mature Tussock Grass (up to 2 meters tall), which is the most important habitat on the Falklands. After fighting our way through we came to the resident Black-browed Albatross and Rockhopper Penguin nesting sites. We were able to approach closely and observe the busy activities as young birds were being fed and exercising their wings constantly. Our friends were now slowly becoming hooked as birdwatchers. On the yomp back we spotted our sole record of Peregrine. On the return trip we saw a young Hump-Backed Whale at close quarters. The most excited were Captain Michael and crew woman Jeanette as it was only the second one they had seen in over 30 years sailing in the Falklands.

An early morning walk before breakfast turned up the two Wrens, Grass and Cobbs (lifers) so list climbing nicely with no gaps. After breakfast we take our first FIGAS flight to Pebble Island. After Smoko (I told you there was a lot of Smoko involved) we had a guided trip around the Western side of the Island. We visited the crash sites of two Argentinian Mirage fighters shot down in 1982. We also visited the memorials to HMS Coventry and the SAS. We also had an hour or two on a beautiful beach where we encountered breeding Dolphin Gulls, Southern Giant Petrels, Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins. There was also a superb display of up to 4 Commerson's Dolphins displaying their synchronised surfing skills in the waves, presumably just for fun. A morning stroll to the ponds on the eastern side added Speckled Teal and Silvery Grebe before a serious storm moved in hats on quick, for a couple of hours before our next flight.

The next stop for two nights was Sea Lion Island in the south east of the Falklands, perhaps one of the most famous wildlife locations in the Falklands. During our stay we recorded our first Snipe, Snowy Sheathbill, White-tufted Grebe, Flying Steamer Duck, Fairy Prions and Chiloe Wigeon. However, it was the sheer numbers of birds, breeding colonies and the ability to get so close that was most memorable. We also had close encounters with Southern Elephant Seals (now I know who ate all the pies) and Sea Lions that were hauled out. We also visited the HMS Sheffield Memorial, which is steel cross looking out to sea to where the Sheffield went down. Rob informed us that each section at MPA had voluntarily undertaken to look after a memorial to ensure they were maintained in good condition. After two fantastic days at Sea Lion Island, it was back to Mount Pleasant for Smoko and pack the car for our road trip around the island. This would be broken by a self-catering stop in the far North West of the island at a farm in Cape Dolphin. We arrived to find that the weather was not great but we did find Barn Owl and some very confiding Meadow Larks. That night the owner/farmer invited us to join him and his family to a fantastic lamb dinner. He briefed us about his environmentally friendly, low intensity farming regime resulting in fewer but much larger and healthier lambs and this protected the natural Falklands flora and vegetation including Tussock Grass. He was trying to convince his fellow farmers that this was the best way forward for farming in the Falklands.

The next day we had a guided tour of the farm by a friend and neighbour of the farmer, which was interesting, and as a bonus we added Variable Hawk to the list.

He also informed us of the exploits of the farmer in 1982 where apparently he had assisted the British at San Carlos and risked his life (being injured in the process) in attempting to rescue the crew of a Gazelle helicopter, which had been shot down. Sadly, the crew had been killed. We then carried on the East Falkland Tour stopping at San Carlos and visiting the British Cemetery, which was very moving. Our final stop was Darwin House for Yes you have guessed it.....our final Smoko.

The next morning, with a list of 59 plus Striated Caracara, we were at MPA for the flight home. What a great trip and I took three things away with me:

1. The nature, in particular the bird life is simply incredible.
2. Memories, reminders and gratitude of 1982 are ever present in the minds of the Islanders.
3. Smoko, Smoko and more Smoko is the way to go, eat your heart out Ritz I know where to go for afternoon (and morning and night) high tea.

Finally, would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Wg Cdr Rob Joly and Ellen for making the arrangements and facilitating our visit. It certainly offered closure for me. I bet they don't mention their next tour and suggest we join them next time.

Will I go back for a fourth visit – never say never. The Falklands do sneak up and hook you.

PS: We have also found out that the 99-year lease for Sea Lion Island and hostel is currently up for sale. Now that is food for thought.



Black-browed Albatross



Crested Caracara



Elephant Seal



Falklands Sea lion

A Return Visit to the Magical Island of Lesvos

A joint article by Pete Evans, Jan Knight and Ken Earnshaw

Pete Evans

“Have you got anything planned for this year yet?” I was asked.

“Yes. We're going back to Lesvos for two weeks in April.”

A concerned expression crossed his face. “But isn't that where all the migrants are?”

“I sincerely hope so.” I replied with a grin. Concern is replaced by puzzlement and I put the poor chap at ease with an explanation.

And so it came to pass, after the success of the previous year's visit, that it wasn't long before Sally was looking into a follow up trip and before the end of the year the 2016 event was firmly on the calendar. This more ambitious event was going to be two weeks with a larger group comprising; Sally and Ken Earnshaw, Jan and Richard Knight, Linda and Dave Mundy, Karen Sims and John Towers, Pete Evans, Ted Barnes and Roger Payne.

Following the Christmas festivities, the New Year saw us preparing for our departure and on the appointed day, 16th April, we assembled at some unearthly hour at Gatwick Airport Departures. With all members present, we checked in our luggage and proceeded to the lounge area and it was at this point that Pete managed to get himself separated from the rest of the party, a trend which would continue for the remainder of the trip, being in the wrong place at the wrong time which probably cost him a lifer or two.

On arrival at Mytilini airport we were pleasantly surprised to find it warm and sunny, a far cry from the previous year when we had experienced a constant cold northerly wind. Following transfer to the hotel at Skala Kallonis we had time before dinner to acquaint ourselves with the local geography and hot spots. A very good elevated viewing platform in the hotel grounds overlooks the Kalloni Pool, a marshy area which holds an extensive range of wildlife. Our first session turned up: Yellow Wagtails (Feldegg race), Squacco and Purple Heron. Flocks of 30 or more Glossy Ibis were regularly sighted here by those seeking some pre-breakfast excitement.

The following day we collected our fleet of four hire cars and set off to the Kalloni salt works, an area of several hectares and one where a large number of bird species can be found. Most of the team had a lifer or two here over the course of our stay. Avocet and Flamingo were present in substantial numbers but we also managed to find both Black and White Storks, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover and Red Throated Pipit amongst others.

Car groups were divided between Sally, Karen, Jan and Linda each accompanied by their respective spouses, partners and friends.

Whilst working their way down the western shore of Kalloni Gulf, Karen's group spotted an Ortolan Bunting which was considered to be quite unusual and sure to be a 'trip tick'. At call over that evening, led as usual by Sally, the moment this bird was called the group stood and while rubbing their thighs, uttered the Chris Packham mantra, 'Stunning bird'.

Karen's group visited Limonos monastery to the west of Kalloni. It nestles in a valley surrounded by hills and can be seen from a distance where its substantial size can be appreciated. It is still in use and the public are welcome to wander the grounds and enjoy refreshment at the little cafe. A fine resident Peacock was displaying in the grounds along with a Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

A visit was attempted to another monastery which lies on the far side of a hill near Lafionas. The car was parked and the idea was to walk the final few kilometres. A track leads around the hill but there is a more direct route which takes one up and over and this was the favoured option. It was a warm, fairly steep climb up to the top through some delightful olive groves full of wild flowers, orchids and insects. On the way Blue Rock Thrush was sighted. There were stunning views from the top looking north towards Molivos. At this point it was decided to return the same way so the monastery was never reached though it was later discovered to be derelict and situated in a cave.

While heading north we stopped off at a well-known viewing point a few kilometres south of Molivos at a known hotspot for Rüppell's Warbler which turned out to be a very productive spot. In addition to the target species, Sardinian and Subalpine Warbler and European Roller were also seen. Pressing on, the team picked up the coast road at Molivos and headed for Skala Sykaminias, some ten kilometres to the east. The road undulates from sea level to cliff tops and the views across the Aegean to the coast of Turkey are superb. A flock of one hundred or more Greater Flamingo, appearing as a pink cloud, were spotted slowly flying north into a stiff breeze. This area was the scene of much human migrant activity which featured in the media. It has to be said that there was very little evidence of what occurred. The piles of discarded rubber boats and life jackets have mostly been removed and it is astonishing how the local people, assisted by international aid workers, have coped and returned the landscape to how it previously was. Arrival at Skala Sykaminias was a lovely surprise as there can be precious few more idyllic little fishing harbours. With tavernas lining the quayside and plenty of outside tables, all enhanced by glorious weather, a very pleasant hour or so was just the way to relax.

To ring the changes a little, Dave and Linda invited Ted and Pete to join them on what could only be described as 'adventurous touring'. The day began with a return trip to Achladeri Forest to find Krüper's Nuthatch which had previously been located by other members of the party. After finding it, telescopes were trained on the nest, and it wasn't long before the pair appeared bringing in food. It was then proposed to take a trip to Agiasos, a village half way up the slopes of Mount Olympus, which is a centre for walking tours on the island. It is very picturesque; built along very narrow streets with inclinations of about 1 in 4 (25% for those of you who have gone metric), which adds hugely to the character. Luckily, no other vehicles were encountered as reversing back down would have been, shall we say, interesting.

After consulting the map, Pete had found three return routes one of which was a track through the hills which was the most direct and, probably, spectacular. Finding the track proved to be problematic as the local maps are not quite in the same league as their O. S. counterparts. The initial section was steep and rough, casting doubts as to its suitability, but undeterred, Dave pressed on and conditions improved greatly. The track levelled off and widened and was probably the best un-metalled road encountered on the trip. A stop was made for some exercise and a spot of birding and Dave wandered along to look at a nearby shrine. As is common in many countries, shrines are placed on roadsides at the scene of fatal accidents and this one contained a photograph depicting a military pilot standing on the steps of his aircraft, which was later identified by Richard as a Chance-Vought Corsair. It was surmised that he had crashed nearby.

On the final day the visits to the salt works and Kalami marsh, just to the east, turned up Spoonbill, Curlew Sandpiper, Long Legged Buzzard, Garganey and Cirl Bunting.

On reflection, this trip was very enjoyable with what one would recognise as typical Mediterranean weather. Of the 273 or so listed species for Lesbos, the group found 170. Like an Easter Egg hunt, the birds are there just waiting to be found. The island is rich in many forms of wildlife. We saw five tortoises plus lizards and snakes, some of which are venomous. Wild flowers and orchids are in abundance, a botanist's heaven!

