



**ROYAL  
AIR FORCE**  
ornithological  
society

Newsletter 103 Spring 2017



# A.G.M. Prize Winners

## Photography (Top to bottom):

Pete Evans (Best Novice Photograph)

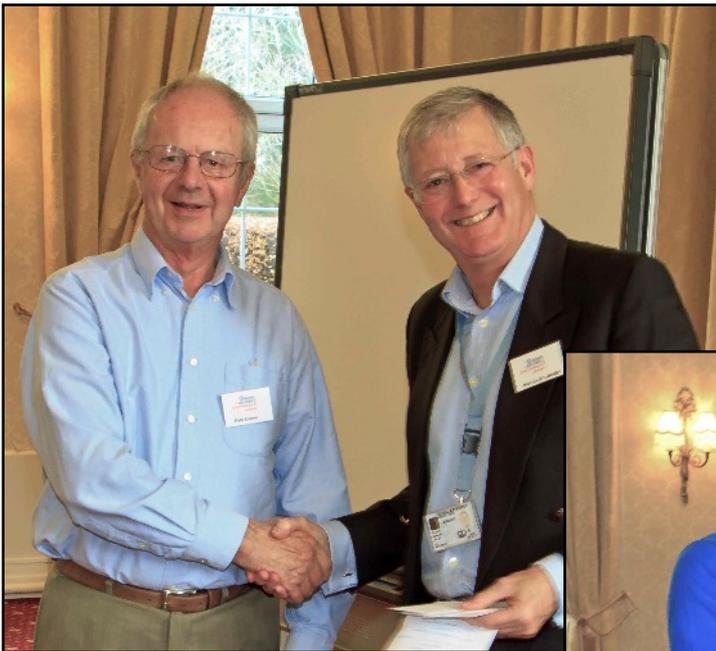
Scott Drinkel (Best UK Photograph) - See Below.

Dick Yates (Best Overseas Photograph)

## Best Written Article:

Mike Hayes - (Not present) - Newsletter 102 'Falklands - Third Time Lucky'.

Congratulations to you all!!





**Prize Winning Photographs:** Sanderling by Scott Drinkel and Red-wattled Lapwing by Dick Yates



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Shoveler (Dick Yates)

# THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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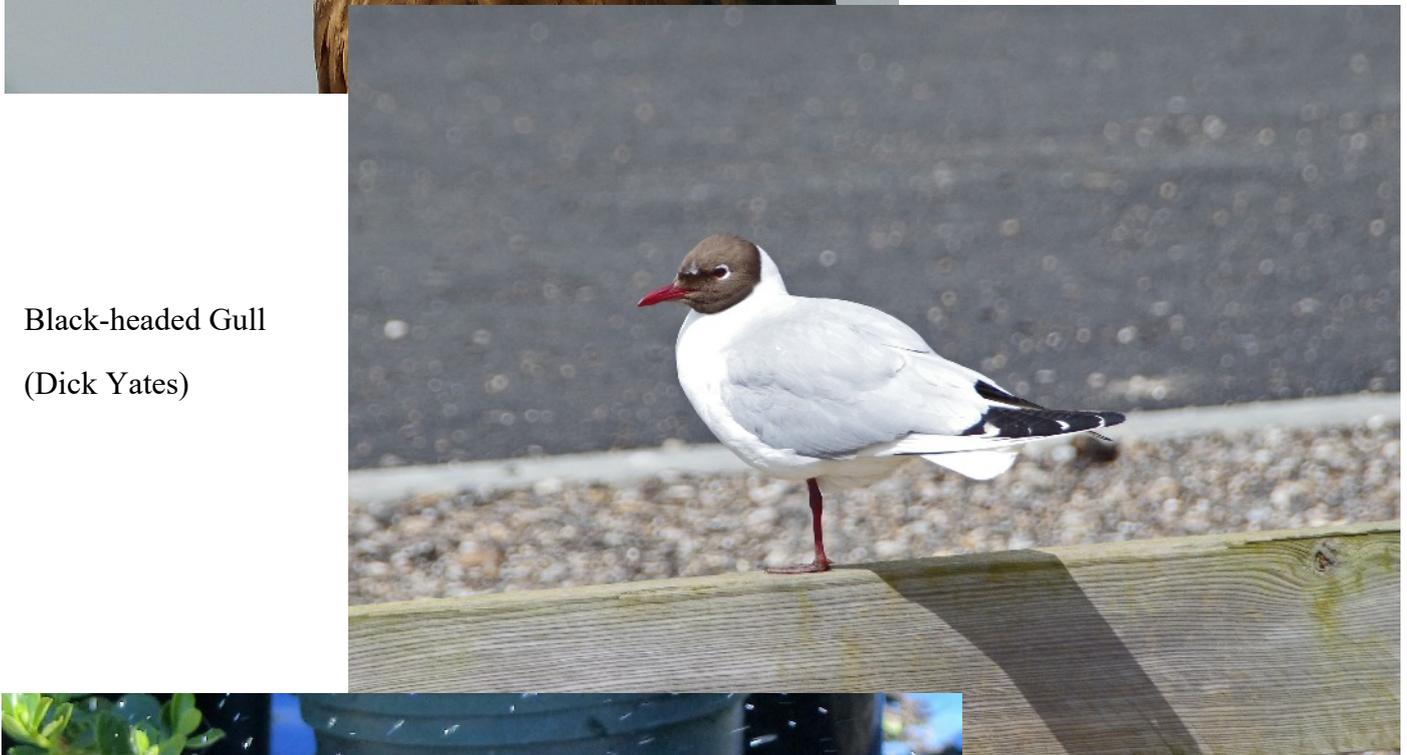
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# 2016 Photographic Competition Entries



Yellow-Billed Kite  
(Martin Routledge)



Black-headed Gull  
(Dick Yates)



Blackbird  
(Martin Routledge)

# Notice Board

## Are You Covered?

When you go on trips, with or without RAFOS. Please make sure that you are adequately insured, both personally and for your optical equipment. Please make sure that if your equipment is covered by your home insurance, that the cover includes its use when away from home.

I am told that the Forces Pension Society offer good terms for equipment insurance.

Best wishes

*Bill Francis*

## On The Levels

By the time that this Newsletter is published, a planned RAFOS weekend on the Somerset Levels from 30 Mar - 1 Apr 17 will have taken place. Visiting reserves in the area and centred on a Premiere Inn at Glastonbury. The weekend is being organised by Pete Evans, Karen Sims and John Towers.

Outline plans are in place for a possible return visit in the Autumn.

Further details to follow - keep an eye on Facebook and the RAFOS web site!

*Bill Francis*

## Free to a Good Home....

The magazine '*Birds Illustrated*' was published quarterly between 2003 and 2009, specialising in bird art and photographs.

I have a full set of this publication, bound in three A4-sized Rexel Wirex folders and if anyone is interested they can be collected from my home or I can bring them to the AGM in November. Please let me know if you want them.

*Bill Francis*

# 50 Shades of Brown

RAFOS on Islay 29 October – 5 November 2016

*By Ken Earnshaw & Pete Evans*

Islay and the adjacent mainland were a riot of colour this autumn ranging from the buff and light brown of the reeds and grasses through the gold of the leaves to the dark brown of some of the moorland foliage. This sparked appreciative comments from Scott and several others.

Fourteen RAFOS members had originally agreed to form the party but in the event five sadly had to drop out though ill-health and they were very much missed. Six members took the 13:00 ferry to Islay on the 29<sup>th</sup> October and managed to see en-route such species as Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Guillemot, Black Guillemot, all three of the commoner divers and a Purple Sandpiper, which briefly flew alongside the ferry. Adrian and Kate made the five-minute crossing from Jura having spent a few days on that island.

Geoff and Christina Walker, Adrian and Kate Hayward, Martin Routledge, Scott Drinkel, and Sally and Ken Earnshaw soon settled into the cottages at Kilchoman on the west coast of Islay. Those new to the island, Adrian, Kate, Martin and Scott were pleased by the quality of the cottages and of the local environment at Kilchoman. Fires were soon warming the rooms and the evening meal warmed our stomachs. Pete Evans arrived via the late ferry at around 11 pm to complete the team, having had a quiet and boring journey from southern England.

As on previous visits the team were free to follow their individual itineraries and a good number of sightings soon mounted up. Prime areas were the RSPB Gruinart reserve and the top end of Loch Indaal. Gruinart primarily for Hen Harriers, dabbling ducks and geese, Loch Indaal for geese, waders and sea-ducks, including a flock of some 600-800 Golden Plover. These were a spectacle in the bright, low light when they were spooked and put to flight. The woods at the top end of Loch Indaal, where the river Sorn enters the loch, were good for passerines such as Tree-creeper, Siskin, Kingfisher and thrushes. Several other locations were also productive, e.g, the roads northward either side of Loch Gruinart, the Portnahaven area for sea-birds, and the Bruichladdich area.

