



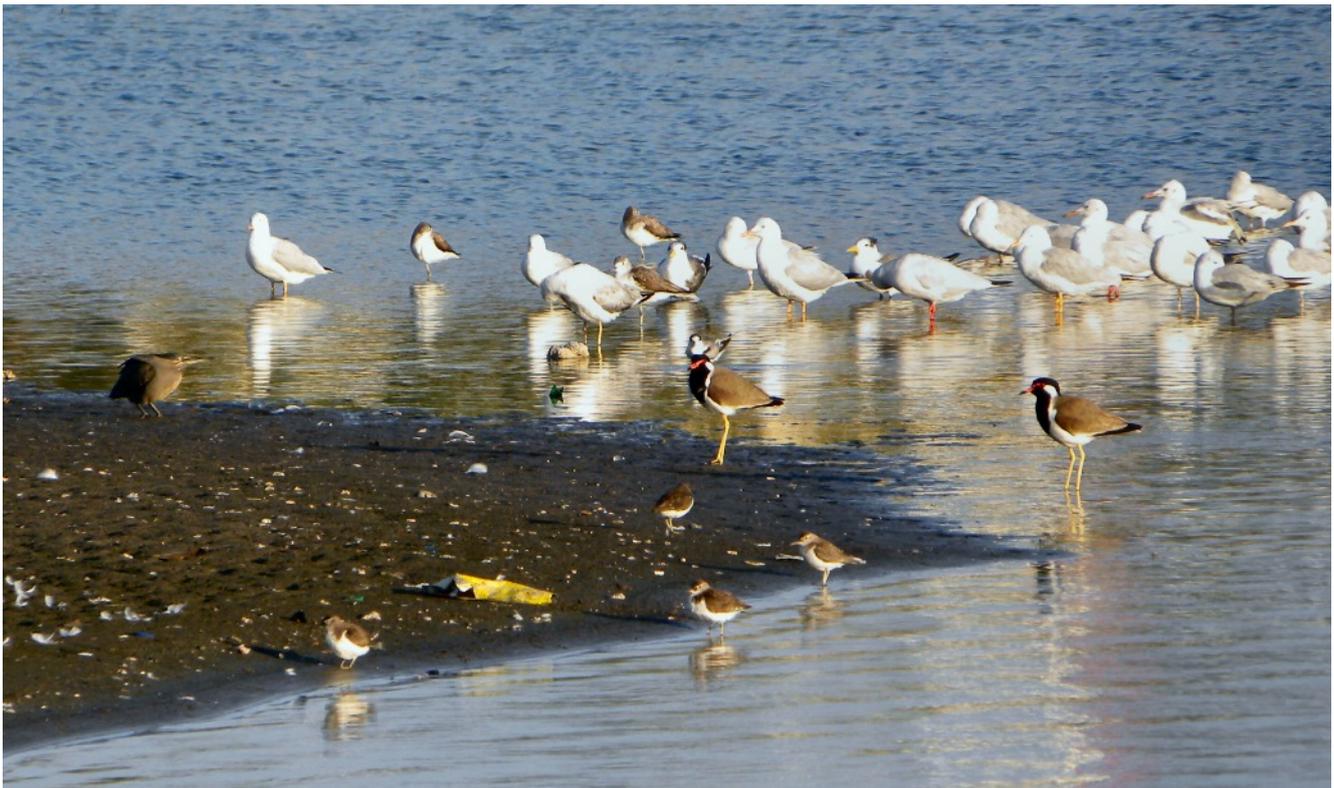
**ROYAL  
AIR FORCE**  
ornithological  
society



**NEWSLETTER No. 104 Autumn 2017**

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Tidal Pools at Seeb, Oman

*Picture by John le Gassick*

# THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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If you wish to be considered for any of these posts, please contact the

## ISLAY MIST 2018 CALLING NOTICE

In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

Those of us a tad older might instead think of Islay in Spring. If the idea of divers, waders and calling Corncrakes appeals, we are planning the next Islay Mist for 12 to 19 May 2018. If you are interested please drop a line to Team Knight on [theknightsat2@gmail.com](mailto:theknightsat2@gmail.com).

As another incentive, the good news is that work has started on the 9<sup>th</sup> distillery on the island. The bad news is that they've only just broken ground so it will be a while before production starts. Only 8 to choose from!



## WINTER DUCK 2018

Expedition WINTER DUCK 2018 will run from Sunday 4 Feb to Monday 12 Feb 2018 (inclusive of travel from Southern England) .

It will run along the traditional lines with 3 teams conducting surveys from John O'Groats to Loch Torridon. There is space for newcomers on Team 1 based at Dundonnell on Little Loch Broom and the expedition majors on Water-Bird Survey (WeBS) reporting of over-wintering ducks and divers.

Although not arduous, the expedition does feature long days in the field and if the weather turns particularly wintry, conditions can be challenging.

This expedition is ideal for those wanting to improve their knowledge of the winter plumage of divers and is hugely good fun. If anyone is interested they should contact Martin Routledge by e-mail at [martin.routledge@gmx.co.uk](mailto:martin.routledge@gmx.co.uk).

Some of the weird types that you might meet!



Left- River Kishorn estuary

Right - Sunset, An Teallach



## Scottish Birds are Bigger .....

By Martin Routledge

Admit it –you’ve all thought this from time to time but maybe just haven’t had the courage to express such an opinion while supping a pint of heavy north of the border. Apart from the obvious abundance of unhealthy food how has this state of affairs come to pass and just what has led me to this conclusion?