Lesbos is beautiful and the people there are very friendly and welcoming. The island relies heavily on the tourist trade and this, unfortunately, has been badly affected by recent events which is a pity as, from our experiences, life is probably as it was twelve months ago. A visit by anyone contemplating it would be highly recommended.

Meanwhile, in another car on a tour without a leader

Jan Knight

It was the first trip to Lesvos for Richard and me and we were impressed that the Pope had decided to visit at the same time, even though he caused us a little upset as we arrived. Our aircraft was sent to an obscure corner of the airfield and we were bussed to the terminal from there.

The hotel was comfortable although a little tired, with staff that could not be faulted for their enthusiasm and amazing sense of humour. It was here on the second evening after a full day's birding that, over supper, the group were introduced by the hotel receptionist to the headmaster of the Kalloni Primary School. He wondered if any of us would be prepared to come to his school in the morning and answer questions from the Year 6 English class for half an hour, on the theme of why lots of bird-watchers from various nations visit Lesvos.

So, at just before 10:00 on Monday morning Ken, Sally, Richard and I found ourselves in the teachers' staff room

having traditional fare in the form of coffee and Loukoumi, the Greek version of Turkish Delight, while being inspected by both the teachers and the students. We were led to the classroom where about 25 children waited with another teacher who was setting up a camera to film us. The questions were put to us in English by the students and they were both interesting and challenging. What is the rarest bird on the island and what can we do to look after it? How long are you prepared to wait to see a bird? How much does the equipment cost? Embarrassing to answer that one! The children were fun and really interested in us. After about half an hour a gentleman entered the room and was introduced - it was the school inspector. He stayed for about fifteen minutes and left with a smile, which meant the headmaster also had a smile. When the questions had finished we showed them the scope, bins and books that we use when birding and allowed them to have a go with them. We left about 2½ hours later, elated, and feeling that the wildlife of Lesvos was in good hands in the future.

The island seems to be divided with most of the good bird spots in the western two thirds. Go to this area for Golden Oriole and Cinereous Bunting and of course you saw them. Migration was most obvious in the area from Skala Kallonis to the salt-pans, at the head of the Gulf of Kalloni. We would drive this route in the morning and again in the evening, and every time it would be different, waves of Swifts, Martins and Swallows coming through and in the first week every bush had a Nightingale. By the second week the numbers of these had dropped dramatically only to be replaced by Black-headed Buntings and then Red-footed Falcons.

From the human migration aspect, we met two Dutch doctors at the salt-pans one morning, one a birder, the other becoming interested as we showed them the Stone Curlews and other birds. They had taken a fortnight's leave to work the night shifts at a camp as there was no other medical cover available at night, and were looking after very vulnerable people. On another occasion, having gone to visit a Roman viaduct, I talked to a Swedish missionary from India who was spending six weeks helping at the largest camp. Because he walked the area regularly for relaxation we got directions from him about continuing on the track we were on to regain the main road rather than double back the way we came. Unfortunately, he left out one turning: following his directions the track deteriorated then ran out in a field. The result was two cars and five people stuck down a steep sandy track. We tried driving up but kept getting wheel spin. We tried filling in the sandy ruts with rocks but just sprayed shrapnel out the back. Finally, we got armfuls of olive-tree prunings and laid them onto the rocks. As one of us said, "I did not sign up for road building". It took two hours to get the cars up the worst 20 yards of the slope with all of us covered in sand, grit and sweat, but we made it eventually. Never trust a Swedish missionary from India!

In the second week we were joined in the hotel by two birding tours, one a party of a dozen Americans. On their first evening they were issued with a booklet, which I assume had an itinerary and a checklist and each subsequent evening they had a call-over – in that their leader told them what they had seen that day. This prompted the comment from one of our group that our tour didn't have a proper leader!

Would we go back? We certainly would, to the same hotel at the same time of year and with the same tour leader!

Happy Return

Ken Earnshaw

It felt very good to be back on Lesvos again but rather disappointing that the number of birders was considerably down on last year. In particular, very few Dutch birders were present due, we understand, to a lack of flights from Holland. One bright spot was the meeting up with Hester, an attractive Dutch birder who tours the island on a bicycle. We met last year; she had found a way of getting there and it was good to see her again. By our second week the number of British birders had considerably increased.

An Icterine Warbler was present just in front of our hotel, singing and showing well soon after our arrival but overall the migration was a bit slow although it soon picked up and parties of migrants of various species started arriving. Throughout our stay the Kallonis Salt-pans presented an ever-changing panorama of migration and were frequently visited by us. The evocative call of Bee-eaters heralded the arrival of parties of this spectacular bird but the less noticeable call of Collared Pratincole only resulted in five individuals, but good to see. A large flock, possibly 2000, of Ruff arrived and were promptly misidentified by myself as Golden Plover but of course at a considerable distance. In addition to Sandwich, Common and Little Terns there were sizeable parties of Whiskered Terns arriving accompanied by a few White-winged Terns and a Black Tern. A single Dalmatian Pelican circled the pans then settled onto one of them, an uncommon visitor. Several Spur-winged Lapwings arrived at the pans with one walking close by us as we sat in the car. Small flashes of water adjacent to the salt-pans attracted a party of Red-throated Pipits along with two or three races of Yellow Wagtails and the spectacular Citrine Wagtails. Montagu's Harriers were keenly awaited towards

the end of the day as they came in to roost near the salt-pans. At Kalami Marsh, south-east from the salt-pans, were possibly the only breeding pair of Coot on the island

Between Skala Kallonis and the salt-pans the Tsiknias River enters the Gulf of Kalloni. This year there was a reasonable amount of water in it and the birds responded accordingly. It became another hot-spot and attracted most of the birders on the island it would seem. The main attraction was the presence of all three crakes; Little, Spotted and Baillons, each of which gave good views of what are normally very skulking species when in the UK. An added bonus was a breeding pair of Penduline Tits at their hanging nest a short distance across the river. While watching the crakes I noticed a flock of about 30 Gull-billed Terns that flew silently along the river, I believe that few amongst the birders saw them.

At a small monastery to the north of Kalloni a Goshawk soared low overhead and gave superb views. We had just exited the monastery and did not have a camera to hand. This was a short distance along the road from the Scops Owl roost where the owls continued to entertain the steady stream of visitors and where a Middle Spotted Woodpecker tried hard to steal the show but I think the owls had it. We visited a site along the west coast of the Gulf of Kalloni, near Parakila, where a track leads up a gully for a couple of hundred yards to a small chapel. Here water is funnelled into a tank for the sheep and so is attractive to birds. Sombre Tits and Black-eared Wheatears were much in evidence as were Cinereous Buntings which were seen by others in our party but I still failed to see any.

The spectacularly situated Ipsilou Monastery was visited several times, the steady climb up from the main road being well worth it. A Golden Oriole was singing in a small tree beside the road as we walked up. Could we see it? No, even though we were perhaps just 6 or 7 metres from it. A Chukar was a lot easier to see and a Red-billed Chough was seen by some of our party, a very unusual occurrence. The monastery itself is very impressive. I was invited into the main church by a monk to view an old framed image; possibly of the person to whom the monastery is dedicated and whose eyes followed you around the room. A little difficult to get the gist of things as the monk appeared to have taken a vow of silence but I think I got it.

On the way to Ipsilou we stopped at the Lardia Valley Gorge where Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows swoop around the sheer rock faces. Rock Sparrows took some time to find, very few there. We later heard tour leaders enquiring as to where they could find some. Much more obvious were Nightingales which were singing everywhere. In particular, along the road to Achladeri Forest near to a field containing a blaze of poppies, several were singing and easily visible while low overhead Alpine Swifts zoomed around a small crag. In addition to the poppies the roadside flowers were very abundant and colourful including several species of orchid. Lizards were very common in the warm, sunny conditions, some being large blackish looking things. At the Kremasti Bridge a loud rustling in the grasses alongside my right foot was caused by a largish snake which had just caught a lizard and that probably was why it didn't bite me. The snake was a light grey in colour but as to species I am not sure. Several Tortoises were seen to be putting their lives in danger by wandering across the roads. Karen and Sally 'rescued' them and set them on their way.

In summary it was a very good visit enjoyed by all in the party. Most of us had some lifers and I think all have very fond memories. During our first week a small party from the AOS was staying at a nearby hotel but we saw little of them unfortunately. The hotel and its staff were excellent and made a memorable visit. The various other tavernas that were visited were variable in quality but in the main were very good.

Our current information is that the first direct flights next year from the UK (per Thomas Cook) are not starting until around the second week of May 2017 which is close to the end of the spring migration period on Lesvos so there may be further difficulties for the island in terms of the number of British birders visiting for that migration. The strong adverse publicity in the media in the second half of 2015 has had, and continues to have, a disastrous impact upon Lesvos.

A list of birds recorded on Lesvos 16 to 30 April 2016

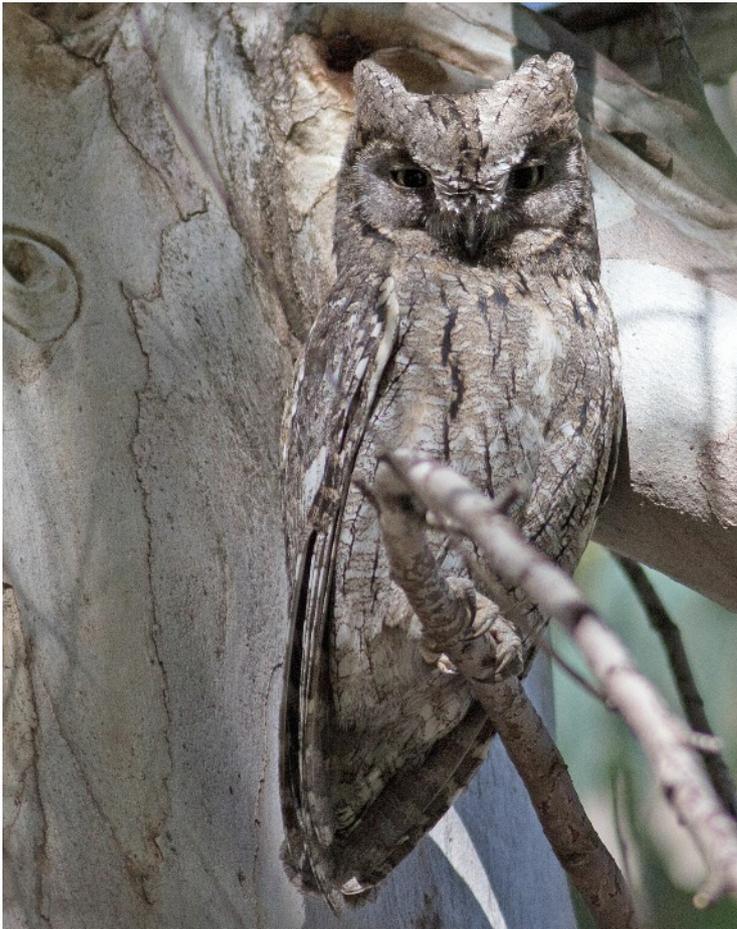
Chukar	Pallid Swift
Pheasant	Alpine Swift
Shelduck	Roller
Ruddy Shelduck	Kingfisher
Mallard	European Bee-eater
Garganey	Hoopoe
Ferruginous Duck	Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Little Grebe	Red-backed Shrike