The woollen mill is always a productive spot as the owners have feeders out that attract many species. Also, the river that runs past is known to bring in Grey Wagtails and an occasional Dipper. It was on our first visit that we had exceptionally good views of the latter as it worked its way upstream towards the bridge. Hopping from rock to rock it busily searched among the fallen leaves picking them up and vigorously tossing them aside to see what morsels lay beneath.

As it got closer it was possible to see a flash of white as its upper eyelid closed fleetingly. Pete had seen dippers before but never as close or for such a length of time as this and he made the most of the opportunity to observe the bird feeding. Of course, the bird was constantly bobbing up and down as it went along and as it drew nearer he noticed that every time it 'dipped' a white flash appeared across its eye as it blinked. As dippers tend to be solitary feeders and therefore not having others to compare, a question arises as to whether this is common. Further research suggests that it is not unusual.

A subsequent visit a few days later found the river in spate and the rocks were submerged consequently no more sightings.

Surveys were undertaken for the RSPB and BTO to good effect. Martin conducted a number of Wetland Bird Surveys (WeBS) across a range of sites whilst Geoff, Christina, Sally and Ken tried to count the Twite flock on The Oa. Tried because of the persistent attempts of a Hen Harrier to nab one or two from under our noses. The flock would not settle but we made a reasonable estimate of about 800 in the flock, (a subsequent update from the RSPB Reserve Manager put the figure at 1100+).

Surveys around the cliffs and between a couple of farms in the south-west of The Oa by Adrian and Martin taking one route, while Pete and Scott took an alternate route to check for Choughs, sea birds and a finch flock produced mixed results. Possibly the Choughs had moved en-masse to the fields adjacent to the cottages at Kilchoman, attracted by an abundance of Leatherjackets. There were several counts of this Chough flock by the team and other visitors with a peak total up in the fifties.

A particular survey was to record ring numbers on geese. Digiscoping was used to aid reading of the neck rings of ten Greenland White-fronted Geese and the leg ring of one Barnacle Goose. The leg ring on a smallish Canada Goose type could not be read unfortunately.

The results from these surveys were communicated to the RSPB Reserve Manager on The Oa and to Ian Brook who acts as a focal point for bird and other wildlife records on Islay.

The final survey was to check for birds present within a defined radius of Islay airport for the airport management. This was undertaken by Scott, Pete, Sally and Ken with the results being passed to Jan Knight for co-ordination with the airport authorities. Numerous parties of geese along with Hooded Crows and Buzzard were noted flying within the survey area which could constitute a potential aircraft hazard.

Large numbers of Greenland White-fronts and Barnacle Geese had arrived on the island in the days preceding the RAFOS visit. Amongst them were several Richardson's Cackling Geese and a Lesser Canada Goose, the former being a distinct species, the latter a sub-species. One or two of these rare vagrants were seen and photographed by the team but without conclusive identification as yet.

Particular sightings were of several Golden Eagles, (a couple of them soared over the cottages on several days), and tantalisingly brief sightings of White-tailed Eagle, Short-eared Owl, Barn Owl and Tawny Owl. One amusing view through a telescope was of a gliding White-tailed Eagle being repeatedly mobbed by a Golden Eagle and showing almost complete indifference to the agitator.

On Loch Indaal at Blackrock a flock of about fifty Scaup were very close to the shoreline all week but a flock of Common Scoter were much further out off of Bruichladdich and were difficult to see. Ian and Margaret Brook, the previous owners of the cottages and who live close by, invited the team into their garden to view their hide; this having been constructed since the last visit by RAFOS. Their well-appointed hide affords good viewing across their garden to the crags beyond and also across to Northern Ireland. An enviable list of garden sightings ranging from Wren to Golden Eagle is building up.

A call-over was held each evening to record the day's sightings and on most occasions was preceded by a communal dinner, prepared by various members of the team, and taken in the Fieldgate Cottage. On Wednesday evening the majority of the team joined the Islay Natural History Society at Port Charlotte for a talk on the wildlife of Derbyshire. Ken wasn't feeling well and had retired for the night by 6.00pm and so missed it. The Friday evening was given over to a final dinner in the Port Charlotte Hotel where we were joined by Ian and Margaret Brook for a very enjoyable few hours.

The weather was, on the whole, quite kind to us in being not too windy and reasonably dry. The Thursday was very wet followed by heavy showers lingering through Friday. We departed from Islay on the Saturday morning in fine weather on the 09:45 ferry from Port Askaig, (due to Port Ellen being temporarily out of action for reconstruction work), and had an uneventful crossing to the mainland, where, at Kennacraig the team dispersed. And so ended another very enjoyable and productive visit to Islay.



Barnacle Geese - one with leg-ring 'SBB'



Dipper at the Islay Woollen Mill



Above: Greenland White fronted Geese (note collar).

Right: Hen Harrier attacking Twite flock.

Below: Hooded Crow.



## Popping My Islay Cherry

*by Scott Drinkel*

It has been a long time coming, but finally I was heading off for my first trip to Islay with RAFOS. A 4 am start from my Oxfordshire home and 480 miles up the M6 and M74 had me at my evening stop location of Lochgilphead on Loch Fyne a little after lunch. This gave me plenty of time to unwind and explore the local area which is rich with ancient history, standing stones and burial cairns. Of course I was in the area on a birding trip, so was out with my camera doing what I do; whilst the records would not be allowed on the official Islay list, it could certainly be added to my Watch the Birdy list, Scotland being a Wildlife Trust Area that I had not visited this year. I met up with Ken & Sal Earnshaw at Lochgilphead that evening and the vast majority of the other 'Islay Mist' birders in the queue for the ferry at Kennacraig. Very soon after we were boarded and I was on the deck with my camera once again, from now bird sightings counted towards the official total. The crossing was incredibly smooth with plenty to see, Divers and Black Guillemots, Eider, Gannets and Gulls. A couple of seals and, for a very brief second, a Purple Sandpiper deciding to visit the ferry a couple of miles from Jura.

Entering the sound between Jura and Islay, I was struck by the overall look of the countryside around us, given that most of the scenery was a shade of brown, the patchwork of textures that presented themselves was fantastic. We landed at Port Askaig and formed a mini convoy of 4 cars – The Earnshaws in the lead followed by Martin Routledge, Geoff & Christina Walker and myself. We scheduled a single stop to make the most of the remaining light and birds at Black Rock, before we arrived at our accommodation, the cottages at Kilchoman. Having come from Jura, Adrian and Kate Hayward were already on site, which just left Pete Evans to complete the group arriving on the later ferry.

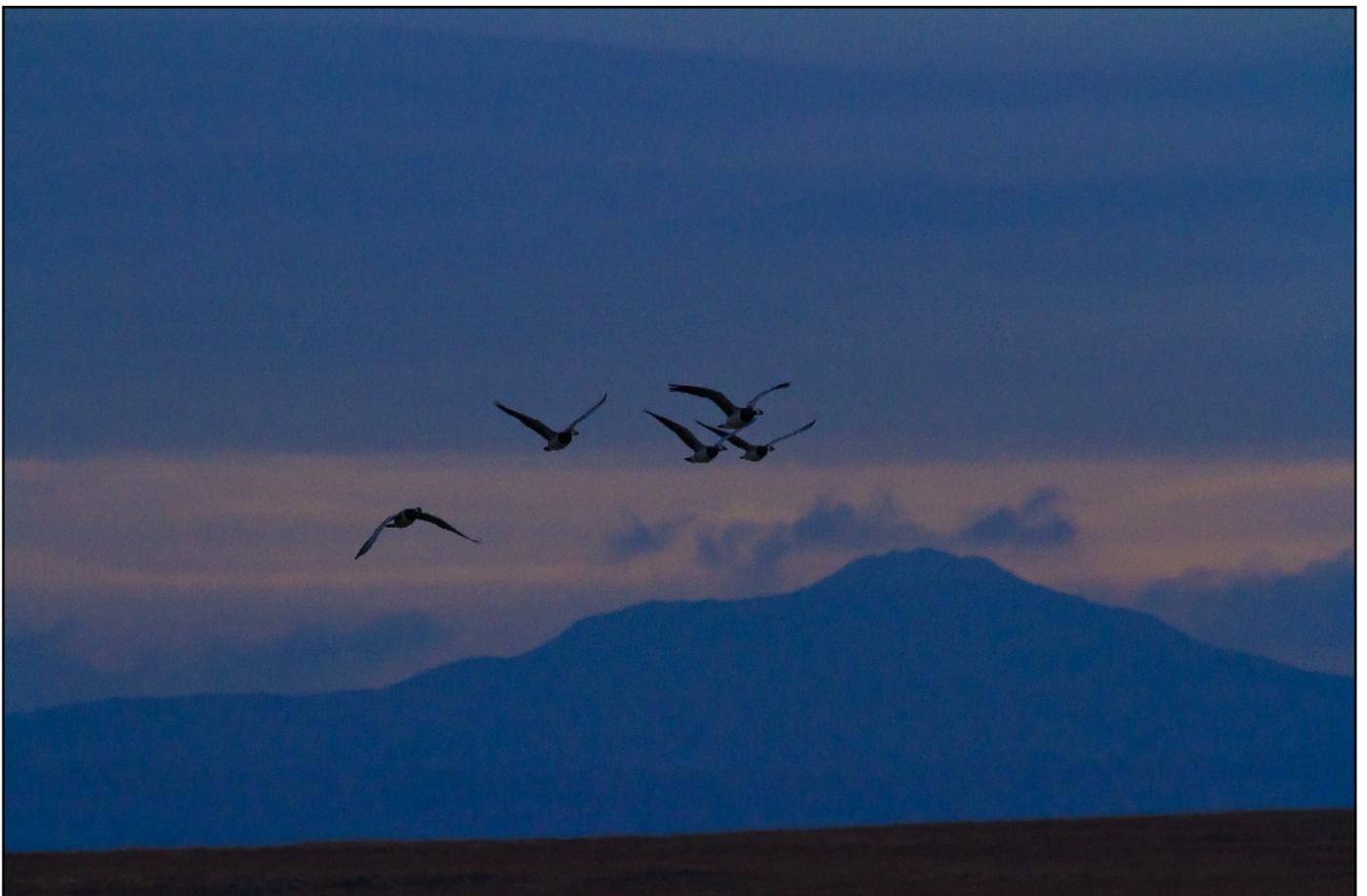
Through the week, the 9 of us split into smaller collaborations to meet our personal goals of the trip and covered a huge swathe of the island. Some specific surveys were carried out – WeBS surveys at a couple of locations, total bird count in a 5km radius of the airport, Chough count at Kilchoman, Twite count and a general species count on the Oa. Outside of this, the choice was quite open as to where would be visited. I personally had a fantastic time, spending the week learning hand over fist from the expertise (and humour) of Ken, Sally and Pete as we moved and visited much of the island with key points listed here in no particular order.