Imagine the scene, you are out with your mates birding in Scotland and a **Common Kestrel** *falco tinnunculus* swoops down and catches a field vole which it takes to a nearby fence post to eat. Nature in the raw but then someone says: ‘I think the Kestrels up here are bigger than those down South’. Are they? Maybe they are; they certainly look bigger to the casual observer but is this in fact the case? So with the juices of scientific enquiry coursing through my veins I set forth in an attempt to try and find out.

Now I’m no trained academic but I do know the first thing one does in circumstances like this is a bit of research into what is already out there in terms of published data and opinion. A ‘literature review’ is the smart name for it – a Google search (Wikipedia is my best friend!) is what the modern man might call it. My old professor would have called it sheer idle plagiarism but that’s another story. Not much came up on Google, so time for another good trick - ask an expert (aka phone a friend!) – so I banged out a quick e-mail to Dr Jim Reynolds of Birmingham University asking if he knew of any good sources. Some readers may recall that Dr Jim is the Army Ornithological Society’s expert in residence who spoke to our AGM a couple of years back on the Ascension Island Sooty Tern project. Dr Jim mentioned there are a couple of good books on Kestrels such as the Poysner monograph ‘The Kestrel’ by Andrew Village and of course ‘Birds of the Western Palearctic’ but nothing specific to this question. Dr Jim also quoted Bergmann’s Rule which says:

*"within a broadly distributed taxonomic clade, populations and species of larger size are found in colder environments, and species of smaller size are found in warmer regions. Although originally formulated in terms of species within a genus, it has often been recast in terms of populations within a species. It is also often cast in terms of latitude."*

So the hypothesis was: Common Kestrels in Northern Scotland (colder) are bigger than those in Southern England (warmer). Was this a myth or was it supported by the evidence?

Scientific endeavour of this nature needs verifiable data. Where better to find morphometric data on Kestrels other than the ringing records of the BTO? A polite internet enquiry to the BTO (there’s a link on their web site for such things) elicited a response in a few days with a data spread-sheet of over 2400 captures of Kestrels with details of weight, wing length, sex, where caught and when. Once converted into an excel spread-sheet the ability to order and analyse the information was immense. But first some notes on the data.

There were just over 2400 records of first captures of free flying birds from 1961 to mid-2016. Age and sex were not always recorded but the place of capture was. There were even 21 records from Gibraltar included in the total data set and for the sake of my analysis I divided the data into the following latitudinal banded regions:

Northern Scotland – The Highlands in effect everywhere north of a line between the Clyde and Forth estuaries.

The North – down to a line between Morecombe Bay and the Humber including Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

Middle Earth – southwards to a line from Fishguard to Ipswich – so all of Wales, the Midlands and East Anglia.

Southern England – the rest of God’s country including the Scilly Isles.

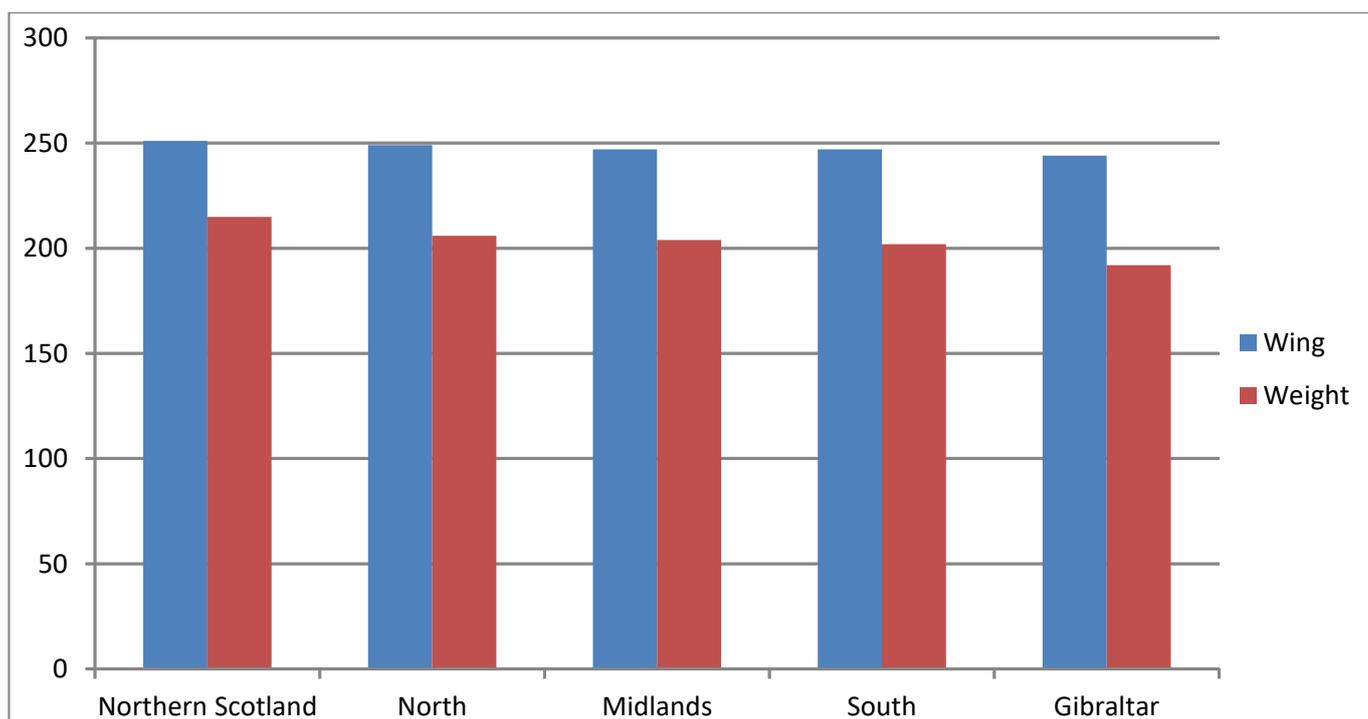
Gibraltar

Each UK band had at least 100 records so, with the exception of Gibraltar, I had a reasonably well represented set of population data to mess about with and work out some robust average weights and wing sizes for both males and females of this species.