Great-crested Grebe
Greater Flamingo
Black Stork
White Stork
Glossy Ibis
Eurasian Spoonbill
Little Bittern
Black-crowned Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Great Egret
Little Egret
Dalmatian Pelican
Great Cormorant
Shag
Common Crane
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montague's Harrier
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Common Buzzard
Long-legged Buzzard
Lesser Kestrel
Kestrel
Red-footed Falcon
Eleanora's Falcon
Peregrine
Coot
Water Rail
Little Crake
Spotted Crake
Baillon's Crake
Moorhen
Stone Curlew
Oystercatcher
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Spur-winged Lapwing
Ringed Plover
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Spotted Redshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Greenshank
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Turnstone
Little Stint
Temmink's Stint
Dunlin
Curlew Sandpiper

Lesser Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Masked Shrike
Golden Oriole
Jay
Chough
Jackdaw
Hooded Crow
Raven
Sombre Tit
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Skylark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Barn Swallow
House Martin
Red-rumped Swallow
Long-tailed Tit
Penduline Tit
Cetti's Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Reed Warbler
Wood Warbler
Olivaceous Warbler
Olive-tree Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Blackcap
Lesser Whitethroat
Eastern Orphean Warbler
Common Whitethroat
Eastern Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Rüppell's Warbler
Nuthatch
Krüper's Nuthatch
Rock Nuthatch
Blackbird
Dunnock
Robin
Thrush Nightingale
Nightingale
Zitting Cisticola
Whinchat
Stonechat
Isabelline Wheatear
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Spotted Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher

Broad-billed Sandpiper
 Ruff
 Collared Pratincole
 Slender-billed Gull
 Mediterranean Gull
 Audouin's Gull
 Yellow-legged Gull
 Gull-billed Tern
 Sandwich Tern
 Little Tern
 Common Tern
 Whiskered Tern
 White-winged Tern
 Black Tern
 Rock Dove
 Turtle Dove
 Collared Dove
 Great Spotted Cuckoo
 Cuckoo
 Scops Owl
 Little Owl
 Long-eared Owl
 Common Swift

House Sparrow
 Spanish Sparrow
 Rock Sparrow
 Starling
 Yellow Wagtail
 Blue-headed ssp
 Black-headed ssp
 Grey-headed ssp
 Citrine Wagtail
 Grey Wagtail
 White Wagtail
 Tawny Pipit
 Red-throated Pipit
 Chaffinch
 Serin
 Greenfinch
 Goldfinch
 Linnet
 Corn Bunting
 Cinereous Bunting
 Ortolan Bunting
 Cretzschmar's Bunting
 Cirl Bunting
 Black-headed Bunting



Scops Owl



At Lardia Valley



Temminck's Stint



Little Stint



Marsh Sandpiper



Bee-eaters



Black Stork



Dalmatian Pelican



Spur-winged Lapwing



White Winged Black Tern

Robins' Nests

By Martin Routledge

I'm an occasional nest recorder; I don't major on it, nor do I roam the countryside looking for nests in hedgerows or on beaches like some I could mention. That said, if an opportunity presents itself of course I'll observe and record the outcome. This year (so far) I've had several nests to look at from Mute Swans on my local patch, through Pied Wag-tails in the courtyard at work to various attempts in the garden and out buildings of Chez Chairman. Of particular note this year have been the Robins.

The Ladder Nest – as seen on Facebook! I left a commercially made open-fronted nest box on the ladders in my garage after cleaning it out last year. Sheer idleness really as I should have put it back in the garden over winter but by the time I thought about that a pair of Robins had started showing an interest. No real surprise as in previous years I'd had Robins build nests in dark corners of the garage but this was the first time one became occupied and had eggs hatch. This was a very early breeding attempt with the first egg being laid on about 11 March and the clutch of 3 all in place by the 14th. The pair successfully sat with the male feeding the female at the nest and they hatched three chicks on Easter Monday – sadly a few days later they were predated by something (Magpie suspected) and while I'd had a camera on the nest previously I'd turned it off at this stage!

A rather nice postscript to the Ladder Nesting attempt was that after the Robins had used the box a cock Wren built a nest there and filled up the remaining space. He'd sit on the roof of the garage singing his heart out to advertise this extremely des-res but in the end used a different nest site when he finally attracted a Jenny; clear evidence that when it comes to choosing a place to raise a family the female has the casting vote.

The Garden Nest – a few weeks on later I noticed that a homemade open-fronted box in the garden was now occupied. This box had been home to a mid-season breeding attempt last year but the 2 chicks that hatched were quickly predated. This box is not well hidden until later in the year when the various bits of flora have bushed up and covered it so at the time of nesting it was still quite exposed. I first noticed Mrs Robin sitting on 30 April and when she did move off to feed I found 5 eggs in place – this suggests the first egg date for this nest was around the 25th which in turn would suggest that hatching should be on or shortly after 10th May.

Mrs Robin was a very tight sitter which is usually a good sign until one day I noticed her on the grass and a quick check showed the nest to be empty – no eggshells present so I suspect predated at the late egg stage. It might be that the eggs had already failed as by now it was 17th May and that after the Robin gave up something found the eggs and cleaned the site out. Chief suspect again the Magpie but I also get Grey Squirrel and Great-spotted Woodpeckers so... . Given the estimated egg laying dates this nest could have been the same pair who had earlier nested in the garage. Meanwhile back in the car barn





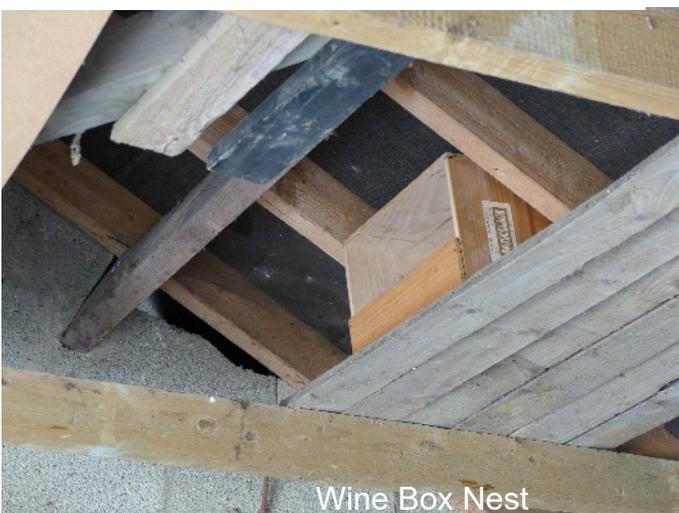
Garden Nest



Garden Nest with Mrs Robin

The Wine Box Nest – up in the rafters of the garage I had an old wooden wine box, no not Chateau Lafitte, which I'd left expecting Starling to show an interest in. But again the Robins had built a neat nest in one corner of the box. First sign of activity was on 21st May when I noticed the parents coming in with food so counting back the first egg date was estimated as 3rd May which means this must have been a different pair to the Garden Nest but could have been the original garage nesters. Up with the camera (there's a video clip on the RAFOS Closed Group Facebook page) and routine watching over the next couple of weeks showed that the nest held 5 chicks and was being attended by a ringed Robin with an unringed mate. Mist netting in the garden I caught a male Robin so slipped some bling on his left leg (most of the time I ring the right leg which is pretty standard). Lo and behold within minutes the left-leg blinged Robin was back at the nest and provisioning food well.

The ability to tell between male and female at the nest led to some interesting observations which may or may not be true across the Robin world. The male seemed more successful in bringing in food making more visits than the female. However, he tended to rock up feed the first gaping mouth and then pop straight off – sometimes with a faecal sack as his reward! On the other hand mum seemed to spend longer deciding which chick to feed, ensured that even the smallest received a fair share and spent a bit longer generally being house proud and tidying up about the place. The other interesting thing the camera revealed was that the chicks were left alone all night and rarely stopped fidgeting. The last feed was around dusk at 2130 ish and breakfast was usually served at first light – nothing unusual there but as fledging date arrived breakfast seemed to be served later and later (this could have been a weather thing though). Post fledging both parents continued to bring food to the nest site before hunting around the garage to feed the adventurous youngsters. Fledging from the nest is only half the story of course and who knows what adventures have befallen these 5 chicks since. Both adults are still active around the garden and I've seen the male feeding at least 2 fledglings – hopefully the others are safe under a bush somewhere.



Wine Box Nest



Proud Father

TIGERS, TREEPIES AND THE TAJ

A trip to India 8-23 Feb 2016

By Dick Yates. Photos – Dick & Daphne Yates

India hadn't been on my radar as a birding destination, but when Daphne said that she really wanted to see Tigers in the wild I thought that I had better look into it. I knew nothing about India and I was a little wary of trying to organise it myself as I do for most of our trips, so I decided to let Naturetrek take the strain. In their 2016 brochure Daphne found a trip called "Tigers Direct" which looked suitable and lasted about a week and of course I wanted to do a bit of birding. Daphne then said that as I had never been to India, I couldn't go there and not see the Taj Mahal. So I contacted Naturetrek's area Operations Manager, Rajan Jolly, and requested if we could add a pre or post birding extension to the trip, also to last about a week, squeezing in a day in Agra to visit the Taj. His response was very positive and we ended up with a tour that took us to Bharatpur and Chambal for birds, a visit to the Taj and Agra Fort, then joining the Tigers Direct group to visit Pench and Kanha tiger reserves.

After an overnight flight from Heathrow to Delhi we were met at about 11.00 by the local ground agent rep, introduced to Naresh who would be our driver for the next week, and taken to the airport Holiday Inn where we were briefed on the programme and given the vouchers for the birding and Taj part of our trip. We then had a sleep!!