Kilchoman – obviously as a 'base of Ops' it provided some awesome sights, including Golden Eagles overflying the cottages. It was only about a mile to the beach, so that became a daily dawn ritual for myself, providing some pleasing views of Short-eared Owl and some stunning colours as the sun rose. I was very surprised to find a CWGC (Commonwealth War Graves Commission) site on the clifftop overlooking the West coast of the island dropping into the Atlantic, and just like every other CWGC site I have visited (and it is quite a few) I am in awe at the incredibly highly maintained standard to which they are kept. Kilchoman cottages are overlooked by an ancient and now derelict church that roosted many corvids including Red-Billed Chough, Jackdaws and Hooded Crows. A small copse immediately next to the cottage offered some nice habitat for smaller birds including Wren, Chaffinch, Great and Blue Tits and Goldfinch. I could spend hours just around here, enjoying the sights around and the overall serenity of the location.

Driving past Loch Gorm to the RSPB Reserve at Loch Gruinart allowed some wonderful views of Greenland White Fronted Geese that were reasonably cooperative, allowing others with better eyes than your's truly to identify the codes from their collars for the records. The Lochs offered many sta-



Purple Sandpiper



Barnacle Geese

ples, Heron, Teal, Wigeon, Barnacle Geese and Curlew among others. This location leapt higher in my esteem as two Hen Harriers decided to fly in, one spending about 20 minutes eating a substantial meal in front of the hide, absolutely astonishing.

Black Rock and Bridgend became a regular stop, being on the route home from most areas of the island. A raft of Scaup 20 yards from the edge of Loch Indaal were seen almost daily, but the sheer numbers of birds in this area was amazing, not least the thousands of Barnacle Geese that were often in the air together making a most delightful cacophony, a sound that will remain with me for some time to come and I doubt would be recreated anywhere else I am likely to visit on the mainland. One day these were joined by several hundred Golden Plover, shining like a shoal of airborne mackerel! Away from the Loch was a lovely wooded area that offered me my first view of Treecreeper (thanks to the persistence of Kate and Adrian to hunt one out for me). Here we had all agreed to meet in the hope of catching Waxwing in the masses of Rowan berries but alas there were none when we were there. Not far from here is the Woollen Mill where the Dipper showed wonderfully, close enough for discussions about why they seem to blink every time they bobbed!

Finlaggan offered another cultural site, the ancient seat of the Lord of the Isles – I am very impressed by our ancient cultural sites and this proved to be no exception. Despite the cold weather, it was very mild for all but one or two days of rain in the week. This is all I can offer to suggest a reason as to why a Common Darter would still be flying and basking in the area. The fenland around Finlaggan was also home to some of the smartest marked Pheasants I have seen.

The old church at Kildalton and the awesome High Cross of Kildalton in its consecrated grounds was another worthy diversion from birding for half hour. There are a lot of places within easy reach to be isolated on the island, but this place offered a very different serenity. I mean no offence when I say this church is not my style of religion, but I can certainly appreciate the magical atmosphere this site provided.

The Oa might as well have been a different island in itself, it certainly had a very different feel to the rest of Islay for me. Going was a bit more difficult due to the volume of mud created by the significant rainfall that day, really the single day of poor weather. Pete and I walked round the cliffs to determine how many Red-Billed Chough we could see – it was easy – none! At the Mull of Oa is a huge monument to those lost in Feb and Oct 1918 due to the sinking of American vessels and from where most of the Island can be seen. Heading back down to meet up with the others we tried to count the huge number of Twite that decided to hunker down in the crops out of the rain, only coming up to fly away from the persistent Hen Harrier that kept flying through them – not the easiest count in the world!

Whilst the weather was certainly not 'bad', for me at my level I found the conditions challenging for photography. Light levels were often low and many of the longer range sightings simply did not return with the clarity of image I want! What does that mean? I think I will have to go back and hope the conditions are better and my skill level has increased – if I needed justification to return 😊

There are simply too many places and memorable sightings on this incredible week's trip, and if I haven't already, I am sure it would not be long before I bore you with my reminiscences – the seven distilleries offered a lovely range of food and drink (Cakes, teas & coffees as well as their own whisky). Every area of the Island offered something different and the variety of birds was astonishing (particularly with the added bonus of a HUGE White Tailed Sea Eagle overflying, a very impressive bird it was too). The full list of the 117 bird species observed is below, but from my perspective this trip provided me **16 lifers** in a single RAFOS trip: Scaup, Eider, Red-Breasted Merganser, Black-throated Diver, Red-throated Diver, Shag, White Tailed Sea Eagle, Golden Eagle, Purple Sandpiper,



Hen Harrier



Cock & Hen Pheasant

Black Guillemot, Tawny Owl, Red Billed Chough, Hooded Crow, Treecreeper, Dipper and Twite. Stonechats and Buzzards were almost everywhere you looked, but you know there are obviously some elusive species out there that you just might get next time...and there will be a next time!

## Species List, 2016

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>

Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>

European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Pied Wagtail/White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>



Grey Seals, Islay

## Skokholm Island 18-25 April 2016 Joint Services Ringing Expedition

*By Julia Springett*

Sunday 16 April 2016 saw the majority of the tri-service ringing team gathering at Marloes for a sociable evening meal and a couple of pints before joining the remainder of the team at Martin's Haven at 0700 the following morning to travel to Skokholm. Waking to a bright, sunny day the team assembled with boxes of provisions and personal luggage, sufficient to last the week. A human chain was formed, and the mountain of boxes, rucksacks and vital birding equipment was transferred onto the small ferry. No sooner had we set off from the landing jetty, than we were in open waters and counting off the gulls, cormorants and puffins.

In no time were reached our destination and were met by the islands wardens, namely Richard Brown and Giselle Eagle. The wardens are assisted by two young graduate volunteers who spend four months on the island gaining valuable experience, and carrying out daily surveys of the breeding migrants and resident birds. Once we had disembarked we reformed our human chain and unloaded the victuals and equipment into two small 4x4 vehicles; these then hauled our goods to our accommodation which was a great relief, the climb up the hill being extraordinarily steep.

Over a welcome cup of tea and a slice of Welsh fruit bread we were given a welcome talk from Richard that included all the health and safety issues and 'rules' of the house. Next we settled into our accommodation which was found conveniently to be individual rooms leading from the common room. The stone building was exceedingly cold. Our team was the first group of visitors to stay on the island since last autumn, and much effort had been put into painting the interior and lime washing the exterior. However, no heating and hot running water only through an efficient solar heating system, meant that when the sun wasn't shining the cold prevailed.

The next evolution was a familiarisation with the island, keeping to the well marked paths, and a tour of the lighthouse, that also serves as accommodation for the wardens. Once we had located the bird hides and made mental notes of the areas where the Puffins and Manx Shearwaters were breeding, it was time to get to work on the reason for being there – ringing.

Skokholm Bird Observatory is well served with three Heligoland traps which have the advantage of being used to catch birds when it is too windy to open mist nets. In addition to the traps we had the use of four nets variously situated by a small area of fresh running water and a small reed bed. There was also one net in the walled courtyard and one close to the accommodation. Other nets and traps were held in the store and put to good use. Potter traps were placed in among the reeds and a Water Rail was successfully lured in. There was an abundance of Greenland Wheatear and Meadow Pipit on migration and we successfully caught these in spring traps baited with live maggots which had been given to the team by the owner of the fishing tackle shop in Brixham.