So what did the results look like? The overall average weight of Kestrels in UK was 204 grams and the wing length was 247 mm. Hang on a minute I hear you say – Kestrels, like most birds of prey, show considerable sexual size dimorphism so for those birds that were sexed what were the averages?

All Records	Average Weight	204	Average Wing Length	247
All Male Records	Average Weight	201	Average Wing Length	243
All Female Records	Average Weight	222	Average Wing Length	254

As any raptor watching birder would expect the girls are noticeably bigger than the boys across the board. Hardly ground breaking news! But regional variation was also quite noticeable - using all records both male and female



Variation in Kestrel Wing and Weight by Latitude



I think this can be summed up as small but noticeable differences but it is just crying out for some more data investigation. For example are boys and girls equally bigger in Scotland: well the data suggests that a male Kestrel in Morayshire is on average 9% heavier than a male in Cornwall although the wing length is about the same. On the other hand, the object of his affection is only likely to be 4% heavier and with a slightly bigger wing (about 6mm or 2% longer on average) than her southern cousins so it is quite possible that this isn't discernible to the casual observer. Then there is the difficult fact that English females are about the same size and weight as Scottish males which will only add to the confusion but on the whole the data suggests that Bergmann was right especially when taken to the extreme of the Gibraltarian captures which show that these Mediterranean birds are, on average, 11% lighter than those from Northern Scotland even though their wing length is only slightly smaller.

So there you have it - Scottish birds are bigger ..... but only say it quietly!



## portugal and Spain in April 2017

*By Ken Earnshaw, Pete Evans, John Towers, Dave Munday and Ted Barnes*

The anticipation experienced during the calm and quiet of the drive through the night by Sally and Ken Earnshaw to pick up Pete Evans and to arrive on-time at Bristol Airport was overshadowed some hours later at Faro Airport when trying to pick up our hire cars. Chaotic scenes at the desks of certain hiring agencies caused long delays. The moral here is to not try to save a few pennies but use more professional outfits for car hire.

The team consisted of John Towers, Karen Sims, Ted Barnes, Dave and Linda Munday, Pete Evans, Sally and Ken Earnshaw. Ted, Dave and Linda travelled to Portugal a couple of days before the rest of the party and returned a day earlier due to flight availabilities.

By way of contrast to the car hire, the first hotel we stayed at, just outside Lagoa in the Algarve, was a delight. Small, spotless and run by an engaging, friendly Swedish guy, Göran, our stay of four nights here was most enjoyable. The orange juice at breakfast was as fresh as you could get, the oranges being straight off the trees in the garden. Some good birds as well: Waxbills, Alpine Swifts, Iberian Magpies, Cattle Egrets, etc. The local Aldi offered a reasonable view of a Little Bittern from the car park for the menfolk while the womenfolk were inside getting provisions for our lunch but Lagoa lagoon, where the bird was, unfortunately is under severe threat from developers.

At Pera Marsh while watching the birds, we engaged in an extended conversation with a friendly Belgian couple and shared several common views and opinions. A Portuguese birder, something of a rarity, gave us some local knowledge of the area. Particular birds: Purple Swamp Hens, Purple Heron, Whiskered Terns, Audouin's Gulls, Collared Pratincoles.

We visited Cape St. Vincent in the extreme west of the Algarve - Shags and Gannets over the sea and some stunning Stonechats on the coast but it was so overrun with Easter holiday visitors that after an hour or so we retreated to a very quiet area of scrub, woodland and large open areas a little way inland. A Black Kite hung around us for a while, a fair-sized flock of Choughs wheeled about and two Griffon Vultures drifted over, all giving good views. During a lazy couple of hours further birds such as Hen Harrier, Booted Eagle, Raven, Tawny Pipit, hirundines, larks, parties of Bee-eaters, etc, were noted.

Away from the coast the area of high ground at Monchique provided some splendid views and a confiding Rock Bunting. A quiet interlude for lunch was had in a wooded lane near Monchique where Iberian Chiffchaffs presented their distinctive song, a Western Bonelli's Warbler also sang for us and Nuthatch, Short-toed Tree Creeper, Firecrests and Short-toed Eagle, etc, were seen.

En route to Moura for our next hotel, we stopped-off for an hour or so near the tiny hamlet of Guerreiro in the Steppe Country of the Alentejo. A large flock of vultures flew over, mostly Griffons but with a couple of Black Vultures. Several elusive Quails were calling, and Ted did manage to see one. Three or four Great Bustards were flying around and one sitting, possibly on a nest, several hundred yards away, but unfortunately no signs of Little Bustard.

The extensive fields of flowers, grasses, etc, in this area were resplendent in the bright sunshine, stretching away uninterrupted on the rolling countryside for as far as the eye could see. Near to Entradas a wonderful flying display by about six Montague's Harriers was enjoyed by us, and also by the Harriers it would seem. Or was it an extended territorial dispute? Five more Great Bustards were seen flying by and a colony of Lesser Kestrels at a well-known site were visited, but severe heat haze interfered with photography.