Next morning Naresh collected us at 08.00 for the drive to Bharatpur. It is only about 180km from Delhi but the trip, with stops, took about 5 hours. The journey through the Indian countryside was most interesting for me as it was my first taste of India. On the way we stopped at a couple of areas that Naresh knew to be good for birds and picked up Bronze-winged Jacana, Red-wattled Lapwing, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Purple Heron, Sarus Crane, Painted and White Stork, Black-winged Kite, Egyptian Vulture, Long-tailed Shrike, Pied Bush-chat and Indian Roller among others. At Bharatpur we checked into the Birders Inn, had a bite of lunch and then got picked up by our bird guide Harish and the rickshaw pedaller SK.



Now called the Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur is recognised as one of the world's most important bird breeding and feeding grounds. Originally, during the 1850s, it was a royal hunting reserve for maharajas and the British. In 1982 it was declared a national park and then later listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985. The park contains over 370 species of birds and animals and has well-defined tracks which can be covered either on foot, cycle or rickshaw. From the main gate the reserve is strung out down a long straight road with tracks off to each side, SK pedalled,

Harish rode his little motor bike and we sat in the rickshaw, stopping every 100m or so to look at birds. Initially, the habitat is mainly scrub and this gives way to superb wetlands about one third of the way down.

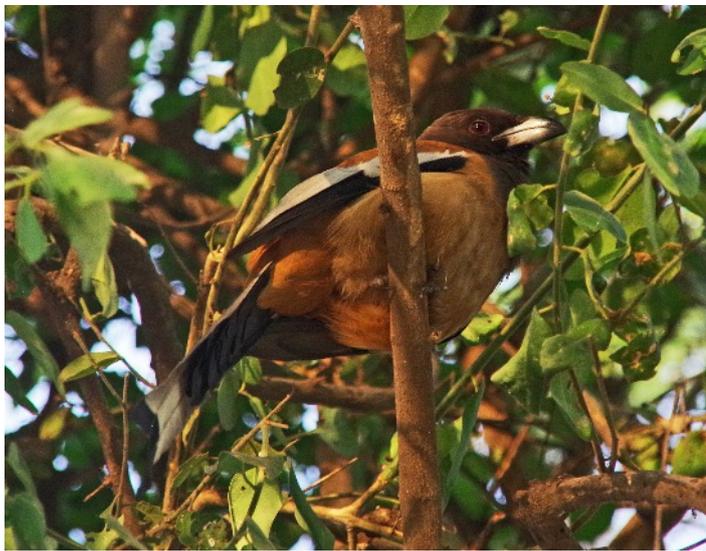
Our first stop was to watch a Shikra doing a couple of circuits before heading off over the bush; but we also got White-eared Bulbul, Common Babbler, which is not quite as common as the name suggests, Grey Francolin and a lovely Purple Sunbird. The next stop was at a tree that Harish knew contained a pair of roosting Spotted Owlets. Then we saw our first Rufous Treepie. This bird is very handsome and very common and related to our Magpie. Also, we had Ashy Prinia, Bluethroat and the commonest of the babblers, Jungle Babbler; also a fly-over by Short-toed Eagle and Greater Spotted Eagle. A bit further down the track we reached the wetland and it was good to get a closer view of Sarus Crane and Painted Stork. Many of the waders we saw, 16 species, were familiar but Black-headed Ibis, Indi-



Purple Sunbird



Spotted Owlets



Rufous Treepie



Indian Roller



Large-billed Crow

an Pond Heron, Pheasant-tailed Jacana and White-tailed Lapwing were good spots. Likewise with the ducks, but good numbers of Ferruginous and Indian Spot-billed Ducks were also in evidence and first for me was Bar-headed Goose. Other new birds that rounded off the day were Large Grey Babbler, Bank Myna, Pied and White-throated Kingfishers, Orange-headed Thrush and Lesser-spotted Goldenback. Black Drongos were everywhere.



White-throated Kingfisher



Indian Spot-bill

After a pleasant dinner and a couple of Kingfisher beers in the Birders Inn we were able to make a leisurely start next morning and after breakfast we were collected by Harish at 0800, just as the reserve opened. The Birders Inn is only about 150m from the entrance so under pedal power it only takes a couple of minutes to get there. Initially the birds were the same as yesterday along with several Chestnut-shouldered Petronia, Rose-ringed Parakeet and Laughing Dove. Red-vented Bulbul joined the bulbul tally and we stopped again to see the Spotted Owlets. When we got to a crossroads we turned off and started to pick up new birds. Brahminy Starling were common, Indian Grey Hornbill and Brown-headed Barbet were joined by Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Oriental White-eye, the diminutive Copper-smith Barbet, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and Red-breasted Flycatcher. Pair of Oriental Magpie Robins were scouring the scrub beside the track along with a pair of Indian Robins and we also spotted Tawny Pipit, Citrine Wag-tail and Lesser Whitethroat.



Yellow-footed Green Pigeon



Coppersmith Barbet

Harish then suggested that we take a ride in a punt through a short waterway. As it was only 300 rupees, about £3, we agreed and it was amazing how close we could get to the birds. This painted Stork and the Red-wattled Lapwing took

almost no notice of us; and the Sambar Deer watched us quietly from about 30m as we silently punted past and we were able to get very close to a roosting Grey Nightjar.



The trip took about 45 minutes and was well worth the £3. After a short walk back to the main track during which we picked up White-breasted Waterhen, Wood Sandpiper and Glossy Ibis, we re-joined SK who pedalled us back to the Birders Inn for lunch. Harish apologised that he would not be able to accompany us in the afternoon as he had to travel to Delhi to pick up another group but his colleague DD would take us out. DD and SK picked us up at 1530 and Harish had obviously briefed him on where we had been and what we had seen as he took us further down the main track and then off onto a couple of other side tracks. Naturally, many of the birds we had seen already, but among the new ones were Marsh Harrier, Greylag Goose, Great Cormorant, Common Pochard, Wigeon, Little Grebe, Southern Coucal, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Blythe's Reed Warbler, Purple Swamp Hen, Comb and Lesser Whistling Ducks and really good views of Plain Prinia. But the highlights were a Dusky Eagle Owl at a nest and after a long wait Siberian

Rubythroat. I couldn't get a shot of the Rubythroat and the Eagle Owl was quite distant but I think you can make him out, the female is on the nest and was quite easily seen in the scope; the Plain Prinia was most cooperative.



As it was getting towards dusk we returned to the Birders Inn and prepared for our morning departure to the Chambal Safari Lodge where we would be staying.

After a quick look at the Indian Scops Owl roosting in a tree outside our room, Naresh picked us up at 0830 for the 3 hour drive to Chambal. We arrived at midday and after checking into our room we met our bird guide for the next 2 days, Bashchu, (pronounced Bishoo) and had lunch which was laid for the guests in the garden.



Chambal Safari Lodge is a delightful establishment set in 35 acres of original woodland with many mature trees and surrounded by extensive farmland. The present owners are the descendants of the original family who established the estate as a field camp in the 1890s. The family fell on hard times and by 1999 the whole complex was almost derelict and in danger of demolition. In that year the present owners gave up their lucrative professional careers and commenced the restoration of the complex and by 2001 it was ready to open. Today it is beautifully run and has its own team of naturalists who take visitors round the estate and local farmland and further afield to conservation projects in the National Chambal Sanctuary, a 400km stretch of the Chambal River and from 1-6km wide along its course. The conservancy was established in 1979 to protect the Gharial population which had been decimated by indiscriminate poaching. After lunch Bashchu took us for some birding in the grounds of the lodge and the local area. In the wooded area we found 2 more Spotted Owllet and a Brown Hawk Owl, quite rare for this area apparently and a pair had been regular visitors for a few years. Other good birds in the woodland were Large-billed Crow, Asian Koel, Verditer Flycatcher, Hume's Warbler, Common Chiffchaff and Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher. We then moved onto a patch of open ground that looked good for pipits and wagtails and soon we spotted Paddyfield and Tawny Pipit and White



Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark



Common Babbler



Black-necked Stork



River Lapwing



Great Thick-knee



White-browed Wagtail

and Citrine Wagtail along with Brown Rock Chat, Red Collared-Dove, Black Redstart, Indian Robin, Indian Roller and in a nearby field of some type of vegetable Bashchu put up several Barred Button-Quail.

Time to return to the lodge and plan the following day's activity over a Kingfisher beer. Our programme had us going to another wetland – a Sarus Crane conservation area – but as we had just had 2 days of wetland birds and seen Sarus Crane we asked if we could try the dry country ravine close to the river before going on a boat trip the following afternoon. Bashchu checked with his boss that this didn't clash with anybody else's activity and it was agreed; so the next morning we set off with Bashchu and our own driver to the Chambal Ravines about 30km away. A couple of stops on the way yielded Baya Weaver, Tree Pipit, Common Stonechat, Jungle Prinia and common Kestrel along with several other Prinias and Babblers that we had seen before. At the head of the ravines we started to walk; and it wasn't long before we saw a fairly distant Sirheer Malkhoa, quite a rare bird in this area apparently, and Yellow-eyed Babbler, another bird of limited distribution. We also saw a pair of Golden Jackal and a family group of Large Grey Mongoose.



Sirheer Malkhoa

Golden Jackal

We saw many other more common birds before moving on to some open ground on a plain above the river and this proved to be a very productive location. Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Osprey and Egyptian Vulture were all present as were Southern Grey, Bay-backed and Common Bushshrike and a Wryneck. Smaller birds included Crested Lark, Small Minivet, Common Babbler, Rufous-fronted Prinia, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark and a bird that Bashchu seemed fairly confident was a Brooks' Leaf Warbler, but I didn't get a good enough look to be sure that it was this, difficult to ID, leaf warbler. As we were heading back to the vehicle to go for lunch a small flock of Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark flew into an almost barren field about 300m away and this time I managed to get close enough for a couple of not too great photos.

After lunch we headed back to the Chambal River for our boat trip. On the way we got Black-necked and Painted Stork on a pond not far from the lodge and as we approached the river we saw River Lapwing. Once on the river the birds came thick and fast. Pond Heron, Great Cormorant, Pied Kingfisher, Common Snipe, Bar-headed Goose, Greenshank, Black-winged Stilt and Ruddy Shelduck; and our first Sand Martin of the trip. The stars of this early part of the show were without doubt the pair of Great Thick-knee, only one in the picture opposite, and a beautifully marked White-browed Wagtail.