The team quickly settled into a daily routine, mist netting from first light weather permitting until the birds stopped moving across the area. Supper was a team effort, as was the washing up, then at 2100 we joined the wardens for 'call over'; reporting numbers of birds counted during the day plus any other mammal and sea activity. The day rounded off with two or three ringers following the transect from the accommodation to the lighthouse across the island and with the aid of moonlight, head torches and landing nets picking up and ringing the Shearwaters from their burrows. Listening to the Shearwater calling to one another in the moonlight is a magical sound!

Overall ringing totals were considered to be a success, and the luckiest catch of the week was a Subalpine Warbler which happened into the Heligoland trap on the final day, providing great excitement being the first ringed on the island.

# Skokholme



Accommodation

Domestic Site



Home Comforts

The week away was curtailed by one day as the weather was on the turn and it was thought prudent to leave! The expedition was deemed a success and much experience gained. Those participating were Mark Cutts from RNBWS, Roger Dickey and Carl Powell from AOS, and George Candelin and Julia Springett from RAFOS. Ringing totals below.

All Photos by Carl Powell of AOS

<b>Skokholm Ringing April 2016</b>									
<b>Date</b>	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Totals	
<b>Manx Shearwater</b>					9	21	18	48	
<b>Water Rail</b>		1						1	
<b>Meadow Pipit</b>		2						2	
<b>Wren</b>	2	1						3	
<b>Robin</b>				1				1	
<b>Redstart</b>					1	1		2	
<b>Stonechat</b>			1					1	
<b>Wheatear</b>		5	1				1	7	
<b>Song Thrush</b>				1				1	
<b>Blackcap</b>		7	9	10	2	2	5	35	
<b>Lesser Whitethroat</b>						1		1	
<b>Whitethroat</b>			1					1	
<b>Subalpine Warbler</b>							1	1	
<b>Grasshopper Warbler</b>							1	1	
<b>Chiffchaff</b>	2	3	6	2	3	2	1	19	
<b>Willow Warbler</b>	5	34	25	13	10	2	22	111	
<b>Goldcrest</b>				1				1	
<b>Goldfinch</b>	1							1	
<b>Linnet</b>							2	2	
<b>Totals</b>	10	53	43	28	25	29	51	239	
<b>RETRAPS</b>									
<b>Manx Shearwater</b>					2	6	2	10	
<b>Wheatear</b>		1						1	
<b>Blackbird</b>				1				1	
<b>Meadow Pipit</b>			1	3		1		5	
<b>Wren</b>	1	6		5		2		14	
<b>Willow Warbler</b>		1	3	1	1	2	1	9	
<b>Chiffchaff</b>	1		3	2	1			7	
<b>Blackcap</b>		1		1	1	2	1	6	
<b>Totals</b>	2	9	7	13	5	13	4	53	



Subalpine Warbler,  
Skokholme



Willow Warbler  
Skokholme

## WALKING IN PROVENCE

*By Anne Bodley*

After a winter of constant coughing, we decided we could do with some fresh air, exercise and warmth, so we booked an 11 day walking holiday in Provence in May. Provence has 3 mountain ridges running east/west: Luberon is the most southerly with Vaucluse to the north and Mont Ventoux, with the highest peak of 1912m (6300ft) north of that. We were based in the village of Fontaine de Vaucluse at the source of the River Sorgue in a delightful hotel, converted from an old mill.

Although a walking holiday we of course had to indulge our interest in birds and botany. Botany came off best because we had to spend so much time looking down at our feet on the steep and stony tracks that flowering plants were often in full view. Birds on the other hand were much more difficult to see in the forested mountains and most viewings were entirely serendipitous. During the 2 day drive south, we observed Buzzards, seen frequently sitting on fence posts along the motorway particularly around the Tours area, an occasional Kestrel hovering over the verges and further south Black Kites. The midway overnight stop produced our first but certainly not our last Nightingale. In fact they, with Jays and Chaffinches, abundant in the woods, were seen or heard every day.

On arrival in the village of Fontaine on a very warm Saturday afternoon, we were rather horrified to see it swarming with tourists but our hotel was situated well away from the bustle and noise. The only noise was the rushing river outside our bedroom window and the mill leet which ran alongside the breakfast terrace. The hotel only did bed and breakfast, but there was a multitude of restaurants within easy walking distance and that first night we dined al fresco above the village square and watched Swifts screaming around the town. The next morning a Blackbird was singing loudly in the garden trying to make himself heard above the gushing water and a pair of Mallard flew downriver. The Swifts were all around the hotel, nesting, we thought, and then flying off to the cliffs where an old ruined castle was perched.

We perused our walking notes and opted for one of the two walks which started from the hotel and made its way up the steep sides of the valley. We soon realised how unfit we were for mountain walking and decided that 13 km in that sort of terrain with lots of ups and downs was not achievable on the first day! Apart from Great Tit and Chaffinch calling in the wood and a Nightingale churring at us from some scrub near an unoccupied farm, we had little to add to our list and we turned back before the halfway point and took a shortcut back down to the village, where we were met by a pair of Collared Doves.

The following day's walk also started from the hotel and involved a steep climb up a rocky slope through woodland, where we heard Nuthatch, till we reached the plague wall that was built in 1721 to keep out the plague which had decimated the population of Marseille the previous year. 30km long, it was guarded by 800 men from Royal and Papal troops and was never breached. We walked along it for about 20 minutes before descending to the nearby village. We ate our lunch by a tiny chapel in the open countryside before reaching another small town which produced a Hoopoe feeding in short grass at the edge of an olive orchard. Downhill all the way home now and 15 km accomplished in extreme heat.

A feature of that area of Provence is the hilltop towns of Gordes and Rousillon, full of tourists but few birds. Rousillon is interesting in that it sits on what is left of the world's largest deposit of ochre and has imposing cliffs coloured in shades of yellow through orange to red. A short circuit of the

town went through tracts of open country with many seemingly derelict fields now given over to poppies and other arable weeds, unproductive but colourful with flowers now rarely seen in this country. A Mistle Thrush sang from the top of a tree, our first Swallow was seen near a farm and a Kestrel was hunting over the fields. One of the highlights of the trip was a single Bee-eater flying around the valley as we climbed back to the town; it then had the grace to perch on an aerial of a house below us. It was only the second time we had seen a European Bee-eater in Europe – the first time was in Corsica. The third time has just happened in north-east Portugal in October where a couple were still lingering in the warm sunny weather, mid 20 degrees! I digress. The walk continued through cherry orchards where Starlings and Jackdaws were abundant to a hamlet called Le Chateau where the castle has been renovated by Pierre Cardin. Whether he was in residence we don't know as we decided not to call in for tea! A Cuckoo however was in temporary residence and calling loudly. Another steep climb up to the cliffs with Falaise de la Madeleine and a windmill on the top, then a descent through olive orchards and vineyards before another climb back up to the town, where cold drinks were eagerly sought and consumed in a cafe with a view.

That night we had no energy for a walk to a distant restaurant and sank down at a table at the next door hotel with an excellent view of the river. Before long we were enjoying Dipper bathing in shallow water on a concrete ledge where water cascaded from a pipe under the old paper mill opposite. Then a Grey Wagtail appeared, fly-catching from shrubs on the opposite bank, while a White Wagtail flew in and out of a ruined building nearby. The food and wine were good too!

The next day was dedicated to birdwatching – first a visit to the Gorges de Regalan where we searched in vain for raptors for which the site was said to be good. However Crag Martins were in evidence around the cliffs, a flock of Long-tailed Tits foraged in an olive grove and a Raven called overhead as we were leaving en route for some water birds. From the hide at the dammed lake on the River Durance we at last found substantial numbers of birds – 8 or 9 Grey Heron, 1 Little Egret, 22 Cormorants, 6 Great Crested Grebes with nests, 4 Little Grebes, Herring Gulls, Pochard, Coot, Mallard with young, Mute Swan and 3 Black Kites circling over the trees on the far side. As we returned to the car park we had our first glimpse of a Red Squirrel and we couldn't help thinking what a disaster the introduced Grey Squirrel has been in our country. A Black Redstart in the garden of the auberge where we dined that night rounded off a very satisfactory, if somewhat lazy day.

The next 3 days walking produced some lovely views but few birds. Singing Common Redstart and Serin were a delight, while Buzzard and Chough flew around some distant cliffs. We had hopes that a visit to Mont Ventoux, the highest mountain in the area, might produce some alpine species but mist and low cloud soon dampened those hopes. Cyclists there were by the dozen, toiling up the slopes – the climb forms part of the Tour de France - and we got the impression that every cyclist in France, whatever nationality, regarded this as a personal challenge! Alpine flowers decorated the verges and we explored the area around one of the watering holes but while I notched up several special botanical species, birds were limited to 2 Rock Buntings in the car park as we were leaving.