Iberian Raptors *pictured by Ken Earnshaw*



Booted Eagle



Black Vulture



Griffon Vulture

Moura is a very pleasant, quiet, small town with narrow cobbled streets, fine buildings and friendly locals. The hotel was a converted nunnery, with adequate facilities and well suited to our needs for the four nights spent there. Easter Monday and we were looking for somewhere in Moura for an evening meal. John asked a group of elderly locals in his own characteristic way, (no common language), if anywhere was open. No was the general opinion but one gentleman then led us along several narrow, cobbled streets to a restaurant which appeared closed. Loud thumps on the door by our new-found friend elicited a friendly response and, thanks to him, within a commendably short time we were tucking into a very nice meal and enjoying the house wines.

On a quiet road between Moura and Portel another flock of vultures milled around with four Black Vultures giving very fine views as they searched for food from on high. In Portel we were quite happy to follow, in the car, a local brass band as they marched through the narrow streets while producing some fine sounding and well played music. While having refreshments at a road side café in the narrow streets of the village of Barrancos, near to the Spanish border, a very large moth, about four inches across, was found at our feet. It was later identified by Karen as a Great Peacock Moth. Also, we had a very good view of a Pallid Swift flying low around the houses at the same time.

Our last day in the Alentejo was spent in the area of Mourão. A Short-toed Eagle conveniently perched close to the road and a fine pair of Iberian Grey Shrikes and a Short-toed Lark along a dusty track to a small reserve allowed some photo opportunities. Kestrels and Lesser Kestrels were present along with two large, pale, unidentified Terns over a small lake.

Meanwhile, John and Karen went off on their own to the reservoir at Luz and had good views of Collared Pratincole and Gull billed Terns. There were a few close views of Booted and Short-toed Eagles and a distant Black-shouldered Kite.

The day then went down-hill for them. A visit to the Castle ruins in Mourão and a cold drink in town were ruined on returning to their car which had been broken into. The passenger sidelight was smashed and the driver's door handle broken. The boot had contained the telescope, tripod and a rucksack (this had John's phone in it). No longer, just John's spare walking boots - obviously the wrong size! They asked at the local bank for directions to the town's GNR (police station). They then spent the next three hours filling out papers, explaining in broken English/Portuguese with the help of the computer, to all the members of the station what had happened. There had not been an incident like this in two years in the town but Karen and John were the second in half an hour. A Dutch couple had got there just before them with the same problem only their stolen items were camera lenses. Both cars were finger-printed but no matches were found. It seems like the robbers were likely to have been from a bigger town who may have followed the Dutch couple who were there earlier and Karen and John just happened to be in the wrong place as that time. The police helped with a call to the car hire company and a swap of the car was arranged for the next morning back at Faro. Back at the hotel, Vodafone was spoken to from Karen's phone (which had been safely left in their room along with passports etc) and John's phone was locked and disabled. So, a drive to Faro for them and then a rendezvous with every-one else at La Rocina reserve Spain in the afternoon. Once back home, insurance all sorted and refunds for stolen items and the excess on the car all paid out. John is now the proud owner of a new Swarovski Scope and Manfrotto tripod.

### **And on to Spain.**

Pete, Sal and Ken travelled from Moura via Mertola to join the A22/A49 at Castro Marim while Dave, Linda and Ted took a more easterly route. On the journey, near to the attractive-looking town of Mértola, was that a Pin-tailed Sandgrouse that flashed across the road giving a very

Short-toed Eagle



White-headed Duck

Steppe country at Guerreiro in the Alentejo



*Pictures by Ken Earnshaw*

brief view? Later we all met up at the La Rocina reserve on the Coto Doñana where the shade of the pines was most welcome.

Our base was the Lantana Hotel in Pilas, to the north of the Coto Doñana. A sprawling hotel in what appears to have been a university campus. Initially it was rather meagre in terms of breakfast, but the arrival of a large, noisy, haughty contingent of a Spanish religious group led to an improvement in the food. The couple running the hotel were very friendly and engaging but again no common language and the manager was friendly and helpful and had the benefit of some good English. These three made our stay of five nights quite enjoyable.

At the La Rocina visitor centre in the Doñana it was good to be able to distinguish the song of a Savi's Warbler from that of a Grasshopper Warbler and then go and find the bird singing down in the reeds. A good range of other marshland and woodland birds were here and at the Acebuche reserve where Western Subalpine Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Crested Tit and Iberian Magpie were particularly noted. At Matalascañas on the coast several Manx Shearwaters passed by and Common and Little Terns milled around but a party of about eight possible Roseate Terns resting upon the sea a couple of hundred yards out was an unusual sight.

On the long journey to the José Antonio Valverde visitor centre, deep in the Doñana, a Red knobbed Coot and large breeding colonies of Great, Little and Cattle Egrets and Purple, Night and Squacco Herons were seen. At the visitor centre a skulking Marbled Duck was the main point of interest. Nearby four or five Great Reed Warblers created a cacophony of sound in a small area of scrub and marsh while across the track were three White-headed Ducks. Black and Whiskered Terns hunted over the marsh while Griffon Vultures drifted overhead.

Unfortunately, we learnt that a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles that we were hoping to see had been evicted from their nest by an Eagle Owl, resulting in us seeing neither species. However, an enjoyable day was spent at a Bird Fair at the Dehasa de Abajo reserve where we all met up with the organiser, Beltran, who we knew from our previous RAFOS visit to the Doñana. Breeding Bee-eaters, Booted Eagles, Black-necked Grebes and a single Black Stork were noted and while we ate lunch a White Stork was feeding three youngsters in their nest about 15 yards away.