Once out into the river plenty of the subjects of the reserve, Gharial, were in evidence along with others of the family, Marsh Crocodile. There were also plenty of birds; Temminck's Stint, Kentish and Little Ringed Plover, Red Crested Pochard, Little, Great and Intermediate Egrets, Bar-headed Goose, Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Common Redshank and Spot-billed and Lesser Whistling-Duck. A pair of Indian Skimmers sat on a sandbank and let us get close enough for a photo as did a River Tern, while Black-bellied Tern and Pallas's Gull put on a bit of a flying display and a pair of Small Pratincole and half a dozen Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse gave a low fast fly-by. We continued down river for about 1½ hours before the sun started to go down and Bashchu produced his flask for a cup of tea. Our final birds before we motored back to the landing area were a pair of Bonelli's Eagle at their nest, a Blue Rock-Thrush and several Sand Larks on a stretch of beach.



Gharial



Marsh Crocodile



River Tern



Indian Skimmer



Tea on the River



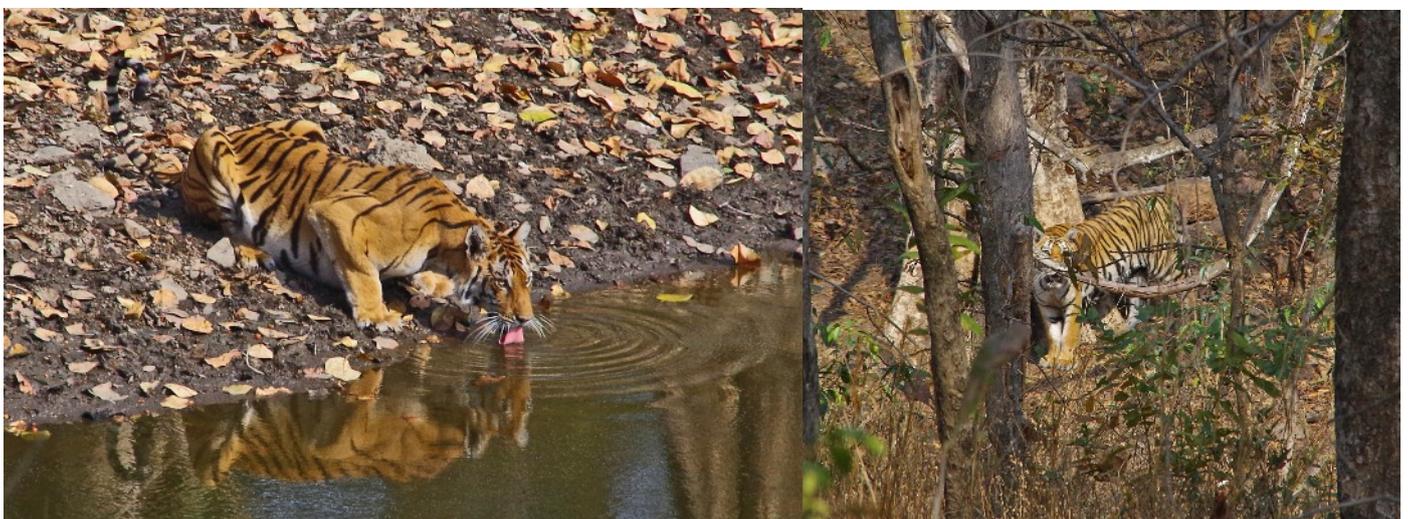
Camabal River Sunset

This was a memorable outing on the Chambal River and a fitting end to our dedicated birding session in India. Tigers would be the focus of our attention during the second half of the trip, but not before we had visited the Taj. The following morning Naresh drove us the 55km to Agra where we met up with our guide for the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort.



A slightly different view of the Taj, from the usual full frontal. Note the scaffolding round the minaret. Every so often the minarets and dome need cleaning to remove all the dirt deposited from the pollution laden atmosphere. This is done by applying a mud pack which has to remain in place for up to 10 years. The mud absorbs the grime and leaves the marble sparkling white again. It is a truly breath-taking building. Incidentally, Black Kites circle the dome endlessly. Agra Fort is also very interesting and it is well worth having the guide, foreground of the picture, to explain what's what. The 2 tours lasted until early afternoon and then Naresh drove us back to Delhi via the new motorway, a distance of just over 200km but which still took nearly 5 hours. Next morning he collected us at 0830 to take us to the airport for our flight to Nagpur: but not before we had seen Dusky Crag Martin and Little Swift from our hotel window.

At Nagpur there was a car to meet us and take us on the roughly 2 hour drive to Pench National Park where we met up with the rest of the Naturetrek 'Tiger Direct' party, another 12 people. We all gathered about 1800 for briefing by our 2 guides Durgesh, known as DG, and Yusuf. Both these guys were great and the organisation for the whole of the tiger week went like clockwork. Pench is where the David Attenborough narrated series called "Tiger – Spy in the Jungle" was filmed. It was designated as a tiger reserve in 1992 and was the 19th 'Project Tiger' reserve. It protects about 300sq km of prime tiger habitat and spans the border of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra states, and the Pench River runs through the reserve. We had 2 nights at Pench before moving on for 4 nights at Kanha Tiger Reserve. Our day in both locations started with tea or coffee and biscuits at 0545 and then boarding the jeeps to get to the park entrance for when it opens at 0630. Our group had 4 jeeps 3x4 and 1x2 occupants. Our guides went with 2 groups and a park ranger with the other 2; the guides swapped over after each game drive. We saw our first tiger on our first drive on



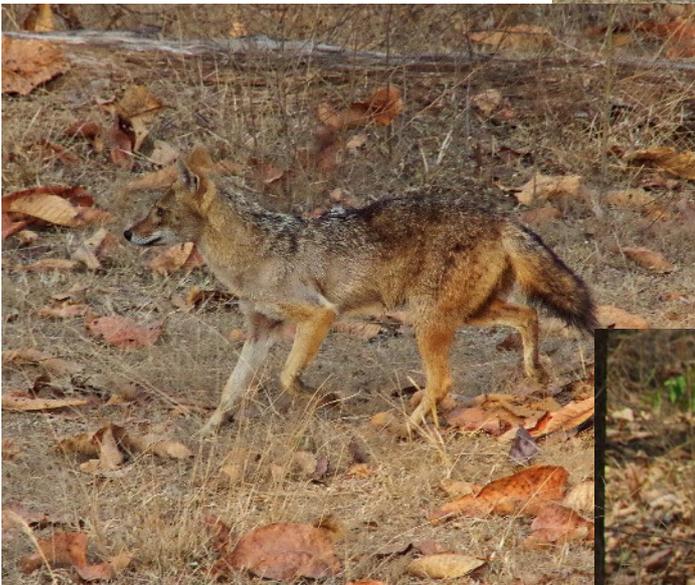


Spotted Deer

Nilgai - Blue Bull



Golden Jackal



Dohl



the morning of 16 Feb. It was a tigress who had 4 semi-adult cubs, I think we saw 3 of them, and she came down to a water hole to drink. On the right is one of the cubs. They were shy than their mother. Other animals we encountered that morning were Spotted Deer (very common), Nilgai or Blue Bull, Dohl - Indian Wild Dog - and Golden Jackal.

Although the focus of our safaris was looking for tiger we also saw several good birds in Pench but I didn't get many photos. Among the new trip birds were Black-crowned Oriole, Green Bee-eater, White-eyed Buzzard, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Grey-headed Fish-Eagle, Peafowl – it is rather surprising to see them roosting at the top of tall trees as the sun goes down - Malabar Pied Hornbill, Alexandrine Parakeet, a single White-rumped Vulture, our only vulture of the whole trip, Red Jungle Fowl and Mottled Wood-Owl.



After a short morning safari we left Pench for Kanha National Park Tiger Reserve. The Kanha Tiger Reserve covers about 1950sq km and is one of the largest in India. Initially established in 1970 to protect the tiny surviving population of hard-ground Barasingha, Swamp Deer, of which less than 100 remained, the population is now around 300 individuals, the park embraced the Tiger Project in the early 1970s and is now one of the best places to see tigers. There is also a good population of Sambar Deer, tiger's favourite food, Rhesus Macaque, Common Langur, Gaur, the huge Asiatic Bison, Wild Boar, all of which we saw and a small population of Leopard and Sloth Bear, which we missed. Kanha Jungle Lodge is delightful and a wonderful place to stay. The food and accommodation were first class and the service beyond all our expectations.

We followed the same routine here as we did at Pench and after early morning coffee we mounted the jeeps to drive the 1km to the park entrance. The mornings at Kanha were a bit colder than at Pench and a fleece was definitely



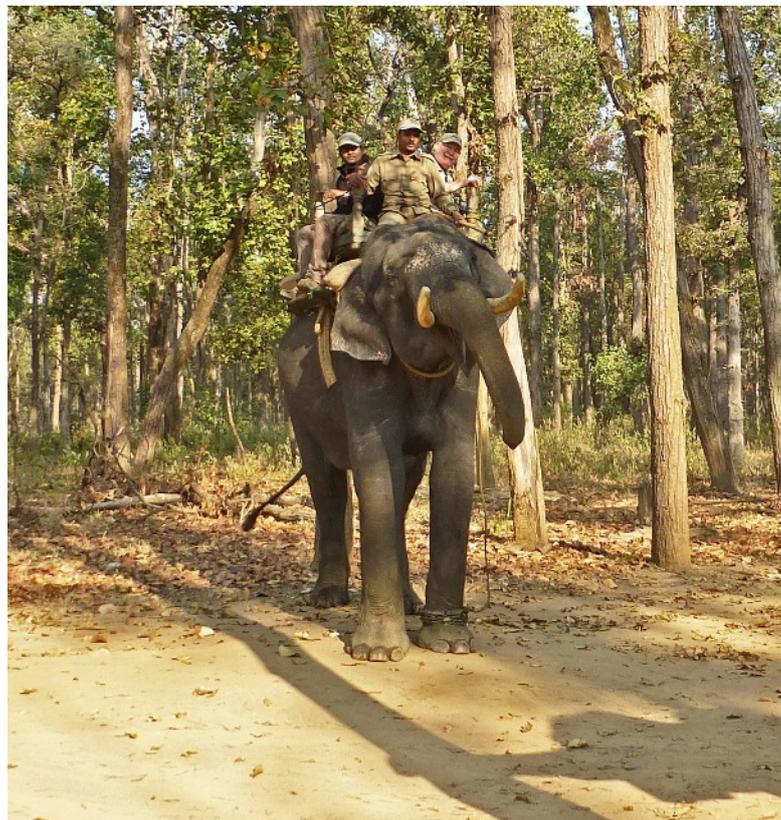
needed first thing. However, the lodge also provided rugs and hot water bottles! I will not go into a blow by blow account of each day's activity; suffice it to say that we had 7 game drives, two on each of the three full days we had there and a rather shorter one on the morning we left. We took breakfast with us and ate it at a couple of different picnic areas where getting out of the vehicles was allowed; it was prohibited everywhere else. But let me get on with the animals and birds that we saw during our time at Kanha.