Time for another walk and with another hot day forecast we opted for a short circuit of Rousillon. A small group of Goldfinches were seen and heard in the conifers as we set out down a rough track. This led down to a magnificent villa garden with many tall trees where a Roller suddenly appeared and flew across an open area to trees on the far side. A brief glimpse but another first for our birdwatching in Europe. As we arrived at open farmland there were more abandoned fields but these at least were appreciated by a Skylark singing its heart out overhead. The next surprise was the song of Golden Oriole, which was followed by a sighting of a splendid male and then a female. Time for lunch and just as we opened the bag of delicious Provencal specialities purchased at the local bakery, we had to abandon it to concentrate on the raptor overhead – a Short-toed Eagle, our first and last raptor speciality!

# ***Gulls – Optional***

*By Martin Routledge*

What follows is a semi scientific review of Winter Duck 2016. Readers will know this is a scientific survey conducted by RAFOS since the turn of the century which is based on the Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS). The WeBS recording form asks for all sorts of data but acknowledges that some of this is 'optional' – Gulls fall in to this category.

## **Setting the Scene**

The Winter Duck series of expeditions has been a regular feature of the RAFOS expedition calendar since the turn of the Century and 2016 saw our fifteenth expedition to the far North West of Scotland. The format has settled down into a 3 team design with Team 1 surveying mainly in the Ullapool, Loch Ewe, Gairloch and Loch Torridon areas; Team 2 cover the Assynt area north of Ullapool up to Kinlochbervie and beyond then Loch Carron; and Team 3 effectively cover the North coast from John O'Groats to Cape Wrath. Surveying consists of viewing selected pre-mapped sites or sectors and recording the wetland birds observed. At the same time, since 2012, we have recorded all birds seen on a 10 Km square basis for the BTO BirdTrack recording system which has added enormously to the data set. Simply put, these are areas that are significantly under watched in winter and our data is invaluable to the scientific and academic communities.

What I have tried to do in this article is to analyse some of the data and give a small insight in to just what is going on. I have used BirdTrack information (mainly because it is the easiest to interrogate using Excel) but have broken out the WeBS species list in order to concentrate on wetland birds as the Expedition was originally intended to do. The main data used has been the distribution by 10 Km square of the various species and the absolute numbers seen i.e. their abundance. Hopefully from the tables and graphs one can get a feel for how well certain species are doing in Scotland's winter wetlands.

## **BirdTrack Species Distribution Ranking for Winter Duck 2016**

The list below shows the most commonly reported birds this year and in brackets their position in the list last year. To put the whole thing in perspective I have also listed the number of different 10Km squares in which the species was reported to give an idea of distribution – we entered lists from 48 squares so Herring Gull in 40 squares would be a distribution rate of 83%.

1.	Herring Gull (1)	40
2.	Shag (2)	39
3.	Great Black-backed Gull (4)	38
4.	Oystercatcher (3)	36
5.	Common Gull (5)	36
6.	Hooded Crow (11)	35
7.	Great Northern Diver (8)	33

8.	Grey Heron (9)	32
9.	Curlew (7)	31
10.	Mallard (10)	30

Overall this is a very similar picture to previous years although the widespread reporting of Hooded Crows is noteworthy – this may be a result of milder weather allowing more widespread feeding or it might just be down to more diligent reporting of what is after all a common bird for the area.

This is all very well but if Gulls are Optional so too must be all the other brown bits and bobs from Wren to White-tailed Eagle. Come on this is all about wetland birds how did they stack up in the overall scheme of things?

### **Core WeBS Species Distribution Ranking for Winter Duck 2016**

The list below shows the most commonly reported, and thus widely distributed, wetland birds this year and in brackets their position in the list last year. Again, to put the whole thing in perspective I've also listed the number of different 10Km squares in which the species was reported to give an idea as to distribution – we entered lists from 48 squares so Shag in 39 squares would be a distribution rate of 81%

1.	Shag (1)	39
2.	Oystercatcher (2)	36
3.	Curlew (4)	34
4.	Great Northern Diver (3)	33
5.	Grey Heron (7)	32
6.	Mallard (6)	30
7=	Red-breasted Merganser (8)	27
7=	Greylag Goose (12)	27
9.	Cormorant (3)	23
10=	Ringed Plover (16)	18
10=	Black-throated Diver (23)	18

So what? Should we be reading anything into all this? Probably not other than distribution seems reasonably stable. Cormorants seem to have dropped back this year but over the 15 years of the survey reports of this species have been increasing and their distribution widening. BTDs seem to have been more widely spread this year than last but interestingly the total numbers reported are down and we saw very few of the evening roost rafts that we're used to.

All this distribution malarkey is very interesting but being widespread isn't the same as being abundant – how many birds did the Winter Duckers actually record and which species was most numerous – once again BirdTrack has the answer .....

This year the intrepid team recorded over 23,200 separate birds; I have to say over because sometimes we only recorded the presence of a species rather than the numbers seen and sometimes the counts were, quite reasonably, recorded as 'circa' or 'over'. Nevertheless you can get an idea of just what was out there from this list

## **Core WeBS Species Abundance Ranking for Winter Duck 2016**

1. Greylag Goose (2)		3770
2. Barnacle Goose (5)	1587	
3. Shag (1)	1440	
4. Oystercatcher (4)	1087	
5. Wigeon (6)	847	
6. Curlew (8)	761	
7. Mallard (3)	708	
8. Teal (10)	449	
9. Eider (11)	330	
10. Great Northern Diver (12)	322	

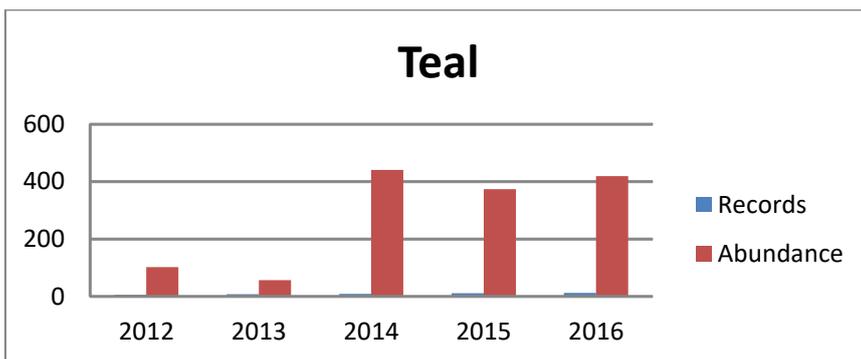
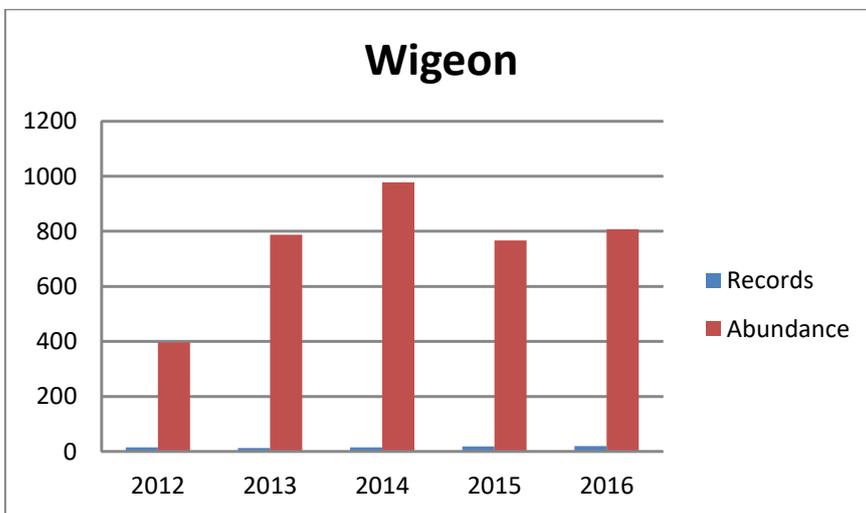
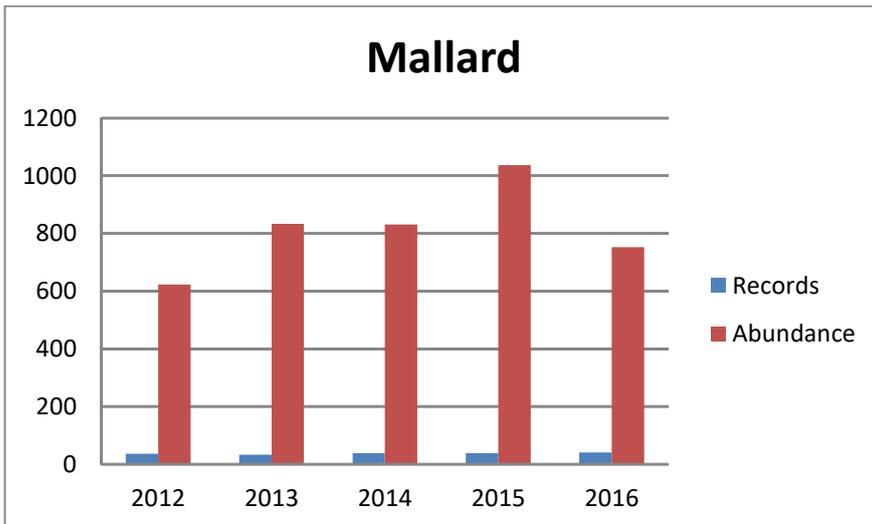
Again the position in the ranking last year is shown in brackets and the big number is the total individuals counted across the survey area. So Greylag Geese, Shag and Oystercatcher were well distributed and present in large numbers. On the other hand Barnacle Geese were nowhere near as common (not in the top 10) but when found there were lots of them. Similarly, Wigeon, Teal and Eider didn't make it into the top 10 in terms of distribution either but again when found they were also seen in good numbers.