En-route back towards Portugal and time was available for a stop-off at the Odiel marshes at Huelva where various waders, gulls and terns were present. Elegant Slender-billed Gulls, quiet Black Terns, stately Sandwich Terns and noisier Little Terns were shuffling around with the fast rising tide. Curlew Sandpipers, Dunlins, Little Stints and Sanderlings were all resplendent in their summer plumage on the salt pans and Osprey and Hen Harrier put in appearances. The car of Ken, Sally and Pete (a Renault) had a key akin to a credit card and, as long as the card was somewhere inside the car, engine operation was normal. They stopped for a bit of birding and Ken was out of the car when Pete tried to turn the engine off without success. A call to Ken to return with the key and shove it through the window solved the problem. Pete got out but Sally decided she would stay behind. When Pete returned a while later Sally told him that all the doors had locked while he and Ken were away although it was possible to open them from the inside. Ken returned and they attempted to move on. Pete pressed the start button. Nothing. Check car's in neutral, foot on the brake, Ken brought the card back, still nothing. Then Sally's voice from the back, "Try locking the doors and then unlocking them again." Pete looked at Ken and Ken looked at Pete. Not a word was spoken but both knew exactly what the other was thinking. With no immediate alternative, the doors were duly locked and unlocked. Pete pressed the button and the engine sprung into life. The moral of this story is, never underestimate the power of the female logic.

Then it was on to our next stay in a river-front hotel at Tavira in the Algarve. Our arrival at Tavira was something of a navigational nightmare. The town spans a river and comprises very narrow cobbled streets most of which are one way only. Our three cars had got split up on the journey and Pete, Ken and Sally had spent a good deal of time trying to find the hotel. Stopping to take stock of the situation and trying to find a way to their destination they realised that they could see the hotel on the opposite bank of the river. Pete decided to phone Karen to see if she

and John were fairing any better. The opening conversation could have come straight from a Morcambe and Wise sketch.

Karen; "We are lost somewhere in the town and no idea where the hotel is but we are on the right side of the river."

Pete; "We can see the hotel but we are on the wrong side of the river."

Eventually, all arrive safely although the Earnshaw car crossed the same bridge five times in the process! Meanwhile in the hotel, Dave, Linda and Ted were enjoying a drink, oblivious of the drama on their doorstep.

A good few days in this area, but, apart from some fine summer-plumaged waders on the Tavira salt-pans, not a lot of birds about. However, in Tavira there were a good range of restaurants in which to pass a few hours and some cultural events to attend. The food was very good especially the black pig, (a speciality of Iberia), and octopus tempura which Ken introduced to Pete with evident success. During our stay in Tavira the weather deteriorated from the hot, dry and sunny conditions of the first two weeks to low cloud and persistent rain for a couple of days. On our return to the UK, Faro airport was chaotic, John and Karen very nearly missed the flight due to delays at the three main process stages.

And so a largely enjoyable time in southern Iberia came to an end.



Purple Heron

*By Ken Earnshaw*

Short-toed Lark

*By Ken Earnshaw*



## More Iberian Birds

*Pictures by John Towers*





Above:  
Sardinian Warblers,  
Female & Male



Left:  
Savi's Warbler

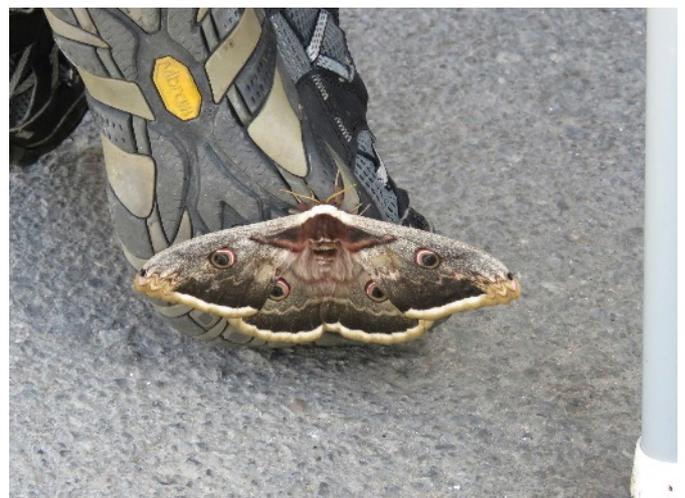
Below:  
Slender-billed Gull



Below:  
Bee Eaters



Left: Spanish Festoon, right,: Great Peacock Moth *all pictures by John Towers*





Cork bark awaiting processing



Mertola



Some of the Iberian trip team



Tavira

*Pictures by Pete Evans*

# The Big Base Birdwatch - A Summary

by Scott Drinkel

## Background

The Big Base Birdwatch (BBB) was held 26 May -04 Jun 17 (school half term). It was intended to be a bit of fun that would expose both military personnel/families and their MOD bases to a bit of birding. It was hoped that some interesting data would be captured but also that more personnel would become more aware of RAFOS with a hope of raising membership.

The BBB was, in essence, a glorified garden birdwatch, but allowed personnel to record what they saw on Domestic sites, Technical sites and in some cases, the airfield. A basic return form was created that listed 34 common birds, but provided the facility for additional sightings to be recorded. This was published on the RAFOS website, again to try and increase traffic to our page.

To kick us off, our illustrious Chairman warmed up the Station Commanders from 24 Stations (**Bold** = responded, *Italics* = expected results, plain text – no response); **Benson**, Boulmer, Brize Norton, **Coningsby**, **Cosford**, **Cranwell**, *Fylingdales*, Halton, **High Wycombe**, **Honington**, Leeming, *Leuchars*, Linton on Ouse, Lossiemouth, Marham, Northolt, *Odiham*, **Shawbury**, **Spadeadam**, **St Mawgan**, **Valley**, **Waddington**, Wittering and **Wyton**. Over the course of engaging with the various points of contact at these stations (Environmental Protection Officers and Conservation Club ICs mainly), I was able to add **Boscombe Down** and **Portreath** to the list.