As at Pench there were plenty of Spotted Deer and Sambar (opposite, left) and the Barasingha (right) and we saw these daily. New birds continued to turn up regularly, but as the focus of the safari was tigers we couldn't stop just for me to get into position for a decent picture, so most of what I got were purely shots of record. We started off that morning with Spangled Drongo, Golden Oriole, Large Cuckoo-Shrike, Plum-headed Parakeet, Long-tailed Minivet, Grey-breasted Prinia and a brief view of Red Spurfowl, which was sitting on a rock by the road as we turned a corner, but departed the fix pretty rapidly as we approached. A Jungle Owlet was roosting nicely out in the open but too far for a decent shot, Oriental White-eye, our only Red-rumped Swallow of the trip, common Kingfisher, Common Hawk-Cuckoo, Black and Woolly-necked Stork, Eurasian Stone Curlew and Crested Hawk-Eagle were all seen as were Painted Francolin and White-rumped Shama.

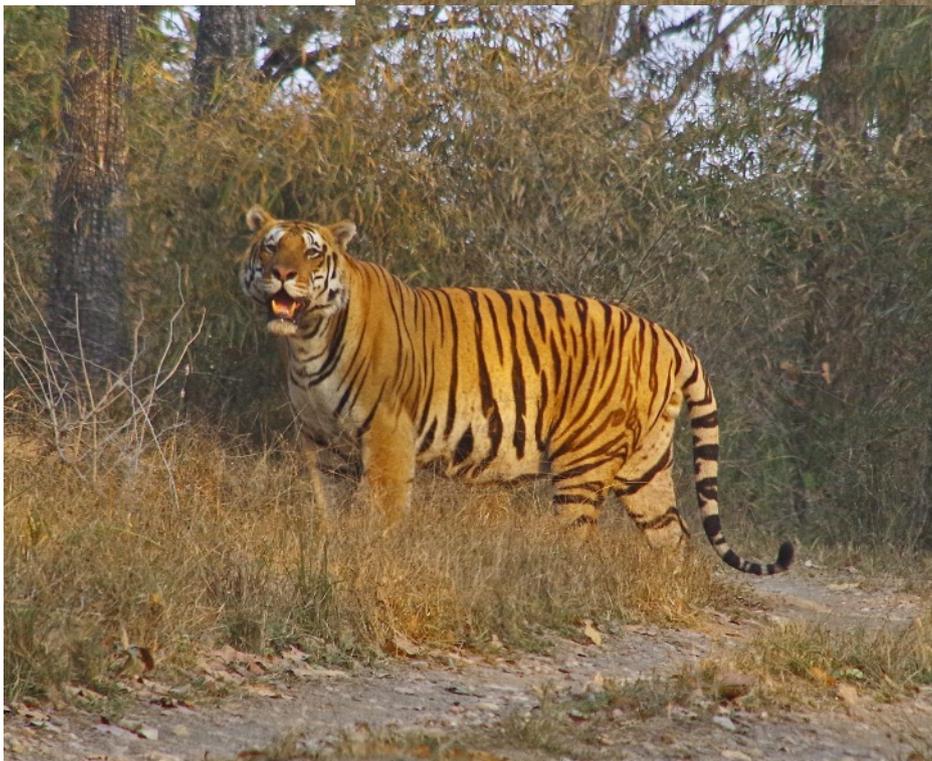
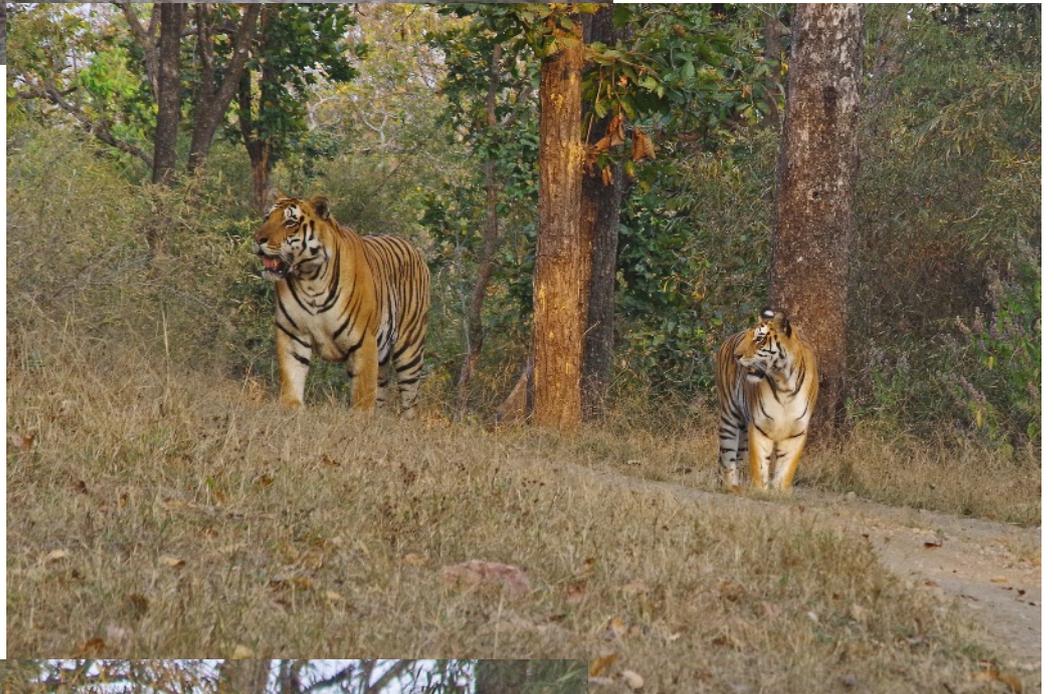
Several other birds were seen over the 7 game drives including Great, Indian and Little Cormorants, Black, Spangled and White-bellied Drongo and I rather liked this shot of a Greater Racket-tailed Drongo silhouetted against the early morning sky. Most of the common babblers put in an appearance.

But as I have stressed the main attractions were tigers. Our most memorable encounter was when we rounded a corner and coming down the slope in front of us at about 50m was a magnificent male. At this time our vehicle was all on its own, as you can imagine drivers tend to honey-pot when a tiger is found; but there is no radio contact between vehicles so each driver has to find his own or get to the target by word of mouth from other drivers. Our encounter lasted a full 10 minutes without another vehicle in sight. And here he is. He stopped for a moment and looked into the bush. The guide said that he, the guide, could hear another tiger, probably his female and that she was likely to come out and join him; and sure enough within another minute she appeared. They greeted each other playfully and then walked towards us side by side, taking no notice of us at all. From the photo below the size difference between male and female is very obvious. They then stopped and looked into the bush, the guide said that he could hear wild boar in there, supper? Finally the male turned and gave us a last stare before they both disappeared into the undergrowth. A truly wonderful encounter made all the more special because we could enjoy it in peace without the argy bargy of other vehicle drivers trying to get their clients into a good position to see the tiger and take photos.

That was not our only tiger encounter but definitely the best. That evening at supper DG said that there might be a chance of getting an elephant ride the next day.



We had been told that this would be a very unlikely occurrence as the parks department had called a virtual ban because the elephants were required for park work, and anyway they were very expensive, over £100 for an hour. DG took names; naturally I said yes, I had never ridden on an elephant before; not even in a zoo. We had 7 takers, and he told us that he should know by morning whether it was a go or not. It was, and our group of 3 plus DG would be on the second push. We arrived at the RV as the other 4 members arrived back on their elephants. They told us the mahouts had heard a tiger but hadn't seen it. We mounted our trusty steeds, I with DG, and off we went. An interesting experience and after about 10 minutes you get the hang of the elephant's gait and feel stable enough not to hang on with both hands. At least you do until a mahout shouts "Tiger Tiger" and then we were off; cross country at a fair old lick and hanging on for dear life. We ploughed through the lower branches of trees and vines, some with quite nasty thorns; down into ravines and across streams in pursuit of the tiger. We saw her, for it was a female, but the lazy, graceful walking pace of the



tiger was still too fast for the elephant through the jungle terrain and vegetation and after about 5-10 minutes, time was a bit hazy, we lost it. But a great experience. When we got back Daph said “Did you get some photos?” No chance, I was too busy hanging on to spare a hand for the camera. OK I promise only one photo of me on an elephant; but while waiting to mount my trusty steed we picked up Oriental Turtle-Dove in the mahout’s compound.



Following this bit of excitement we continued with our safari and saw another tiger at a water hole and then we came across a small herd of the Gaur (pronounced gar), mostly females and juveniles with this ‘big boy’ being the proud boss of the harem. The gaur is the Indian Bison and is the largest breed of cattle in the world.

I had been keeping a tally of the birds seen after call-over every day and I was approaching the 200 mark for the trip so I let Yusuf know and together we kept our eyes open for new species on our last day, they were quite hard to come by now. However, it was not long before he put me onto a Golden-fronted Leafbird fairly high up in a tall tree, but good views nonetheless; 199. We also came across another pair of tigers in the morning but this time there was quite a crowd of jeeps already in place. I continue to be amazed that with all those vehicles so close the animals took almost no notice and having sat in the track for about 15 minute they got up and leisurely strolled into the jungle. A bit later on I called a bird that looked like a shrike, yes – Brown Shrike, said Yusuf, 200! Not a great shot I’m afraid but the best I could do. My camera was beginning to play up and despite daily cleaning it was getting clogged with dust. It cost £200 to have it cleaned and serviced on my return!

We had seen Langurs every day and mostly they shot off if we stopped the jeep to try and photograph them, but this mum with her baby seemed quite relaxed. It was also the first time that we had got close enough to Wild Boar for a reasonable shot, although they wouldn’t stop digging; and I promise this is the last tiger – but he is handsome isn’t he?

February 20 was my birthday and when we got back after the afternoon game drive the staff had left me a little message outside our room. Also, just before dinner they came out during pre drinks with a beautiful cake. Dinner that evening was described as a jungle supper. We were called to walk along a short path through the bush lit by lamps to a seating area where tables had been set out with the buffet and bar set up to one side. This was a lovely touch and was typical of the way the lodge is run by the manager, Tarun who is also a very good guide in his own right, and his wife Dimple, who runs the catering side of the lodge and offers demonstrations of Indian cooking and how to dress in a sari. I resisted that temptation but Daphne gave it a go.