The abundance picture looks relatively stable year on year from 2015 to 2016 so what, if anything, can be derived from some longer term trend analysis? Here the data gets a tad less definitive because BirdTrack recording only started on Winter Duck in 2008 and some records were not entirely complete. Nevertheless the WeBS records are much more accurate (if requiring a much more mandrauc approach to releasing their secrets). Nevertheless picking out a couple of key species and combining WeBS and BirdTrack data we can get an overview.

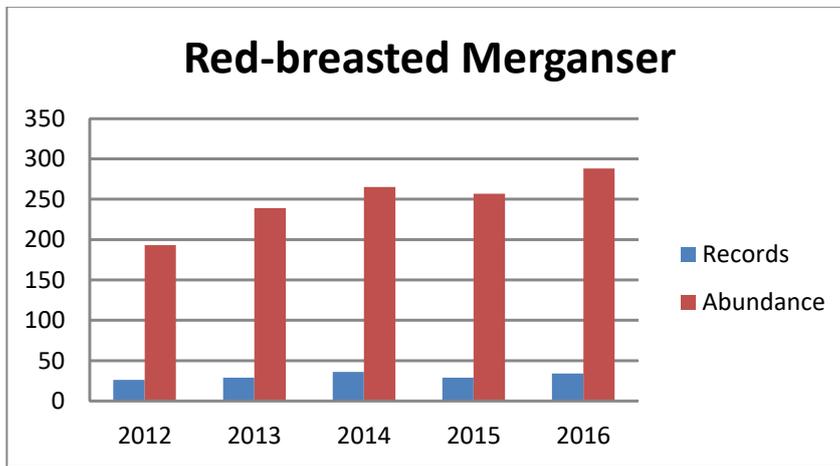
### **The Results are In:**

So let us start with some Ducks – the graphs show the distribution by 10 km squares in blue and the abundance in red. It can be seen that for Mallard the distribution is relatively static and the abundance, although fluctuating from year to year, is also holding up well. Wigeon seem to be in-

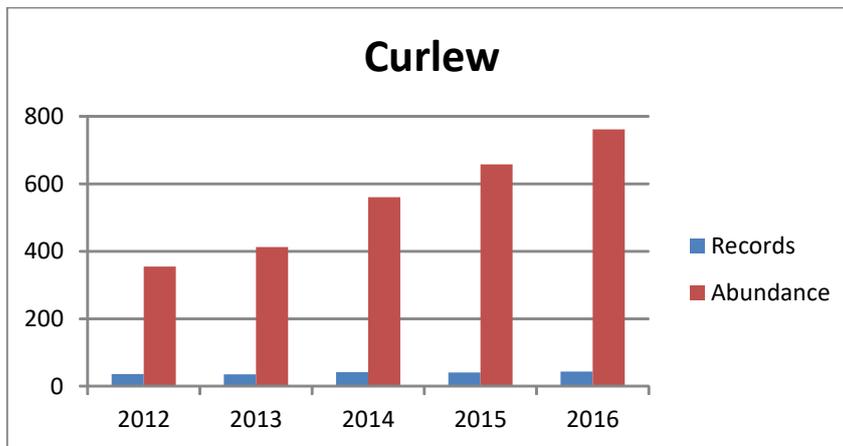
creasing in both distribution and abundance and Teal seem to have had a dramatic increase in 2014 which has been maintained, more or less, since.



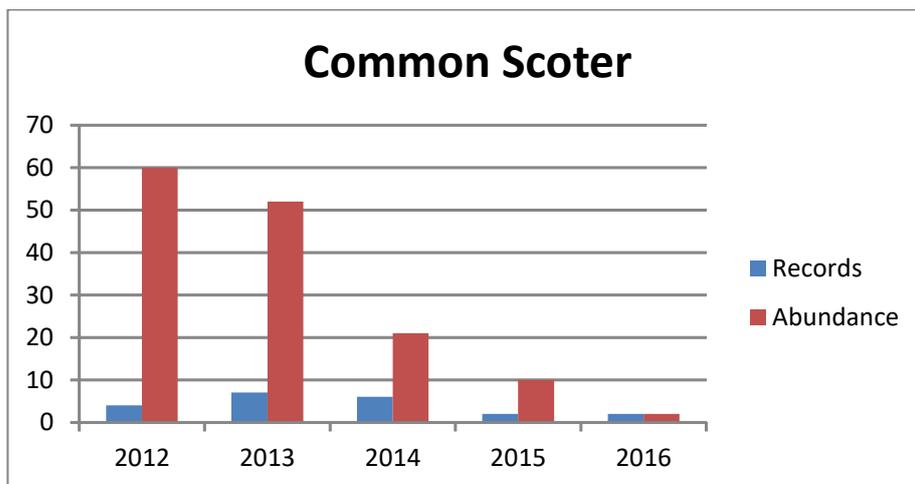
If Teal are a success story then so too are Red Breasted Mergansers who are doing well by both measures:

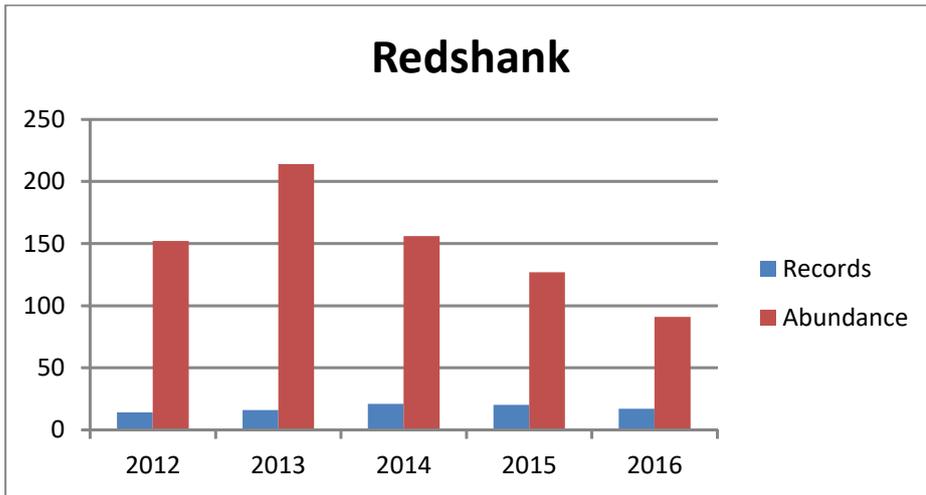


There are other successes on the wetland bird front too – look at this graph for Curlew:

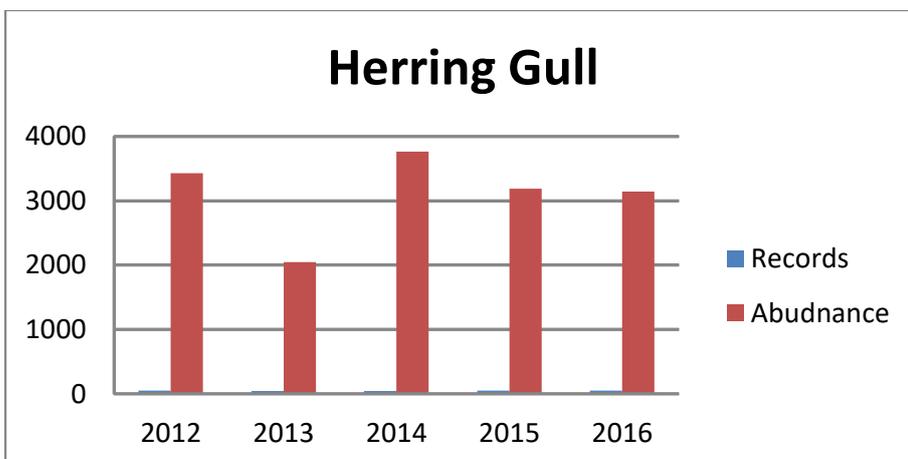
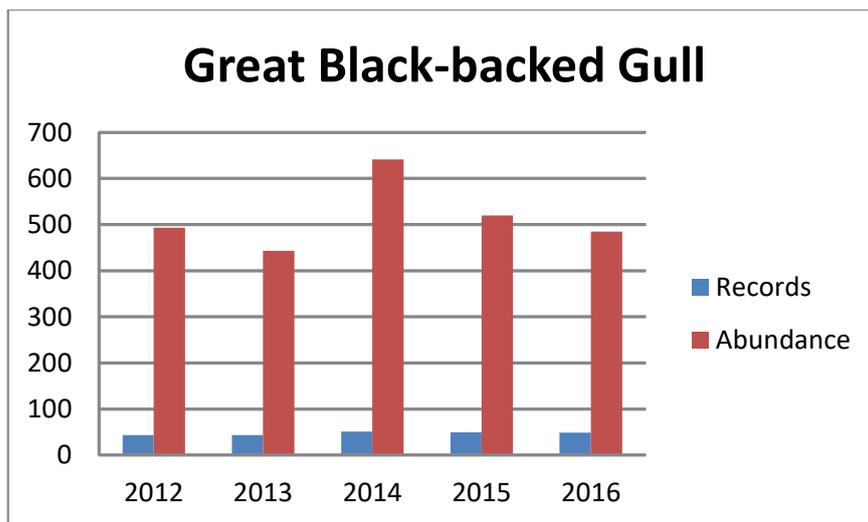