This created a list of 26 Stations, of which (and at the time of writing 04 Jul 17) 14 Stations have returned at least 1 result, with promises of returns from 3 more stations, with 9 stations not participating at all.

Some stations were busy and could not lend resource to the cause, but thankfully these were on Stations where RAFOS members worked, so huge thanks for last minute assistance to Brian Lyon at Shawbury and Brian Eke at Waddington, engaging with their station and raising awareness of & participation in the event.

At RAF Benson (my home base) the Station was flooded with posters advertising the event, I arranged to have the Bird Control Units on side (with their pretty exclusive access to the Airfield) and even presented at the Primary School's assembly to get some activity from the younger sector, with a view to being half term parents may offer birding as a way to get an hours peace from bored children. In truth, participation from the school pupils did not happen and I would recommend, should any similar activities occur in the future, that we would be better served carrying it out in school time where 'classes' could undertake a collective activity. In the case of Benson Primary school, I think the appetite and interest is there, just need another way of capitalising on this enthusiasm.

Other stations carried out some good activities too – Odiham, for example, carried out a series of dawn chorus walks for the BBB – unfortunately the Odiham reps also trust the RAF snail mail system – after sending the reports on the 12 Jun I have not received them 40 miles away at 04 Jul! Wyton has carried out numerous conservation based activities and were kind enough to present their findings. Fylingdales have regular bird watching events in the heart of the North Yorkshire Moors, again willing to pass their data through to RAFOS.

One of the main requests was for general bird identification charts – the RSPB and BTO were very helpful providing free charts for me to send off to the stations as the requested them. It did make me wonder why we (RAFOS) have not progressed to creating our own charts – could be reasonably easy to achieve with the membership offering up photos to include. These could sit on our

web page which could drive interested folk to our site once more – worthy of more investigation in my opinion and hopefully something that every member of RAFOS could be a part of.

## Results

Of the Stations that have responded, the table below shows how many returns they have received. This could be from a single person over a number of days, or multiple people on a single day or anywhere in between! Of course, Benson looks heavy with 18 of those submissions coming from myself, trying to lead by example (and paranoid that all results would be from myself in the early part of the event) I took every opportunity I could to record in different locations on Benson. On a positive note, this still left 10 submissions coming from other participants, which looking at the totals think is a good return!

BENSON	28	PORTREATH	8
BOSCOMBE	1	SHAWBURY	4
CONINGSBY	1	SPADEADAM	1
COSFORD	1	ST MAWGAN	1
CRANWELL	4	VALLEY	5
HIGH WYCOMBE	2	WADDINGTON	5
HONINGTON	8	WYTON	4

## Common Birds

The 34 birds listed on the return form were:

Blackbird	Goldfinch	Magpie	Sparrowhawk
Blackcap	Great Tit	Mistle Thrush	Starling
Blue Tit	Greenfinch	Nuthatch	Swallow
Carrion Crow	Gt Spot Woodpecker	Peregrine	Swift
Chaffinch	House Martin	Pied Wagtail	Woodpigeon
Coal Tit	House Sparrow	Red Leg Partridge	Wren
Collared Dove	Jackdaw	Robin	Yellowhammer
Duncock	Kestrel	Rook	
Green Woodpecker	Long Tailed Tit	S	ong Thrush

## Points of interest (as I see them!) wrt all responding locations.

- Blackbird – not seen at Valley.
- Carrion Crows – not seen at Boscombe Down or Spadeadam.
- Coal Tit – only seen at Shawbury.
- Chaffinch – not seen at Honington or Valley.
- Greenfinch – still thin on the ground, only being seen at Boscombe Down, Portreath, St Mawgan and Wyton.
- Great Spotted Woodpecker – only seen at Benson, Shawbury and Spadeadam.
- Nuthatch – not seen on MOD land at all!
- Peregrine Falcon – only seen at Portreath and Shawbury
- Pied Wagtail – not seen at Coningsby or Valley
- Robin – not seen at Valley.
- Yellowhammer – only seen at Boscombe Down, Coningsby and Shawbury.

The other bird species were spread reasonably across the board, being seen in some places and not in others.

Over and above this list of 34 birds, an additional 47 bird species were recorded across the participants.

- Barn Owl – Coningsby & Waddington.
- Black Headed Gull – Coningsby & Waddington.
- (Very) Common Buzzard – seen at 11 of the 14 sites.
- Canada Goose – Coningsby, Portreath, Shawbury & Spadeadam.
- Chiff Chaff – Cosford, Portreath & Shawbury.
- (Not so) Common Tern – Coningsby only.
- Common Whitethroat – Portreath, Shawbury & St Mawgan.
- Coot – Shawbury only.
- Curlew – Coningsby, Honington, Shawbury & Waddington.
- Fieldfare – Benson only.
- Fulmar – Portreath only.
- Garden Warbler – St Mawgan only.
- Greater Black Backed Gull – Portreath only.
- Goldcrest – Shawbury & Wyton.
- Greylag Goose – Valley & Waddington.
- Grey Heron – Coningsby only.
- Grey Partridge – Waddington only.
- Grey Wagtail – Benson only.
- Guillemot – Portreath only.
- Herring Gull – Portreath & Valley.
- Jay – Boscombe Down, Portreath & Shawbury.
- Lapwing – Coningsby & Waddington.
- Lesser Black Backed Gull – Waddington & Wyton.
- Linnet – Boscombe Down, Coningsby, Portreath, St Mawgan, Waddington & Wyton.
- Little Owl – Coningsby & Waddington.
- Marsh Harrier – Coningsby.
- Mallard – Coningsby, Honington, Shawbury, Shawbury, St Mawgan & Waddington.
- Meadow Pipit – Portreath, Spadeadam, St Mawgan, Waddington & Wyton.
- Moorhen – Wyton only.