On the morning before we departed we had a final fairly short game drive. Talking to one of our fellow guests the previous evening he showed me a photo he had taken of Cinnamon Bittern. So I checked where it was exactly and got the guide and driver to head off there next morning and to my great delight the bird was still there – the other guy’s photo was much better than mine, but at least I got one - he did have a 500mm lens.

On returning from the game drive we cleared our rooms, had an early lunch and set out on the nearly 6 hour drive to Nagpur. Least said about that the better but all the vehicles were very comfortable, it just seemed to take forever. There were a few interesting sights: watching several dozen Indians ducking under the barrier to cross the railway line just seconds before the train roared past, this included several young men who rode under the barrier on their motor-bikes! The ones with their backs to us had already crossed and the guy on the line just made it: and for any rail buffs among you this is the main Bombay to Calcutta express.

Arriving in Nagpur, which has the proud boast of being in the absolute centre of India, we went to the Hotel Tuli Imperial. The entrance to this hotel looked amazingly magnificent – an elaborate staircase curved up from the huge lobby, which held reception desks on one side and a lounge on the other. This was furnished with what I can only describe as thrones rather than chairs, and music from a grand piano added to our enjoyment. Closer inspection revealed there was no pianist – it was automatic! Our room soon shattered our first impressions of the hotel – dirty shower, chipped loo seat, dubious looking bed covers, and carpets throughout the hotel looking in need of a good clean, replacing actually. The dining experience in the restaurant was nothing special either, lots of very helpful waiters but the food was very ordinary compared to what we had been having. However, we were only there for an overnight stay before a flight to Mumbai and onward flight to London. This caused a bit of aggravation as well. It was a night flight and we had to be out of the hotel by about 15.00 so I had booked the Pranaam lounge thinking we could get a drink and something to eat. What a joke!! An awful meal had to be brought in from lord knows where and just to get a very expensive beer one had to find a waiter and then wait while he sent out to the first class lounge for it. It had cost about £30 each to use this lounge and I complained bitterly, but got nowhere of course. Apparently the lounge had only just opened and was having teething troubles, like their own kitchen had not yet been fitted out and they hadn't got a licence to serve alcohol yet. Never mind, it was a great trip and we got home safely. The birds and animals were fantastic and Naturetrek provided us with great service. Also, if you are tempted to see tigers, Kanha Lodge is a must; we loved it.

Total birds: 201

Total tigers: 11 + 16 other mammal species and 8 reptile species.



Brown Shrike



Cinnamon Bittern



Spotted Flycatchers

12 Days in Summer: Too Brief a Visit, Too Sad a Departure.

By J N Wells Aff iEMA, Tech IOSH, MSM

In the Wells household garden birds are watched earnestly as the 3 of us record sightings for Cambridgeshire Bird Club (CBC), Garden Birds survey (GBS), where each visitor is 'ticked-off' by species only and no totals - easy! Visitors are logged and reports fed back for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter periods. Every 6 months the coordinator publishes reports in the Club Newsletter on garden bird numbers and any interesting sightings of migrants. See http://www.cambridgebirdclub.org.uk/gardensurvey_summer16.html

Sunday 5th June 16.

Commencing each Sunday we have a 'push' to fill the CBC GBS tick-sheet and Sunday 5th June was no different, except as I walked down the grass of the back lawn to the garden shed to do my regular filling of feeders; Niger seed, wild bird mix and a wire fat ball feeder, I noticed a short darting flight of a bird as it headed down the garden and under the cover of the Elder tree in neighbours' adjoining garden and intersection with the 'Bow-Window' car park. The restaurant car park is very quiet and only takes a few cars at weekends. I stood my ground and looked feverishly for what the bird was and wondered what it could be – a brown, smallish, very fast passerine about the size of a Robin. I stopped in my tracks immediately locking-on to a Spotted Flycatcher - very unusual and not that regular in Cambridgeshire. Peering through the leaves of the 2 apple trees up into the Elder was very tricky and I'm sure it clocked me first. But the sighting was confirmed shortly and with hand and mouth gestures to Sue in the lounge I let her know what I had seen.

Sue got the Leica binoculars trained down the garden and from the conservatory we had the best views whilst viewing from a place unlikely to cause disturbance. We did not want to lose the beauty, so from the conservatory we concentrated our efforts and the bird returned, going about its business down the lower third of the garden, out over the open weedy car park where it seemed happy hawking insects and sharing perches between the Elder, an open branch of our large Eucalyptus tree and the edge, and top frame of my Raspberry cage.

Later that day a text from Sue to me at my cricket match said that she felt there were two Flycatchers, but seeing them both together was almost impossible! I was suspicious and queried plumages and the subtle differences, if any. I agreed it was nearly impossible in the field to view even with decent binoculars. Maybe in the hand and for ringing, but not obvious at the distances we were looking at. So later that day, Sue updated us on how things had gone. She was unsure about the possibility of two separate birds, as she had no views of both at the same time. But most of that day the recording was left to Sue who explained she had had a lovely day watching the bird flit between perches on the fruit cage, rose trellis, Eucalyptus and over the car park and up into the large Elder.

The car park and Elder afforded good fly-catching opportunities and the open space behind the large Leylandi hedge was a favourite haunt for other aerial hunters in the evening, namely, our resident Pipistrelle bats, so there must have been the chance of a bird, staying for a week or so and using this quiet part of the open patch between the larger trees. It certainly had possibilities and I recalled that when we moved here Stevie Heather had commented how well the large arboreal sided garden, with its quiet ambience looked for 'Spot Flies'. The grape vine which has somewhat escaped my control from the greenhouse and which was now climbing the red tree behind the greenhouse and dense Elder in the corner has thrown up some beauties in its time: Blackcap, and Sedge Warbler - yes - right in the middle of a town. How weird is that? It shows that any decent cover can hide birds on migration that 'rest-up'. That unusual sighting was at 05:50 on 19th May 2016. Other beauties have been: Reed Warbler, as well as Garden Warbler and Goldcrest. Not a bad little spot for a town patch.

Monday 6 Jun 16

Up early on the Monday, I didn't see the bird before I left for work at 07:00 but Sue's vigil continued and paid off. She texted me at work with; "I can confirm that we definitely have two Flycatchers and I have seen two birds together. One is taking the weave from the hanging basket coir material. The other is on the lower branches of the apple trees near the Raspberry cage". As you can imagine, we were all ecstatic. We had Ashley on camera from every vantage point; both upstairs and down. Added to which, he was getting some decent and sharp photos of the birds flitting to and fro' between favourite perches. I guess they make easy photo opportunities but Ashley's are better than mine.

The male (possibly) was the one collecting the coconut matting. He was there later that day when I got home from work but by this time he had company, as a Goldfinch was copying his taking nest material from the hanging basket. This turned into a bit of a stand-off and then a full-blown squabble! However there was no real winner and they both got their share of the brown hairy material from the matting liner. This led me to wondering-where was the nest? I immediately suspected the Eucalyptus as a likely nesting location, being open, dry barked and facing in large parts to the car park behind.

Tuesday 7 Jun 16.

I was awake at 05:00 my usual time, and checked the gap between Rose and Eucalyptus tree, but no birds in sight; only Robins and Blackbirds hopping around the grass searching for scraps and seed spilt from the feeders. Robins hunt the borders from favourite perches in Buddleia, Crimson Elder and *Sambucus racemosa*. The birds continued visiting the garden with increased confidence and courage. They almost seemed to be getting used to us as long as we sat this end of the garden and kept away from their territory. Leaving the chairs at the top end of the lawn we got some great views. Sue said one had come up as far as the patio plants whilst she was sat alongside the garden furniture less than 6 feet away. Sue and Ash were both watching the birds throughout the morning from upstairs where Ash was also taking photos. This is the location he took picture 1 from.

The carpark side of the Eucalyptus was my best bet on the location of the nest, if there was one. Sure enough, from under the apples, and alongside the greenhouse, I could just make out some nest material in the far-side, of the Eucalyptus, where the main trunk forked. I drew a quick sketch to let Sue and Ash know my feelings on the location of the nest and that the hunch was correct. 'You never lose it!' Ask a certain Keith Cowieson - he's a top nest finder! Bird Atlas teams were often seen nest hunting on long afternoon post-survey sessions in Argyle and Bute. Mostly while we waited minutes, nay hours for Keith to locate the Wood Warbler nest!

Back onto the Flycatchers. I generally had twenty minutes or so looking early in the morning before work. It seemed that Flycatchers are not early risers and I never saw much of them before breakfast cereal. There were no signs of the birds flying either as I took breakfast, in the conservatory and checked for signs of movement. The only birds about were 2 Dunnock hopping and searching bright and early.

At work a text from Ash backed up the theory: "Defo nest building in Eucalyptus somewhere"? Ash's pictures from his upstairs bedroom were crackers (see picture) - well worthy of an entry in this year's AGM competition. So I have no claim on them, but very worthwhile adding to The Newsletter! The climbing yellow rose trellis was proving to be a hot-spot for one of the pair.

The detail in Ash's photos' picked out the small flecking on the upper front chest but by no means as defined as a very many bird reference books.



Here are daily entries from my Diary:

Wednesday 8 June 16 – Saturday 11 June.

Three solid days of vigil: sitting in the shed behind plastic mesh sheeting, also from the car park and an exploratory observation from a stool in the far side of 'The Bow Window' car park beyond to try and locate the nest or at least chance a bird flying to the nest. This was unsuccessful as no birds flew in whilst I was sat still tucked away under cover of trees and shrubs.

Sue's entry: Daily records were a steady trickle of comings and goings, a single bird at a time 'hawking' for food in the main, or what were exchanges on the nest as a quick dart in was observed followed by a bird darting away across the carpark.

Sunday 12 June 16.

A bird was first seen in the Elder tree, on the topmost perch and hang-open twigged branch with leaves each end; seen visiting the Holly area and Eucalyptus tree. At 07:50 I made the decision to sit in the shed and observe for half an hour. The peeled bark of Eucalyptus was the focus of attention. Unable to see the cup or sitting bird it was down to fleeting glimpses as one bird came in and another departed the nest..



Monday 13 June 16.

It rained heavily for most of the morning. Covert watching revealed 2 birds on rotation at the nest 07:40. Then later in the day there were very heavy showers. This wasn't good weather for a seemingly open nest location. My concerns grew.

Tuesday 14 June 16.