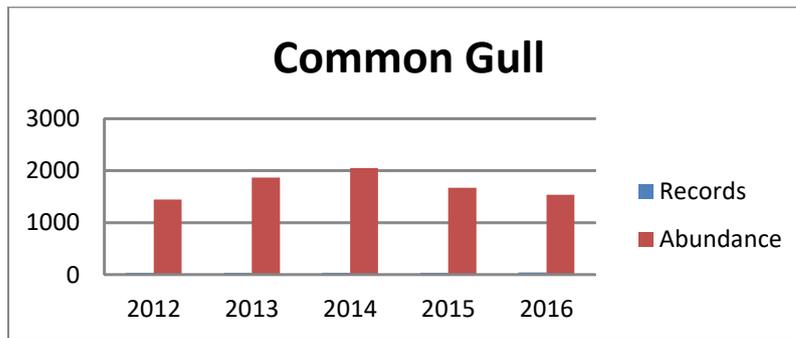
There are equally good pictures emerging for Great Northern Divers, Black-throated Divers and Cormorant. Then again there are some tales of woe and it is sad to report that Common Scoter and Redshank both seem to be in significant decline as far as our survey goes. The pictures are below and the interesting point here is that while well distributed, Redshank numbers are clearly falling.





I could go on but before you become graph blind I'm sure the Larophiles will want to know just how those 'optional' gulls are getting on. Well the Great Black-backed Gull is holding up rather well but both Herring and Common Gulls seem to be in gentle decline over the last 3 years; although I'm not sure anyone who has been attacked coming out of the Chippy in Ullapool would agree!





So to sum up, the Winter Duck series of expeditions has produced some very worthwhile data over the years and gives us some interesting pointers as to the health of certain species populations wintering in NW Scotland. Of course this data needs to be considered alongside more comprehensive studies over wider geographical areas and in the breeding season as well. It may be that Redshank are choosing to winter elsewhere and aren't really in decline ( although the BTO lists it as AMBER in the UK and notes it is a population in decline while for Europe it is classed as being a species of Least Concern). Nevertheless without data we have nothing and so the importance of Winter Duck must not be undersold.

By the time this edition of the Newsletter hits the streets Winter Duck 2017 will have been completed and we'll be able to see if any of these trends continue.



Kulmlein's Gull

*Picture by Alan Kennedy*

# 2016 – My Year for Lifers!

*By Scott Drinkel*

As most of you know, I ran an event called Watch the Birdy (WtB) throughout 2016 – the basic idea being to find and photograph as many different species of birds from the 47 different Wildlife Trust Areas of the UK. For me, it served as a further incentive (as if I needed one) to get out there with my camera. The result for me was **33** (yes, Thirty Three) birds that I had unto that point not seen in the wild. Many of these would not be seen as exciting by many I am sure but as a collector of images, I love building lists, so to capture birds that I have not done so previously was very rewarding.

## January

It started on my very first outing to kick start my WtB outing with my better 1/4, Donna. One of my local birding haunts is Farmoor Reservoir in Oxfordshire, about 30 minutes travel for me. Out of the car, up the boat ramp to the circular perimeter road and the first bird is a **Great Northern Diver**, about 100 yards into the reservoir. A great start to the year!

A different trip to the Ewelme Cress Beds (also a nature reserve) normally yields quite good views of a Water Rail, but this time I was surprised to see a **Mandarin Drake**, hanging around with a pair of Mallards. I have, of course, seen Mandarins in captivity, but these lifers are birds seen 'in the wild' so this was a good extra for me!

## March

No Lifers spotted in February, but I travelled to Slimbridge in March to participate in a RAFOS Committee meeting. Arriving a little early I bumped into Dick and Jan Knight heading up to the Kingfisher Hide. There bouncing through the reeds was a **Cetti's Warbler**, although at a very long distance, it did sit up on the top for a brief second allowing me to grab a snap! I was very happy with this, for me, these elusive birds do not pose well!

## April

Another trip out to Farmoor and I was able to grab some nice images of Bullfinch, not a lifer, but I was in a buoyant mood after seeing this glorious bird. Just a little further on I noticed a flash of red fly into a tree and managed to get a single photograph before it darted off once more, so I did not get a good look at it. Assuming it was the Bullfinch again I was not too fussed, until I got home and processed my images, I was chuffed (choughed?) to bits to find it was a **Redstart**, not the Bullfinch – Lifer count up by 1!

## May

May was an awesome Lifer month. My arrival at Otmoor was not actually planned – I had intended to head to Farmoor again, but the place was locked up and would remain so for a further hour, so a 15 minute drive to Otmoor seemed the right choice. After walking around the entire location on a nice bright day, I was on the main track heading back to the car park when I heard a **Cuckoo**, a beautiful noise that I have heard before, but never seen the origin. Today was different, sat on top of a bush, calling quite merrily was the first cuckoo I have seen. I spent a good 10 minutes watching and listening before it headed away and I left a very happy man!

When I did get back to Farmoor, I headed on my normal route around the smaller reservoir first. In the distance was a bird I did not recognise, so being the basic birder I am, I aimed my camera



Top: Great Northern Diver,  
Farmoor Reservoir.

Centre: Mandarin Duck,  
Elmoor.

Bottom: Common Redstart,  
Farmoor.

and took as many images as I could so I could try and identify back at home - and identify I did: a **Black Tern** (verified by the RAFOS Membership in the Facebook group – a great resource for people like me, chuck the image onto Facebook with a little info and watch the answers flood in. I am pleased to say more and more of my thoughts are getting to the right answer, so something is sticking)! The next Lifers are all thanks to the Norfolk Extravaganza weekend, run by John Towers and Karen Sims. En route and stopping off at the Lakenheath RSPB reserve show I could show my better ¼ (Donna) the variety of habitats available this weekend, I was lucky enough to see a **Hobby** darting around hunting the dragonflies that were in abundance. 2 minutes later a large bird burst through the reeds and flew off in front of us – an amazing **Bittern**! A brilliant start to a brilliant weekend, but more was available. Heading to Chosely in Norfolk, I was lucky enough this year to see the reported **Turtle Doves** (absent on each on my previous visits) but I did not have the range to see any of the **Dotterel** that were in the same area. Titchwell offered my final lifer from the weekend and indeed the month, a lovely pair of **Little Tern**. At one point they even posed with a pair of **Sandwich Tern** and a **Common Tern** so great for comparisons back at home!

## August

June and July offered nothing in the form of Lifers for me, indeed they were very slow as general birding goes, but August back in Oxfordshire had another couple of surprises for me! Back to my old haunt of Farmoor and a flash of bright yellow passed from the wall of the reservoir to the grassed slope across the path. Staring keenly through my viewfinder I had a brilliantly coloured **Yellow Wagtail** staring back at me. A week later I headed to the Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire's (BBO) Wildlife Trust Flagship reserve – Warburg. A nice walk around the wooded area had me focussing on some unusual bird activity at the top of a tree. I was contemplating what the birds could be when I saw one dart up, athletically catch a fly and return..."Hmm a fly-catcher perhaps? I thought to myself. Again verification with RAFOS membership confirmed my first **Spotted Flycatcher**!

## October

September again yielded no 'Lifer' results, but October brought me Lifers in spades, again thanks mainly to the RAFOS Trip to Islay, initially planned by Dick and Jan Knight before being passed onto Ken and Sal Earnshaw. Before the long trip to Scotland I had to have my now almost mandatory trip to Farmoor. This trip to Farmoor was actually returning from a Committee meeting at Gloucester and I thought I could make use of the remaining light. I had to pass within 5 minutes of Farmoor on my way home so why not? So pleased I did as by the water's edge, having been blown in by strong winds over the previous couple of days were a pair of juvenile **Little Stints** hanging around with a **Dunlin**; wonderful and well worth the diversion. Now up to Scotland – before we left the mainland at Tarbert I had my first definite **Shag**, comparing to the **Cormorants** that I am much more familiar with. At the Ferry port of Kennacraig, **Red Breasted Mergansers** were showing well (and became quite prolific throughout the week). The daylight crossing was exceptionally calm and clear (although a little cool) and led to plenty of sightings. It was great hanging around the experienced birders Pete Evans, Martin Routledge and Ken Earnshaw pointing out all the birds I was missing! Great to see the **Black Guillemot**, that in winter plumage was much whiter than the **Common Guillemots** in the area. Having seen the **GND** in January, it was wonderful to see both **Black Throated** and **Red Throated Divers** on the crossing, both previously absent from my list. As we neared Jura I managed to see a relatively small bird dart towards the ferry. Hastily grabbing a couple of shots of this bird while trying to draw attention to it to other birders who had not noticed, it was not around long enough for a positive id. Once at the accommodation and on the computer, the images were reviewed again to identify a **Purple Sandpiper**. As a 'belts and braces' I put this onto the Facebook group without our conclusion to have the thought verified. It doesn't get better than this I thought however, Islay had so much more to offer!