- Oystercatcher – Honington, Portreath, Valley & Waddington.
- Pheasant – Cosford, Honington, Portreath, Shawbury, Valley & Waddington.
- Raven – Portreath only.
- Razorbill – Portreath only.
- Red Kite – Benson, High Wycombe & Waddington.
- Reed Bunting – Coningsby only.
- Reed Warbler – Wyton only.
- Rock Dove – Benson only.
- Rock Pipit – Portreath only.
- Shag – Portreath only.
- Skylark – Boscombe Down, Coningsby, Portreath, Spadeadam, St Mawgan, Waddington & Wyton.
- Stock Dove – Benson, Waddington & Wyton.
- Stonechat – Portreath & St Mawgan.
- Stone Curlew – Honington only.
- Tawny Owl – Boscombe Down only.
- Teal – Shawbury only.
- Tree Sparrow – Waddington only.
- Willow Warbler – Shawbury only.

Looking at the Stations involved, Portreath recorded the most number of bird species (40), closely followed by Shawbury (37 - RAFOS supported), Waddington (35 – RAFOS supported), Benson (33 – RAFOS supported) – the support of RAFOS members at the sites obviously driving interest and participation, so many thanks again to those involved.

These Stations were closely followed by Boscombe Down, Coningsby, Honington, St Mawgan & Wyton who all had high numbers of bird species (24 or greater) with Valley showing the least diversity (9 species) recorded off 5 submissions.

# Winter Sun 2017

By John Le Gassick

In February I re-visited the Oman. To say re-visited is probably a little strong, as a young crew member on Shackleton Mk3s and Nimrods MR1 and R1, I visited Masirah Island many times, many many times. More recently I had a day visit when calling into Muscat on the MV Arcadia enabling me to pick up a few species in Riyam Park and visit the Muttrah souq. The port at Muttrah is the largest in the Oman. I think that most members of the RAFOS will agree that the two Expeditions to Masirah in 1976 and 1979 helped to put the Society on the ornithological map and the participants were for many years the nucleus of the organization, foraging and sometimes even five-gathering at various AGMs. For many years, whilst we still had contacts within the SOAF, we hoped that we would get the chance of another visit but alas it was not to be.

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Since 1970 the Sultanate of Oman has been ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said and under his leadership has developed into a prosperous and modern country with a very efficient network of roads linking the major cities. The country is Muslim and follows the Ibadi faith which is very tolerant of all other faiths and churches and synagogues are all openly permitted. This tolerant and peaceful role makes them often the preferred mediators in the many disputes of their neighbours. The traffic is very heavy and the driving quite frantic, imagine the M25 on "speed"! A car is a must to visit the various places of ornithological interest. The population of the Oman is four million of which one and a half million live in Muscat and its environs. The international airport is at Seeb and is shared by the SOAF and the Royal Flight. Seeb is where we stayed for our visit courtesy of one of the two British Military compounds both of which are within walking distance of the town centre.

What about the birds? I hear you cry, what about the birds indeed! It must be remembered that all of my birding, on this preliminary visit, was in the Muscat area. I also did not get to visit the jewel in the birding crown the Al Ansab Sewage Farm, which is now a Wetland Nature Reserve but a guide has to be booked for a visit. It should be easy to access being just off the Muscat Expressway, I was heavily out voted in my proposal to visit, what does everyone have against

Camel Market at  
Muharraq



Sewage Works? Nonetheless fifty species were recorded give or take a Great Black-headed Gull or two. I would also like to state that I only had my pair of trusty Steiner 8x32 Skyhawks and a Nikon "Bridge" camera (like Jan's) and whose legendary spotting ability was also sorely missed! I generated a garden list of eleven birds (the small garden overlooked a scruffy Date Palm plantation) of which Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis* and Purple Sunbird were displaying along with a very noisy and early rising Grey Francolin. Not as glamorous as his close relative or dare I say as tuneful as his cousin Frank *Francolinus francolinus* whose morning "scales" called many a RAFOS birder to arms when camping on the Akrotiri Peninsular. Singing Bulbul were always present and both Red and Yellow vented were seen in equal numbers. Amongst the numerous in-comers was the Common Mynah which along with the Indian House Crow gathered in sizeable flocks in the parks and green spaces to scavenge the discarded food from the many traditional afternoon Arab picnics. One evening on an hour long walk, at dusk, in the immediate area of the compound which consisted mainly of scrubland with some marshy patches: A Spur-winged Plover, two Jack Snipe and a (Little) Green Bee-eater *cyanophrys* and an Alexandrian Parakeet, eating fruit from a road side tree, were recorded.

Seeb has an extensive sea front with miles of promenade stretching for a couple of miles, modern and well manicured. On the inland side of this however there are many tidal pools which are either viewable from the road above or can be accessed from the beach by going through the passages under the road. These are a happy hunting ground for birders at the correct time of the tide. Some of the many wading birds were easily identified: Red-wattled Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Sand Plover Lesser and Greater but the more active "little scurriers" were not so easy. At the far northern end of the promenade there was a large area of scrub occupied, during daylight, by a herd of hobbled grazing camels. This was excellent habitat for various larks and Green Bee-eaters appeared to breed in the sandy hummocks. This area also excellent for gulls and the many varieties of tern here the majority of my sightings were made. In Muscat beside the extensive and popular Qurm Beach there is a large Ramsar Convention Reserve consisting of Mangrove Forest and Salt Marsh. Although there is a hide overlooking the estuary this Reserve appears to be closed to the public. Excellent views however can be



Palm (Laughing) Dove

had of most of the area from the shady roof café of “Starbucks” where observations can be made over a “skinny” latte, (other similar beverages are available) my sort of bird watching. For the more adventurous access can also be made, as in Seeb, from the beach through the water outflow passages.