Very rainy and cold all day! Damn and blast! This last 48 hours were crucial, not great and certainly no weather to sit and observe, far too risky for both birds and humans! Sue felt the forecast was better in that they said it was drying later that day. But I was ‘concerned of Ramsey’ all day at work. Better news followed as Sue reported individual birds, seen separately, but not both together. Still concerned, I had my doubts that the long wet spell had disturbed them. But I was grateful Sue had reported one in.

Wednesday 15 June 16.

To act as a perching position I moved my x2 Runner Beans in tubs down near the apple trees. So I located them both opposite the raspberry cage. I felt it might give the birds another option as a feeding post, well as providing some further cover as many birds fly straight down the garden into their territory.

Thursday 16 June 16.

This was the ‘glum day’ no sighting at all. None either side of breakfast, and none later during the day. Sadness started in earnest.

Friday 17 June 16

I sat and observed the nest location from the shed, but to no avail. It was now a certainty that the birds were gone, but what had happened we shall never know. I could not bring myself to look further into their departure. I told myself I would not look at the nest site until next week.

Monday 20 June 16.

After work and with no sightings over the past 4-5 days, it was clear we had a desertion of the nest. Still, in a BTO publication I had seen a request for nests – for scientific research from a professor at University of Lincoln. I felt if I located the nest it would give me some feedback on the behaviours and the open questions in my mind:

- Had there actually been a nest?
- Where was it?
- Was it successful? That is, had laying commenced or had any occurred?
- Could the nest possibly shed light on the failure?

I took the ladder up to tree and behind the peeling bark was a neat cup and 5 eggs! Four were in the cup, and one on the edge, just outside of the cup. That was odd. All 5 were fresh looking, but the nest was very wet, with a small dead tree leaf over the 4 eggs in the cup. These were stone cold and wet. Why was one outside the nest? I was perplexed. Saddened deeply, and not a little ponderous as well as feeling gutted inside.

Later Ash reported he had seen a squirrel in the garden these past two or three days. That was news to me and led me to wonder about the identity of the culprit and the possible reasons for the desertion:

- a. The eggs were very cold in an open and none too clever a nest location, in an exposed and thus vulnerable position that got wet easily, whereupon the sitting female deserted.
- b. Were they young, first year breeding adults? Had the female laid the egg outside the nest being a ‘first year’ inexperienced mother, and or both adults were inexperienced?
- c. Had the Male deserted with the female?
- d. Had a squirrel disturbed the nesting female? Had the squirrel attempted to disturb and lifted an egg out, then left it?

I shall never know, but I put up a wooden open-fronted nest-box for them for next year. I'm of the opinion a nest-box might be selected if they pass through, as the other migrants have successfully night stopped on passage. The box may tempt them back. Here's hoping!

As for the nest, it may go to Lincoln University. I'm still far too upset to disturb it or move the eggs. Let us hope the birds both moved on safely and found a new place to nest and rear a second clutch - in a safe and protected place to their liking, and where they successfully raised a successful brood of youngsters. Here's hoping!

John N Wells



Norfolk Extravaganza Weekend – 13 to 16 May 16

By Scott Drinkel

The weekend started early for many, with considerable miles to cover before reaching the 'Base of Operation's, the Granary Hostel in Burnham Deepdale. Of course, as many neared the location and breached the Norfolk border, all birding could be counted towards the 'grand total' of the Norfolk Extravaganza weekend, so there would be suitable stops during the course of the day.

Mid-afternoon saw the group slowly forming at the RSPB reserve at Titchwell. Despite the weather remaining quite windy and the sky becoming overcast, there were some nice views of Common Terns and House Martins 'stalling' in the air – fantastic for amateur photographers such as yours truly, this made life much easier to capture the movements of these normally rapid birds, when on the wing.

The beach at Titchwell was relatively scarce of species but good numbers of Turnstone and Sanderling, with the numerous Herring Gulls and Oystercatchers. From the comfortable Parrinder Hide, there were some very good views of Common Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, and an impressive sight of 3 Tern Species in the same location – Common Tern, Sandwich Tern and Little Tern.

As the afternoon drew to a close, the group finally complete at the Hostel were:

Ted Barnes, Scott & Donna Drinkel, Ken & Sally Earnshaw, Brian Eke (taking on recording duties), Peter Evans, Matthew Gulliver, Robert King (with his partner Anna), Dave Munday, Alan Roberts, Jon Orme, Karen Sims, John Towers (Event Organiser) and Dick & Daphne Yates.

After a fantastic evening meal at the Nelson Pub, we assembled for call over and planned the next day and the more co-ordinated, targeted approach for recording the Norfolk birds. One of the many great aspects of the Norfolk trip is vast number of reserves, locations, habitats and opportunities to see a large array of species. There is little formal direction as to where and when sites would be visited, which adds greatly to the scope of species seen – different members of the group would visit the sites at different times of the day (inevitably bumping into other members to get updates on what is happening and where)! Burnham Deepdale, as a base, works beautifully in this mind-set allowing folks to 'spoke out' as far and wide as they wish, returning for often desperately needed cups of tea and potential clues on favoured species that have been seen.

Following a hearty breakfast (with frankly some of the best Black pudding I have ever had!) at the adjoining café, the collective fragmented into their desired groups and dispersed to cover huge swathes of Norfolk. Sites covered included the Choseley Drying Barns, a favoured location for Turtle Doves, Yellowhammer and Corn Buntings, which again did not disappoint (although it took a couple of tries to coincide a visit to the barns when the birds were there). On this weekend, we were also blessed with a number of Dotterel in a field behind the barns. They must have known exactly where to rest, ensuring it was the absolute furthest distance from any vantage point we could see! Persistence paid off though as some of the group did eventually manage to see these elusive birds hunkered down in a field escaping the worst of the wind. Cley Marshes, under the maintenance of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust has recently expanded to include most of the Salthouses Reserve, expanding the site and more importantly, the range of habitats available, and yielded some good sightings of Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler. Titchwell Marshes were visited numerous times through the weekend, as were: Burnham Overy Staithe (the presented Grey Plover and Brent Geese), the Woods at Wells Next the Sea (home to a wonderful Jay), the Manor House grounds of Holkham Hall, especially for those looking for the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which remained elusive but did allow sightings of the single Barnacle Goose of the weekend, the dunes and woods of Holkham Beach, where the Spoonbills were nesting along with numerous Little Egret, the Seafront at Hunstanton, always a favourite for catching the Fulmar, the dunes and gorse at Snettisham, Weeting Heath for the ever popular Stone Curlew, they did show well but remained a healthy distance from the hides.

Sunday had several of the party having to depart to meet work commitments on the Monday but as they travelled through Norfolk some of the more distant locations were visited such as the WWT reserve at

Norfolk Birds

Herring Gull, Hunstanton



Avocet, Titchwell



Jay, Wells-next-the-Sea



Jackdaw, Titchwell



Turnstones, Titchwell



Little Ringed Plover, Titchwell



Welney, right on the border of Norfolk to Cambridgeshire. The ‘hard core’ group remaining continued their expansive travels, racking up additional sightings through the day and into Monday when the trip was rounded off.

Again, the organisation and preparation carried out by John Towers and Karen Sims added immeasurably to the overall success and enjoyment of the weekend, engaging with both the Hostel and the Nelson Pub to minimise the effort and hassle of such a large group arriving ‘en masse’ prior to the RAFOS rabble even entering the county and allowing us ‘participants’ to just concentrate on birding! Huge thanks to them both for an exceptional weekend that recorded 120 species to the RAFOS list for the location in 2016! The species are listed below:

Mute Swan	Whimbrel	Song Thrush
Pink Footed Goose	Eurasian Curlew	Mistle Thrush
Greylag Goose	Black-tailed Godwit	Blackbird
Canada Goose	Bar-tailed Godwit	Common Whitethroat
Barnacle Goose	Ruddy Turnstone	Sedge Warbler
Brent Goose	Ruff	Cetti’s Warbler
Egyptian Goose	Temminck’s Stint	Reed Warbler
Shelduck	Sanderling	Willow Warbler
Wigeon	Dunlin	Chiffchaff
Gadwall	Little Stint	Goldcrest
Teal	Common Sandpiper	Wren
Mallard	Greenshank	Spotted Flycatcher
Shoveler	Common Redshank	Great Tit
Red-crested Pochard	Little Tern	Coal Tit
Common Pochard	Black Tern	Blue Tit
Tufted Duck	Sandwich Tern	Long-Tailed Tit
Common Scoter	Common Tern	Nuthatch
Red-legged Partridge	Black-headed Gull	Magpie
Grey Partridge	Common Gull	Jay
Pheasant	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Jackdaw
Fulmar	Herring Gull	Rook
Gannet	Yellow-legged Gull	Carrion Crow
Cormorant	Great Black-backed Gull	Starling
Bittern	Rock Dove	House Sparrow
Little Egret	Stock Dove	Chaffinch
Grey Heron	Woodpigeon	Linnet
Spoonbill	Collared Dove	Goldfinch
Little Grebe	Turtle Dove	Greenfinch
Great Crested Grebe	Cuckoo	Reed Bunting
Marsh Harrier	Barn Owl	Yellowhammer
Hen Harrier	Nightjar	Corn Bunting
Montagu’s Harrier	Swift	
Sparrowhawk	Kestrel	
Common Buzzard	Merlin	
Moorhen	Hobby	
Coot	Skylark	
Stone Curlew	Sand Martin	
Avocet	Swallow	
Oystercatcher	House Martin	
Golden Plover	Rock Pipit	
Grey Plover	Meadow Pipit	
Lapwing	Pied Wagtail	
Little Ringed Plover	Duncock	
Dotterel	Robin	

More Pictures from Lesvos



Olivaceous Warbler



Black-headed Bunting



Squacco Heron



Nightingale



Kalloni Salt pans at Dawn

The RAFOS Newsletter

Is published twice each year

The Editor will be most grateful for pictures and articles to grace the next edition.

Letters to the Editor to raise any issues and details of articles for sale are always welcome too.

Please remember the following:

- Brief contributions are always welcome.
- Illustrations (Photographs or art work) are always welcome
- Please send written work as soon as you can. If pictures are included, please send them separately from the text.
- Please avoid footnotes and tables – they are difficult to import with my software!
- Articles can be sent as attachments to emails, on a CD, DVD or memory card.
- If pictures are sent as hard copies, please let me know if you want them back.
- Digital images should be in .jpg format.

The closing date for inclusion in Newsletter 103 is 1st January 2017 and any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 104.

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