Black Tern,  
Farmoor.



Bittern,  
Lakenheath



Hobby,  
Lakenheath

At the accommodation, **Red-Billed Choughs** were incredibly common and were even the subject to a specific Chough Count. In the woods, as a collective, hoping to find the Waxwings reported in the area, I was lucky enough to be escorted by Adrian and Kate Hayward who persevered to show me a **Treecreeper**, a lovely little bird that I have wanted to see for some considerable time. Opposite the Bowmore distillery was a nice layby that served as a sensible meeting place. It was here that we saw a lovely raft of **Scaup** and across the bay **Eider** (the birds with the very best call, ever (in my opinion)). I have seen **Eider** previously, but only captive birds, so as a wild specimen I am counting this as a lifer! There was always so much to see, a **Merlin** darting at low level through a field was bonus for me, and seeing many **Twite** across a telegraph wire was a very new experience. Corvids seemed to really like hanging around the derelict church at the accommodation, which helped me add **Hooded Crows** to my list, easy to pick them out from the **Jackdaws** and **Choughs**. The final lifer for October was a **Short-Eared Owl** that insisted on avoiding my camera focal point, regularly flying across the reed beds at the beach where I spent each sunrise, absolutely stunning colours, punctuated with a wonderful dawn chorus and the sight of this majestic owl.

## November

Early November included the second half of the Islay Mist RAFOS trip. The RSPB reserve had a wonderful demonstration of a **Northern Hen Harrier**, but not quite as good as at the Oa, where the continued close fly-bys of the **Harrier** disrupted the scheduled **Twite** count. Stunning bird. A trip to the woollen mill saw us finding one of my few 'target' birds, the beautiful **Dipper**. Completely oblivious to our presence it hopped and scavenged through the rocks grabbing morsels to eat. I was lucky to actually be at the accommodation when the glorious **Golden Eagles** decided to make their appearance, soaring from the cliff tops. This was only topped by seeing the **White Tailed Sea Eagle**, close enough to look in awe at the size and power of the beak, that overflowed us not far from a café frequented by our group for a quick lunch. Finally, after attending a local AGM for the Islay Wildlife group and subsequent presentation by a bird photographer, we headed home. Eagle-eyed Pete stopped the car on the track, before reversing slowly a little way, drawing attention to the branch above, where a wonderful **Tawny Owl** waited, unfazed by our presence. Even the lack of my camera did not bother me, as I mentally saved the image of this bird. As we crested the brow of the hill after moving on, on the fence line by the road was a lovely **Barn Owl** – not on for my Lifer List, but lovely to see all the same.

I was also in the right place at the right time, when a trawl for volunteers was put out at work for personnel to participate in a Force Development trip to the Somme and First World War locations. One of these trips saw me head on a misty morning from the amazing Loch Nagar crater to the moving Thiepval Memorial. Sitting in the middle of a field next to a road junction was a stunning **Great White Egret**, my first and one I could not photograph as I was the driver for the day. This didn't stop me pausing at the junction for a couple of minutes longer than I needed to so I could observe it properly though!

December did not allow me to add any more lifers, despite trying, but I cannot complain, 2016 contributed to my bird list significantly. I could not really want for anymore – 33 lifers. For me it shows that the RAFOS trips have a great deal to give, especially to relative newcomers, loads of sightings with the icing and cherry of both experience and knowledge offered by other participants. I hope to continue to make the most of what is available, and see what I can add through 2017!



Spotted Flycatcher,  
Warburg



Little Stint,  
Farmoor



Black Guillemot,  
Islay

## **Nests and Thermal Insulation 'From Analyses of Old Nests – Dr Charles Deeming'**

*By John N Wells AffIEMA. MIET, Tech IOSH, MSM.*

In our long garden there is great cover for nesting Robins, Thrushes and Dunnock in the large Leylandi hedge bordering a quiet car park for the adjacent Restaurant.

This breeding season I watched attentively a pair of early nesting Dunnock to try to locate the nest for my BTO Nest Recording.

Alongside the nest recording it dawned on me that after broods have successfully left and there's not a chance of a second brood, what a waste it is when the nest just lies there empty. I opened my one-of-many BTO publications: BTO - *Life Cycle, Spring 2016 Issue 3* [the one with the Dipper on the front]. Opening to page 3, and in there, was a request from Dr Charles Deeming, University of Lincoln who was appealing for old nests: This year researchers are particularly interested in Thrush, Finch and Warbler species' nests, where Dr Deeming and his team of students research nests, with known provenance on their thermal insulation properties.

Dr Deeming has papers on the thermal properties of Linnets nests also the relationship between attentiveness and nest insulation in a wide variety of species. Also the effects on the geographic location of materials used by finches, and thrushes. Analysis from last year on thrush nests has been promulgated on link: <https://sites.google.com/site/nestconstructionfunction/home/how-to-get-involved>.

There is also a request from Hunterian Museum of Glasgow for nests of 10 scarcer species including; Nuthatch, Ring Ouzel and Lesser Whitethroat [good luck-with that one, may I add!].

Notwithstanding the difficulty of locating nests, I felt as I was monitoring Dunnock and the species isn't always easy to find. I could send the nest from the Leylandi in my garden.

Also as I was going about my chores in the garden, I literally stumbled upon a perfectly formed moss and lichen covered nest, from a Chaffinch. I am 99% sure it was a Chaffinch, lying on the stones in the leaf litter directly under our apple trees, suggesting that it had fallen from a neighbour's garden and under an overhanging Sycamore or direct from our apple tree above. None the less, I felt this one may have been unsuccessful-in two ways because:

1. It was early May and they should have eggs and or chicks, by now unless they (the parents), were a very early pair of breeders.
2. The wind probably blew it out of the branches it was on, either with eggs or chicks that were now perished.

I have packaged them both up carefully in separate boxes to Dr Deeming and I shall keep you all posted on how it goes. I had hoped to have results by now, but Bills' deadline is now upon us and I cannot hold the article any longer. (PS I hope it fills some space for you Bill)!

The subject is terrific volunteer science and one we can all participate in as ornithologists; one for RAFOS members to participate in fully.

# 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:

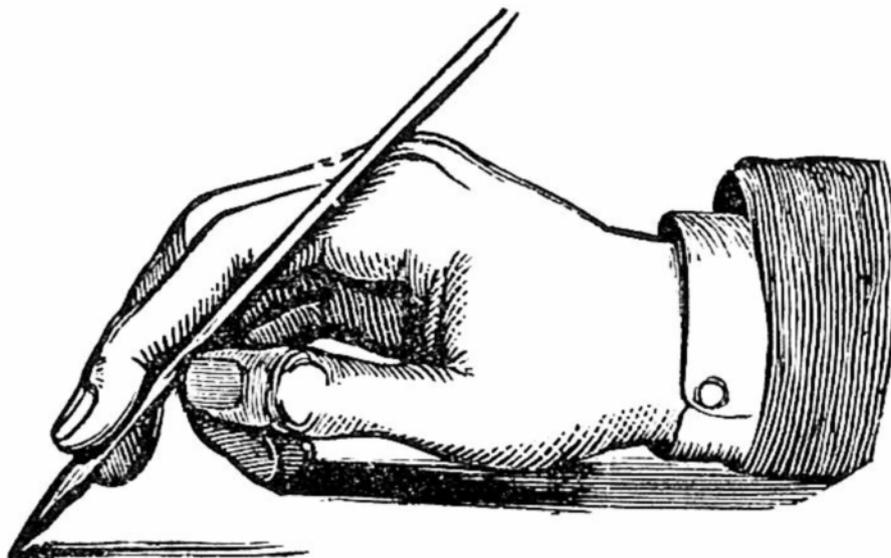
- Brief contributions are always welcome.
- Illustrations (Photographs or art work) are always welcome
- Please send written work as soon as you can. If pictures are included, please send them separately from the text.
- Please avoid footnotes and tables – they are difficult to import with my software!
- 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 104 is 1<sup>st</sup> July 2017 and any contributions received after that date will be held over for Newsletter No. 105.**

Please address contributions to:

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**RAFOS**  
**Annual General Meeting**  
**2017**

**RAF High Wycombe**

**Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

**Please note in your Diary**



**RAFOS On Line**

**Web Site: [www.rafornithology.org.uk](http://www.rafornithology.org.uk)**

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