The resident hirundines appear to be Pale Crag Martins which were seen at two locations, one was, surprisingly, around the Al Alam Palace in Muscat!

On the 7<sup>th</sup> February Barn Swallow and Pallid Swift were seen, I presumed (possibly wrongly) that these were north bound passage migrants.

In conclusion I believe that in the winter Muscat is an excellent place for waders, terns and gulls (you can shut your eyes Martin!). Over the next two years I am hoping to re-visit and yes I will wear the “T” shirt with the logo “This is not a Bird Watching Holiday John!” When next we visit the Expressway linking Muscat to Salalah will hopefully have been completed and I will do my best to visit this other ornithological gem. Perhaps if I start referring to the Al Ansab Sewage Farm as the Al Ansab Wetland Reserve I will even manage a visit. Next time I will try to arrive during the Spring or Autumn migration. I imagine all those lovely grassy verges of the highway teeming with tired migrants re-fueling for the next leg of their epic journey. I have so many spaces on my check list to be filled in on future visits, the place is purported to be alive with Raptors with birders tripping



Green Sandpiper

# **An Introduction to the Somerset Levels**

*By Pete Evans and Sally Earnshaw*

At the last AGM I (Pete Evans) was approached by Ann Bodley and asked if I would consider organising a trip to the Somerset Levels. With numbers falling away at Chew Valley, this was something that Jon Orme and I had been mulling over for some time as a possible replacement. This was just the spur required, so I readily agreed. Local knowledge was readily forthcoming from Ann and Dave Bodley and a date was agreed upon which was, basically, was a long weekend with participants arriving and departing as they pleased.

Most of the reserves we visited lie within an area 2 or 3 km to the west of Glastonbury, probably the most well-known being Ham Wall. Others visited included Avalon Marshes, Shapwick Moor, Shapwick Heath, Catcott and Westhay.

Avalon Marshes Reserve was the agreed meeting point for lunch on Friday and, lo and behold, all those expected turned up, eventually! For the next two days the pattern was; communal breakfast, where we decided where we were going and, most importantly, where we would have lunch. It is not only an army that marches on its stomach!

After lunch we proceeded to Shapwick Heath reserve. It was a rather dull day but Chiffchaff, Cetti's and Willow Warblers were present in good numbers. Water Rails were also heard calling in the reeds. We had good views of a Marsh Harrier quartering the reed beds and an Osprey was spotted perched on an old tree stump. Whilst we were there, one or two of us had a faint suspicion of a distant booming Bittern and as it turned out the following day, we were probably correct. As late afternoon approached we made our way to the hotel, freshened up and had dinner at the restaurant next door, which was also the venue for breakfast, although the menu had been changed.

Saturday dawned warm and sunny with a light breeze. We set off for Westhay Moor and having arrived at the car park were soon viewing some nice birds, in fact some of us were still in the car park when the first of several raptors appeared. After only a few minutes we had seen a Goshawk, a pair of Sparrowhawks and a Peregrine. The pools gave good sightings of Little and Great Crested Grebes, two Great White Egrets and Egyptian Geese. Once again warblers were very much in evidence. Lunch was taken at Sweets Tea Rooms which we all agreed was excellent with good home-cooking at a reasonable price.

We moved on to Catcott Reserve where in spring and early summer the water levels are kept low so the fields can be grazed. This is vital to maintain the ideal conditions for wintering birds when the site is flooded.

Sunday was sunny and warm after a hazy start. The RSPB reserve at Ham Wall was the site of choice and once again we were not disappointed. Lots of birds, notably Redpoll, busy foraging to feed hungry chicks. Midway through the morning we were joined by Dave and Ted who had travelled up to join us and also Mike. There was much activity on the pools and among the more common water fowl we were treated to sightings of another two Great Egrets. The highlight of the day, however, had to be two Bittern flying in full view right in front of us.

There were many fellow birders out enjoying the good weather and, being a sociable bunch, we got to hear that a couple of Glossy Ibis were showing well in the adjoining Shapwick Moor reserve so we made our way over. Sure enough they were showing well feeding on the edges of the reed beds some way off so it was very much 'scope time. While there, five Common Cranes were spotted in flight which got a few of us quite excited.

As the afternoon progressed most of us started to make the homeward journey although Ken, Sally, Richard and Jan opted to stay another night and return the next day.

One phrase that I heard repeatedly was 'Why haven't we done this before?' Well, over dinner on Saturday evening the consensus was, indeed, that it should be repeated, this time in the winter and another date was agreed upon, December 1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup>. I think we can be assured that the birds we see then will be significantly different from those we saw in the spring.

So I'll sign off with, 'See you all in December.'

Those enjoying the weekend were: Pete Evans, Jon Orme, Ken and Sally Earnshaw, Richard and Jan Knight, John Towers and Karen Sims, John Stewart-Smith and Frances Eggby, Dave Munday, Ted Barns, Mike Hayes and Alec Smith.

**It has been confirmed that a return visit to the Somerset Levels will take place during the weekend of 1st, 2nd and 3rd December 2017. Friday to Sunday. Accommodation is available at a local Premier Inn and a Travel Lodge. If you are interested, please contact Pete Evans, email [pete.whooper@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:pete.whooper@hotmail.co.uk)**



## 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 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, or on a disk.
- 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 105 is **1 January 2018**

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